

CO
STAR TREK
BEST DESTINY
Diane Carey
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Dedicated to the young men and women
in the Vision Quest program, and to the crews of
the Schooners

New Way

and

Bill of Rights,

who prove that troubled youth can not only be saved .
they can save themselves

What you from your fathers have inherited,
Earn it, in order to possess it.

comGoethe

Commanding a starship is your first best destiny.

comCaptain Spock to Admiral James Kirk in

Star Trek II The Wrath of Khan

HISTORIAN'S NOTE

This story takes place shortly after the events
chronicled in

Star Trek VI The Undiscovered Country.

FOREWORD

Ahhhh! We're back and it sure feels good!

Diane and I have been on sabbatical for four
years from the Star

Trek universe, but we haven't been idle. We
traveled back in time to

write a three-book series set during the
American Civil War.

Though we are once more flying around in the future for
humanity's

best destiny, we're still working in the past-this time

James Kirk's

past.

At first we thought we would just swing back into Star
Trek,

concerned only about changes in Trek. We didn't
realize we were

bringing so many changes in ourselves.

Nor did we expect any connection between the genres
... but the

past and the future were way ahead of us. They had
something else

in mind.

After a few thousand pages of raking our
Civil-War-era characters

over the coals, the two of us found ourselves burgeoning
with

unexpected insight into what might have shaped the life
of Captain James Kirk. Tiny events, not

big ones, can ultimately make a hero,

or fail to make one. Suddenly the tiny

things were important, all

because we had become so sensitive to the small events
that shaped

our own history. In writing our Civil War
series,

Distant Drums,

Rise Defiant,

and

Hail Nation

(bantam Books, 1991, '92, '93),

Diane and I have been hammered by the very lesson
Star Trek
has
been trying to teach us all along.
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Just as "the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many,"
the
actions of the one can overwhelm the actions of the many.
Let me
show you how.
In 1861 the European aristocracy saw the New
World cracking in
two, and smiled. The Confederate States of
America, they felt, were the inevitable winners of the
conflict. History gurgled with examples
of weaker powers emerging victorious when defending
their home soil. More significant, however, it
seemed impossible to
drag the rebellious states back into a
"voluntary" union. To the European elite the
United States of America-the big experiment
in mob rule-was at an end. Now the Europeans
would be justified
in crushing any rising democratic sentiment on their
own continent. They'd simply point over here and
say, "See? Won't work."
Dismemberment of the United States was too tempting
for the European powers to ignore. By 1862
Britain and France were poised to recognize the
Confederacy and offer monetary and military aid to the
new country-fan those flames! Watch that nation
crumble!
They hedged their bets, however. They waited for one
big Confederate military victory to prove the
Confederacy's ability to not only survive
Northern aggression, but end it. In a daring move that
took advantage of infuriatingly timid Union
General McClellan's turtlelike military
pace, General Lee split his smaller army of
grays into three parts and invaded the North.
As the gods looked down upon the impending battle,
the odds against the
survival of western democracy were very long.
The gods and the aristocracy lost their collective
shirts that day!
The North was dealt a wild card. One of General
Lee's men lost a
few pieces of paper that contained a complete set of
orders for the
impending battle. Now, if a cow had happened upon
the orders and

eaten them, this would have come to nothing but a historically insignificant belch. But instead, the lost orders ended up in General McClellan's hands, and the future history of the world was changed.

With Lee's battle plans in hand, a blind man on a three-legged horse could have led the Union Army to a flashing victory and ended the war then and there. Since it was McClellan who had the paper, the Union managed only a stalemate.

Because that accident with the piece of paper and McClellan's

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personality got together on the same day, North and South had to endure three more years of wartime carnage. The Confederate Army was turned back and the European powers never considered intervention so seriously again.

A minor incident in a day's work

...

a careless Confederate courier can't keep his paws on a few pieces of paper, so the United States of America survives its greatest trial.

If not for this one clumsy moment, there might not be a single

unified nation here today, but a handful of squabbling nation-states

each jealously guarding its borders. We'd spend our time suspicious

of every bit of trade, every law, every traveler, arguing over who got

to take advantage of whom, who got to set which rule, who should

patrol which road, who got to toll which river. We would never have

been able to pull together to build a society or nurse a flourishing

economy.

There would be no "we."

How different would the world look today if the United States had not existed to play its role in the economic and military

developments of the last century?

And what makes a hero? Single people can turn events, even if they're not dropping battle plans out of their map cases.

Later in the war President Lincoln finally found a hero for his

war-weary country. A non-McClellan emerged, willing to fight with

the firmness needed to end the civil conflict and reunite the nation.

It was General U. S. (unconditional Surrender) Grant. While Grant lacked General Lee's military acuteness, he made up for it with a pit bull's tenacity and the dispassion of a surgeon.

If we were inventing Grant's past from scratch, as we had the chance to do with Jim Kirk, would we create a polished youth, a successful collegiate, a square-shouldered officer?

Probably. But history taught us something else, just in time.

General Grant, later to become President Grant, had no success early in life; in fact, before the Civil War his life was marked by failure after failure. He was completely out of place in civilian life, and could barely feed his family during those days without a uniform. The war was Grant's last chance to avoid stunning mediocrity.

How might events have been different if Grant had been success-

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ful and wealthy at the advent of the war? Would he have been as

driven toward success, having already had it? Why was President Lincoln willing to take any personal or political risk to reunite the country? What is it that forges heroes

like U. S. Grant, Abraham Lincoln, or, as we have tried to extrapolate, James T. Kirk?

Best Destiny is a Star Trek historical novel. Like the heroes of the real-life past, we know much about the deeds of Captain James

Kirk. Through the television series, movies, books, and comics, Kirk and crew have been dragged through and survived a multitude of adventures.

But why them? What in our characters' pasts gives them that extra pinch of determination and guile it takes to survive the trials of space travel? What minor events and twists of fate, like those in

the American Civil War, piled one upon another,
resulted in Captain Kirk rather than Chief
Surveyor Kirk, or Sixth Level
Accountant Kirk, or Mr. J. T. Kirk,
101 No Particular Avenue?

Best Destiny
is not a complete picture by any means. However,
Diane and I do hope we've developed an
insightful and entertaining
peek into the steel personality of James Kirk
while he was still raw
iron and coal.

So join us in the future, and explore the
Star Trek
past. If you
enjoy
Best Destiny,
perhaps we'll do more of the past

...
in the
future.
And don't throw away any marching orders that fall
into your
hands. They might affect the path to your own best
destiny.

Gregory Brodeur

USS

Enterprise

1701-A

United Federation of Planets Starship,

Constitution-Class

Naval Construction Contract 1701-A

Captain James T. Kirk, Commanding

"You'll retire with extraordinary honors and the
boundless gratitude

of an unfolding Federation. We have a real chance for
prosperity in

the galaxy... a large portion of that chance is due
to your vitality of

will, your fundamentally of purpose, and your belief in
us, Captain

Kirk."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I don't know
what to say."

On the starship's forward viewscreen, the president
of the

Federation took an uncustomary pause. His white
eyes never'

flickered within his whey complexion and the frame of
long,

chalk-white hair, but today hope did luminate in

them.
"still
could suggest something,"
he said,
"if you were willing."
An "aw-shucks" grin creased James Kirk's
face, and he fingered
the armrests of his command chair for one of the last times.
"Thank you again, sir," he said. "We've had our
time in the light.
It's time for others now."
The president offered his idea of a nod, barely a
movement at all.
His Deltan albinism made almost any expression
something only
the perceptive would notice.
"We shall speak again,"
he said,
"and privately raise a glass to
your career, sir, and to your officers. Starfleet
Command has
authorized Starbase One's interior occulting
light to flash in alter
nate white and gold, as salute to the
Enterprise.
I shall consider it my
privilege to sign your Bell Book personally in
note of arrival, as this
will be her last time coming in."
"When we return to Starbase One," Captain
Kirk pointed out.
"At your discretion. No authority will supersede your
own as to the
final cruise of the
Enterprise.
Enjoy it."
The president nodded his elegant shaggy head, those
alien eyes
seeming not to really see.
The screen suddenly went black. Only the audio
system operated
for a last few seconds, in the voice of an
official communications
person.
"United Federation of Planets, Office of the
President, Starbase One, out."
Captain James Kirk wagged a finger toward the
bridge communi
cations station, noted the acknowledgment, and settled
a little too
calmly back into his command chair.

"I want to speak to Mr. Scott," he said.
No one acknowledged him. No one wanted to.
Somehow protocol didn't fit just then. A moment later the
communication tie-in on
the command chair's armrest spoke for itself.
"Scott here, sir."
"Condition of the ship, Scotty."
"Aye, sir. We've got all damaged decks
evacuated and sealed off
and isolated priority repairs. Warp engines are
fine. Cosmetic repairs
can wait, but I'll have the ship's engineering up
to full integrity
within twenty hours."
The captain leaned an elbow on that armrest and lowered
his
voice. "Mr. Scott. . . you understand the ship is
being decommissioned upon our return to Starbase One."
"still
do, sir. But if Starfleet Command is going
to retire a space-
worthy
Enterprise
without my corpse rotting in her hull, I
guarantee they'll have pain doing it. I
intend to make them
go down on record as having decommissioned a
service-ready
starship."
Silence pooled on the bridge. There was no echo,
but there might
as well have been.
The captain was gazing at nothing, as though
preparing to follow
his vessel into that nothing. He and the chief engineer.
Their ship.
"I understand," he said. "You carry on, Mr.
Scott."
"Thank you, sir, I will and a half. Scott out."
The captain crossed his legs and leaned back as
though to digest
what he had heard, and what he had uttered back.
"Steady as she goes," he said to the helm before him.
On the quarterdeck behind him, a very thin man with eyes
the
color of water and hair that had gone merrily gray
felt his own
square features harden up. Dr. Leonard
McCoy had waited all his

life to become a country codger, and he was enjoying it. He could scowl openly at such exchanges. He could snarl at anybody, and not get hit in the mouth. With an aggravated frown he stepped sideways to the science station, as he had a hundred times before in years past,

muttered again to the same person who had heard his mutters those hundred times.

"What can we say to him, Spock?" McCoy began, easily loud enough for the captain to hear.

A figure straightened inside the science station cowl. The entire bridge seemed to inhale as the alien presence turned to the ship's fore. Small, alert eyes brushed the bridge, set in the triangular features of his face that McCoy had once regarded as hard, cold, built deliberately on angles. Sober and thrifty-that underpinned the study of being Vulcan.

How old was the Vulcan now? McCoy skimmed the medical records he kept handy in his mind and tried to equate Vulcan years with human years. Failed, as usual. They just didn't equate. Spock's straight hair, once stove-black, was now a dignified sealskin gray. His quill-straight brows were still dark, still angled up and away, but were shaggier than in his youth, though they still made the Vulcan look to McCoy as did all Vulcans-like tall, skinny bats with clothes on.

Add them to the one feature that had made Vulcans so hard to take seriously ... the elongated ears that came to points. McCoy had decided those ears were the reason Vulcans had given up emotion. They couldn't stand being teased. Suddenly McCoy felt lucky to be standing beside this man.

Despite the years of mutual antagonism, he and Spock had been

through every form of effort, every kind of death, every kind of
life
together; each offered himself in sacrifice for the other time
after
time, and somehow they were both lucky enough to still be standing
there.

McCoy knew he was also lucky to be standing next
to the first
Vulcan in Starfleet, the first of what had turned
out to be many. The
Vulcans had always tried to be unimpressible and
self-contained, but because of this one, they had changed their
minds.

Because of the young Spock, the impertinent radical who
had
shunned his race's Olympian seclusion,
Vulcans no longer prided
themselves on inaccessibility. They'd discovered that
Starfleet,
though founded by those silly humans and still primarily
run by
them, wasn't quite the lawless fluster the Vulcans had
assigned
humanity in the past, and that it didn't cause
concussion to the art
of being Vulcan. In fact, they'd found out that
Starfleet emblemized
law in settled space, was counted upon by dozens of
defenseless
worlds in a touch-and-go galaxy. The Federation was the
great castle
that protected them, and Starfleet was its
kighthood.

Even enemies knew it. That was why there had been
affluent
peace for so long. Starfleet insisted upon it, had the
muscle to back
it up.

The Vulcans were now proud, yes, proud to be part
of Starfleet, to
actively defend the Federation, to participate in the
strength that
prosperity insisted upon, and they too bristled when that
path was
blocked. Those who had once turned their very straight
backs on
Spock in his Starfleet uniform now nudged their own
sons and
daughters into Starfleet Academy, eager to see
them answer a bugle
call they themselves had once rejected, and to see them

participate
in the spaceborne operations a thriving interstellar
community
simply had to have gone on.
Yes, things had changed.
Though he was standing right beside McCoy, Spock also
didn't
bother to mutter, or even to lower his voice, on the
bridge. This
critical deck was built for acoustic perfection,
so no order went
unheard, no whisper unconsidered, no buzz
unanswered.
On top of that, there was the captain's damned
alertness. Like a
leopard at rest.
"What can we say," McCoy sighed, "to make it
easy to watch all
the
Enterprise
fade into history?"
Spock shifted his weight. "The Constitution-class
starship is no
longer considered state-of-the-art in
patrolstexploration craft, Doctor. That
accolade now goes to the Excelsior-class."
"Excelsior-class," McCoy grumbled.
"Looks like a swollen-up party balloon at a
Starfleet shoving-off party."
The captain glanced at them, stood up, and casually
circled his
command chair, running his hands along the soft
back.
"All things change, gentlemen," he said. "All
things grow. It's our
duty to be gracious."
He hesitated, gazing at the viewscreen and the
enormity of space.
"How would it look to the young," he added, "if we
botched our
final duty?"
USS
Bill of Rights
United Federation of Planets Starship,
Excelsior-Class
Naval Exploration Extension 2010
Captain Alma Anne Roth, Commanding
"Contact Starfleet! Level One distress,
immediately!"
"Trying, Captain! No power on normal
channels! No power at

all!"

"Then use abnormal channels! Get a message out before it's too late!" "Aye, aye-switching to telemetry!" James Kirk's hair had gone darker with age instead of lighter, as had his temperament, yet he still bore the tan of a sailor and the browns of a fox-acorn, walnut, toast, bone, berry-in his cheeks and hair. He had always been on the foliage side of the color wheel.

It was dark in the forest today.

"Jim," McCoy attempted, "just because you're retiring from command doesn't mean you have nothing to give. The Federation doesn't want you to retire from Starfleet-nobody does."

"Nobody?" James Kirk responded. "I've lived not only a good life, but a great one. I've cheated death a hundred times in the field, beaten the perils of space, and now the people who were kids when I was in my prime are in their prime. It's their turn. I can't take mine and theirs too. I've spent my time behind a desk and in front of a classroom, and neither of those are for me, Bones. They're decommissioning this entire class of starship in favor of the Excelsior-class heavier design, and without a ship

...
the best part of my life is over."

His two closest friends regarded him somberly. They were seeing all the changes in each other, and not so much how things had stayed the same. They were still together after twenty-five years, yes.

Their legacy was approaching what appeared to be a close. They had all learned to look forward to retirement.

St. . .

"I'm going to be an officer and a gentleman about it," Kirk said.

He didn't look up at them. "It's time to lower

the pennant, spend
time on the family farm, rediscover old friends

...

go out on the
oceans of my home planet and do some
serious adventure of
another kind."

Not even his two closest friends could decipher how
deeply he
meant those words.

"Captain, excuse me," Uhura said. Long
familiarity with her
deep, clear voice told them she was disturbed.

Her chocolate
features and those fashion-runway eyes gave the
bridge a flavor of
the exotic. "I'm picking up an echo of
communication from
Bill of Rights."

Kirk angled away from Spock and McCoy as
though he was glad
to be changing course.

"Are we authorized to intercept that?" he asked.

"No, sir, not technically."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Sir, it's coming in on the coded emergency
channel, over
telemetry," she enunciated carefully. "I'd
say their audio was down,
except that it's coming over the lowest grade
signal capacity. In the Academy, communications
students sometimes refer to that as the
"panic channel" because it reads like a last
resort. Permission to
accept and decipher?"

"Quickly." His brows came together and he spoke
fast. Suddenly

everyone who knew him was tense. They'd seen his
instincts at

work before. "Well? Haven't you got-was

"Sir-receiving an SOS from them!"

She worked more swiftly as stillness came over the
bridge, leaving
only the hums, chirrs, and buzzes of her systems
at work and the

sounds of a starship's bridge on automatic,
running the ship as best it could while the people were
busy-waiting-worried.

Then suddenly she wailed, "I've lost them!"

"Sir?" a young ensign interrupted from the starboard
upper deck

as she peered into her viewer. She frowned into her screen and didn't say anything else. But there was something in that one syllable.

And an instant later-

"Captain! Antiproton flushback!"

The head of every experienced person on the bridge suddenly shot around at her, as though she had cursed at a kitten-then killed it.

"Shields up!" Kirk barked at the helm, then spun around.

"Spock, confirm that!"

The Vulcan was already laying his large hands upon the long-range sensor panel on the quarterdeck, while the other bridge officers were scrambling to go into pre-alert, as always when the commander ordered shields.

Kirk wasn't waiting. He dropped into the command chair on one thigh and snapped, "Chekov, lay in a course for the source of the flushback and engage!" Then he regained control over his tone and

added, "Prepare for emergency warp speed."

The compactly built Russian at the helm pursed his lips but kept his voice in control. "Emergency warp, aye." "Flushback confirmed, Captain," Spock reported. There was dark trouble in his tone now.

Kirk slammed his chair's comm link with a fist.

"Engineer Scott, prepare our shields for forward-intense against antiproton

flushback." Then he cast back at Uhura,

"All hands on deck. Code one emergency."

She didn't nod, but went straight to her controls.

Her voice thrummed through the huge vessel with an evenness that somehow intensified the urgency.

"This is the bridge. . . all hands on deck. .

. all hands on

deck . . . code one emergency, repeat, code one emergency!"

The emergency alert panels began to flash a

steely electric-blue
light. As it flashed, a familiar voice plunged
up like a Celtic
drumroll through the system.
"Scott to bridge! Repeat and verify that
forward-intense order. Did
you say flashback?"
"Kirk here, Scotty. Verified."
"Aye, sir!"
"Uhura, close all outgoing communications. Log
the Perils of
Space Rescue Response Clause, the time,
stardate, circumstances,
and decision to act without headquarters contact."
"Aye, sir, logging."
"Sensors on long-range, wide dispersal, Mr.
Chekov."
"Long-range wide, aye."
McCoy frowned. He knew those tones too well
from people with
whom he'd spent a half century on the not
particularly welcoming
doormats of space.
"What's going on?" he asked.
No one paid any attention to him.
He was used to that too.
Careful not to trip or bump anyone as the bridge
erupted into a
flurry, the doctor moved cautiously back up
to the quarterdeck and
went sideways to the science station and its poised
alien officer.
There, he leaned on an elbow to make sure he was
out of the way,
and lowered his voice.
"Spock, what does it mean?" he asked.
"I've never heard of
antiproton flashback before-was
"Flashback," Spock corrected him. His mind
was on more than
just the word, yet he frowned as he said it. Even through
Spock's
poise, McCoy could tell it was a hated word.
"You haven't heard it, Doctor," he said
heavily, "because anti-
proton flashback cannot occur in nature."
"When
can
it occur?"
Spock straightened then, posture tight, and looked
at the forward

screen as the ship shot into warp speed, and the galaxy
blew by. He
gazed at the long streaks of distortion as though all were
new and very frightening. His angular brows drew
tightly inward, and for some reason too personal to be
voiced, he gazed at the back of James
Kirk's head, the back of a captain intensely
occupied with
whatever lay before them.

The answer, even in its Vulcan reserve, was
bitter.

"To our science ... only in the explosion of warp
engines."

Silence clacked between them. A sentence like that demanded
silence, murdered for it, thrived upon it.

But this was a starship's bridge, and something was on their
wind.

Silence couldn't reign here.

Voices, voices, all over, from the depths.

Sounds. Technology leaping to the call of men and
women. Men and women leaping to the call of trouble.

Reports. Different voices. Each its own
purpose.

"Science decks checking in, Captain. All
hands ready."

"Engineering reports all hands on deck, sir."

"At warp two, Captain. Chief engineer
signals ready for emergen
cy acceleration on your signal."

The captain's voice.

"Emergency warp speed."

"Emergency warp, aye ..."

The ship began a low whine, from her bowels.

"Warp three ... warp four ..."

"Emergency jump," the captain said. "Go to warp
nine."

A pause. A nervous confirmation.

The surge of speed, eruptions of successive
warping, without

pause, without rest-

crack, crack, crack, crack.

"Warp nine, Captain. Stressed, but holding."

"Go to yellow alert."

"Yellow alert, aye!"

"Yellow alert, yellow alert

...

a

hands to emergency

stations... yellow alert, yellow alert

..."

Part One

DEAD RECKONING

ONE

Tension on the bridge could have been lifted and carried.

It would have cast the people into chaos, except for the anchor of

the captain's voice. The captain on any ship was the only reason the

crews could ever sleep or eat, for no one can sleep or eat where there isn't the anchor.

With that anchor on board, no storm was too bad, no fog too

thick, no silence too damning.

Knowing the ship around them was screaming through space at warp nine, piercing through increasing waves of antiproton flush and heading not away from that horrifying fact of death but right into it, the crew clung to the captain's voice.

"Mr. Chekov, project our course and report what's there in a funnel of fifty light-years in diameter.

Specify any outposts, Federation or otherwise, areas of contention, reported storms, and call up manifests of any shipping that has passed through that area in the past ten days."

"Aye, sir, projecting the course. I'll have that for you in a few moments."

"Short moments, Mr. Chekov."

"Aye, sir."

On the quarterdeck, the ensign who had first noticed the

flushback swallowed obvious guilt at having been the bearer of

awful news. Wasn't her name Dimitrios? Demarris? De-something.

McCoy knew that look, had carried it plenty of times himself.

With nothing to do-yet-in this emergency, he stepped away

from the science station and over to the other side of the bridge to

the young woman.

She was trying to get some moisture back into her mouth while she tracked the surging waves of flushback and tried to pinpoint

their source. Not an exact science at all, if her expression was any

clue. Her hands were shaking.

"Don't drink coffee," McCoy suggested.

The ensign blinked, glared at him, confused. Then she turned back to her screen and squinted into it.

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Don't drink any coffee until whatever's happening isn't happening anymore."

She bit her lip, then only said, "Thank you, sir."

McCoy shifted his feet, watching the bridge personnel move tightly at their stations and the lights and panels of the bridge crackle with activity. A ship at warp nine was plenty active.

"It'll make you nervous," he added, "and you'll have to-

was "Yes, sir," the ensign snapped. "I understand. Thank you."

She wanted him to go away, and Leonard McCoy wasn't the go-away type.

"What's bothering you, Ensign ..."

"Devereaux, sir."

She swallowed a couple more times, resisted the urge to glance at

him and damn him for his doctor's intuition, but then she lowered her voice and let it out.

"If there's something out there that made an Excelsior-class ship blow up," the ensign said, "what chance do we have?"

McCoy offered the girl an annoyed glare, then swaggered a step closer to her, took her elbow, and turned her away from her console.

She gawked at him as if he were crazy.

The doctor didn't care that he was interrupting her work. Didn't care that she had been the one to tell everybody that a sister starship might have just been blown to bits. He was concerned about something else.

He nodded down toward the main deck, to the command chair,

and to the man in it.

"Kid," he said,

"that is our chance."

Ensign Devereaux looked down there too. Through his grip on her elbow, McCoy could feel some of her trembling go away as she

watched James Kirk in his command chair.
There was just something about Captain Kirk.
The ensign cleared her throat, licked her lips,
and turned back
toward her station. Halfway there she paused, and
gazed at Dr.
McCoy. She was still afraid, but not in quite the same
way.
"Thank you, sir," she said. "I won't forget."
At the navigation station on the upper deck, Commander
Chekov
straightened from his backbreaking hover and turned
to look at the
heart of the bridge also.
"Captain ," the Russian said, speaking around his own
accent as
much as possible. "I have put up the merchant marine
manifests on
this screen for you to review. There are very few, sir.
And there are
no storms, no contested areas, no border disputes,
no reported hazards in the specified funnel of
space, no Starfleet outposts,
no unfriendly settlements, and only two star
systems within a
hundred light-years. One is uninhabited, and on
the other there is
only a Federation archaeological excavation on a
small outside
planet."
Captain Kirk came up out of his chair. He had
always had trouble
sitting when there was action going on.
"Name the project," he ordered.
"I have never heard of it before, sir," came the
clipped answer.
"It is logged as
...
Faramond."
If McCoy was any judge of people he knew and people
he didn't
know, no one else on board had heard of that place
either. One
glance around the bridge told him that.
But then he looked down again at the captain.
On the face of the man he knew so well,
McCoy saw a glitter of
dangerous recognition.
The captain turned like a policeman about
to make an arrest. He
paced behind his command chair, caressing it. He glared

forward
into the rage of warp nine as stars and space debris
blistered past
the main viewscreen. His brows drew together and his
eyes narrowed. A fire came into them which his friends thought talk
of
retirement might already have killed.
Though he watched the screen before him, he was gazing
into the
past. His lips parted and he spoke, but not to anyone
there.

"Faramond . . ."

TWO

Forty-five years earlier. . .

A rope footbridge over the swollen North
Skunk River,

Mahaska County, Iowa

"Stick with me and you'll get the ride of your
lives."

A surly clutch of teenagers clung to those words as
tightly as they

clung to the tatters of the ages-old jute

footbridge. Beneath them,

the swollen Skunk River lazily whispered

dare you, dare you, dare

you

and suggested they fall on in.

"Don't look down! Nobody look down."

Immediately the grunts and complaints went silent.

Nobody wanted to get chewed out by the stocky boy

with the sawdust-

colored curls and the stingers in his eyes.

"Keep moving," he added. "No looking down."

"It'll be our luck a tourist tram floats by and

sees us," Zack

Malkin said. He wanted to scratch his neck, but

he didn't dare let

go. "We're on the Tramway's historical

trail, you know."

"They won't."

"What if they do?" Lucy Pogue spat. Her

soggy, bloodshot eyes

were wide and her hands twitched on the prickly

ropes. "You didn't

think of that did you, genius?"

"We'll wave at 'em, all right?" their leader

snapped, scowling

from under the brim of his grandfather's touring cap. With a

shift of his shoulders he rearranged his high school

jacket to free his arms a little. "Shut up and keep

moving. One step at a time. And don't look down."

"I don't like this, Jimmy," said a brittle, fragile boy who had trouble breathing. He didn't look down, but he did glance back over the third of the walkway they'd already crossed.

"Nobody told us we'd have to cross something like this."

"There's going to be a lot out there that nobody tells us about.

We've got to find out for ourselves," their leader said, "before it's too late."

Tom Beauvais squinted into the sun and cracked,

"You mean before we get caught."

"We could just sit at home," Jimmy shot back.

"Be real safe that way."

The only person ahead of him was a girl whose powdery complexion barely picked up the light of the western sun. Her small eyes were like clear gelatin-hardly any color but lots of shine-and they were tightened with fear. Her cheeks were large, the shape and color of eggshells, and on a less swanlike creature might have been ghastly.

Shivering, she murmured, "Jimmy ..."

"Keep moving," he told her softly. "Don't try to hurry. We're not going to move any faster than you can go. That's why I had you go first. I'm right here next to you, Emily. Nothing can possibly happen."

Their muscular leader curled his fingers around the jute and

packtwine ropes and willed the sixty-foot-long footbridge to hold up.

It stretched from one cliff to another, east to west over the river. It had two sides for handholds and a walkway on the bottom that once had been tight and safe-a

long time ago. Now it was rotting. An adventure, or a death wish.

Jimmy gritted his teeth at it. It'd been there for

two decades, so it
could just stay there another ten minutes. He'd argued
them down
about how this was the best way to cross the Skunk without
getting
caught, and how the authorities would be after them by now,
and anything else he could tell them to keep them in
line. He tried to
make this look easy, to pretend the old ropes
weren't scratching his
palms and to act light on his feet.
Giving the others his voice to concentrate on, he
kept talking.
"Always think four or five moves ahead. That's the
trick."
"If it's such a good trick," Tom countered, "why
didn't you think
of one of us going across this wreck first to see if it would
hold up?"
His brow in a permanent furrow, Jimmy tightened
his eyes and
tried to slip around the truth. "Better this way.
Even distribution of
weight."
He held his breath, hoping nobody would notice
how little sense that made. He squinted into the west and
ignored the sun's glow off
his own peach-fuzzed cheeks.
Peach fuzz. That was his father's phrase. Peach
fuzz, baby face,
greenhorn. Damn his cheeks for fitting that
description. Deliberate
ly he looked away from the sunlight.
"We're pioneers," he said. "We're going
straight up the Oregon
Trail, just like the people who settled this country and put
in the
railroads and the towns like Riverside across this part of
Iowa. Only
instead of horses or steel, we're hopping the
Stampede."
Though he had played for team spirit, his only reward
was a nasty
grunt from Tom. "Sure. We're going to hop
onto the fastest train in North America while
it's doing nine hundred kpm five
centimeters
above the ground,
in
a tube. That'll be a whole new definition of
'friction.'"

"Glad you're paying attention, Beauvais."
"Glad you can fly, Kirk."
Jimmy shot a glare at him. Warning.
"Even the Stampede stops once in a while," he
said. "All we have
to do is make Omaha at loading time and we're
aboard. Next stop,
Oregon, and next after that... South America."
"What're we gonna do when we get to South
America?" Quentin Monroe asked.
"Anything we damned well please." Jimmy
glanced past Lucy
and Zack again to see how Quentin was doing, and hoped
Beauvais
would look after the little guy.
Quentin's brown face was ink-spotted with big
black freckles,
enhanced by his spongy black hair and perpetually
worried eyes,
which in this light looked like two more inkspots.
Jimmy hadn't
wanted to bring him along. Quentin was only fourteen
and every
body else in the gang was sixteen, he'd never
held his own in a fight,
and he hadn't even been to the city, but there was something
about
the frail black boy that said I'm okay, I'll
grow, I'll learn.
So here he was, on the great adventure with the big
kids, and Jimmy had to live with the decision. There was
no turning back
now.
"Maybe we'll become archaeologists," he said.
He tightened his
brow and nodded in agreement with himself. Inch by inch he
urged
them toward the middle of the rope walk. "Hack through
rain
forests looking for the ancient Mayan city-states.
Find out why they
went extinct after a thousand years of-was
"They found those."
Jimmy stopped. So did everybody else. The
bridge shuddered.
"What?" he snapped. "What'd you say?"
Quentin clung to the ropes and blinked. "They found
them. The
Mayan palaces. A long time ago. You know .
.. how the twentieth-
century archaeologists found lance heads in the

walls, and later they proved that the city was under siege, and how the siege forced them to do all their farming behind the walls, and how the crop yields fell off, and how-was

"Where'd you hear all this?"

"It was ... in our history of science book."

"Books!" Jimmy spat out. "You're going to believe what you read in some book? Why waste your time with a book when you can get out and live!"

Quentin fell silent, ashamed that he had wasted his time.

Jimmy shook his head and barked, "Keep moving." Suddenly an arm of wind swept downriver, pushing the bridge with its enormous hand. The ropes started whining and the whole footbridge began to sway.

"Damn, I almost dropped my pack!"

Zack complained, and tried to rearrange his load.

"Don't do that," Jimmy said. "You've got the fake ID'S."

"How'd you get those, Zack?" Quentin asked.

"Tapped into the voting records for people who hadn't voted in five years. Figured they were long gone, so we took the ID'S of any children they had who were the right age five years ago to be eighteen now. Took their numbers, and bing-we're legal."

"Damn. Good idea."

"It was Jimmy's idea. I just did the hardware."

"Told you," Jimmy said. "You don't have to worry about anything. I've got it all stitched up."

Lucy grimaced. "These ropes stink! What if they're rotten? What if they break? We'll die here like some goddamned trout in that rolling throw-up down there."

"We're only thirty feet over the water."

"Water can break your neck if you hit it at the wrong angle," Zack provided.

Lucy let her lips peel back and broke the looking-down rule. "My astrologer told

me not to do anything dangerous this week. I

knew

I

should've paid attention to the signs-now look where I am."

With a stern scowl Jimmy said, "Don't believe in it."

Zack nudged Lucy another sidestep west and called to Jimmy over the wind as it howled between them.

"You don't believe in destiny?"

"Didn't say that," Jimmy called. "Said I don't believe in stvedestiny."

"Why not?"

"Because somebody else has to tell me what mine is. That means

somebody else is in charge. Means somebody else knows more

about me than I do. Malkin, see this main line?"

He put his hand on

the only braided line on the side of the rope bridge. "That's the one

you hang on to. No, the other one. Look at me.

This

one."

Lucy's voice sounded a little steadier when she spoke again. "I

know there's something about the stars and when you're born and all. I've

seen

enough. I've had crazy things happen that can't be coincidence. Like when they advised me to start packing a knife,

and the next week I had to use it."

Glad he had managed to distract her, Jimmy

said, "The stars care

whether Lucy Pogue carries a knife? We know what stars are. We

know that's one." He spared a hand and poked a forefinger at the

bright golden sky. "Am I supposed to believe

some arrangement of things in the sky makes life just a package deal? A frame-up all

set

before we're born? What if your mother trips on a pig like mine did

and you're born a month early? Which date sets destiny-my

birthday, or a month later? Which stars should I

look at? A batch of

hot atoms a billion light-years away has
some influence on my
future?" He snorted.
Some of the gang nodded. Others didn't. So he
continued talking
as long as they were moving.
"Destiny and predestiny are two different things.
Predestiny is
pointless. If it's true, we might as well
turn around right now, go back to Riverside, and sit
on our bulkheads, because whatever's
going to happen's gonna happen anyway."
"How's destiny any different?" Tom Beauvais
challenged.
A crooked grin danced on Jimmy's face as he
leered back at them.
"That's the one
I'm
in charge of."
From the west, the sun buttered his apricot curls and
sweat
glittered on his brow. To the others, he looked like a
demon with a
license to smile. If anyone in the group wondered
how he had talked
them into running away, a moment like this snuffed the thought.
Something in the ballistics of Jimmy Kirk was tough
enough and
vivid enough to keep them going across the shabby old rope
bridge,
stepping one by one over their better judgments.
Zack coughed as the wind filled his lungs, and he
forced himself
to move along the ropes, to stay distracted, and not
to look down. "Sounds like plain luck to me."
"It sounds like that, but it's not," Jimmy said. He
held out one
hand, fingers spread, as though gripping the imaginary
brick with
which he would lay his foundation. "Luck is blind chance.
Destiny . . .

you
build."
He eyed them, one by one, even Beauvais, until
the belief
returned to each face.
Then he said, "Move along. Twenty more feet and
we're there."
The river whispered below. They moved slowly toward the
west

bank, a few inches at a time, each burdened with a backpack of survival supplies and foodstuffs.

Lucy's voice showed she was trying to keep control as she asked,

"How are we going to find our way to Omaha?"

Jimmy helped Emily find a handhold. "Dead reckoning."

"Dead what?"

"Basic sail training."

"Who's gonna sail?" Tom cracked. "We're going on a cargo carrier!"

"It's basic seamanship, Beauvais. Get used to it. The captain's going to expect us to know this stuff. The STD formula. Speed, time, distance. If you know your constant speed and distance, like how far you'll go and how fast, you can figure how long it'll take. If you know your time and speed, you can figure how far-was

"Maybe we should go to space instead," Zack suggested.

"Space? Cold and empty. We got it all right here."

He dismissed the subject with his tone and twisted forward, watching Emily's tiny feet custodially. He moved his own feet carefully after hers, along the miserable knots and fraying lines that once had been sturdy enough to carry teams of Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts across the Skunk River. Long abandoned, the sixty-foot ropewalk had been left up for sentimental value as part of the Tram view of the Oregon Trail. He and Zack had worked for almost an hour breaking through the protective grating that kept hikers off the old footbridge. Zack could break into anything. That's how they'd gotten the food in the backpacks-it was how they'd gotten the backpacks. That's how they'd finagled tickets for the Stampede Tubetrain.

All they had to do was get to Omaha without being spotted for

runaways, and they'd never be seen again.
Jimmy shook his head and forced himself to stop thinking about what they'd stolen. What choice did they have? They hadn't been given anything, so they just had to take somebody else's. That was fair.
Snap
"Ah-ah-Jimmyyyyy!"
The shriek cracked across the ravine at the same moment as the rope bridge waggled hideously to the snap of parting jute-and
Quentin went over backward. His hand clawed uselessly at a broken line, then at open air.
Lucy screamed, driving the needle of terror under all their skin.
Jimmy cranked around in time to see Quentin bounce against the ropes on the other side of the bridge and bend them almost all the way down to the level of the walkway. Part of the braided walkway caught the small of Quentin's back and bounced him stiffly, but finally held. And there he was, hanging.
The boy was arched backward over the outermost strands, his upper body in midair, hanging halfway out over the greedy water.
His loaded pack yanked at his shoulders and held his arms straight out sideways. The whole bridge wobbled back and forth, back and forth, in a sickening bounce.
None of them did any more than freeze in place, clinging to their own ropes.
"Nobody move!" Jimmy bellowed. "I'll do it!"
"Goddammit!" Beauvais shouted. His face twisted. "This was your stupid idea! We could've just taken the long way, over ground, but no! We had to do it Kirk's way! Why does anybody listen to a blowfish like you!"
"Cram it, bulkhead. I'm busy." Jimmy unkinked his fingers from the scratchy ropes and forced himself to move back toward Lucy.

"Please, Jimmy," Emily murmured, "don't let him fall..."

Jimmy pressed her hand just before she was out of reach.

"I'm not going to let him fall. Nobody else move. Quentin, hold still."

They were only a couple of stories up, but Jimmy knew it was enough to kill. Below, the muddy water chewed and gurgled. Jimmy maneuvered around Lucy, then around Zack, careful not to dislodge either of them from their hold. The ropes shivered, but no more parted or frayed.

"It'll be all right," he said steadily.

"Everybody stay calm. He just put his foot on the wrong braid. Nothing else is breaking."

"Tell the ropes," Beauvais snarled.

Jimmy's face flamed, and he stopped moving toward Quentin.

"I'm telling the damn ropes!" he bellowed.

"Leave me alone and let me do this."

Beauvais rearranged his grip and muttered, "Okay, okay . . . just get him."

Below them Quentin dangled backward, his hips tangled in the old ropes, and gasped as though he couldn't remember how to breathe. "J-J-Jimmy-was

"I'm almost there. Don't whine."

Jimmy reached Quentin and lowered himself to the braided cordage, his own breath coming in rags. Old tendons wobbled and grated against the cross-braids, threatening to open beneath him.

By the time he got above the dangling boy, his palms were bleeding.

Quentin's left foot was caught between two braids that had twisted as he went backward. If he turned his foot now, it would slip through and he would be tossed out like a circus performer on a springboard. No one wanted to point that out; they all saw it.

A finger, a limb, a joint at a time, Jimmy lowered himself to his hands and knees onto the walkway of the bridge. The old jute cut into the flesh of his kneecaps right through his clothing. He

bit his
lip, ignored the pain, and searched for a secure
position over
Quentin's entangled legs.
There wasn't one.
The ropes quivered defiantly under him, refusing
to cooperate. Ultimately he arranged himself on
his stomach across the braids,
right beside Quentin's leg. He shoved an arm through the
side ropes
of the bridge.
"Monroe, give me your hand."
Nothing happened. Spread halfway out in
open air, the younger
boy was muttering unintelligible sounds.
"Monroe, what are you doing?"
"P-p-praying."
"Well, do that later, will you? Give me your hand."
"I can't-move-was
Jimmy lowered his voice, literally made it darker,
grittier, meaner. "This is one of those times when
you've got two possible
destinies, right?"
"Mmmm .. ."
"Pick the best one."
No one else breathed, no matter how the rising
wind pushed air
between their clenched teeth.
"Now!" Jimmy ordered.
A brown hand arched upward toward the sky. Jimmy
caught it,
and hauled.
"My arm! My arm!" Quentin bellowed as his body
cranked
sideways, upward.
Jimmy twisted his fingers into the boy's shirt
collar. "Beauvais,
take his backpack. The rest of you, keep
moving. Zack, you're in
charge."
"What? I don't want to be in chaise."
"You don't have any choice, do you?"
"This was your idea."
"Fine. Lucy can be in charge."
The bridge waggled.
"I don't want it either!" Lucy protested.
"We're more than halfway across!" Jimmy shouted.
"All you
have to do is go twenty more feet! How many decisions do
you have
to make?"

"I'll be in charge," Tom said as he slung the extra backpack over his shoulder.

Jimmy cranked upward the other way. "I didn't pick you!"

"We didn't "pick" you either."

"Yes, you did. This was all my plan."

"Some plan! We're not even out of Iowa and we're already in

trouble. You're all gas, Kirk."

"Look, any time you're ready to turn back-was

"Jimmy..."

The soft beck from above drifted down and silenced the dishar

mony.

Jimmy twisted back toward the others. "What is it, Emily?"

The girl stood with each narrow white hand on a side of the bridge, unable to push back her hair as the wind blew it forward

over her cheeks and into her eyes. "Quentin," she murmured.

"I know, I've got him," he grumbled, and returned his attention

to where it should have been.

Quentin's brown face had gone to clay by the time Jimmy hauled

him up and pulled his legs out of the ropes he'd gotten tangled in.

He had both eyes knotted shut and refused to open them until

Jimmy threatened to leave him in the middle of the bridge.

Then Jimmy took him by the shoulders and almost broke

shoulder blades. "Quentin, this is how it is," he said. "We're going

on. It's just rope. We're not going to be beaten by rope. Are you with me?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He

straightened, placed Quentin's

hands on the side support lines, nodded toward the bank, and

started picking his way westward again. He didn't look back.

Quentin would follow, or be left out there.

But through his boots he felt the pressure on the braided rope behind him, and knew he would win that bet.

On the bank Tom Beauvais was the last to jump
onto solid
ground. They turned to watch Jimmy bring Quentin
all the way in.
Jimmy jumped onto the hard, rocky ground,
pulled Quentin up
behind him, then stepped aside as Zack and Lucy
came forward to
help Quentin stumble onto the grass.
When he turned and looked up at Tom
Beauvais, there was
mercury in his eyes. He took two steps forward,
and
boom-
A roundhouse right pitched Tom's head backward,
and he staggered but didn't go down. He gathered himself
and let fly a
rabbit punch to Jimmy's midriff, but Jimmy
saw the punch coming
in time to tighten up. He had the advantage of
not
being too lean.
His buff curls flickered, his brow drew in, his
eyes turned to
arrowheads, and the heels of his hands struck Tom in the
shoulder
hollows. Another flash spun Tom around, and
Jimmy had his
challenger's wrist forced halfway up his spine.
Tom ground out a senseless protest and arched his
back, then
bellowed in pain.
Forcing the arm upward another inch, Jimmy asked,
"Your way
or my way?"
"Okay, okay, your way! Don't break
it!"
Jimmy shoved him off and dropped back a pace,
satisfied.
Holding his arm and swearing, Tom stumbled away.
"I'll break it next time," Jimmy said.
The others looked away from both boys, embarrassed
and unsure
about their adventure.
He pushed through the others to Quentin, and his entire
demeanor changed as he took Quentin by the shoulder
and said, "Take a deep breath. Now take another
one ... you did it. You beat it."
Quentin managed a nod.
Jimmy turned him to look at the shaggy rope
bridge as it waved in

the wind as though to say good-bye. "There it is

...

everything you

were afraid of. You went one step at a time and you trusted

somebody. Now it's all behind you. Understand?"

As Quentin looked at the rope bridge, at how far it was back to the other cliff, and at how far he had come, his trembling slowly faded away.

It

was

behind him. He never had to cross it again. He'd done it.

He cleared his throat and said, "You're stronger than you look."

Jimmy smiled. "All right, everybody, mount up.

Get your packs on and let's get moving.

We've got a schedule to keep."

He strode cockily away from Quentin, leaving most of the group

to stare at the back of his head, closed almost his whole hand around Emily's upper arm, and started walking her west.

"I," he said, "will take care of you. You don't need anybody. You

don't need your teachers, you don't need your parents, you don't need your sisters ... you need only me. By morning we'll be in Omaha. Then, four hours on the Stampede, and

zam-

we're in Bremerton, Oregon, signing on as deckhands of dynacarrier

Sir

Christopher Cockerell."

"How old you are?"

"Old enough to get here on our own."

"From where you come?"

"From over two thousand miles. You guess the direction. We

want to sign on. Work our passage."

As the six young people stood on the windy dock, looking very

small, oafish, and overwhelmed beside the

58,000-ton dynacarrier,

the German first mate gazed down on them from far above. The

ship's rail was two stories up, and he wasn't

going to waste time

going down to the dock to talk to these children, no matter how they

had demanded audience with an "officer." Suddenly he wished he could be wearing a uniform instead of denim and deck shoes. That would be funny. He could scare them even more.

He paused to light a cigar, shoved back his shaggy yellow hair, and tried not to laugh. Only two of the teenagers looked fit for duty at sea.

The others were ... uncertain. He could see it in their eyes.

"You got your mama's okay to come here?" Without a pause the boy shot back, "You got yours?"

The mate paced a few steps.

"This is no toy boat," he said. "What will you do on big merchant ship?"

"Whatever it takes," said the boy with the chamois curls who appeared to speak for all. He stood with one foot on a piling, leaning forward on that knee, boiling with the know-it-all cockiness of youth.

The first mate sucked on his cigar and strode a few feet along the ship's rail, turned casually away to get that smile out of his cheeks,

then faced them again and paused. "Deckhands?"

"That's right," the boy said.

"What do you know about a dynacARRIER? What I tell the captain I am bring on his ship?"

"You can tell him it's got a hull design that can be adjusted in sections by the navigation computer, and that she carries harvested crab, shrimp, and fish from the continental hatcheries to the statis outposts so they can be preserved and sent to our colonies in space.

Tell him she's got telescoping masts with duckwing stabilizers that fold back in harbors and expand on the open sea. Robotics do most of the work and that she goes out of the harbor on antigravs and you turn off the antigravs and settle into the open water, because somebody figured out that cargo carriers don't have to be fast, just efficient. And tell him he's got six apprentices who want to learn to

run the robotics."

The first mate wasn't particularly impressed, but he was amused.

The boy had a belittling tone in his voice and an uncharming bitterness in his eye, but he'd obviously done his homework, prepared for this moment.

Cheap labor. Hmmm ...

"What you want for pay?"

"I told you," the boy said. "Passage, berths, food... and no questions."

Real cheap.

The first mate shrugged with his expression.

"I see what I can do."

Down on the dock Jimmy repressed any sign of victory and kept a stiff scowl on his face. He was sure the others were amazed.

Deliberately he didn't look at them.

"How can you know all that stuff, Jimmy?" Quentin asked. "How

did you know how to get us here on the train? It was a great trip! I

want to go on that train again someday, don't you, everybody? I

can't believe all the stuff you know, Jimmy!"

Jimmy narrowed his eyes and gazed up at the looming panorama

that was their future—a red and gray sea monster stretching across

their entire field of vision, loaded to the gunwales with ocean

harvest, and rumbling.

"It's my business to know," he crowed.

Quentin appeared in his periphery. "What I mean is

...

how can

you know if you don't read any books?"

Color flared in Jimmy's cheeks.

He buried his embarrassment in a cough and brought his foot

down off the piling. He felt the heat in his face and turned away

quickly to hide it. Above, three sea gulls circled, whistling with

laughter.

"Well," he pushed out, "you ... gotta read the right books."

He buried his blushing complexion by fussing with supplies and packs they'd dumped a few feet back on the dock.

"Jimmy?"

"Yeah?" He straightened suddenly, and found himself looking into Lucy's overused, overmade-up, over-everythinged face. It took some hard looking to see past the cake and lipstick and see she was still young. He lowered his voice. "What's the matter, Lucy?"

"You didn't tell certain people that this son of a bitch would be so big,"

she said. "There was nothing like this in Riverside."

"That's the point," Jimmy said firmly. "We're not in Iowa anymore, Toto."

"Why do we have to go on the ocean? I don't want to barf all the way to South America. Why can't they just fly cargo around?"

He felt the eyes of the others on him. Answers.

They always wanted answers. Reasons to keep doing what they had decided to do.

Then he would give them reasons.

"You want to know why we don't fly?" he began.

"If you're at the bottom of a well and you want to get to the other side of the well, do you climb all the way to the top, then walk around, then climb all the way down again?"

Lucy snarled. "Oh, sure."

"Why wouldn't you?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "Because it'd be brain-dead."

"Because it'd be a brain-dead waste of energy, right?"

"What's that got to do with this?"

"Earth's at the bottom of a well of gravity.

If you want to move a half-million tons of harvested seafood, you don't use up energy lifting it thirty thousand feet in the air just to bring it down to the same level later, do you?"

"I guess not."

"That's why we don't fly cargo around."

"Hey! You, down there!"

He and Lucy turned, as did the others, looked up, and saw the first mate grinning down at them with a weird, devious glint in his eye.

"Hey! Captain say he won't notice if you come on board. Then we get a look at you."

"Attention, Cockerell!

This is Port Authority. You are being detained on suspicion of illegally transporting minors into international waters. Put your engines in neutral, fall off your course, and prepare to be boarded."

Garish fog-cutting spotlights jabbed from the Port Authority

hovercraft as it hissed toward the dynacARRIER.

Its aircatcher

quivered like a sea slug's skirt.

The big hovercraft was dwarfed by the dynacARRIER, but there was

no doubt as to who was in charge.

At the

Cockerelfs

bridge rail, the captain frowned at his first mate

and said, "Damn you, Klein. These deckhands you brought on

board-have they brought false identifications we can point at?"

"They all claim to be eighteen years

old. I saw the cards, with

pictures," the German responded. Then he grinned. "Just like last time."

"Stick to the story. Where are these children?"

The mate grinned wider, crookedly. "In the galley ... scrubbing mouse shit from the corners."

The captain grunted. "Hmm. Thought they would be on sail

computers, and they end up scrubbing-who is that!"

He pressed

forward against the upper deckhouse rail and peered down onto the

deck of the hovercraft as it came alongside their boarding ladder.

"What is Starfleet doing here!"

Before the mate could answer, the captain was on the stairs to the

lower deck.

"Contact the galley! Lock up those children!" he

shouted as he
dropped to the deck. He didn't wait for the
mate's confirmation,
but just hoped the ship's comm was buzzing.
The captain met the hovercraft, having
worked down only part of the dread on his stubbly
face-if only he'd shaved today! He barely
managed to choke out a civil greeting to the
Starfleet Security
Division team as they stepped aboard.
Three men and two women, neat as a picket fence,
none
particularly amused or affording his ship the usual
visitors' appreci
ation.
They weren't there to visit.
The highest-ranking officer was a muscular man with
iron-red
hair and no fun in his face, who obviously took
this situation
personally.
"Captain," the officer said, "you picked up six
teenagers in
Bremerton, just outside of the naval base. Where
are they?"
"In custody, Lieutenant!" the captain said
quickly. He pointed at
a little coffee station near the middle of the ship. "We
put them in
the midships deckhouse as soon as we saw
that their identifications
were fake. We didn't know when we hired them-was
"Save it, Captain," was the growling response.
"And I'm a
commander."
He tapped his rank insignia with a forefinger.
"You can take it up with the Coast Guard," he said.
"They'll be
here in ten minutes to lodge charges against you and your
parent
company for antagonizing the laws of your host
government and for
illegal international transport of minors. This
practice is going to
stop. You're going to have to pay the competitive price
for consent
ing adult labor, and that's it. Now," he added,
"where are those
kids?"
Sweating and turning purple, the captain snapped his
fingers at

the mate and shouted, "Get them!"
"Bringing them now!" the mate called instantly.
Coming toward them were several crewmen of the dynaship,
flanking the teenagers, all of whom were
particularly grim. There'd
been a fight. Two of the
Cockerelfs
crewmen were dabbing at
bruises on their faces. Another was holding his arm
and trying not
to wince.
The Starfleet commander squinted, then glowered. "There
are
only five. Where's the other one?"
Viciously the captain shouted, "That bulldog!
Where is he?"
One of the crewmen gestured back at the shabby white
deck
house. "He's fighting. Kicking and spitting.
Crazy. Like a barbarian
or something. Won't come out. No respect for
nothing."
Everyone paused, and sure enough the deckhouse was
physically
rattling. From inside, the muffled noises of contention
boomed. Bodies hit the old plank walls.
Coffee spilled under the door and
spread onto the deck. The door clapped and
squawked against its
hinges.
"Don't worry," the captain said, pulling at his
mustache. "We have control, don't worry . . .
we'll get him out."
But the commander gestured to the captain, the sailors, and
his
own people to stay behind, and he stepped forward himself.
"stHis get him out."
The teenagers averted their gazes and didn't meet
his eyes as he stalked past them.
The captain and his sailors gathered closely and
watched the Starfleet man get smaller on the
huge deck. The man's fists were
knotted, his thighs grinding like pistons, his head
forward and his
shoulders set, the wind picking up his
blood-colored hair and
Sopping it down with every step.
"I wouldn't want to be that bulldog boy," the
captain muttered.
One of the sailors rubbed a sore jaw and said, "I
wouldn't want to

be the Starfleet man."

The commander caught the deckhouse door handle at that instant and raked the door open so sharply that the others heard it shriek all the way across the deck. He disappeared inside.

Everyone winced in anticipation and waited, making bets inside their heads and wondering if they had time to make them out loud.

Almost at once the deckhouse stopped lurching.

Another ten seconds trickled by.

The deckhouse door scratched open, and three battered sailors

slogged out with obvious relief, happy to leave that under-aged

terror to somebody who was armed.

But suddenly there was no more thunder from inside.

Instead, the door opened one last time, and the Starfleet officer

stepped into the spilled coffee, dragging Jimmy

Kirk by the collar of

his jacket so hard that the jacket was nearly being pulled off.

The boy allowed himself to be hauled, but like a convict in the hands of an abusive guard. He refused

to look at his captor, only

blinked into the sea wind as he was made

to pass by his bitter

comrades and stand before the captain and the Starfleet

Security

team.

"You see the problem we had!" the captain insisted

to the

commander. "We saw the mistake, but too late!

Tell me-how did

you get him to come out? We had to fight! It was

terrible. You see my

men's faces-all scratched and hit. How did you

do it?"

The Starfleet man swallowed several times and stood braced

against the ocean wind, holding the boy's arm with each of them

standing as far from the other as possible.

"I didn't have a choice," he said. He looked

at the boy then, and spoke with a digging shame.

"He's my son."

THREE

"Petty theft... fraud ... shoplifting ...

leaving school without

permission ... falsifying identification ... breach
of public security ... unauthorized
use of private credit lines ... invasion
of official records and illegal use of accessed
information."

George Kirk's forefinger drummed on the
galley's scratched
tabletop, his face bayed by anger. With a flop of
oxblood hair
hanging in his face, brown eyes scowling, and his
scarlet and white

Security Division jacket collar bunched up
under his chin, he
looked like a mad rooster.

Under his boot soles, the rumble of the hovercraft
provided a
constant ugly drone. He was glad the two of them were
alone.

"You strike off to see the world and this is the gang you
follow? Lucy Pogue? Her juvenile record
didn't give you a hint that maybe
she was somebody you should avoid? Zack Malkin?
He's got a

computer crime file as long as his leg. Quentin
Monroe? A skinny,
sick kid. Brilliant choice. Tom
Beauvais? The only thing lower than
that backslider's goals are his grades. And
Emily!

You
talked her
into going, didn't you? A girl like that, on a
dynaship! You not only follow these junior-league
swindlers, but you entice somebody like Emily to go
along? What were you thinking?"

He hesitated, but got no answer.

After a few seconds he lowered his voice. "You
don't have a clue
how to pick the right people to be close to, do you?"

At the corner of the table, against the bulkhead, as far
down the
bench as he could get, Jimmy Kirk sat with his
knees flopped apart
and his touring cap pulled low over his eyes,
doomfully silent.

His father paused, ticked off five seconds, then
shifted his feet.

"Nothing to say?"

Like a prisoner of war, Jimmy remained
resolute, stony, and
refused to meet his interrogator's eyes. His

wait-it-out posture was
damningly effective.

"Okay, let's have it." Pacing across the tiny
cabin, George
demanded, "Who's the ringleader?"

Jimmy turned his head so his father wouldn't see the
smirk that
erupted on one side of his mouth. He tapped his
thumbs on the seat
of the chair, rattled his imaginary handcuffs, and
remained uncoop
erative.

"Who was it that invaded the voting records? Zack,
right? Was it
Beauvais's plan? Are you going to waste your life
following Tom
Beauvais around?"

Jimmy folded his arms, belittling his father with his
disinterest,
and slumped further.

"How were you expecting to survive once that ship
docked in
South America and those people were done with you?" George
demanded. "Do you have any clue how tough it is
to make a living down there?"

"I'd have been fine."

George stopped, gaped down at the unenchanted
representative
of youth, and wondered what button he'd pushed
to get an answer
that time.

"Fine?" he echoed. "Okay, let's say you'd have
been fine. Then
tell me what's down there for you. Why would you want
to go
there?"

"Didn't want to live at home anymore."

"Why not? What's so bad about home? It's a
decent little town,

isn't it? Lots of fresh air, polite Amish
neighbors still farming with
horses, close to enough cities that there's plenty for
you to
do-
legally . . .

how do you think this is affecting your mother?"

The touring cap's brim came up just enough for George
to see his
son's broiling eyes masked by a band of shadow. The
voice was a
grim dare.

"Leave her out of this."

Another light snapped on in George's head.

He widened his eyes
and nodded.

"Leave your mother out. Sure. Easy. Like she's not
home
worrying about you. Like she got up yesterday morning and
said,

'Oh, Jimmy's run away from home. Guess
I'll fry a couple less eggs
for breakfast today.'" He paused and changed to a
tone that put this

issue on the top of the list of crimes. "You
should've heard her voice
when she contacted me," he said. "If you had, you
wouldn't say, "Leave her out of this.'" "

Stern as a circus firebreather, Jimmy folded
his arms tighter and
changed the subject.

"How'd you find us?"

George parted his lips to tell him, maybe get a
good gloat out of
all this, but then he changed his mind.

"Why? So we won't find you the next time? Forget
it."

He continued pacing.

"Now you'll be looking for ways to avoid being found
again, right? Why don't you tag along behind some
light-fingered punk
with a bright idea to

beam
out of Iowa? Does that sound fancy and
intriguing enough for you? Violate beaming regulations,
scramble

the patterns? Adventure enough for you? It's real
fast, y'know. I

sure couldn't trace you, not that it would make much
difference." He slapped his own thigh and added, "Your
leg'll end up on some

old lady's neck and I won't be able to do a thing
for you anyway. Sooner or later you're just going
to be too big for the safety net,

Jimmy, and you're going to fall through."

He leaned forward on the galley table and glared at
his son.

"Jimmy," he asked, "when is it going to dawn on
you that rules exist for a reason?"

The words settled poorly against the hovercraft's
hum.

He straightened. His head came into the
direct line of the cooking

light near the galley stove, turning part of his
hair carrot-red as though in punctuation.
"What is it you want?" he asked. "What're you
doing all this for?
What do you
want?"
Jimmy's eyes were cold. "Respect."
"I can't give that to you. You've got to earn it."
"Whooo," Jimmy mocked. "A zinger from the book
of parental
cliches. I'm burned."
His father straightened and swallowed hard. "I'm real
disgusted
with you, I want you to know that. Nothing like this is ever
going to
happen again. And when we get back to Riverside,
we're going to
figure out what to do about this."
Jimmy shifted his feet and, if possible, turned
farther away. "You
can try," he said doomfully. "But it's all just a
broken mirror to me,
"I don't know what to do."
George fingered the kitchen curtains and
looked out across the
tenant farmland he owned and the two Amish farms between
there
and Riverside. Off to his left he could see the
English River almost flowing out of its banks.
A fleeting memory of crossing that river on a
rented road-and-
float vehicle flicked back at him. There he
was, barely an adult
himself, with his wife, a toddling son, and a brand-new
baby boy,
antigravving across a swollen creek that laughed at
him for moving
in the spring instead of waiting two months until the
water dried up.
George and Winona Kirk, and their boys,
George Samuel, Junior,
and James Tiberius.
George winced. Poor kid, named after a
constellation . . .
"James T. Kirk . . . say it, pal!
Jimmy, look at me, buddy. Can you
say "James"? Say James Teee
..."
Images of their young family and the
anticipation of the future
shriveled as he realized what his younger son was

becoming.

"What can I do?" he asked quietly. "He's too big to spank

...

I can't lock him in his room, can't give him extra chores . . . you can do things to a six-year-old that you just can't do to a sixteen-year-old

...

I can make him come home but I can't make him stay. I can't help feeling that he's salvageable, but he's fallen in with the wrong crowd and now he's tight-lipped as a convict. He's going to turn into one if he stays on this track, and I don't know what to do to head it off. The beardless twirp won't even talk to me.

What can I do?"

Deep in the nearby farmlands, their Amish tenant and his four sons tilled the cornfields with horses and plows, mirroring a more distant past than George could imagine anymore. His mind was used to another kind of field, a field of stars, tilled by cranky, hard-working space vehicles held together with spit and spare parts, by people who rarely set foot on a real planet anymore. Only on leave ... only in emergencies ...

"I'm scared, Winn," he murmured. "My boy's turning into a gangster, and I can't stop it." Behind him, Winona Kirk stood with her arms folded and her one shoulder poetically against the wall. She was a leaner, always had been, always had her shoulder or her elbow or a hand propped against something, and did her best thinking while holding up a building.

"Sam was never like this," she said. "Jimmy's strong and he's rebellious, always a smoke-chaser, looking for trouble and calling it fun ... he's so much more skeptical than Sam ever was, so much less fulfilled ..."

George turned and started to say something, but his wife's appearance there in the natural light struck

him silent.

Her hair, a mass of tight buff curls, was too much like Jimmy's. She even had her arms folded the same way the boy did-both hands tucked under, fists knotted-not in relaxation, but in tension and thought. Neither she nor Jimmy ever folded their arms just to get them out of the way like most people did. She still had her lab coat on and she didn't look so different from the girl he'd eloped with-how long ago? Almost twenty years?

And after twenty years, the only things they had in common were the two boys. No animosity ... just not much in common.

It hadn't been a problem when they were eighteen years old.

Being married had been impressive all by itself at that age. They'd wanted to be completely grown-up, big man and big woman. They hadn't seen reality lurking behind the wedding pictures. Prestige was the only trophy at that age.

Then one year, two, three, a couple of children ... and they'd discovered that being together at eighteen and being together at twenty-five...

Between themselves, they'd made it work. For the children- He sighed and walked toward her. "My emergency leave won't last forever, you know."

"I know," she said. "Forty-eight hours, eighteen of them gone already."

Her voice was utterly passive. She'd gotten used to his not being around. They both had.

But this ... this was too much for her to handle alone.

They both felt that.

He paced right past her and halfway into the dining room.

"Maybe I should leave Starfleet."

"Oh, cripe, there's an echo in here," Winn said.

"How many times have I heard that?"

She turned to lean against the other shoulder so she could still be facing him.

"How is it going to help Jimmy to see his father wandering

around the farm, bothering the Amish workers, knowing you gave up your career because of him? And it'll straighten him right out to see Mom and Dad carping at each other." She smiled ruefully, but her eyes were forgiving. "You know how we get when we're too close together for too long."

"Well, I'm not helping him from out there, am I?"

George desperately bellowed.

She shrugged. "You're having some kind of effect on him. First

chance he got, he headed for open water, didn't he? All that sailing

stuff when he was little-not wasted, apparently."

"And not enough, apparently," he grunted. "Well, you know

Jimmy best. I'll help if I can, Winn.

If he'll accept it-but I won't make any bets. Got any suggestions?"

She pushed off the wall without unfolding her arms. She

moseyed around the room, staring at the carpet and biting her

lip.

When she turned, she looked squarely into her husband's eyes.

"Take him into deep space with you."

George almost choked. "What?"

"It's an idea."

"Deep space? I can't do that! I'm in the Diplomatic Corps's

Security Division! Our missions are touchy!

We deal with unstable

cultures, unknown sectors, border disputes, angry representatives,

assassination attempts-nothing you take a civilian on, much less a

kid

civilian! You get court-martialed for that! I go dangerous

places!"

Her left shoulder went down and her eyebrows went up.

"Then go someplace not so dangerous this once," she said. She

paused, strode to the window at his side, and leaned there for a

change. "We'd better show him there's something better out there

than what happened to him the first time he went in

space, don't
you think? There must be something that's routine to you, but that
a sixteen-year-old will think is kind of enchanting.

Isn't there?

You've been promising him for years."

"I promised ... but you know what happened ...

whole sec

tions of space started to open up

...

I got called away-besides, he
didn't seem all that disappointed. He didn't
seem like he really
wanted to go."

"George, look back. You know what it's like to be
a boy. It's taboo
to show emotions like those. He saw that Sam wasn't
particularly
bothered by not going, and he didn't want to throw a
tantrum while
his big brother stayed cool-you know how that
is."

"Yeah, I know how that is." .

"And he didn't want to make you feel guilty
when you couldn't
work it out. Eventually, I guess he realized it
probably wouldn't
happen." She paused, tightened her arms around
herself, blinked
out the window, and frowned. "Come to think of it

...

that may
have been when he started to close up."
Turning a troubled gaze on his wife, George
let the revelation hit
him full in the face.

"Oh, God, is it my fault?" he murmured.

"Is it all my fault?"

She seemed troubled as he said that, and faced him.

"That's not
what I was after," she said quietly. "He's
responsible too. He's
sixteen, after all. I know it's an age when you
blame other people,
but still..."

"I've got to do something," George said,
pacing tightly. "I've got
to fix this."

"I always knew he would go away someday ... there's
something
in his eyes. He can't stay home." Winona
pulled at one of her own curls and twisted it while

she helped him feel guilty. "Use some of those connections of yours. Why don't you do it, George? Your son needs more than just me these days. He needs to see a man work, not a woman. He needs to see his father at work. And you need to spend time with him too. Go ahead ... take Jimmy into space on some safe little cakewalk. It'll be good for both of you."

Ten hours later. . .

A Federation utility ground-to-space stratotractor, in space over the U.s.-Mexican border Jimmy Kirk sat smoldering where he'd been left in the miserable excuse for a galley, going over how his father could have caught him.

The porthole was thick and scratched and had evidently served duty as a dart board, because it had little round dirty spots all over it. Through those dirty spots, Jimmy looked down at Earth.

Around him the stratotractor growled and burped. The chunky, squared-off utility crawler had looked more like a sleeping rhino than a space vehicle when he'd first seen it only an hour earlier. But yes, it launched into space, and yes, it made orbit. When had vessels gotten so ugly? Didn't anybody care what ships looked like any more?

Below, the planet was particularly sleepy. The sun was just setting over America, and there was a chalk-dusting of clouds in the north.

Otherwise, not a storm to be seen.

Except here, in his own head.

He felt his mouth set hard and his teeth grind. It awakened something.

Here he was, in space. Big deal.

The walls were cold, the engines were a dull grumble, the view of space was empty and black, Earth looked like a lonely old woman with white hair, and every ship

he'd seen so far was a battered old barge with too many space hours in its log.

"Damned depressing," he proclaimed to the porthole and the planet, and the walls. Obeying the twist of determination inside, he got up, and his eyes went into a stiff squint.

"I'm not going. I'm getting off this junkheap."

He pulled his cap low over his eyes, raised his jacket collar like a cat burglar trying to hide his face, and started going through the crew's lockers.

FOUR

"George! You crimson dragon! How are you?"

"Don't ask."

"Contentious as ever, eh?"

"Robert, please. Couldn't you be a little less jolly once in a while?"

A lanky forty-some-year-old fellow in a sweater tilted sideways to see past his cross-grained old friend and peer from under an awning of fluffy brown hair at the stratotractor's foredeck lift. The opening was small, as was usual in these planetary station grunt vehicles, so it couldn't hide much.

"Where's Jimmy?"

"Below."

"Of course-good for you! Taking no chances. Don't want him to see you bashing dignitaries with a pole-ax like you did the last time, eh?"

"Quit rubbing that in! The greenhorn punk just wouldn't come up, that's all."

"Cat-and-doggish as ever, the two of you. What would I do if George were not George and Jimmy were not Jimmy? Ah, the Kirks!"

Robert April shoved his hands into his cardigan pockets, bunching the shawl collar up around his jawline, shoved the sweater forward until it nearly hid his gold command tunic, and regarded George with open affection. He rocked on his heels and grinned sentimentally.

Lean and casual, his expression always neighborly, Captain April still carried a forbearance that betrayed him as a Coventry uppercruster. He was a happy, broad-gauged English string-puller whose steady hand had kept Starfleet on good footing since the beginnings of the long-range exploration program. Easily imagined as Sir Robert or Lord Robert, he had come to be regarded by his crews as something closer to Uncle Robert. He was a man to whom life was a jubilee, who could even take the jading tedium of space travel without a hint of wear, and he was as comfortable here on a maintenance tractor's foredeck as he was on the command bridge of a ship of the line.

He'd ushered hundreds of young inductees into space exploration as the Federation of Planets expanded, simply by treating them as though they really could do this remarkable thing and do it plenty well.

To that dauntlessness George now pinned his last chance. "Have you got a mission for me?" he asked. Robert tilted a little forward as though sharing a secret. "I've got

...

Faramond."

It sounded mysterious, especially the way he said it.

George tried

to get it in context, but there wasn't any.

"You got what?" he asked.

"Faramond," Robert repeated, smiling.

"Faramond. It's a planet.

And on it there's a newly discovered archaeological mecca. A

massive project. George, wait until you see it!" He spread his hands

illustratively. "They're dealing with an ancient advanced

race.

Think of it! With an ordinary dig we'd have to be careful, but we'd

never stumble upon anything we didn't understand. But this-this is remarkable! The information at Faramond could boost Federation science and medicine forward immeasurably.

It's comparable to scientists of Columbus's time

stumbling upon a sunken nuclear carrier, complete with computers."

George tucked his chin and blinked. "Wow."

"Yes, very wow. And listen to this part-Faramond is a cold

planet. No volcanic activity whatsoever for ten million years, and

it's far from its star, so it had no heat to speak of at all. We've had to build huge atmospheric domes to work under. We're just now ready to start the actual archaeology."

"Why would some advanced culture bother with colonizing a

planet they had to heat up? That's a hell of a lot of wasted energy, isn't it?"

"That's what we want to know," Robert corroborated. "If they were interested in it, perhaps we'd better be also. It wasn't used for farming or mining, yet it was a massive complex, obviously far beyond us. Then all at once the entire culture packed up and left. And here's the clinch

...

we haven't the faintest idea how they left."

"How"? You mean "why"?"

"No, George," the captain insisted.

"How."

George squinted at him. "Are you telling me there's no vessel residue?"

"No vessel residue, no technological droppings, no fossilized dock casualties, in fact no remnants of docks at all, no fuel film, no space markers, nothing to take care of a ship," Robert said, and

paused. He spread his elbows in a shrug without taking his hands out of the pockets. "So how did they leave? It's a sociological

mystery. And, George, we are finally ready to start solving it. The Federation has asked me to break ground with the "golden shovel,"

so to speak. Very easy on our parts, nothing to it." He hesitated, sighed.

"I'm so wrapped up in the starship program, I was thinking of turning them down until you contacted me about Jimmy, and I thought how much he might grow at

seeing such a place, so far away. It's a minor diplomatic mission ... well, I suppose it's not minor to the fellows involved, is it? Glad I thought of that," he added. "I wouldn't want to disappoint anyone."

George, even in this choleric mood, couldn't resist an appreciative chuckle and wondered how a gate-crasher like him had ended up with a friend like Robert. The thought eased him somewhat. Robert April was well known to shun the lionizing offered by a grateful Federation of Planets as it bloomed outward like a rose bush, wanted little to do with the celebrity he deserved, but he did understand people's natural need to fuss and cheer. George knew Robert believed that's what kept the blooms on the roses-the spirit of exploration, as much as the purpose. Drawing a breath that betrayed the tight hopes chewing at him, George heard himself say, "I'll go get the little gangster."

"Go easy on him, now," Robert admonished. "He's probably sitting alone, making a lip hang."

"Yeah, he thinks he's been bushwhacked. I'll be right back."

"George-was He spun on a heel. "Yes, sir?"

Robert's mouth quirked and he raised both eyebrows. "I have a surprise for you."

As though he couldn't take a surprise, George held still and asked with his silence.

The captain grinned slyly. "We're going to take her out again."

For a moment George didn't understand. Then he felt his nerves twist and realized what was being waved before him.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked, staring. Robert grinned wider. Stepping feebly toward him, George gasped, "Are you telling me ... that my boy ... is going to get to ride on her?"

The silence between them tingled.

"I've gotten you out of your hitch with the

Diplomatic Corps,"

Robert said, "temporarily at least, and you're going to be one of my officers again. Won't that be like old times? Here we are, thick as thieves, all set for adventure and chivalry. Be quite something for Jimmy to see, eh?"

He hadn't been told anything. Just asked a favor. Hadn't been given the details. Yet, Robert knew. Had sensed, pieced it all together, the needs of old friends. Even though he had too many other friends to count, Robert April had known what two particular friends needed.

How many strings had he pulled? How many favors had he cashed in?

She was going to fly again, for the Kirk boys. Overwhelmed and unable to hide it, George simply murmured,

"I don't know what to say ..."

The captain gazed warmly at him. "She's spacedocked. We're almost there."

George's mouth dropped open. "You mean now? Right now?"

"Right now."

"Oh, this is-this is

...

I'll get Jimmy! He's gotta see her from the outside! How close are we? Where's she docked? No-forget that-it doesn't matter! This is great! Slow us down, will you? No, never mind! I'll move fast!" He took the captain's nod as permission to leave the deck, and hopped the lift doubleqk, and just before the panel slid shut he stuck his head back out.

"Robert, you really know how to ice a cake!"

On a station stratotractor, from anywhere to anywhere was a very

short jog. A matter of seconds put George on the utility deck,

stepping between mooring harnesses and powerloaders to the little crew galley where he'd left Jimmy sitting alone.

"All right, champ, on your feet. Wait'aa you
see-was
He stepped in, and another second told him the
rest. There was
nothing in here but the gurgling snack dispenser.
"Ohhhhh-no!"
He left the galley on the run, stumbled over
two triaxial coils and
a spooled umbilical, and this time didn't wait
for the lift. This time
he climbed the companionway ladders, s queezing
past pitch adjust
ers, going directly from the trunk deck
to the anchoring deck to the tonnage deck, right into and
then past the crew saloons. He peeked
into every portal, every cargo gate, platform, hatch, and
hole, and
got strange glances from the crew. They weren't used
to anyone
hurrying, much less a Starfleet Security guy,
because nothing
ever
happened on a stratotractor.
Of course, they probably weren't used
to Starfleet officers hitch
ing rides on maintenance craft either.
He didn't stop, except for a brief few
seconds in one of the six
dispatch silos, where he spied a compact fellow in
a Security
uniform being pressed against a stored antigrav
pontoon by two
Neanderthal mechanics.
"Hey!" George shouted, stumbling off the ladder.
"What's this
about?"
Cocoa eyes and a burnished face turned to him and
called in
clipped Trinidad English, adding a West
Indies spice to the dull
deck. "Commander! Lieutenant Francis Drake
Reed reporting for
assault and battery! Kiss the stars at your timely
arrival! Tell these
walking rocks that my father was a priest and I never
cheat!"
George waved at the mechanics and barked,
"Back off, you
animals. He's under my command."
The mechanics were bigger than any four of
George, but obvious

ly weren't used to being ordered around by a Starfleet officer.

George snapped at his subordinate and said, "Trouble. Fall in."

"But I've-was

"I said trouble! Jimmy's gone!"

"Cow poo. Where can he go on a flying garage?"

"That's what scares me!"

Drake Reed dropped a bow at the two mechanics he'd just fleeced and started to make an exit statement.

"Pardon, all the thunderclap and shivaree, but duty caaaa-was

And choked when George grabbed him by the collar and hauled

him down that ladder.

In seconds they were clattering between decks.

"I told you it'd take two of us to watch that kid!" George

blustered. "Why didn't you meet us at the embarkation port?"

"I didn't even know you were on board yet,"

Drake protested. "A

witch doctor, am I? Brain juju? I can see through walls?"

"And I told you not to run any games while you've got your

uniform on. All I need is a complaint from the dock superintendent

against my own lieutenant for gambling on duty.

What's the matter

with you? They could yank this tractor's dock warrants for that! Do you know what a mess it is to try to get your license out from under a complaint? Every person on board can be waylaid indefinitely!

Climb faster, will you?"

"I am a gentleman, not a lizard. Where could the unripe lambkin be?"

"I've got a hunch he's trying to get off the stratotractor while

we're still in the spacedock area."

"Hunch away. I shall follow."

They dropped onto the messy shipment deck, and George gave his assistant a push through crated parts and structural segments.

"Check the removable airlocks! I'll check the workbees!"

"Right." Drake started away, then spun around.

"What on a

spice rack could he do in a removable airlock?

They're only used for
transfer of pressure-sensitive cargo, yes?"

"Don't underestimate that snot. If it leaves the
ship, he could be
in it."

"But they have no thrusters!"

"Go!"

George waved him off with a frantic thrash and ran
in the other

direction, toward the row of four one-man
work pods that common

ly peppered space around docked vessels. Ugly
with claws, magnets,

antigravs, and hooks, the acorn-shaped bees could
attach to almost

any section of any kind of ship or dock section

while the man inside did mechanical or

electrical repairs. Otherwise, the bees were

pretty

low-tech. So small they were nicknamed potatoes and
their bays

were called pantries, they couldn't get far on their
own.

Barely far enough for a boy to blow away from a
stratotractor.

After that-a very hard landing.

Crossing with some difficulty into each pantry and
checking the

old-style hatches that took a workman's badge
code to get open,

George satisfied himself that two of the bees'
hatches hadn't been

tampered with.

The third one, though, was locked from inside.

He yanked his markline spike from its sheath
on his holster and

hammered the blunt end on the hatch.

"Jimmy! Open up! Open up, goddammit!"

There was no response from inside, but the on-line
lights were blinking on the external skin of the workbee.

It was preparing to
jump.

"Drake! Drake, over here!" he shouted, and
poked hopelessly at the outer control panels.

Nothing worked.

He started to shout again, then heard Drake's boots
thudding on

the deck behind him, and kept his attention on the hatch.

Risking detachment of the workbee with a ruptured seal,

George

turned his markline spike to the pointy end and started prying at the flexible seals around the airlock hatch. All the fancy, flashy weapons in the galaxy couldn't match a simple eight-inch pointed steel spike at moments like this. If he could just rupture the seal enough-before the workbee jumped free of its cowls-the safety system would take over and the big metal things holding the workbee wouldn't detach it.

Just enough-
Hshshshshshs
"Got it!"

When the airlock seal suddenly hissed, both Security men felt the rush of jackpot and alarm that comes only at moments of truth. As

the hatch gave against his shoulder, George's instincts and training took over and his Fleet-issue laser pistol swept out of its holster and into his hands as though it had a life of its own.

He plunged in, locked both legs, fell into aim-and-fire posture, and shouted, "Hold it!" "George!" Drake blared.

Instantly George yanked up the barrel, stumbled, and gasped,

"Jesus, what am I doing!"

He and Drake gawked at each other. Could have been funny.

Should have been.

Then they both looked again into the workbee's pilot cubby.

There, not quite filling the man-size shell, cooking with resent

ments, plots, and plans, Jimmy Kirk was ready to make his escape.

He seemed more disgusted than embarrassed at having been

caught, and he didn't move or attempt to cover up what he'd been

doing. Maybe he was even proud of it.

Amber eyes that had once gazed at George in adoration and

respect now burned with thankless acrimony-and it took some of

the red out of George's hair to see it.

The boy was dry ice.

"You're pulling a weapon," he said, "on your own son."

Jimmy's bulky, muscular body never flinched as he glared at his father. Still half-hidden between the touring cap and the raised collar of his high school jacket, his eyes showed belief in his own

sentiments. He had moved forward on his decisions with all the force of a teenager, and apparently he had no concern that his judgment might be bad or his course off.

He remained silent, pillorying his father with a full load of mean-mindedness.

Knowing when to keep his clapper tongue quiet, Drake Reed

cautiously reached out and removed the laser pistol from his superior officer's hand.

His chest withering, George stared at his son and held out his bare palm.

"Jimmy, I

...

I'm sorry .. ."

Brooding, letting his victory burn, Jimmy refused to show his father the slightest sympathy.

Seconds ticked by without relief, until he finally said, "Didn't

know the word was in your rule book."

George jabbed a finger at the boy's face.

"Look, you retract your bristles, bud! What were you thinking anyway? These potatoes aren't toys! There are a lot of ways to die in space, but the worst one is to die of stupidity. You can't get around the security on this thing. The jump codes are-was
ENABLED ENABLED ENABLED

"How'd you do that? I'm in

Security and I couldn't break this security!"

The boy got up slowly.

"Too bad," he said.

He stepped past, barely brushing his father with a very cold

shoulder, and got out of the workbee.
George sagged against the curved interior shell,
touched a hand
to his head, and groaned, "He's gonna be a
criminal..."
Drake clapped him on the back. "Buck up,
George. He can take my place as a
Starfleet legend."
He left George near the hatch and moved into the
cubby to shut
the potato down and buzz for a repair crew before
anything went
wrong.
At least, that was his cover. George knew Drake
was really giving
him time to go out there and handle his son alone.
Not just time, but a push.
He swallowed a couple of hard lumps, then
stepped out onto the
deck, feeling as though he had a butt full of
duckshot.
As far down the cluttered deck as could be, Jimmy
had retreated
to a coffin-size niche between two big
cargo-antigravs. There, he was waiting.
George approached without theatrics, and stood just out
of the
niche.
In the mirror of Jimmy's expression,
George's hopes saw them
selves and shivered. The resistance was palpable.
"Life's just one giant setback to you, isn't
it?" he asked.
The boy looked away from him, shoulders down, a
foot braced casually on one antigrav's
trunk.
"You knew which bricks to pull out," George began
again. "You'd have breached the couplings and gone off in the
potato without anybody knowing you were out there, without
following
any pattern, without announcing your presence in the
maintenance
channels-if you even got out of the pantry alive.
You could've
killed yourself detaching that piece of junk the wrong
way. Or you
could've killed somebody else if the pressurizing
went wrong in
here. You could've killed Drake or me."
He paused, searching for reaction. There was
absolutely none.

"Do you even care about that?" George added.
Jimmy folded his arms morbidly. He seemed proud that he had used neither hindsight nor foresight, and remained deaf to reason.
"You know what my dad always says," he answered. was "In space, you take your chances.""
He stalked farther into the niche, like walking rocket fuel.
"Maybe you can help me a little here," George said. "What'll work with you?"
Jimmy's cheek was barely visible as he tossed a response over his shoulder.
"How about raising the side of my crib?"
"Y'know, there's a lot to see in space if you'd just unclench your tight ass and open your eyes!"
George struggled.
"Thanks for the advice."
"How old do you figure sixteen is? Wait till you hit twenty. In the Academy they give you tests you can't even win!"
The boy turned, scowled at him, and refused to be impressed.
"Any game can be won."
"Oh, is that right? How'll you ever know if you can't even get past the entrance exam?"
"I could get into Starfleet's monkey farm if I wanted to. Who says I couldn't?"
"Your grades, that's who." George pointed back at the workbee.
"Why don't you put some of those smarts into your schoolwork?
You mother enrolled you in the pre-Academy program so you'd have a little direction, not so you'd have a reason to go become some half-cocked vagabond on Earth. You mother and I have always tried not to compare you to Sam, but-was
"What do you know about how things are on Earth?" the boy challenged. "What do you know about Mom and Sam? We've gotten along just fine without you. Our names aren't in your Fleet manual."
George flopped his arms at his sides. "So you're just going to

sneak back to Riverside and follow that pack of delinquents around

until you hatchet your life. Good plan."

"Guess I better spend my life dodging black holes and pretending aliens don't smell. Thanks for the advice."

The tone was completely composed, even dry. There wasn't even

the satisfaction of scorn for George to cling to.

He stepped back, giving Jimmy room to not get

close. "All right, come out of there. Captain

April's waiting to see you. That's how it

is, you know, when you come on board a ship, you

report to your

commanding officer."

"So now he's captain of a station tractor?" the

boy commented as he moved with damning slowness toward his

father. "Thought he'd

be doing better by now."

"These things don't have captains, and you know it,"

George

said. "Now, move. We're going to show you what he

is

captain of."

FIVE

"Jimmy, hello! Why, you look as if you've

lost your dog."

Captain April spread his arms in welcome as

George pushed his

son out of the lift.

Jimmy Kirk wagged a hand but refused to speak.

Before him,

framed by struts and strings of lights outside-were

those part of

the spacedock?-Robert April gazed at him with

complete under

standing and tolerance, and the last thing Jimmy wanted right

now

was to be understood or tolerated.

A shove between his shoulder blades told him he

wasn't moving

fast enough.

He stepped down to the foredeck, putting space between

himself

and his father.

Captain April was already gesturing him forward.

"Take a look at

the moored vessels, Jimmy. And the service

docks. It's all quite

stirring in its labyrinthine way."

Bitter refusals popped into Jimmy's head
while he was trying to
envision whatever
labyrinthine
meant, but he couldn't push out any
cracks as Captain April gathered him toward the
wide, curved
viewportal.
Jimmy was stiff, but he couldn't help seeing. If
he turned around,
all he'd see was his father.
Out there, in geo-something-or-other orbit over Africa,
was a
tangle of spacedockage whose organization wasn't
immediately
clear.
"Looks like a girder factory puked," he said.
"Yes, doesn't it?" the captain said with a grin.
"All around here
are merchant ships in for repairs or refits.
They'll go a few at a time
into the structural docks . . . and that bunch of
angular things is the
LBR complex for spacefaring vehicles not carrying
passengers.
Loading, building, repair. Isn't it pretty
in its industrial way?"
The strings of docklights were garish, but the dock
girders
themselves didn't catch any light, not even
the sunlight, and had
probably been painted with low-reflective paint
to keep unexpected
flashes from being mistaken for docking lights or
buoys.
At least, that's what I would do,
Jimmy thought, and mentally
retreated for a moment to imagine building a thing like this
if he had to.
Rather than going around the skeleton of red and blue
girders, the
stratotractor plodded right through the center,
apparently having all its passage warrants in
order. Jimmy had tried not to pay attention, but
he'd picked up enough casual conversation to know that
warrants and patterns were the only way to keep
robotic
vessels, or any kind of vessels, from knocking
into one another and
into the dock brackets.
He cleared his throat and pressed his lips tight,

annoyed with himself for having paid attention without meaning to.

"These funny-looking beams have names," the captain explained, pointing as he spoke. "They seem snarled up, but they're not really. Those extra-long ones are longitudinal antigravity pontoons. They're always in line with the longitudes on the planet's surface-don't ask me why. But the entire dockage can be dropped out of orbit and landed on the planet, or taken apart and pieces of it landed, with vessels inside. Doesn't happen very often, but now and again it's handy. Oh, look there. No, no, directly above us

...

crane

your neck a bit-that curved area above us-see it?"

"I see it."

"That's called a head wall. The curved bows of most Federation-standard vessels fit right in there. See the slings and clews that hold a large ship in place on the cutting stage? And those over there are built-beams we call backbones. All these ships are being worked on in some capacity. You can see that each one is flashing a blue light directly between two red lights, vertical to the ship's lines? Those are their not-under-command lights." Still aware of his father standing silent behind them, Jimmy only

grunted, determined to remain undazzled.

As they passed through the metallic mess, stringed lights sprin

kled their colors on Captain April's face and made the smile lines crease around his eyes. He pointed at several vessels, all different shapes and sizes, which weren't in the dock complex, but were

floating free in space, tethered by umbilicals to orbiting tanks.

"Those barges and clippers are in for resupply,"

Captain April

said. "That's why they're at external moorings.

There's no reason to

take up dockspace with them. Most of these are merchantmen

under contracts of affreightment with the Federation. The

large ones are the clippers. They'll go from here to the DLO ports, which means "dispatch and loading only." The big ones carry bale cargo. That's raw material that comes wrapped in bunches. Their holds are called bale capacity or bale cubic. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, great," Jimmy chewed out of the corner of his mouth.

"The smaller ones, the barges, usually carry bulk cargo," April went on, "which is anything stored loose, not boxed, baled, crated, or casked. Flowing stuff, like liquid fuel, for instance, or even water for outposts. They can get their Bill of Entry directly from the dockmaster, along with certificates of registry, bond notes, warehousing tickets, and Bills of Lading, without having to set foot planetside. All the customs inspections, trade appraisals, and damage surveys can be done right here on the spot. It's really all very smart and allows for what we call "customary dispatch." That's the quick, lawful, and diligent loading and discharge of vessels." He drew a long breath as though inhaling in a garden, then let it out slowly. "Ah, it still gives me a chill to see how well we carry on such things!"

Jimmy bit the inside of his cheek to keep from reacting. Trying not to show on his face that half of that information had just flushed in one ear and out the other without stopping to check in, he suddenly felt very small. The trick of getting himself and five friends from Iowa to Oregon had seemed tough enough. Now it withered against the problems of moving a spaceship and cargo from here to there. Space had seemed drawing-board simple while he was sitting on Earth ... bills of what? What kind of tickets? Surveys? Notes?

Luckily, Captain April didn't look at him, but instead was waving a hand appreciatively across their view. "All these are involved in what we call the coasting trade," he added. "That's moving cargo within the Federation of Planets, or to colonies settled by our member planets." Jimmy tried to spit a "Who cares?" but couldn't. If it had been anybody else talking to him- April's hand curled over Jimmy's shoulder. "And there," the captain added proudly, "is Starbase One."

As the stratotractor left the tangle of dockage and came out into open space again, they saw before them the majesty of what mankind had built on its own doorstep. A hard lump of air made Jimmy tuck his chin when he had to swallow. Starbase One ...

A man-made heaven, beside Earth. A giant silver spool with thread of lights, rotating slowly on its own axis, whispering into a boy's ears, First of my kind, first of my kind, welcome, welcome. Jimmy swallowed a smile. He offered Starbase One only a constricted eagle eye. He tried not to listen, just as he had ignored the whispering of the Skunk River, but these things spoke to him somehow and he could never forget. That's how it had always been. The distance had always whispered to him. The sunset, the howling wind, the hum of aircraft, the shiver of sails. Anything a hundred miles beyond wherever he was standing. Testimonials to the great outside had always whispered to Jimmy Kirk. He gazed down through the popcorn clouds at the planet below, at the detail offered to him by the special windows and the cameras that brought pictures up to the monitors above himself and Captain April, and, trying to keep a handle on his

narrowmindedness, he
muttered, "Guess you can't bathe nude in your
backyard any
more."

"Mmm, guess not," April responded. "In
fact, Starfleet has expressly requested that
officers not do that."

A smile pulled, but Jimmy chewed it down.

"Before many more years," April went on, "I hope
to have officers who won't have to worry about that sort of
thing . . . you know, the kind who don't have clothes
to take off."

Jimmy leered at him. "Huh?"

"Aliens. I hope to attract more aliens
into Starfleet."

"Why? Who needs 'em?"

"Don't you think that would make service more interesting?
More noninsular, so to speak?"

"Not for me. I wouldn't want to spend my time working
next to some slimy lieutenant with a tentacle."

"Well, why not? You, the adventurous type who
doesn't care what's around the next tree? Why,
I'd have thought you'd be the
type clawing to get out to space, Jimmy."

The boy turned suddenly and purposely dark.

"I've been to space," he said sourly.

"Once."

New silence broke out as the forward area opened up
and showed
spines.

April shifted uneasily, realizing his error.

"Oh," he uttered. "Yes ... of course you have.

Sorry."

Jimmy bathed in the syrup of satisfaction while
keeping his face

bitter, then coldly added, "Don't apologize
to me. I'm one of the ones that lived."

Great. Played right into his hands. He knew his father
was back there, holding his breath, hoping for a reaction.

There would be none. There would be only a prisoner's
glower, only disdain for that which had taken him away from
where he wanted to be, when they all knew he had a
fair reason for never wanting to go into space again.

They were taking him away from Earth, away from
Emily, away from those who did what he told them
to do.

Though he was seeing the glittering spacedocks and the magnifi

cence of Starbase One, Jimmy peered only through his
own savage

tunnel vision. He worked so hard to keep

his face barren that his
cheeks got stiff and his eye muscles actually
hurt. Squinting them a
little in the docklights helped, and he hoped it
looked like a frown.

No matter how the struts glowed in the sun's
aurora or how the
strings of docklights shimmered on the transport
ships, he refused to be impressed. He kept his
body stiff and aweless.

It took every ounce of his willpower to deny his father even
the

smallest satisfaction. Keeping his face a
practice in nonwonder, he
stood before Niagara Falls and felt no spray.
After a few more seconds of calculated nothing,
Jimmy got his
reward.

"I'll go make sure Drake's all right," his
father said from behind
them. "Don't want him accidentally locked inside
a damaged
potato. I'll

...

be right back."

A twinge of victory ran up Jimmy's spine.

His father sounded
defeated.

Captain April turned. "George, didn't you
want to see

...

you
know."

As the lift panel slid open, George Kirk
appeared surly and
crestfallen.

"I don't know if I want to see her or not right
now, Robert," he
muttered, and simply left.

The panel sighed shut. Now Jimmy was alone with
Captain April
and that field of astonishments out there. They looked at
each
other.

No matter how he tried, Jimmy couldn't muster
the same rude disregard for Robert April that he
gave his father. So he kept his
father in mind in order to keep the chill on his face.

"Who's 'her'?" he asked, bristling.

Captain April blinked.

"Beg pardon? Oh!" Then he chuckled. "Oh,

you'll see soon
enough. An old friend of your father's and mine, you might
say.

He'll perk up when he sees her, don't you
worry."

"I don't care."

"You don't care? That's no way to talk, my
boy."

"Isn't it? He held a gun on me."

"Oh, now, Jimmy!" the captain admonished.

"Is this the same
family I spend Christmases with?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Shows how he thinks of me, that's
all I know."

"Certain it wasn't just instinct at work?" His grin
twisted

warmly. "A Security commander has to go on instinct
more than most of us. Don't you realize that?"

Eyes still hard, Jimmy charged, "Is that a
reason?"

"No, no, of course not... let's try to forget
it, shall we? We're all

starting out on a wonderful adventure. We won't
let a bit of

domestic sandpaper spoil it, will we? Of course
not. Oh, look! See

those little one- and two-man worker vehicles? We have
funny

names for those, like potatoes and hedgehogs and
sandbaggers-was

"Sandbaggers," Jimmy repeated. "That comes from
wooden

racing boats."

The captain looked at him. "Does it? How so?"

Suddenly on the spot, Jimmy sifted for a nearly
faded memory.

"The East Coast. . . sandbaggers were racing
sloops in the 1860's, I

think. They had big sails with extra-long booms,
and they used

sandbags for movable ballast. Every time the boat
tacked, they'd

toss the sandbags to windward."

"Really! What a spartan way to run a race!

Must've taken a great

deal of skill and timing. Where'd you learn about such a
thing?"

Sensing he was being cornered, Jimmy shoved his
enthusiasm

into retreat. He wasn't about to say where he'd
learned that. It

would mean mentioning his father.
"Just happened to hear about it," he muttered.
"It's champion that you know these things," Captain
April said
genuinely. "Spacefaring is just an extension of
basic seamanship.
Good fellow. Proud of you!"
He clapped a congratulations on Jimmy's
shoulder and kept his hand there as he gazed at
Starbase One.
Jimmy felt heat rising in his cheeks. He stewed
in silence as the stratotractor moved across the
starbase's main doors.
And didn't go in.
When he realized that, Jimmy straightened and
frowned.
"What's going on? Where are we going?"
A cagey grin appeared on Captain April's
lips. "We're going
around to the other side of the base, to the Starfleet box
dock."
"Why? I thought we were going someplace on this-was
Bucket of bolts.
"comship."
"Oh, no. We're going on another ship, my
boy. Another ship altogether. Look . . ."
The stratotractor was just coming around the starbase,
breaking
out into open space with the planet glowing at their left,
half in
daylight and half in night. In the coal-black
distance shimmered the
thing April had called the box dock.
It was an elongated red hexagon hovering there in the
blackness,
peaceful and separate, glowing with rectangular
lighting bars much
softer than the strings of lights on the merchant
spacedocks.
There was something inside it.
Something white.
Jimmy pressed his shoulder against the rim of the
viewport and
determined to remain composed. He would offer a nodding
accept
ance to whatever Robert April showed him, and an
open derisive
ness to whatever his father showed him. He made
promises to
himself. He folded his arms and let his hands go limp
at his sides to

show how bored he was.

"This is Captain April aboard Strato 838,
requesting permission
to approach."

"Acknowledged, Captain. You're free
to approach. Please use the
port side arrival patterns and fall
into magnetic tractor beam
port-four for docking. We'll do the rest."

"I will, thank you. April out."

A few more clips and taps, and the robotic piloting
took over.

They drew closer and closer to the box dock, moving
higher into orbit, up, up, up toward the box
dock-until the angle of the dock's
ribs could no longer hide what hovered inside.

Robert leaned forward in nothing but love.

Bathed in beaconage, there
she

was. The gazingstock of Starfleet,
With the diamondlike poise of a resting Lippizaner
stallion, a

huge milk-white ship beguiled the blackness.

Two pencil-shaped
warp nacelles pierced back from her lower hull,
implying speed.

The lower hull, where mankind's genius of engineering
found

expression, provided the ship's sense of ballast.

Robert knew those
impressions had been designed into her in defiance of
common-

place understanding that a ship in space could be shaped like
almost anything. There was no wind resistance to consider
here. Here, such

a ship was designed for only two things purpose

. . . and raw

inspiration.

He knew. He had been there at the beginning. Seen
the design

plans. Seen the flash in the eyes of the designers.

Heard their gasps

of hope. He had touched Starfleet in its

embryonic years, known

and worked with the intrepid designers who dared have ideas,
and

this was the brilliant white mystery that came
from those ideas.

As they came around to the fore of the ship, Robert gazed
up and

smiled at the primary hull, spreading above their

approach like the
bell of a great bass horn waiting for a tuning
note. For the first time
they were given a view of the entire ship, without
interruption by
dock struts.
There was a sound at his side, barely audible. One
of those little
human sounds there's no name for but that all humans
recognize.
Robert glanced-and noticed the change.
Beside him, Jimmy Kirk was canted forward over the
panel,
committing the deadly sin of enthusiasm. He forgot his
sworn duty
to melancholy, and stared.
Robert April placed a warm hand on the boy's
hunched shoulder,
and spoke with quiet adoration.

"We call her

...

Enterprise."

"She's a starship, Jimmy... isn't that a
masterful word?

Starship ... her express purpose is to roam
free to untouched stars.

And she has the power to do it too. She and her kind will
hammer

through the frontiers of space, approach and contact
faraway

civilizations, bridge cultures, learn, share,
grow ... she's a flintbox

for the firewalkers among us. The starship
Enterprise."

He hesitated, drew another breath, then sighed
heavily.

"Isn't she a royal flush," he murmured.

Before them was the calm, elegant antithesis of
Iowa. Jimmy

knew his lips were hanging open, knew his shoulders were
chinked

forward and that he was leaning on both hands as though he
wanted

to break right through this viewport and touch her-he knew
all

that.

And could no more stop it than get out and fly.

He was going to go aboard

that...

"She's a testimony to just how much good mankind can
do,"

Captain April went on. "The first of her kind.
Our flagship. Her engines are the first full
time-warp commodities. She's built for
constant thrust, none of the usual getting up to a
speed, then going
on momentum. She just keeps going faster and faster
until the
captain tells her not to. We're not even sure
how fast she'll be able to go eventually. Until now
she's been on a few stressing-out missions,
but soon she'll be embarking on a series of
five-year missions in
deep space. We're going to go out, take our
technology with us, our
medicine, our dreams, our tenacity, our willingness
to help and the
wisdom we've gotten from our own mistakes ...
we're going to
climb aboard that mastercraft, and we're going
to head out. In time
there'll be a dozen like her, going in a dozen
directions for years at a
time. They'll be like the first pioneers who went out in a
reed
boat

...

no contact with anyone, no help nearby, relying
on their
own spit and thatch to survive. That's adventure,
Jimmy ... real
adventure. Isn't she something to write home
about?"
Behind them, George Kirk stood in silence with
Drake Reed.
Robert and the boy hadn't heard them come back
in-or
were too captivated to notice. George's own
attention was swal
lowed up too by the giant white angel, shellacked
and mounted
on ebony before them. He and Drake barely breathed
at the
sight of her.
George hadn't seen the starship in almost five
years. Not since all
the decals, pennants, and insignia had been added.
He had known
her only as a white-on-white masterpiece with
lights. Now, though,
she was decorated with red nail polish and black
eyebrow pencil in

fine, unblended lines, and she said who she was and who
had made
her, and she said it with all the simplicity and pride
of naval
tradition.

NCC1701. . . USS Enterprise . . .

Starfleet, United Federation of
Planets.

But even this wasn't the shock of the day for George
Kirk.

Now he gazed no longer at the ship, not at
Robert, who was softly
talking, but at his own son-

-

who was
listening.

Jimmy the unbeguiled, Jimmy the hard, Jimmy
the cold ... was

leaning so far forward he was almost climbing on
the control panels.

He was poised on all ten fingertips, his face a
sheen of reflections from the starship.

For the first time in years, George saw his son's
brick wall of
disillusionment begin to crack.

"I don't understand the doomsayers among us,"

Robert was saying softly, "those who think of our
culture as some kind of

disease, who say we should hide and not inflict ourselves
upon the

galaxy ... after all, look what we've done!"

The boy was looking. He didn't blink. Couldn't
turn away.

Couldn't belittle what he saw.

Beside him, Robert April smiled, let his voice
go higher with excitement, and added, "If that was
circling above your planet,

wouldn't you

want

to talk to her?"

The four stood, two in front, two behind, as the
stratotractor

followed a prenegotiated path on invisible
magnetic beams

along the starship's port side. The cold-cream
hide of the ship

reflected the docklights in blurred pools and
cast them back on
their faces.

Then, there were voices again.

"This is Captain April, requesting permission

to come aboard
this lovely lady of ours."

A raspy but competent voice responded, one that
seemed very
used to the jargon of such moments.

"Simon here, Captain. Permission granted and
welcome back.

We've got you on approach. You're clear for
docking, port torpedo loading bay."

"Thank you,

Enterprise.

Pleasure's all ours. April out."

Robert angled away from the viewport, and only
then noticed George and Drake.

"Ah, gentlemen, you're back. That was my first
officer. You'll like

her. She's almost as old as Starfleet and twice as
experienced. She's

a grandmother too, so she knows how to handle peppery little
boys!"

He poked Jimmy, but withdrew his hand quickly when the
boy

wincing and smashed backward into the wall as though he'd
been hit

with an electric shock.

"Oh, Jimmy!" Robert said. "Sorry-didn't
mean to startle

you."

The boy gaped at him, seemed confused, then
noticed his father

and Drake, and fought to get control of himself again.

Deliberately

he did

not

look back out the viewport. He avoided watching
as the

vessel they were in approached the starship's gleaming
secondary

hull.

Now there was nothing but panels of hull material,
faintly dotted

with rivets and fitted bandings, little flashing lights,

and the portal to which some part of this ship would go in
like a foot

into a shoe.

Then they would be on board the starship, and Jimmy
wouldn't have to look at her from out here again.

He seemed to be holding his breath, waiting for that, so
he could get control again.

"Jimmy, you all right?" Robert asked with a
sympathetic grin.

Before their very eyes, the portcullis of resentment slammed down again between them and George's son. The sensation was so strong, so obvious, that Robert actually backed away a step and George had to buck an urge to leap inside before the gate came down.

He didn't make it. They could almost hear the clang.

"If I was all right," the boy snarled, "I wouldn't be here."

George felt his whole body tighten. "You watch your lip, buster.

That's Captain April you're talking to."

If the reprimand had any effect on Jimmy, they couldn't see

it-except that he didn't say anything else.

He held very still a moment, broiling, then stepped around his father toward the lift.

"Keep track of him, Drake," George snapped.

Drake nodded, but it was Jimmy who turned and spoke.

"Don't worry," the boy said. "He's got me in custody."

He stepped to the lift, the panel opened, he got in, Drake

followed, and that was that.

Once the lift panel breathed shut, George sagged as though he'd just survived a bar fight.

Robert sidled toward him, both hands balled in his cardigan's pockets, his expression one of affection and even amusement.

"George, he's a wonderful boy."

"He's a brat!"

"Oh, yes

...

but he's a wonderful brat!"

Part Two

THE BRIDGE

SIX

USS

Enterprise

1701-A

"Hard to think of

Bill of Rights

as one of a whole new breed of
starship, isn't it?"

"No," Jim Kirk said. "It's hard to think of
kids like Alma Roth
commanding ships of their own. There's a difference."
"Well... that's what I meant."

Leonard McCoy kept his voice down as he
joined the captain on
the command deck. With everything going on, it was easy for
him to
remain ignored. Attempting to ease this awful
time-the time that
was always awful, the interim of travel between realizing
there was
trouble and getting to the trouble-he tugged the
breast flap of his
uniform jacket down from his throat into its informal
position.

He thought he was helping the moment, but the captain's
voice
told him there wasn't any way to cotton-dab the
sensation of dread
they both had.

"Alma Roth's not a kid, Jim," he said.

"She's thirty-six ...
thirty-seven, by now, isn't she?"

"A kid," the captain sighed. "They're all
kids. All the midship
men and ensigns who signed on my ships and let me
risk their lives
for them ... they're all my kids."

McCoy grunted. "Maybe you've gotta be young
to let somebody else make decisions for you. Beats
me. It's not like I remember after
all these years. Like you said, Jim, things change.
Styles change ... starships change."

"What is it you want, Bones?" Kirk said.

"Want to hear me say

I'm jealous of another breed of ship? All right.

. . I'm jealous. I

wish Roth was back on the engineering deck below just like
she was

for ten of those thirty-seven years, helping us get
through this

flushback. She gave me years of devoted

service with no questions,

and when she asked for a recommendation to command school,

I

gave her one. How many of those make it to a starship
command?

Two percent? Three? But she had the strong recommendation of a starship commander. I may have put more on her than she could carry. Now she's out there, in the middle of whatever's happening. Probably dead, along with four hundred and ninety other young crewmen. How many were mine, Bones? How many did I train to go out there and take these wild risks?" McCoy squirmed self-consciously. "Didn't mean to bring up a sore subject, Jim."

"It's not a sore subject," Kirk said. "You know I don't believe in wishes. But she's out there, and her crew, and her ship, maybe in a million pieces, and that's what I hate." His tone turned bitter, grinding, and his eyes grew harder. He glared at the screen, because he couldn't give another person this look that had a captain's despise at its core.

"They're telling me the Enterprise and the entire Constitution-class of starship is going to be decommissioned, eclipsed by a new breed of ship, new technology, new everything. They're saying skis can replace a toboggan. Or the other way around, for that matter. Depends on prevailing conditions. On who's traveling. And what the mission is. Every design of ship has a unique purpose, and a balance of ability all to itself."

McCoy groaned in some kind of agreement. "But you know as well as I do the Federation's dazzled by all the labs and science and fancy analytical gear on those big ships. They've got exploration on their minds, and not much else. I don't think they're remembering how flexible a starship needs to be these days. Some people don't want to face the facts."

"Federation delegates haven't been out in rough seas like we have, Bones," Kirk agreed. "Damned few people see the

back alleys of
space. It took Starfleet to go out and get in the
dirt. We were cavalry.
We went out first."
The doctor tried to conjure something to say out of his
black bag
of psychological potions, but he was too set
back by the captain's
use of past tense.
Went. Were.
Kirk broiled that hard glare of his at the
panorama of passing
space before them. He looked at nothing else.
"Not only Roth, but all the other people
aboard that ship who
started out on the
Enterprise,"
he said. "I owe them."
"I think they owe you," McCoy corrected.
Kirk tucked his lower lip and shook his head.
"That's not the way a captain sees it. When
crewmen give their youths to a commander
and a ship, they're owed something back. Even if it
happens later.
No matter where it happens," he added, "or how
much later."
Brow puckering with curiosity now, McCoy
determined to fill in
the holes that were still gaping for him.
"Do you know something about this place?" he asked.
"I've
never heard of Farmon."
Kirk glanced at him, annoyed, then away again.
"Faramond."
"Jim, can't you take a hint? I've been inside
kicking distance of
you for twenty-five years and I've never heard of this
place. If I had
to testify, I'd say you've never been
there."
"I never have been," Kirk said.
Yet, his old friend could read that it wasn't just
evasion. It was
some tainted sentiment at work. A memory of a
burn.
"Never quite made it," the captain added.
"Okay ... why not?" McCoy prodded. "What
got in the way?"
In spite of the storm cones fluttering in their heads,
the alarms
and whistles and horns going off all over the ship that

somehow they
could hear right through the soundproof decks-because their
years here had better senses than their ears
did-both men had
their minds on something else entirely.
It shone in the captain's hazel eyes ...
resentment of space, yet
the inability to stay away from it. They had both been
drawn to the
fire. They had given up everything for it. Their youth.
A chance for
anchorage. Family. Home. Children.
Magnetism of space. Adventure always
one light-year beyond
wherever they stopped. Just one more light-year. Just one more
after that.
The captain parted his lips and spoke to the flowing
distance. "I
was busy," he said, "finding out I wasn't
perfect."
"Well, George? How did you like seeing the ship
with all her decals
and insignia and emblems in place? Her name on her
bow, her
lights encoded-was
"Great. Fine."
George tried to knuckle away a flop of his
argumentative sienna
shag as it fell in his face, but it wouldn't go. He
felt his facial
features stiff as rock beneath it. That was all he
needed. To stalk
around the
Enterprise
looking like a chip that fell off Mount Rushmore
...
"Sorry," he said as they turned the corridor
corner toward the
turbolift.
"Not at all," Robert brushed off.
George stepped aside to let the captain board the
turbolift first. "Where's the brat?"
"I believe Drake is showing him around engineering just
to keep
him busy. They'll be meeting us on the bridge."
As the lift door
gushed closed, Robert asked again, "Well? You
didn't answer my question."
"What question?" George grouched. "Oh-the ship.
She looks
different, Robert, real different. Gorgeous ...

kinda scary."

"Really? How do you mean?"

"I don't know ... pretty, but

...

she's got authority now. She's got all that Starfleet makeup on her hull now, all those red streaks and blue things, and all those lights shining, and her name right out there, and her construction contract number . . . you know, I didn't remember her being so

...

so goddamned big."

Robert chuckled. "You were right about letting Jimmy get a look at her in spacedock. A ship doesn't look quite the same from inside, does it? A wise sailor," he said, fanning his arms, "will one time stand upon the shore and watch his ship sail by, that he shall from

then on appreciate not being left behind." He grinned and added, "Eh?"

George gave him a little grimace. "Who's that? Melville? Or C. S. Forrester?"

"It's me!" Robert complained. "Can't I be profound now and again?"

"Hell, no."

"Why not?"

"Because you're still alive. Gotta be dead to be profound."

"You're unchivalrous, George."

"Yeah, I know."

"All that savage Celtic blood in you. Same color as your hair.

Good thing Jimmy looks like his mother."

"Mmm," George grunted. "He's still got the blood though. That's the problem. Winona gave all her nice pink civilized blood to Sam."

"Yes, how is Sam?" Robert asked affably.

"Qualified for the Science Academy in biosciences. Can you believe that? I can't even spell it."

"Same girlfriend?"

"Sure, same one. All the way through high school, two years of

college, swears he's going to marry her after they both graduate.
What I wouldn't give to see some of that consistency in Jimmy.
Every week,
a new scheme and a new girl."
"Ah, well," Robert sighed, "that's because he's-was
"A Casanova. I know, I know."
"No, George, no." Smiling and using that twinkle he kept in his eyes for just such moments, Robert leaned back against the lift wall and gave him one of those looks that made people think of him as a kindly uncle. "Not one of those at all."
"Okay. Don Juan."
"Oh, George, you're missing my point."
"What point? That my son's a wolf? I don't think he's seen me and Winn together enough in his life, Robert. She and I were better off apart, but I never thought-was Unexpected pain came into George's expression, and he sighed in a disturbed way. "I guess it's one of the ways I ...
butchered my family life."
"George," Robert uttered with scolding sympathy. "You're a bit clumsy at being a parent, but you want to catch the boy before he goes over the side."
"Can you blame me?" George tried to keep control, but his voice rippled. He sighed to cover it. "In space one time, and that one time he witnessed a mass ... mass ..."
"Execution," Robert assisted, "by a man who thought thousands of lives could be better run from a central power. The lesson was well taken by the Federation, at very least. We saw in a painful manner that no power at the top can do better than thousands of individuals all scrambling and deciding and trying and sweating for themselves, not even in a situation as desperate as Tarsus Four that day. Better to starve with a bit of hope than be marched off and slaughtered in the name of nobility."

Robert paused, stuck his hands into his sweater pockets, then pushed them out and poked along, gazing at his feet as though picking his way across cobblestones. "Kodos the Executioner... they, um, never found him, did they?" "No," George choked. "I'd like to find the bastard-what he put my family through, and me through ... wondering if my wife and sons would be found among the survivors or among the charred corpses-was He crushed his eyes shut and winced. "Nobody-nobody-should decide what somebody else's sacrifice is going to be! Dammit, I wasn't going to think about this-was "Didn't mean to fan an old flame, George, but you can't beat some things down." "I don't want to talk about it, okay? I don't want to step out onto the bridge, talking about this." "All right, as you wish." The lift eased to a stop and the doors brushed open, and Robert stepped out first, but not before nipping, "We'll talk about it later." George lingered in the lift until he gained control over his scowl of response. He was always surprised by that little bird of persistence nesting under the thatch in Robert April's country cottage. It inevitably came out and flitted by him at moments when he couldn't do a damn thing about it. The lift's red doors almost closed again. The sound shook George out of his thoughts, and he jumped forward. The doors shot open again with a hissing automatic apology for almost closing on him. Before him, Robert paused. "What's burning?" Someone from the port side said, "We've got a bad circuit here, sir. Electrical problems with one of the overrides. Some dock turkey

misconnected it."

Robert immediately stepped off in that direction.

Left alone in the "visitors' section," the porch
in front of the

turbolift, George drew a deep breath. It
came out shuddering.

The bridge of the
Enterprise.

A place with a real, audible, tangible
heartbeat. A living, breathing place that was the envy
and desire of

every cadet. The first of its kind.

Oh, there were other starships on the move out in space
these

days, or having their hulls laid even now, but this was
the first. There wouldn't ever be another first starship
Enterprise.

There

would never be another ship whose diagnostic panels
pulsed back to

the earliest date of starships, and at some point this
ship would be

known as the oldest of her kind. Someday ... she'd be
history.

Today she was the future. She seemed to know it too.

Her

diagnostics and subsystems monitors twittered
and chirped and pulsed in beautiful but seemingly
senseless patterns, like jungle

birds singing. Little squares of red and blue, white
and yellow lights

and colored bands on black backgrounds patched the
circle of black

computer control boards all the way around the
middle of the

bridge in a big headband, flashing in happy
nonsynchrony. Each

pattern was reporting from some remote part of the ship,
blinking

diligently and waiting to be needed. Above them,
mounted on the

blue matte walls under soft ceiling lights, were
displayed sectors of

the known galaxy, known star systems and nebulae,
anomalies and

gas giants, maps and charts, prettier than any
an.

There were shadows too. The lights here were
deliberately

subdued to allow for shadows. Shadows of overhanging
panels,

shadows of chairs, shadows of people standing, turning, walking.

Life-forms who grew up on worlds with trees and mountains liked

shadows, liked a sense of depth, a memory of sunrise and sunset. The starship's designers hadn't ignored that. Because of the shadows, the bridge was a warm place that allowed for retreat and thought.

George figured there would have to be a lot of thought going on here over the next few decades. A lot of decisions would be made here, about many lives, and it was fitting that the place where those decisions happened should remind people about life.

Shadows and

soft lights could do that. The bridge did that.

As he watched Robert move around, George gazed at the

luminous arena, the braintrust of the starship, and all the memories

of trouble stirred up by this ship came flapping back at him. The

ship's an example of how machines don't need humans anymore.

It's too powerful. It's a big weapon that flies. It's a big computer that thinks. It's a flying bomb. It's a sign of mankind writing himself out.

The wrong people will get their hands on it, it's too big to handle,

it's going to get out of control, it can kill a whole planet on a whim,

humanity's a kid and kids can't handle anything with an impact

over two years, gripe, gripe, doom, doom, doom.

Hadn't happened. None of it. The ship had been out on a few trial

stressing runs for spaceworthiness, and while the designers were at

it, they'd executed a few darn nice missions and proven that

humanity could make a wise decision, in fact a lot of wise decisions,

and perfectly well understood the future impact of things present.

But today George wasn't concerned about the future of human

ity. He was concerned only with the future of one boy on the

edge. He shook all the memories out of his head and tried to focus.

The bridge had more people on it than the last time George was here—one, two, three—helm, science station, navigation, engineering, two guys at tactical, a girl up to both armpits in an access on the floor, and over there just a pair of legs sticking out of a hatch under the impulse propulsion systems console. Except for one man picking at the helm station, George didn't recognize any of these people at all.

They all looked so young....

Suddenly he became aware of how long five years could be.

He stayed on the back of the quarterdeck, overwhelmed by his thoughts, watching Robert step down the two little stairs to the command deck. The captain caressed the parrot-red bridge rail, then the black and gray command chair. He looked like a visiting dignitary, his ivory sweater still hiding most of his command uniform.

Somehow it was comforting to see him down there.

Another deep breath let George inhale the crisp electrical smell, the scent of people at work, and he started to relax. In its way, it was a good smell. The smell of correction, accomplishment.

He hadn't expected to come back here. He'd been her first officer for a couple of minutes, but knew it was temporary and never anticipated coming back. He hadn't been ready to be second in command of a ship like this back then, and he knew he still wasn't-

A terrible thought almost knocked him over. He unclenched his fists, leaned forward on the red rail, and crouched to speak to

Robert without anybody else hearing.

"Rob-Captain!" he snarled, just in case anybody

did
hear.
Robert turned, brows up. "Yes, George?"
"You haven't-I mean, you don't expect me
to-I
mean ... have you
got
a first officer?"
"Oh," Robert said, and gave him a reassuring
nod. "Yes, we have a wonderful first officer.
You'll like her." He winked conspiratorial-
ly. "Don't worry. You're not on that hook this
time."
"Who is it?"
"You don't know her. She's been out on policing
missions
between Federation colonies. You know, I thought she was
here-was He glanced around the bridge, then finally
addressed one of the men
working at tactical. "Bill? Excuse me."
The larger of the two turned. "Sir?"
"Where's Lora?"
"I'm under here, sir," a voice called from the
floor. One of the
feet sticking out of the impulse propulsion hatch
rose and wagged.
Robert bent down and asked, "Getting the ship all
natty and
trim, are you?"
"Some last-minute trouble with the deuterium flow to one
of the
reactor chambers. We've almost got it, sir."
"Why are you in the hole instead of having one of the
impulse
engineers go down there?"
The engineers on the deck looked around guiltily,
but the voice in
the hole said, "Happened to be here, is all."
"I see," Robert droned. "I have someone for you
to meet."
"Sorry, can't hear you."
"I have someone here I'd like you to meet!"
"Oh-was
"George, that's First Officer Lorna Simon
down there. Lorna,
Commander George Kirk."
The foot wagged again and a voice croaked, "How are
ya?"
"I'm," George called from the back, "just great.
You?"
"Arthritis. And I can barely breathe down here-was

Robert smiled and stood up again. "George, meet the rest of the officer complement and the bridge crew. Bill Thorvaldsen and Larry Marvick beside you at engineering subsystems, our chief impulse engineer and chief warp drive engineer, respectively. And you remember Carlos Florida, our helmsman since the beginning and still holding on. Carlos, look who's back."

The stout, dark-haired Latino fellow at the helm offered George a friendly wave of recognition and filled in, "How've you been, sir?"

George nodded uneasily, but he was inwardly damned relieved to see a face he recognized. "Great. You?"

Florida returned the nod, smiled, and made George feel a little more welcome.

"Over there is Ensign Isaac Soulian, our navigator." Robert gestured to a young skinny Arabic type, or Lebanese, or something, with one of those beards that wouldn't go away no matter how much he shaved. He nodded at George, but both hands were busy as he handed tools to-

"Ensign Veronica Hall," Robert went on, noting the young woman on the deck, "is our astrotelemetrist and communications officer."

"Hello, Commander," the girl said in her quiet voice, wagging a stylus-type instrument, then pushed aside one of a dozen blond braids-supposedly braided to keep the short hair out of her face, and apparently failing at that.

George nodded down at her, noting that she wasn't much older than Jimmy, and was assaulted by all the other why-couldn'ts that came with such a realization about young people. Three or four years ago, this girl hadn't been on the verge of criminal behavior, that was sure. Why couldn't-

"All our women seem to be on the floor today,"

Robert said. "Gentlemen, you're failing at your courtly duty."
Smiles rippled. The good mood started to seep over George and smother his doubts.
Until the turbolift doors opened again.
He turned, and was hit by a blast of cold teenager.
Jimmy Kirk stepped onto the bridge of the starship Enterprise,
absorbed the active colored lights, the fog of shadows above and below, drew in a breath, and wrinkled his nose in contempt.
"It stinks in here," he said.
The deck turned to concrete. The words dropped and clattered.
Several members of the bridge crew heard. They turned to get a look at the jacketed, capped, eagle-eyed snot who spoke that way about their bridge.
Already they didn't like him.
A few paces away from his son, George Kirk felt his muscles turn to thread. He drew his brows together in a kind of warning.
"They're doing electrical work," he said. "You know... accomplishing something."
"Watch your tongue, son," a voice crackled from the lower forward deck. "Somebody might say the same thing about your ship someday."
For the first time since George came in, the first officer showed herself out of that hole in the deck. Lorna Simon let herself be hauled to her feet by Florida and Soulian, but her eyes were already on Jimmy.
She was a very stout woman with a shaggy hat of white hair and long time lines arguing between scowls and smiles etched into her roundish face. Everything on her was round, in fact. Hair, face, figure, fingers-a mushroom of officer material-and she would've had to tease that hair to make five feet.
George held his breath, terrified of what

Jimmy might say to such
an unlikely person.
Maybe there was a lingering resemblance
to somebody he re-
spected, or maybe Simon looked like a teacher
he was scared of, but
the boy clammed up suddenly and glared at her.
She didn't give him a second glance after that.
She turned to the
captain and said, "Permission to go below and adjust that
thing at
the source?"
"Certainly," Robert said. "I'd like you back on
the bridge after
we leave the star system."
"Aye, sir," she said. "I'll be back in time
to spank any little ass
who gets out of line."
She tossed a very short but puncturing glance at the
somebody
she had in mind, then toddled into the turbolift and
disappeared.
Only after she'd gone did Jimmy muster the nerve
to speak again.
"What's somebody's grandmother doing on your ship?"
"That's Commander Simon," Robert said. "First
officer."
"First officer? Seems more like first warden of the
women's
block."
"She's been offered a captaincy with a ship command
nine times. Turned down every one."
Jimmy's expression changed from trying to gather up
his spilled
respect to real amazement. "Why would anybody
turn down a
chance to be a captain?"
Robert offered a supple librarian's shrug.
"She didn't want it."
"That's stupid," the boy said, and was gratified
to catch his
father's wince in his periphery. "Why wouldn't you want
to be in
charge?"
"Charge means responsibility, Jimmy,
decisions. Maybe lives on
your hands. You could kill someone just docking a ship
incorrectly.
The prospect of command is enthralling, but there's a
certain shine
that comes off the function. Lorna's just smarter than

I am," he
added with a grin.
"Where's Lieutenant Reed?" George
interrupted, turning to
Jimmy.
His son shrugged, not in a polite way. "He sent
me up here. I
don't know where he went."
"He just sent you up alone?"
Jimmy ironed him with a glower that said he understood that
his
father didn't trust him.
"He said he'd sell me to a reggae drum section
if I didn't come straight up. Whatever that
means."
George set his jaw and tried not to snap back an
answer, but it
was Robert who took care of the ugly moment.
The captain didn't seem at all bothered by the
boy's tone. He
swept his bridge crew with a series of glances.
"All right, everyone, let's say we heave tight
and fetch some headway, shall we? Bill, sound the
farewell whistles in the
dockmaster's office and request clearance."
"Aye, sir."
"Ensign Hall, get up off the deck,
dear, and help us clear for
making way."
"Yes, sir."
Hall clamped the access panel shut, squirmed
to her feet, and wriggled over to the communications station,
straightening her
uniform girlishly as she went.
George tried to keep his eyes off her, but in
spite of being very thin and small-boned, she was all
girl. Seemed too soft and
flowerlike to be in the service. Hard to ignore in
this environment.
He noticed Jimmy watching her too.
Behind him, the turbolift doors parted, and George
stepped aside
as quite another kind of woman stalked onto the
bridge. This one was blond too, only
straw-colored blond while Hall's hair was
creamier.
Somehow it fit. George always thought that color had
suited this
particular lady from the moment he first met her.
"Robert!" the newcomer cried. "You're
late!-oh, George. Hello.

What in blue hell are you doing here?"

"Came to see you again, Sarah, why else?"

George said.

"I know," the woman said. "It's always wonderful

to see me. Robert, that sickbay's a mess! You

said my surgical team was

cleared for duty on this ship, and they're not!" She

shook a yellow

computer recording disk at him. "I've got four

complaints from

planetside Starfleet hospitals saying I'd

appropriated their person

nel without ample notice. They're bitching at me

about the Third Interstellar Convention for Safety of

Life in Space and quoting bylaws at me!

What am I supposed to do at this late date?

We're about to take off, for crying out loud!"

Robert turned a glad eye on her and said,

"Ah, Sarah darling, yes.

Veronica, would you patch my authorization through to those

hospitals, please? And notify Starfleet

Headquarters that it's all

clear?"

Hall put out a hand for the yellow disk. "I'll

take that for you, Doctor."

"Report for me, Sarah?" Robert

asked. "All squared away in

sickbay?"

"Well," the doctor grumbled, "I guess so.

I just hate coming back

to these details."

Robert stepped onto the upper deck and took both

her hands.

"Isn't she lovely, George? Gotten

prettier every day since we welded

the old nuptial bargain, eh?"

Sarah April softened visibly, sank against him

a little, and

lowered her voice.

"Cut it out

...

making me look bad."

"So lovely," he murmured, and pecked her

cheek.

"That's not regulation, Captain," George commented

from one

side.

Sarah leaned back and cast him a casual look.

"Who asked you,

volcano? Hey-is that Jimmy back there?"

George stepped aside, but didn't

look at his son.
Sarah backed away from Robert, though still holding
one of his
hands, and spoke to Jimmy. "Last time I saw you,
you were sailing
paper boats on the puddle behind your farmhouse.
What are you
doing here?"
"Not much," was all Jimmy said, and he put some
space between
himself and the adults.
"Well, let me know when you get spacesick."
She pushed off her
husband and headed for the turbolift without ceremony.
"It's
always like that when there's a young crew. Barf, barf,
barf. I keep
telling those idiots at headquarters that artificial
gravity is never going to take the place of some
nice chunky planet. I'm going to check the
medical stores. I don't trust the manifests
they sent me. And
please
be sure to have the department heads tell the new
recruits where sickbay is, because I
don't want to be running all
over this ship, looking for some confused midshipman.
You can get
lost with a bad left turn on this monster. Don't
forget!"
The lift doors almost cut off her last words, but
she pushed them
out in time.
"Oh, brother," George grunted. "One of the
great universal
constants."
"Ah, there she goes," Robert said, "twittering like
a mistlethrush.
What would I do without her?" He circled back
onto the lower deck,
turned the command chair, then settled into it and crossed
his legs.
"Short range scan, on visual."
There were responsive bleeps, and the big
viewscreen before
them came to life—a view of one open end of the box
dock, the
moon way out there, and after that... space.
Robert seemed notably more content at having had a
few seconds
with his wife. There was an extra lilt in his voice

and a grin tugging
at his cheeks as he casually said, "Batten down
all external
maintenance systems and confirm all running lights
on, please."
"Confirming, sir," helmsman Florida said.
"Battened and con
firmed, sir."
"Thank you, Carlos. Let's get under way,
then-oh, Jimmy,
come down here. Want to watch?"
The boy stepped down as beckoned, but his attitude
didn't
improve. "What's to watch?"
"It's complicated," Robert said, "but very
interesting."
"What's complicated about it? You just pull the ship
out, and
once you're out, there's nothing in space but more
nothing."
"Seems like that," the captain agreed, "but you don't
just bear off with a ship like this and assume everyone will get
out of your way.
Even on the ocean there are rules of the
road. "Pass port to port,"
"red right returning," things like that. Aren't there?"
"Well... yeah."
"I envy you knowing about such things. I learned it all
in space. Never spent much time out on the water other
than the occasional fishing curragh in Ireland. I more
or less cling to the land, myself. Never heard of a
continent sinking, you know!" He swung around
to the communications station and spoke to the young girl who
looked so small against those controls. "Are we
cleared by the
dockmaster?"
"Clearance is coming in now, sir. All dockworkers
and mainte
nance personnel are accounted for."
"Good, very good. Thank you, Veronica. Oh,
Carlos, remember
that we have to arrange our departure around the orbit of
that new
powerplant."
"Yes, sir, I'm working out a trajectory
to avoid it," Florida said.
"I'll be glad when they figure out a better
place to hang that thing."
"What's a powerplant doing in orbit?"
Jimmy demanded.
"Jimmy!" George spat from behind. "Don't

interrupt."

But Robert tossed him a glance that said he had expected, and maybe even intended, this to happen.

"That's what he's here for." He looked at Jimmy and said, "It's a starship-type powerplant. There are several of them in orbit several thousand miles farther out than we are. The power is tight-beamed back to Earth. We have to be careful not to knock into them as we leave, and of course not to fly through one of those tight beams.

That'd be spine-chilling, wouldn't it?"

He rolled his eyes, and the bridge crew chuckled and rolled theirs.

George was the only person standing stiff, almost at attention, consumed by nerves. Everyone else was hovering over his station

with a hip cocked or a hand on a belt, poking at controls and overseeing monitors, every face showing a hint of satisfaction. Something about the launching of a ship, no matter where, no matter how long or how short a time she'd been at anchor-there was just something about it.

Their casualness made them seem particularly capable. They had the attitude of people who really knew the ropes.

George almost dared relax-but then-

"Why don't they just put the powerplant down on the planet?"

Jimmy persisted. "That's where the power gets used, isn't it? Why bother to orbit it?"

"For one thing, they're ugly," Robert answered.

"Who wants to live next to one now that we have an alternative? But most important, these are antimatter-type powerplants. We didn't dare use them for planetary power until we figured out how to keep them in orbit and funnel just the power down. Wouldn't want something

like that sitting on the planet's surface, where all the people live, would we?"

"Why not?" Jimmy jabbed back. "We're sitting inside one, aren't we?"

On the quarterdeck behind them, George closed his eyes in misery and knew the nightmare wasn't going

to end.

Below him, Robert was peering at Jimmy, trying to see under the cap's brim into that shadow where the eyes were burning, and he slapped the arm of his chair.

"By St. Christopher, everyone, he's right!" he said. "Let's turn back."

The crew laughed and made exaggerated nods and somebody muttered, "Too late. We're doomed."

George watched his son.

Suddenly a hillbilly at dinner, Jimmy's face turned hard and humiliation scorched his cheeks. The chuckles of the bridge crew made him seem dirty and oafish.

George couldn't help but empathize as Jimmy backed off a step, behind the captain's chair, and made a look that said he didn't want to be talked to. Suddenly, George felt bad for his son-then also remembered that this was why he had brought the boy here.

"Captain," Veronica Hall said, "the dockmaster's hailing with a correction from the barging port. He asks if we can wait for a hydrohaul to pass us."

"Of course we can. Signal affirmative.

Jimmy, come here and look at what's passing by us," Robert called, seemingly unaware of the black cloud over Lake James. He pointed at the forward screen, paused a moment, and waited, then kept pointing as a long, ugly blue and gray ship came across the bow.

"That's a barge, Jimmy, heading out to one of our colonies in another star system. Oh-see that little blue and white decal? That's a mail pennant. It means she's carrying mail for her port of destination, and possibly ports in between. That little sticker makes it a UFP offense to tamper with her in any way, rather than only a criminal offense. Quite a vision of accomplishment, isn't it? There's a whole stasis warehouse inside, with live fish and everything."

"Fish?" Jimmy snorted. "Why?"

"Watch."

As an answer, the big rectangular barge went out

the other side of
the screen and showed what it was to wing.
Jimmy squinted disdainfully. "A block of
ice?"

"Frozen saltwater. Several hundred thousand
tons. Essentially an
iceberg. They just beam it up, it freezes, they
warehouse as many
live fish as they can, and off they go to a colony.
They're going to
establish a saltwater hatchery."

"Don't they cover it up? Put it in a tank or
something?"

The captain cranked around toward him. "Why?"
Unable to think of anything, Jimmy clammed up.
After all, it was
just ice.

"Doesn't seem to be any reason to go to all that
expense," Captain April commented. "Nothing
sticks to it in space, after all..."

Jimmy buried his bungle in another
accusatory question. "They just beam up a couple
cubic kilometers of ocean and take it?"

The captain looked puzzled for a moment, then said,
"Oh, no, my
boy, no! That would be a catastrophe! They have
to beam it up a
little at a time, in slices, essentially."

"Why?"

"Well, beaming isn't a net energy loss of
zero, you know ..." He
paused again, surveyed his guest, then said, "No,
I don't suppose
you do know, do you?"

"Sure he does," the navigator grumbled without
turning.

"Knows everything," somebody else underbreathed from for
ward starboard.

On the upper deck, George was beyond wincing. The
heat flushed
out of his body and into the deck. He'd made some
mistakes before
in his life, but
this-

"There's a tremendous energy exchange involved in
transport
ing," Captain April said, ignoring the comments.

"We make the
universe unstable for a moment. We take mass and
move it. There
has to be an equalization and absorption somewhere

else. Theoretically the transporter takes a bit of where it's going and moves it

...

it's very complicated, Jim, and dangerous unless you know quite well what you're doing. That's why a transporter's not exactly a household tool. Perhaps your father back there can show you the ship's data on the subject after we get under way, eh, George?

George, you still back there?"

"Yes, sir," George said, surprised.

"Yes, I'm still here, I guess."

"Captain," Hall said, touching her earcom unit, "the barging port signals their vessel is cleared of our trajectory and they send their thank-you. Dockmaster confirms area is clear now."

"Acknowledge both of them."

"Aye, sir, acknowledging."

Robert turned his chair forward. "Carlos, clear all moorings, cables, and antigravity support systems."

"Moorings cleared, sir."

"Lay in standard angle of departure."

"Laid in."

"Move us out, one-fifth sublight."

"Point two zero sublight... here we go."

As if a drumroll suddenly erupted in all their heads, the bridge crew straightened their shoulders. No one wanted to slouch as the Federation's flagship embarked. From deep within the heart of the giant ship, a low hum began. As a great sleeping swan raising her neck, stretching her wings, and pushing forward through the pond, the starship Enterprise glided forward and let the spacedock fall away at her sides. Before them, the moon gave them a milky salute, then also slid away to starboard, and left open space before them. The solar system was like a concert accompanying the swan, with subtle tones of the French horn and the bass, as she slid past each of

the planets that happened to be in the path before them. The planets of the Sol system, particularly pretty to all humans because they were the first any human child learned about. They had been the first vision of "space" for everyone on the bridge right now. George wished he could enjoy the sight more, but he was too aware of too many things. Aware of Robert, who had stuck his neck out and pulled some very long strings to get Jimmy aboard, and who had bothered to take a mission he had intended to turn down just to do an old friend a favor. Not even a Starfleet favor. A trouble-on-the-farm favor. And there was Jimmy, clinging to the ship's rail and glaring at the planets. He looked like he was afraid he'd fall off. Either that, or he hated all this as much as he pretended to. Maybe he wasn't pretending. Maybe he really did hate it. Maybe he hated George all the more for dragging him up here.... George felt himself start to sweat under his Security suit. He drew a careful breath and spoke quietly but firmly. "Jimmy," he said, "step up here." His son blinked a couple of times, then leered up at him. "Why should I?" he asked. George gritted his teeth. "Get up out of the command deck, dammit." Jimmy looked around, but his sixteen-year-old smart-ass fatalism prevented him from noting that he was the only intruder in what was traditionally and functionally the captain's private area. He glared up at his father with that question on his face, and still didn't move. George snapped his fingers and pointed at the upper

deck, beside
himself.
"Quit lipping off and get

...
up

...
here."

Hard crust rose on Jimmy's face and his
horns came up. He
didn't like being ordered around in public. He
barely put up with it
in private.

He stepped up onto the quarterdeck, leering at his
father.

"Fine," he said. "You want me out of there? How
'bout if I leave
altogether?"

Without stopping, he stalked past his father and
right to the
turbolift, which opened accommodatingly and then
closed as the
boy turned and stabbed George with a final glare, the
kind of glare
that said he was a boy who'd been making too many
decisions for
himself in life.

Regret gripped George as he watched the lift
doors close and
swallowed that glare the hard way. He shook his
head, touched his

brow, and turned around again-

To find Robert gazing up at him. The captain was
out of his command chair now, leaning on the bridge
rail, framed by the
outermost parts of the solar system as the ship cruised
for open
space.

"Ah, the rocketry of youth," the captain sighed.
"Makes my heart
swell."

George gave him a frustrated, embarrassed
shrug. "He doesn't
like being told to do something when he doesn't
personally see a reason to do it. That'll get him
killed someday, if he doesn't learn better-I
thought maybe seeing the solar system . . . this was a
mistake. I knew it. I should've followed my
instincts when they told
me to turn around and go back home."

"Really, my friend," Robert chuckled.

He grinned sagely and joined him on the upper

deck, so they
could have a semblance of privacy.
"Take that wasp out of your shorts and relax," he
said. "It's going
to be a charming little cruise, we'll do the Golden
Shovel at Faramond, we'll cruise right
back, and your boy will have seen
things he never imagined. You see? Perfectly
harmless. So don't get
in a pucker. Whatever's into the boy, we'll iron
it out. After all, he's only been on board an
hour. Don't want to ask too much of him all
in one dose of medicine, do you? He's only
sixteen! He has
so
far yet
to grow."

"I'm glad you can see something in there," George
said, "cuz I
sure can't."

"Oh, I see lots in there," Robert agreed.
"Take a little heart, George. Remember, it's
the belligerent children among us who become the greatest
leaders ... Elizabeth the First, Alexander the
Great... this kind of person naturally has conflict
with parents. Sometimes violent conflict. Why,
Alexander was suspected of
conspiring in his father's assassination."
"Please, Robert!" George wailed. "Don't
give my kid any ideas!"

EIGHT

"Kirk here. Liaison Cutter 4 requesting
clearance for launch."
"Acknowledged, LC 4. Attention, all hangar
deck personnel-
clear the bay for depressurizing. Repeat, clear
the bay and prepare for
launch."

Alarms began to ring, piercing the entire aft end of the
starship's
secondary hull, warning that the bay doors would
soon open and
any living thing left in the hangar deck would be
blown to bits if he,
she, or it were not inside the thirty-foot utility
ship about to launch.

To some inside the small ship, those bells sounded like
school was
in session again.
To one in particular.
"Jimmy, are you strapped in?"

"I'm trapped, if that's what you mean."
George Kirk cranked around from the
copilotstnavigator's seat to
look aft at his son, who was sitting behind Robert
in the row of
passengerstcrew seats. Now in a Starfleet
off-duty suit, obviously
missing the jacket he liked so much and the cap he could
hide
under, Jimmy glared back at him. He was
unstrapped and apparent
ly intending to remain that way. Teenagers were
indestructible,
after all.
"Regulations," George said, somehow containing what
he really
wanted to say. "I know you don't care much for the
law, but the rest
of us do. Buckle up."
"Probably a good idea, Jimmy," Robert
April said from his own
seat in the crew section behind Carlos Florida's
helm seat.
Letting them know with jerks and yanks that he didn't
want to be
doing this, Jimmy buckled up rather than argue with
Captain April.
Every little defiance seemed to have a limit after which it
became
impotent. He liked to make points one at a
time.
Any point he wanted to make here, though, would have
to be
carefully measured. It was close quarters, and there
were people
here who wouldn't understand him.
There were only seven aboard. Jimmy, his father, and
Captain
April, of course ... Ensign Hall, who was
close enough to Jimmy's
age to make Jimmy unexclusive in the
young club; Lieutenant
Florida, Chief Impulse Engineer
Thorvaldsen, and a somewhat
fleshy-faced engineering technician he had brought with
him named
Jennings or Bennings or Dennings or something. All
here, in this
cookie box with seats.
The two engineers were acting weird, Jimmy noted.
Glancing at

each other and grinning and whispering as though making plans. He

recognized it, because those were the same motions and whispers his gang made before their attempt to escape from Iowa.

But these guys weren't going to run away, so there was something

else they were excited about.

"Hangar Chief to LC 4."

Beside Jimmy, sitting directly behind Robert, Veronica Hall

touched the comm and said, "Go ahead, Hangar Chief."

"The bay is secured. You're cleared for launch.

Commander Simon

is standing by to verify your flight schedule."

"Acknowledged," Hall said.

"Depressurizing the bay... now."

There was no sound or sensation except for the warning bells, but everyone on board tensed anyway. As the deck depressurized, even

the sound of the bells faded away, to be finally no

sound at all. The

dead silence of space, where no sound can travel.

No matter how technology smoothed out moments like this,

launch was still launch. Still a dive into a place that

didn't want life. In a moment those hangar

doors would slide open, and they would

be in the unforgiving, inclement realm of space. They wouldn't have

the advantage of a big ship, so big that the sensations of imminent

danger seemed far away. This little ship was more like taking a

rowboat out on the ocean.

Seated in the pilot's seat beside George, Carlos Florida powered

up the cutter and placed his fingertips on the

controls, just feeling them for a few seconds. He

flattened his lips and shook his head.

"This new design," he complained. "Kinda clumsy on the

power-to-thrust ratios. I can feel it."

"As long as you can steer it," George commented.

"I'm going to recommend they reconsider this in favor of the

smaller design. They're calling it a shuttlecraft."

"Did they ask you?"

"LC 4, Chief... I'm going to open the bay doors."

"Chief, LC 4. Ready when you are," Florida said. Then he grinned at George. "Hell, no, they didn't ask me."

On the computer-generated viewing screen, which looked to

anyone inside like a big window, the starship's dome-shaped hangar bay doors parted and showed the shocking emptiness of open space. It was black, it was big, it was diamond-studded-and it was empty.

Sitting inside his self-constructed shell, Jimmy Kirk kept the scowl firmly on his features as he felt the ship lift off the deck and move toward the great open space. To his left there was a schematic of the ship he was riding, and he tried to concentrate on it so his nervousness wouldn't show. Blunt bow, streamlined sextagonal body, probably flatsided for storage reasons-he remembered his father talking about Starfleet's attempts to conserve space by stacking utility craft. A detachable freight hold underneath made the ship look pregnant. On the top of the control section, outside, was a sensor pod for research purposes or something, so the ship looked like a pregnant whale with a tumor on its head.

An impulse engine in back, two low-warp engines on either side of it, the whole thing painted eggshell white-warp engines? How fast could this thing go?

A carnival-ride surge jolted him back to what was happening. His grips tightened on the arms of his seat and he tried to swallow but couldn't.

To know there was nothing between him and that deadly depressurized eternity out there but the thin skin of this small ship ... sure wasn't the same as chugging around Earth in some nice, safe orbital path.

"Feels funny the first time," Veronica Hall offered. Her enormous pale blue eyes flapped at him.

Jimmy looked at her and clung to what he saw.

Better than a schematic, her features were very plain, except for the size of those eyes. She had almost no eyelashes, almost no

color in her cheeks,
and her lips were pale. Her blond hair was short,
pulled back on top,
and the rest of it was made into about a dozen little braids
that brushed the nape of her neck. She looked
to Jimmy like the medieval painting in the hallway of
his high school, and he imagined her wearing one of those
funny cone-shaped hats with a piece of silk
hanging out of the point and a long dress with a high
waist and no cleavage. Pretty, in a way.

Different.

He clung to the sight of her and tried to imagine
himself as a knight riding beside her, hired by the
king to protect her.

Only then did he realize he was breathing too
heavily, giving away
his fear. And he was digging his fingernails into the arms of
his seat

now.

still

can't act scared. I can't be scared. I'm not
scared.

Yet he couldn't muster up a voice as the cutter
bore off to the right

at a notable tilt against its own artificial
gravity. One of the smaller
auxiliary viewers showed the

Enterprise

hanging in space behind

them, getting farther and farther away. All they had
between them

and the cold of space was this thirty-foot city bus with
impulse drive

and another bus-size hold attached to its bottom.

Not much to cling

to.

He cleared his throat. "What kind ... what kind
of ship is this
thing we're in?"

"It's a low-warp multiduty ship we use when
we want to soft-land

or do aerial mapping of a planet, or scout an
area," she said. "Goes

about warp two, max."

"I thought they could just beam down to wherever they wanted
to

go from a starship."

"They can. But a transport or a shuttlecraft
or one of these

cutters, they're used to take a controlled
environment along with

you until you see what you're getting into. Can't beam everywhere until you take a peek first."

"But we know where we're going," Jimmy countered.

"Don't we?"

"Yes, Jimmy, we do," Robert said, twisting around in his straps. "This time, though, your father wanted you to see a few of the remarkable natural wonders of this sector. The Enterprise is going at high warp to settle a border dispute on the far side of the sector while we do our diplomatic tea party on Faramond. We'll rendezvous with them after-"

"LC 4, this is the bridge. Do you read?"

"Reading you, bridge," Veronica said into the comm. After the acknowledgment, the voice changed to that of First Officer Simon.

"Confirming your flight schedule, sir. Five hours at low warp on the set course, approximately forty-eight hours on Faramond Colony, and rendezvous with us in orbit at Faramond."

"Confirm," Robert said.

Veronica tapped her unit, bothering to reach across with her left hand, which meant she had to lean forward. "That's confirmed, bridge."

"See you in two days, then. Bridge out."

Even as she spoke, the Enterprise veered smoothly off, and left their auxiliary screen.

"Liaison Cutter 4 out." She looked forward to the pilot station. "Cleared, sir."

"Okay," George said. "Let's get our bearings on the Rosette navigational buoy."

"Aye, sir," Florida responded, and told the helm what to do.

Using only the one hand again, Veronica tapped a record of the conversation into the cutter's log, then grinned at Jimmy and shrugged as though to show him how routine it all was. He didn't like that. A girl trying to make him feel at ease instead of the other way around. He hunkered down, wishing he could hide in the raised collar of his jacket, but the jacket was on its way to a border dispute. So he

just clammed up and listened to the conversation at the helm.

His

father's voice, and Florida's.

"Searching," Florida was saying. "Got it. Wow, it's a real clear beacon."

"Position?" Jimmy's father asked.

"Bearing three points on the starboard quarter."

"Come about. Bring it two points abaft the starboard beam and take another one."

"Coming about, aye. Two points abaft starboard beam ... stand by

...

mark."

"Log that, then keep going."

"Logged. Now it's broad on the starboard beam-correction-

one point abaft starboard ... coming on the beam now ..."

Jimmy bit his lip unconsciously, trying to feel the ship turning. It

had to be turning, unless that navy buoy out there was flying around drunk.

Staring at the readings, Florida went on. "Coming one point

forward ... two ... three ... broad on the starboard bow

... three points, two, one ... Rosette

Nebula buoy is dead ahead, sir."

"Cross-sect and get a running fix by bow and beam bearings."

"Aye, cross-secting ... three ...

two ... one ... mark. That's our heading, sir."

"Lock it in."

"Locked in."

"Ahead standard."

"Standard cruise speed, aye," Florida concluded. He gazed at the

big emptiness on the viewscreen, "Here we go."

Amidships, Jimmy Kirk pressed his shoulders deeply into the

cushion of his seat. There wasn't much to feel, but there was a sense

of mechanical life coming up into his legs from the heart of the

small ship. He didn't know how to measure it,
how to judge it-
"Know what all that was?"
Jimmy shook himself and looked to his side at
Veronica Hall.
He collected himself and answered, "I don't care
what they're
doing."
"Really?" She rolled her eyes. "You should. A
small error in
defining a fix can mean a large error in position."
"I'm not driving, so I don't care."
"Okay. That's you, I guess," she said. "Where
are you from?"
"Riverside."
"Sounds pretty. Is it a Federation colony?"
Abruptly self-conscious, Jimmy realized he
hadn't added the
main part of his address. He was used to being with people who
already knew.
"No . . . it's in Iowa."
"Oh! Sorry. The way you said it, I got the
wrong idea." She shook
her head. "I guess being out in space all the time
stretches my
perspective. You know what I mean? I'm from
Minnesota, but I
haven't been back in a long time."
Jimmy leaned toward her and quietly said, "We
could go back
together . . . just for a visit."
"Nothing to go back to," she said with a blush. "My
family's
scattered all over Federation settlements. What
are you doing
here?" she asked. "A term paper or something?"
Jimmy looked forward to see that the others seemed
involved in
getting the cutter on course, except for the two
engineers who were
tampering with hand-held equipment they had brought with
them.
Lowering his voice to a grumble just above a whisper, he
leaned
toward Veronica. "My father dragged me here so he
wouldn't feel so
guilty about ignoring us."
Her pale, straight brows came together. "You mean
you don't
want to be here?"
"Do you?" he countered.

"I'd rather die than be anywhere else."

Skewering her with a courtroom glare, Jimmy lowered his voice.

"Isn't that just a little crazy for a pretty, promising . . . officer?"

She smiled. "What's crazy about it?"

"You just said you'd rather be dead and I don't believe it."

Veronica settled her small shoulders against the back cushion of her seat. "I guess you don't have to believe it. I'm the only one that has to."

A fair point, as Jimmy sat thinking about it.

He couldn't come up with any better argument than calling her crazy again, and he'd already used that one.

She apparently noted that he still didn't understand.

She sighed and filled in. "I like the chance to see sectors of space like the one we're passing on the way to the Faramond system."

Hoping it sounded more like a dare than interest, Jimmy asked, "What's so fancy about this sector of space?"

This time he spoke loud enough to reach the front of the cutter.

Even from two rows back he caught his father's glance and grimace.

"One of the most impressive natural wonders around," the fleshy-faced engineering technician provided. "A trinary star in the Rosette Nebula, neighboring Faramond.

Most of the stars in the Rosette are fairly young, but it's got two suns orbiting a neutron star. Quickly! Who can tell me the gases? Quickly, now! Hup! Hup! Hup!"

Veronica spoke up before any of the men. "Green ionized oxygen, formaldehyde, ammonia, methyl alcohol, carbon monoxide, water

...

oh, no-that's Orion, isn't it? Darn it!"

"Yes, that's what makes the Orion Trapezium appear green."

The engineering tech chuckled and said, "Also why the Orions are so ornery."

"You would be too," Thorvaldsen said, "if you evolved in that mess."

The others chuckled too, sharing a mutual entertainment that Jimmy didn't understand. He hunched down, taking it personally. "We'll be going right past Orion," Captain April continued, "so we'll be able to take a good long look and compare it to the young stars in the Rosette Nebula. I never tire of nebulae ... they're so particularly foudroyant... worth a voyage just to see one." "Rosette's gorgeous. I've seen it once before," Carlos Florida said. "Glowing agitated helium. Makes it all red." The tech added, "Hydrogen cyanide too." "Nitrogen and sulfur!" Veronica finished with a lilt of victory now that she had the right nebula in mind. "You guys are giving me a chemical headache," Jimmy's father contributed. "Why does every errand have to be a classroom?" The crew laughed. "Now, now, George," the captain admonished, "you of all people, now of all times." Everybody knew what he was hinting at, and they laughed again. Thorvaldsen glanced back at Jimmy then and said, "You're a lucky little bast-I mean, you're lucky to be here." Then he and his assistant shared one of those so-are-we glances. Pinched by the condescension he was getting from them, Jimmy shifted his feet and shrugged. "Seen one star," he cracked, "seen 'em all." He might as well have thrown liquid fuel on a fire. The entire shipload of eyes hit him. Slap. Especially Thorvaldsen and his assistant. They were looking at him as though he was turning polka-dotted in front of their very eyes. What had he said? "Well, maybe you haven't seen 'em all," Thorvaldsen commented with a mean glare. Before things got out of hand, Captain April interrupted and dampened the response that pushed at Jimmy's lips. "The neutron star," he said, "is a very massive

sun that's gone through its supernova stage. It swirls so fast that it can't be seen. The little devil constantly sucks matter off the other two suns as they produce it. We're going to do some analysis as long as we're going right past it. Quite something to witness. Very rare in the known galaxy."

Calculating his response down to the last blink, Jimmy Kirk

turned away and grumbled, "Yippee."

Because they had to go around a star system experiencing high sunspot activity that could even screw up a ship in warp, it was more like seven hours than five before the navigational beeper

roused them all from an on-board nap. Carlos

Florida was the first

to rouse and wake up enough to decipher the flashes and notices on

his controls.

"Coming up on the trinary, sir," he said to George.

"Take us off autopilot."

"Autopilot off, aye."

"Take us out of warp speed. Go to point five sublight."

"Point five sublight, aye. Reducing speed."

There was a notable whine, but almost no physical sensation as

the ship dropped out of warp. Though Jimmy stiffened and waited to be pressed against his straps, it never happened. How could that

be? How could they go from serious zooming to a crawl without

feeling anything? What kind of compensators did this tub have?

"Well?" His father was leaning forward, scanning the upper part

of the screen. "Where is it?"

Only then did Jimmy notice that the screen had changed. There

was no longer the image of space matter passing

by, but now the business of stationary nebulae and stars in the distance.

Then...

"There it is," Florida said. Awe closed his throat on his own

words. "There it is!"

The two men in front had the best view, and they seemed

suddenly hypnotized with appreciation. The engineers unstrapped themselves, got up, and went to look.

Before them, though the cutter was crossing laterally and not daring to get any closer, was the trinary star system.

Everyone but Jimmy was leaning forward. Somehow he was forcing himself not to do that. Even from inside his bubble of disinterest he could feel himself magnetized by what he could see.

Two suns, one yellow-orange, one scarlet red, different sizes, stood sentinel in space, burning hard and hot. Like two Irish women's long red hair in high wind, their heat was being sucked off and dragged in two great tails, swirling down into a dark central point, resembling the stuff that pours out of volcanoes.

Just above a whisper, Carlos Florida said, "It must be billions of years old . . ."

George nodded. "Must've been here already when the Rosette's baby suns started to form."

"Federation Astrophysics thinks it was a neutron star a billion years before those two other ones were even formed," Thorvaldsen was saying softly. "Probably a first-generation star, formed when the galaxy formed. Those two probably condensed out of the

Rosette, and all three attracted each other and went into a mutual orbit. Jesus, it's really the last place a human being was ever meant to be, isn't it?"

The awe was uncloaked in their voices.

"Go ahead, gentlemen," Robert April said as he smiled at the engineers. "Have at her."

Thorvaldsen and his assistant almost giggled with sheer excitement.

Their eyes flashed and they bit their lips and couldn't stop making victorious noises as they disappeared into the companion-

way aft. A few seconds-literally only seconds-later, they came up again, hauling satchels and containers of sensory equipment.

"Gonna get some readings, gonna get some facts," Thorvaldsen

bubbled, "gonna get some readings, and take my star

back! Do-ron-
ron-ron, da-do-ron-ron!"

Laughter crackled through the ship. The excitement
could've
been planted and rooted.

Veronica Hall was already opening a sliding panel
in the cutter's ceiling and drawing down a ladder. The
engineers started handing her their equipment, and she stuffed
it topside, into the sensor pod.

One particularly heavy crate made her wince, and
she stepped out of the way, favoring a hand and uttering,
"Ow, ow, ouch."

The two engineers eagerly took her place.

"See you later!" the engineering tech said as he
jumped onto the

ladder and took it two rungs at a time, boiling
to get up there and start looking at this thing.

Jimmy watched all this and tried to figure out why
they were all so

excited. Wasn't it just one of those space things?

Just another nebula

nobody could dare go into?

Thorvaldsen stood back briefly, held both
arms open, and huskily

propositioned, "Come to Papa, darlin'!"

Then he was on the ladder and up there.

"I'm next!" Veronica called, still holding on
to her strained hand.

"You'll have to kill us first!"

The others laughed again. Jimmy just shook his
head and kept

wondering as the ladder disappeared topside and
Thorvaldsen's

hands appeared to tug the insulated panel shut.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch," Veronica mumbled as she
plunked down

across from Jimmy again. She was holding her right wrist.

The hand

was completely extended in a spasm, fingers out as far
and straight

as possible-even farther than possible. Out and bending
back

ward.

She manipulated the wrist, then complained under her
breath

and . . . took the hand

off.

Jimmy gasped, jolted against his side of the craft,
and choked,

"Wha-to "

She looked up. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot

you didn't know."

As he gaped, horrified, she waved the disembodied hand. "The

whole lower arm is prosthetic. Pretty

good imitation, isn't it? You

didn't notice I've been mostly using one hand,

did you?" She

nodded in agreement with herself and murmured, "That's because

I only have one."

Gaping like an idiot, Jimmy choked, "How'd .

. . . how . . ."

"Oh," she groaned, "I just did something stupid,

that's all, back

when I was sixteen."

Jimmy struggled to shove down the quiver running up

his spine. Sixteen . . .

She gazed almost sentimentally at her prosthetic and

said, "I

swear, it was another person entirely, sometimes. I

went canoeing

alone, after I promised my parents I wouldn't.

I went over on some

rocks and opened my arm pretty bad, then I

didn't tell anybody.

Tried to take care of it myself. You know, I knew

everything, of

course. Even when it got infected, I didn't

tell anybody. I tried to

handle it myself for over a week. Finally I

got feverish and passed

out, and nobody found me for almost a whole day. I was

lucky to

keep the elbow."

Trying to think of this soft-spoken, feminine, flowerish

girl lying

feverish in some back alley, Jimmy asked,

"How'd you qualify for

...

I mean, with only one

...

uh

..."

"Starfleet? By taking the requirements one at a

time, that's all. I

can't give myself a manicure and I'll never play

a fiddle, but I can do

a cartwheel, and I can even climb a rope if I

have to. I just didn't

want to give up my biggest dream. The prosthetic

works all right,

but I had to prove to Starfleet that I could do without it

in an
emergency. You know, prove I don't always need
an extra hand."
While she busied herself getting the fake limb
to relax its spasm,
Jimmy sank back and cradled his own right arm.
"Extra-was he echoed softly.
"She's our one-armed bandit," Captain April
interrupted. He
was looking back at them with mischief in his eyes.
"You should see
her manipulate a laser pistol and a communicator
at the same
time."
"Silly thing," Veronica commented, smiling at the
captain.
"State-of-the-science synthetic fingers. Sometimes it
seizes up on
me."
Gazing down at his two plain human hands, flexing
his own
fingers and making fists, Jimmy tried to think of one
of his hands as
"extra."
"Here." Veronica turned toward him. She seemed
to be having a
good time when she said, "Give it a shake."
He hesitated, but didn't want
to insult her, so he twisted and gave
the fake thing a good Iowa handshake-and it almost lifted
him out
of his seat.
"Wow! That thing's got a grip
like
a gorilla!"
"Sure does." She settled back and said,
"Here. Hold hands with it
for me while I get the seizure out of it, will you?"
Jimmy took the hand and held it open end out to her as
she went
to work inside the narrow little wrist that fit her so
well.
"You make it all sound so easy," he said.
"It wasn't," she admitted. "I had sixteen
years to get used to
having more than one. I've had only since then
to get used to having
one to work with, but my mother always said easy things don't
get
any appreciation. That's why I appreciate
Starfleet so much,

y'know?"

"Yeah . . . sure, I know."

"They didn't hold it against me," she said as she worked, then emphatically added, "Of course, I didn't get any favors. I had to come up to everybody else's standards and meet the same requirements as anybody else."

Jimmy scowled and said, "That's not very fair."

She struck him with a wide-eyed look, pursed her lips, and admonished. "Then you don't know what "fair" really means. It doesn't mean lowering standards to meet somebody's hopes. It means you

raising your own hopes to meet standards. What if somebody's life depended on me someday? What if I could get along with the faker, but not very well without it? I mean, if one

hand can get chewed off, there's no reason this one couldn't.

Accidents happen, you know. Standards stayed up. I met "em." Suddenly she smiled. "Preach, preach, preach, right? Well, I'm kinda proud of myself, I guess. How old are you anyway?"

"Si-was

Sixteen. Sixteen. Say it, coward.

"Seventeen."

"Oh, hey! Won't be long, then. You'll be in the Academy before you know it."

Not if I can help it.

"Right. Won't be long."

The words were barely out of Jimmy's mouth before he heard his father's voice in the forward section.

"Carlos," George was saying quietly, "would you mind . . ."

"Oh, sure. No problem."

Florida unstrapped, got up, and crouched back behind his own seat.

"Jim," George called.

Stiffening, Jimmy had to beat down a jolt of surprise and keep a leash on his tone.

"What?"

"Come up here to the pilot's seat and take a look at this thing."

Jimmy shook Veronica out of his head and fought to concentrate on his main message of the day.

"I can see fine," he said.
There was some shuffling on the forward deck.
"Not after I pound that snotty tone out of you," his father said. "Get up here, and I mean right now."
Jimmy thought about balking again. His father had never laid a violent hand on him, and they both knew it. The walls, the furniture, the occasional farm animal, yes, but his kids, no.
Something about being in front of these professionals, though, made Jimmy get to his feet so he wouldn't have to be grouched at again. He could always count on his father for a second grouse. If only he could get up there and take a look at this thing without seeming too interested . . . that was the trick.
He collapsed into the pilot's seat so hard that the swivel mechanism shrieked. Then he slumped way, way down, still holding on to his right wrist. After a few seconds of calculated boredom, he looked up at the big main screen.
Before him, all of nature swirled. The two suns, their hair streams being ripped off and sucked in two great gaseous spirals, the halo effect of three violent gravitational forces working against each other, glowing disks of residual matter spiraling slowly to a common center-what a mess.
But what a pretty mess . . .
"That's the neutron star," his father said. "The small dark area.
It's a whole sun, millions of kilometers across, collapsed down to a rock only a few kilometers in diameter.
All its elemental matter is crushed down that far."
"Son-of-a-bitch density," Florida murmured.
"Yeah, and it's spinning so fast it can't even be seen. Because it's still acquiring matter, taking it right off those other two stars, it'll eventually have enough gravity to collapse all the way down into a black hole. It could go at any moment."

Jimmy watched the churning, sparkling phenomenon out there,
and half expected it to go and take all of them with it.
Every time he
saw a flash, his nerves jumped.
"We lost a good many advance exploration ships in storms like that," Robert added, "before we learned how to avoid them. Lot of decent people fell off that mountain so the rest of us could sit here and look without worrying. . . ."
His voice trailed off into respectful silence.
The neutron star twisted energy into tight braids as fast as the two suns could produce it, then ate it.
The yellow-orange sun's orbit was elliptical and on a different plane from the red giant, and the red giant's higher gravity was also ripping matter off the smaller sun even as its own energy and matter was being sucked into the neutron star. A competition of the most primitive order.
All around the area was a blue haze that resembled fog, except that it sparkled with charged solar plasma. The whole thing made a wacky sight, and baffled Jimmy's imagination as he looked.
"What are those guys doing on top of us?" he asked.
"Looking at it," Captain April said.
"Measuring it, analyzing it, and so on. The sensor pod has a retractable window with special screening. They're able to look at it with their naked eyes. They're taking readings of it in order for the Federation to justify posting long-term cameras and sensor monitors on buoys, in hope of witnessing the event when the neutron collapses into a black hole."
Jimmy's father mistily commented, "It could happen anytime in the next two minutes or the next thousand years."
"A thousand years?" Jimmy abruptly complained.
"Then what's the big deal!"
"That's nothing in the billion-year life of a sun, my boy," the captain said. "The next thousand years is any moment. We stand a fair chance of recording the event if we can get

sentinel buoys out
here. They have an operational life of almost a hundred
years." He
leaned back in his seat and whispered, "Wouldn't that be
some
thing!"
"Thorvaldsen and Bennings are having kittens,
they're so ex
cited," Veronica said.
"But
you
aren't interested," Florida tossed back at her,
grinning.
She shrugged and squeezed her shoulders girlishly.
"Didn't you
hear the meows from my seat?"
"This Blue Zone is a computer-enhanced image,"
Jimmy's father went on, pointing, "to show us the action
of the energy out there so
we can avoid it. It's not really blue. If you were
looking at it with
your naked eye, you'd see the suns and a hole, but
all you'd see
around them is a slight electrical
discharge."
"You wouldn't even realize you were in danger until
too late,"
Robert added.
"Right. But since this is a warp ship, the screen is
computer-
generated. The computer translates this according
to temperature.
So it looks blue from in here. No ship can go in
there. Our science
doesn't know of any shielding that can survive
inside that. The high
gravity and radiation and solar wind would even rip through
the
starship's shielding. Solar wind is made of charged
particles of
plasma shooting off from the sun itself-was
"How do you know?" Jimmy challenged.
"What?"
"How do you know a starship can't survive in there? That
thing
back there's the first starship, isn't it? Why don't
you just go in
anyway and try it."
His father drew his shoulders tight in anger and
leered at him
sidelong.

"Because we'd be dead, that's why," he snarled. "You can't get past that smart-ass fatalism of yours, can you?"

"Maybe I just have an adventurous spirit."

The collective annoyance could've been packaged and shipped.

The idea that Jimmy would refer to the Enterprise as "that thing back there"--

Eyes suddenly hard as walnuts, his father turned more toward him and lowered his voice.

"Is it asking so much that you relax and enjoy some of these things we're showing you?"

Jimmy let his own expression go hard.

"You drag me up here against my will," he said, "and I'm supposed to enjoy it?"

"Can't you at least try? You're not here for my good, you know."

"Oh, right, forgot. I'm here for mine."

He got a mixed victory for his efforts to exterminate his father's efforts when George slumped, scowled bitterly, and jabbed a thumb toward the back.

"Get out," he growled, his teeth together.

Satisfied, but pushing down the nervousness that came with such a win, Jimmy took his time getting up. There was a certain stage timing to these things. The sooner he could manage to dismantle his father's hopes in all this, the sooner he could get back to Earth and get on with his life, his way.

He took care not to give that fantastic sight more than a passing last glance as he got up, crouching to keep from knocking his head on the low forward ceiling.

But that last glance . . .

He stopped short.

Staring--

what the hell!

"What's the matter with you?" his father asked. "G."

Jimmy tried to say something, but though his lips were hanging open, his throat was locked up tight. All he could do was blink, and

point.

Point at the ship coming at them
right out of the Blue Zone!

Even as Jimmy pointed, the cutter's sensor
alarms went off-

warning of intrusion into their flight space.

"Carlos!" George called.

Gaping, Jimmy couldn't move and was shocked when
four hands

grabbed him, yanked him away from the helm, and stuffed
him

behind the navigation seat. He had no idea who had
grabbed him, and he couldn't take his eyes off the
screen to check.

Carlos Florida slammed himself into the pilot's
seat, gasping,

"That's impossible! It's impossible!"

Two neon-orange glows appeared on the
greenstblack hull of the
intruder-and suddenly the cutter rocked under them and
filled

with the screams of electrical reactions.

Over it all, Jimmy heard his father's voice.

"They're firing on us!"

Part Three

FLUSHBACK

USS

Enterprise

comA

"I ought to slingshot around the sun, go back
forty-five years, and
slap myself."

Leonard McCoy turned at the captain's
grumble and asked,

"Pardon me?"

Shifting uneasily, James Kirk drew a long
breath. The taste of
regret.

"I said

...

I ought to go back and slap myself for the first words I
spoke on the bridge. They weren't exactly
poetry."

"Why? What were the words?"

Smears of rosy humiliation ruddied the captain's
cheeks. Kirk

was a hard man to embarrass, but he could still
embarrass himself.

He pressed his lips tight, then parted them, then
pressed them

tight again.

"I said the bridge smelled."

The taste came rushing back. Beside him, McCoy winced.

Suddenly they were both glad the yellow-alert alarms were

honking in the background.

In spite of that, the two men might as well have been alone on the

bridge. In spite of the bustling activity around them, the crew busy

with a ship in alert, tense with anticipation of horror and the

Starfleet officer's nightmare of antimatter

flashback, the two felt

alone in their reverie.

Even the concerned regard of First Officer Spock from the raised

quarterdeck behind them failed to invade, and certainly failed to

comfort. They knew why he wasn't stepping

down. They knew he

had picked up the captain's mood, but wasn't

inviting himself into

the conversation. Yet.

There were some moments only humans could understand-and only some humans at that-as they drew upon a common

heritage,

the special union with vessels that had carried them

since the

Vikings.

Jim Kirk's brow puckered, and he gazed forward

at the vista of

deep space as the ship raced forward at

incomprehensible speed

toward a place whose name made the years peel away

at light speed.

A place where another starship may have just died.

"Bones

...

do you know what it is to feel that a ship is alive?"

The doctor's silence prodded the captain further

into thoughts that couldn't be measured. Kirk didn't

look at him. Didn't really

want an answer.

"When I took command," he said, "and came

back onto the

bridge for the first time as an adult

...

I wondered if she remem

bered."

He blinked, and looked around the bridge now, a
superstitious
seaman unable to throttle down those feelings about
ships that
somehow got into the blood of everyone who depended upon
them.

To depend on a ship for one's very life made it
ugly to think of the
ship as just parts and forms, wood, bolts, and
mechanics. No one
wanted his life clinging to heartless metal and wood.

After all the
years of vehicles in history, a pulse of the
living had seeped into
those manufactured pieces, and there wasn't a
sailor alive who
could deny it without being a liar.

The ship around him now wasn't that same starship, but
her

namesake and her design twin. Beautiful,
yes, but not the ship to
which he owned the apology. That ship-he had sent
to destruc
tion, spiraling down into the atmosphere of a
hostile new planet,
avoiding the necessity of bringing her home to be
decommissioned
after more than forty years of service. Shunted aside
by new
designs, caught in the spin of change, now destined
to be brought
home and picked apart in some drydock somewhere, like a
whale
decomposing out of water.

He had taken her out without permission, against orders.

In some
ways, he was pleased to spare her that fate. She
deserved to die in
space, where she had lived, where she had made it
safe for countless
millions to live.

Circumstance had forced him to send her in and let her
burn, to
let her go to sleep in space, where she belonged.

Almost as though the ship possessed a
heartbeat-

Sailors

...

a little moonhappy, all of them.

Now this ship was being decommissioned too, and she
wasn't that old. The design again. Everybody said

the design was being
superseded by a whole new batch of technology.
Obsolete, supposedly.
Forty-some years was a long time, wasn't it?
"I was only thirty years old," he went on.
"The Fleet's youngest
starship commander. The ship was box-docked when I first
came on
board, the same as she had been when I boarded her
at the age of
sixteen. But the bridge looked smaller than when
I'd seen it
before . . . darker and quieter . . . and there was no
one there but
me. Only me and the bridge. It was like being alone
with a woman
I'd slept with but failed to appreciate. I
felt guilty and unworthy of her. And I
wondered if she remembered those first words."
He hesitated, his eyes fixed on the past, hands
hanging just above
the arm of the new command chair without actually touching it.
"I wondered," he added, "if she'd forgiven me."
Alert whistles chirped in the background, demanding
attention
like young eagles in the nest. Personnel ran on and
off the bridge, each doing a small specific
thing. Add the small things up
...
one
very big thing. Survival in space.
Dr. McCoy shifted his feet, bobbed his
eyebrows in puzzlement,
and leaned back against the bridge rail, not exactly
relaxed under
these conditions.
"I used to think a person would have to be crazy to command
a
ship in deep space," he said. "Now I'm sure
of it."
TEN
Forty-five years earlier . . .
"Evasive! Get some shields up!
Everybody take cover!"
"Astonishing!" Robert April's voice flushed
between the crack
ling sensors and howling alarms.
Carlos Florida gasped, "They hit our pod!"
"Get the panel open!" George shouted. "Get
those men out of

there!"

"I'll get it!" Veronica yelled back, and vaulted to the middle of the ship, where she started working on the ceiling panel. The control board sparked, knocking George sideways.

"There goes our hyperlight communications-was Florida said.

Robert crouched between George and Florida to see the chunky, unidentifiable black and green ship coming toward them out of the

Blue Zone. "What kind of design is that?"

Looks like it's built of triangles. I don't recognize it at all-was

"Checking!" Veronica Hall called from behind. With her real hand on the panel she was trying to open, she reached down with her fake hand and poked in a code, then went back to the panel.

Her small computer screen went wild with diagnostic pictures, ship after ship, design after design, schematics and mechanical skeletons, picking out pieces here and there and putting them in

boxes. Veronica finally frowned down at it, doing two things at once.

"No known configuration!" she said, shouting above the crackle

as a laser struck their outer hull.

Florida transferred her readings forward to his own screen. "According to this, it's built piecemeal from several designs.

There's at least one Starfleet thruster on it

...

a private-shipping

cargo train . . . but according to the thruster-exhaust reading, their power formula appears to be what the Andorians are using."

"Are they Andorians?"

"No way to confirm that, sir." His voice cracked, but he kept control.

Jimmy felt his face turn parchments with terror. He was on his

butt, on the deck, not even in a seat, and couldn't move, not even to

crawl away. His eyes were big and hurting as he stared at the forward screen.

The intruder's gargoylish ship, green parts flickering bronze in

the ugly lights from the trinary, was crowding down upon them on collision course. Its outer hull, shielded by a faint grayish outline that was apparently some kind of shielding, crackled with clinging energy from the Blue Zone.

"Damn! Where are our combat shields!" his father blurted out.

He and Florida were frantically maneuvering back from the encroaching ship.

"We don't have any," Florida said.

"What do you mean, we don't have any! No combat shields?"

"Only navigational ones. Just enough to keep the space particles

off us in low warp. I told you this model was silly! It's meant for

peaceful, boring cruises in known spacelanes!"

"Warm up the lasers! Where are they! Where are the goddamn firing controls?"

Florida bent downward. "All we have is industrial cutting lasers.

They're under here."

"What are they doing down there!"

"Open a frequency, George!" Captain April ordered. "Hail them!"

"Hall, do it!"

Amidships, Veronica scrambled to do that.

"Frequency open, sir," she said.

"George, take it. You're the captain here."

Jimmy looked at Captain April, then at his father in confusion. There was something both scary and odd about that

realization . . . that his father was the captain in this vessel. How

did these things work?

Another neon bolt shot from the stranger and hit the upper hull-

"I can't get this!" Veronica shouted, still yanking on the panel's manual latch.

Suddenly they were all thrown sideways, except her and George,

who were still strapped in. Jimmy found himself folded up like an

envelope against the starboard bulkhead, and realized the

whole
cutter was turning against its artificial gravity and
whining in
protest.
His father slammed a fist on his own control board,
either in rage
or tapping himself in, or both.
Probably both.
"Attention, unidentified vessel! This is Commander
George Kirk of the United Federation of
Planets Starfleet, goddammit! I demand
to know the meaning of this unlawful discharge of your
weapons!
You're in Federation space and you're also in violation
of about
twenty statutes of the Interstellar Maritime
Laws! Cease fire and
identify yourselves!"
Sweat trickled down his face.
Sudden silence fell.
The green and black industrial animal out there
stopped firing. Its
laser ports glowed as though it were ready, waiting.
Maybe thinking.
Maybe something George had said was having an
effect.
Jimmy knuckled his own face-and found a wet,
hot film.
Something had happened to the life support. The
temperature
control-
Smoke poured out of places where there shouldn't even be
places.
Instantly everybody was coughing.
The ceiling hatch! It was kinked partly open and
smoke was
billowing down from there.
"Dad! Up there!" Jimmy yelled.
George struggled to his feet, stepped over
Robert and Jimmy,
motioned Veronica out of the way, and yanked
on the stuck hatch.
"Thorvaldsen! Bennings!"
"Bill!" Robert called.
"Forward life support going on automatic
backup!" Veronica called. She cleared her
throat. "That last hit-oh, there goes the
main-cabin oxygen!"
George didn't look at her, didn't take his
eyes off the ceiling
panel. "Seal off all sections!"

Carlos spoke from a dried mouth. "Why are they just hanging out there?"

"How's the cargo unit, Ensign?" Robert asked, twisting to address Veronica.

She fingered her controls with one hand while waving at the smoke with the other. "Secure so far."

"Seal that off too. Do whatever you must, but make sure it's not a target for their sensors. No point giving away information."

"Aye, sir, sealing off cargo level and shutting down activity there."

He got up and tried to help George get the pod's hatch open. "See if you mightn't be able to do something about this smoke also."

"Aye, sir, ventilating!"

The small ship's engines caterwauled with strain and the ship

bucked. Veronica was thrown backward and landed hard, but

almost immediately crawled back to her controls.

George hung on to the ceiling handle, twisting on his toes.

"Tractor beams!" he shouted. "They've got us!"

The cutter wailed around them with sheer mechanical effort,

bucking harder and harder until everyone had to hang on to

something, strapped in or not.

"Sir, our engines!" Florida choked out. He pointed spasmodical

ly at the attacking ship with one hand and at the impulse systems

monitor with the other. The indicator bands were washing back and

forth crazily. "That monster's ten times our size!

We'll overload if we fight a thing like that!"

"Cut the power!" George answered. "We can't afford a burnout."

Florida pounded his controls. The bucking eased and gave way to

a nasty teeth-on-edge whistle deep inside the ship.

"We'll have to find some other way," Robert said.

Setting his jaw, George yanked open a wall panel, grabbed a piece of equipment that had a point, and started levering at the hinge.

"Yeah. If we had a transporter, I'd beam over there and explain it to them. With my bare knuckles. Thorvaldsen! Answer me!"

His tool flew forward as the panel cracked, then opened with a godawful squawk. He yanked the ladder down, waved at the smoke, and climbed up.

Almost instantly he slid back down and landed flat on both feet.

Jimmy and the others stared at him.

George Kirk had turned into a ghost. Whatever he had seen up there took every cell of blood from his face, left his mouth gaping, his eyes wide, watering, stinging, and red. Robert and Carlos Florida caught his arms, because he looked like he was about to go over.

"George?" the captain dared.

Florida stepped past them and started to go up, but George caught him.

"Don't-don't-was he stammered. He shook his head and crushed his eyes closed for a moment.

Florida's round face crumpled. His shoulders sagged and he muttered something unintelligible.

Grief limned every face as Jimmy watched. Why weren't they going up there? Why weren't they making sure there wasn't a single thing left to do for those two men?

Florida pushed Jim's father back down into his seat, where he sat stiff as a mannequin.

Captain April clung to the back of that seat, hugging it. His eyes were closed too, and he was gasping in little breaths. After a moment he wiped his mouth with a palm and looked up at the screen again, at the ship that had fired on them.

"I simply can't believe it. How could they survive in the Blue Zone? How could they possibly survive? They came out of there like a trap-door spider!"

"Doesn't make a shred of sense," Florida filled in. His voice was quiet with fear. Perspiration burnished his face and plastered his black hair across his forehead. "As if any of this made a shred of sense

..."

"Why do you think they ceased fire?" Robert wondered.

Florida trembled, but managed a shrug.

"Suppose somebody staked a claim on this area and they think we're doing the intruding? Maybe they didn't know this is Federation space."

Rousing himself, George unpursed his lips and said,

"Anybody who could get into space would have to be able to pick up transmissions. They'd know the Federation runs this sector.

When's the last time you saw Aborigines inventing a space vessel?

Communication always comes before space flight. I can't believe they didn't know."

"Right. . . good point."

"Whatever else they're doing, they're talking about us. That's for sure."

"You don't suppose you said something just right, do you?"

Still in a lump on the deck carpet, Jimmy stared at the adults and past them at the invading ship. How could they talk so casually?

How could they talk at all?

He saw the fear in their eyes, but it wasn't coming out in their voices, not even when they shouted.

Not much, anyway.

What did come out was shudders of anger and grief.

He knew what those sounded like.

He placed his shaking hands on the deck, flat, fingers spread. He shifted his weight and started to get onto his knees,

pressing the
carpet and using it for some kind of ballast. At least
he was
relatively sure where the carpet was.
And here was the bottom of the pod ladder.
With a glance at the others to make sure nobody was
watching him, he used the ladder to stand up, then started
climbing it.
The pod was still stenchy and filled with smoke, the
atmospheric
compensators whizzing a futile battle to save
whoever was up there,
and the seals frantically trying to keep open space out
even as they
cracked more and more.
Jimmy sensed the danger and forced himself in up to his
shoulders. He waved at the smoke.
Something wet sprayed his face, then a flap of
oily strings hit him
across the cheek and mouth. He clawed at the strings,
pulled them
off, cast them aside wildly as he might cast
away a big caterpillar
crawling across his face.
And he found a hand!
"I got him!" he called over the whine and shriek
of the ship trying
to save itself. "I got one of them! Dad!"
He grabbed the hand and pulled, putting his thick arms
to their
best use. Save a life, save a life-
He leaned back against the hatch edge and drew hard
on the
weight of whomever he had hold of. Maybe the
gravity was flooey in
here because there wasn't much resistance. Maybe he could
get one
of these guys below!
With one more heave he could get this person into the
hatchway
comj one-
A wet mass suddenly released and flew against him,
striking him
and driving him backward against the edge of the hatch.
He choked. A disembodied arm, shoulder, and half
a rib cage
anchored itself around his throat.
Flailing senselessly, Jimmy felt his mind go
numb and leave him
to pure panic. His hands smacked wildly at
everything, including

his own face, his own hair, his own chest, until the
gory mass fell off
and was sucked back upward into the tornado of air and
supplies
twisting around the broken seals.
Jimmy lost his footing and dropped straight to the
main deck,
curling and gagging.
The cutter might as well have been on the end of a
whistling
string. Jimmy couldn't get up, couldn't
get a thought, couldn't open
his eyes. All he saw in his head was Thorvaldsen
and Bennings and
what was left of them. . . .
There were voices around him, but his brain was turned
off.
Until that ship out there fired on them again.
The cutter rocked violently. Jimmy pitched and
hit the nearest
wall just as he heard his father yell
"So much for saying something right!"
WHOOOP WHOOP WHOOP WHOOP
"Hull rupture!" Florida shouted over the
hideous alarm. "Sixty-
four seconds to atmospheric zero!"
Even more hideous than the alarms was a telltale
hsssss
from
somewhere in the superstructure of the cabin.
George made a sweeping gesture. "Go, go!"
"Aft, everybody!" Robert called at almost the
same instant. The
shouts overlapped, but the message was the same.
"Open the seals
to the hold!"
"They're open!" Florida responded.
"Get below! Seal off!" George shouted.
Jimmy felt his father grip his arms and almost
instinctively pulled
back from it, but there was no fighting the determined force
above
him. His father hauled him to his feet without even
looking at him,
because he was busy shouting orders to the others as they
scrambled
across the tilted deck toward the aft companionway that
led down
into the freight hold.
Staggering, Jimmy grabbed the seats for balance and
hated

feeling his father holding him upright, but he was too terrified and sickened to argue about it. When his father let go, Jimmy turned to see what was wrong.

George was half turned back toward the pilot station, yelling,

"Carlos! Come on!"

"Take 'em!" Florida shouted back, waving.

"I'll fire an SOS!"

"You can't! Communications are out!"

"I'll launch a buoy!"

"Hurry!"

"I will!"

Jimmy gagged a protest. "But he'll be-was

fe

*st""

"dis!""*

Go!

His father gave him a shove between the shoulder blades that sent

him flying toward the aft companionway with most of his air

knocked out of his lungs so he couldn't protest.

His hands bloodless and his breath coming in chunks,

Jimmy

fought to control the trembling of his thighs and shoulders as he

climbed down the companionway tube after Captain April.

It seemed like a long, long climb. Eight feet?

Ten?

The companionway was nothing more than a tube with a ladder

in it and a hatch at the top and another at the bottom that could be

shut and made into a contained airlock. It led down into the

twenty-five-foot tin can of a freight hold

attached to the underside

of the flight section, but they might as well have crawled through a looking-glass into another dimension.

The only company here was

crate after box after stack of supplies bound for the colony at

Faramond. Out of the environment friendly to people, with cushioned seats and carpet, warmth, lights, and

fresh air, they crawled

into a cold, echoing metallic rectangle whose minimalist control

panels were meant to be used only in emergencies.
As Jimmy dropped into the hold, he heard his father
shout above
him.

"Carlos! Get down here!"

George's legs appeared, but he didn't come
all the way down.

Stumbling aside, Jimmy found himself staring at a
flashing panel
bright yellow in the wall.

WARNING-AIRLOCK AUTO SEAL-CLEAR
PASSAGEWAY

It repeated, but he already had the message.

"Dad! Get down!" he bellowed. Lunging
forward, he grabbed his
father's left leg and yanked.

Jimmy wasn't a skinny boy, so his weight
meant something in
spite of his age. With a gulp of protest George
came tumbling down
and crumpled on top of him in a heap.

Overhead, the secondary hatch slammed shut
automatically. The
bolts clacked-and that was it.

"No!" George howled. He shoved Jimmy off,
but it was too late.

Barely five seconds later they heard the
second automatic slam-
and more bolts ramming home. The upper hatch!

"Oh, God-was Captain April gasped.

The panel on the wall changed, and flashed red
instead of yellow.

MAIN CABIN DEPRESSURIZED-DANGER-DO NOT
OPEN

SEALS-DANGER

George vaulted to his feet.

"Carlos!"

"It's wrecked! The sensor pod! Wrecked!"

With ten long fingers stabbed up against the viewscreen and
his

eyes in slivers, Roy John Moss spat
saliva across his own knuckles as he shouted.

"Do you know how much that pod was worth? How many times
do I have to show you porks how to aim these weapons!"

He took a breath to continue yelling-

But someone grabbed him by the ponytail and hauled him
backward, then yanked him sideways and knocked
him out of the way with a cuff across his cheek. He fell
onto both knees.

"Down in front, bobbysox."

The drone was an insult in itself.

Roy Moss rubbed his slick raisin-brown hair
now that his scalp
was aching, and began again to despise.
He despised the captain for that tone of voice.
Despised the crew
as they gawked beyond him to their victims on the
viewscreen.
Despised himself for being only nineteen.
In the dark porchlike cubicle, which could only be
called a bridge
in a card game conversation, a piecemeal gaggle of
racketeers glared
out their own viewport at the sleek white cutter
they'd just grabbed.
In the captain's seat, Angus Burgoyne chewed
on the end of his
long mustache and offered no more attention to the annoyance
he'd
just kicked out of the way.
At Burgoyne's left, old Lou Caskie
clunked forward on two
arthritic legs. "What you worried about? We're
the Sharks, ain't we?
We take what comes past here. Federation!" He
spat onto the deck.
"Probably got a woman running it. Deserve
what they get."
"Daon't spit on moy deck, pig,"
Burgoyne commented.
His Australian accent clipped his words, left the
ends off most of
them, and changed the angle of all his vowels. He
broadened his
accent on purpose, to sound like a legend with an
eyepatch and a hook. He had neither, so he relied
on the accent.
Caskie leaned back and spoke past him.
"Don't you think that,
Okenga? Ain't I right?"
Behind Burgoyne, an Andorian engineer's two
antennae turned
forward slightly in reaction and his blue face
darkened almost to
indigo. His enunciation forced him to speak slowly.
English was far,
far
from his native language, and his tongue didn't
want anything to
do with it.
"We take old merchant barges," he said,
hitting the consonants too hard. "Cargo tanks,

private sloops, transports-was
"That's no Federation barge, you lardhead," a heavy
bass voice
argued from behind.
Virtually the medical-textbook antithesis of his
skinny son, Big
Rex Moss turned his
three-hundred-plus pounds and stabbed a fat
finger between the Andorian and Burgoyne.
"We got a Starfleet reconnaissance cutter,"
he went on. "These
people aren't gonna just die. We should drop this and beat
it out of
here while the beatin's good."
"And they will go back to say all about us," Okenga
said with cold
irony.
"I see no Starfleet signs," said a short,
thick Klingon built like a
New York City antique fire hydrant.
Burgoyne jabbed his finger forward and spat his
mustache out so he could speak.
"It's roight theh, Dazzo," he said. "See it,
mollyhead? "UFP
Sta'fleet." Plain as bloody dayloight.
That's what you get for
spinding too much time behoind bahs."
Daring to wander forward again, still fascinated by the chemical
destruction and the frozen atmosphere pouring out of the
Starfleet vessel, young Roy Moss quietly
mocked, "What's a "baaaah"?"
Burgoyne ground his teeth and knocked the
young man aside
again, this time with a foot.
"Hey, Mr. Nobody! I said git your
Tracking becksoide outta my
way! I can't frackin' see through your skinny
butt, can I? The
captain's supposed t'be ayble that'see, ain't
he?"
Roy leveled a bitter glare on the back of
Burgoyne's head, and felt
his father's disgust from across the bridge. He enjoyed a
moment of
contemplation, imagining his father as a parade balloon
and
Burgoyne as Ichabod Crane. His father floated
by, bumping into
buildings, and Burgoyne, who was all neck and no
chin, was
constantly being suctioned from above. Eventually he would

just suck all the way up and be gone for good, and Big Rex would be pierced by a flagpole and explode. Roy fought a grin and waited until Big Rex lost interest in the altercation and looked forward again at the Starfleet craft slowly turning and gushing the last cloud of its frozen air into space. "No," he murmured, "you can't see through me." "Carlos! Carlos!" George pounded on the locked overhead hatch. "Dear God" was Robert April's shredded whisper. "Carlos . . ." He closed his eyes and brought a shaking hand to his mouth. "What shall I tell his poor mother . . ." Jimmy stared at April and was suddenly aware of his own mother. He watched the captain and wondered if the line was some kind of joke or exaggeration. It wasn't. Backing away until the cold metal wall stopped him, Jimmy shook until he thought he would shake apart. His reaction was punctuated by his father's hammering on the hatch and angry shouts. Over that terrible noise there was another noise-the whine of lasers and the hum of that tractor beam. "What are they doing?" Veronica Hall gulped as she huddled among the crates near the opposite bulkhead. "Why did they do this?" Captain April finally stepped into the hatch cubby and took hold of the raging creature there. "George, stop!" he said. "Stop. . . don't harm yourself. If we don't rock the boat, so to speak, they won't know we're here. This hold is sensor-immune for security reasons. They won't be able to read our life signs, and they won't notice us if we remain calm." His soft English trill made the warning sound like a reading of poetry. It had the right effect. Swallowing his agony whole, George sank down to a crouch,

gripped his teeth, and crammed his eyes shut to lock inside what he was feeling. He boiled and seethed, fighting for control. The single yellow utility hatch light, very small and direct, shined on his hair and turned it to copper. His features looked harsh in that light, skeletal, like a boy playing with a flashlight under his covers. Finally he grated, "We've been losing ships in this sector for years! All the time we thought it was because of the Blue Zone. How many went to these bastards? How many good people! And three more today!" He slammed his knuckles on the deck. "George, your voice," the captain admonished. Teeth still gritted, George crouched there, breathing like an animal, quaking with misery and rage. "Everyone sit down," Robert said. "We've got to think. Is everyone all right?" In the corner Jimmy Kirk sat, staring death in the face. His wits were in shreds. He barely understood what was happening around him and his limbs wouldn't move anymore. His own who-cares-if-we-live-or-die attitudes came rushing back to haunt him. At sixteen, he thought he had lived all of life. Lived it all, and none of it had been under his control. His friends felt that way too. A friend had committed suicide last school year, and one more had attempted it. Suddenly he felt foolish, having thought he understood their motivations and for mocking the adults who tried to save them. The paramedics, the police, the parents, the teachers. He remembered standing on the school grounds with his gang, as though they had a secret language that no adult could speak, plotting subterfuge. Who wanted to live a life that was in some teacher's control, or some parent's, or some case worker's?

"Better to control your own death, at least,"
he and his friends had
concluded.
"Better to go out with your name in the
headlines."
It had sounded right back then. Somehow, he thought it
might
not hold today, though.
Seeing his father's reaction to the deaths of three people,
two of
whom he had just met, abrupt shame washed over
Jimmy. The
shame was a shock. He felt oxish and unfledged.
Realized there was
nothing
he
could do to change this.
He bent into a ball and stared over his knees down the
fifteen-by-
thirty-foot chamber at the aft bulkhead.
Trembling. The metal wall
was trembling. The thin doors on the storage
closets and the cramped toilet were rattling. Something
had the cutter by the
throat.
For the first time in his life, Jimmy saw what it was like
to
really
not be in control.
Thorvaldsen, Bennings . . . Florida . . .
"We'd better get our radiation suits on," his
father said ultimate
ly, "just in case."
He got up and nearly ripped the door off a
rattly utility cabinet
next to the toilet. Inside were eight white
spacesuits, adjustable for
size and loaded with hookups. On a shelf above were
eight
headpieces, and on the side were eight double sets of
narrow oxygen
tanks, each about the size of a woman's forearm.
He started pulling the suits off their hangers and
tossing them
across the deck.
"Everybody put a suit on. Never mind the
helmets and tanks for
now."
Halfway across the hold, Captain April
caught his suit and
Veronica's, then crouched near her, looked into her

eyes, and was
apparently satisfied at what he saw there.
Jimmy was barely aware of his father's
approach until the
off-white protective suit appeared beside him.
Suddenly the twelve or so feet between them and the others
was an ocean of separation, and the two were sorely
alone.
"Here," his father said quietly. "Can you get this on?"
Fighting against himself, Jimmy grabbed the suit. He
didn't meet
his father's eyes, afraid the scared
sixteen-year-old was showing
through his protective shell as he made a
Herculean effort to hide
his fear.
"I could've been cut in half by that hatch,"
George said. He
lowered his voice even more. "You probably saved my
life. Don't
worry. I've been in worse . . . I'll get
you out of this."
Resentful of parent-to-kid lies, Jimmy
crawled back into his
self-imposed mental seclusion and saw lying there a
prime oppor
tunity to stab. His voice was stern, black.
"You got me into it."
A hit-low, sharp, and hard. The truth was a
poison stinger
today.
Jimmy watched in unanticipated surprise as his
father failed to
react the way he expected. Instead, George
stopped in the middle of
a step. He looked stricken. Instead of leaning
closer, he leaned away,
and turned. Put space between them. Slowly. The
walk of a
wounded man.
How could something that sounded so right feel so wrong?
Jimmy
watched and watched, perplexed. For the first time, he
felt bad
about getting a win. He'd been wanting to hurt his
father for years. . . .
So why didn't it feel any better than this?
As though he'd smashed his own head against a wall,
he realized
for the first time that he wasn't the only one with feelings.
He kept watching, baffled, as his father wandered past

Robert

April and Veronica.

April was settling against the wall beside Veronica,
glancing
around at their makeshift coffin as they both pulled the
safety suits

on. With one leg in, he paused to listen.

"Do you hear that?" he said. "They're turning us for
proper

tractoring. They must think we're all dead."

Struggling to find the armholes inside her jump
suit, Veronica

took a deep breath. "Why would they tow the ship if
they think
we're dead?"

His face still puckered in distress, George Kirk
took a couple of

deep breaths, then looked up at the creaks and
moans of their
vessel.

"I think I know," he said bitterly. "I think
we're being salvaged."

"We told you, don't get in the way, you skinny
shit."

Big Rex Moss's voice boomed as he
stretched his wide torso

forward, got his son by the ponytail-their
favorite handle when

dealing with Roy-and yanked him well to the side.

Offering his father only the smallest glance, Moss the
younger

didn't move any farther back than his father pushed
him, and he

kept talking, more to himself than to the others.

"It might still have decoders we can sell," he said.

Then he

plunged into thought. "Think of what those can be worth on
the gray market. State-of-the-art chips . . .

maybe a reaction-control

magnathruster . . . just the hull and ducting
material's worth salvage

...

we should move it out of the area and get it parted
before its home ship comes back-was

"What home ship?" Caskie demanded.

"You don't think something that size got all the way
out here by

itself, do you? What am I saying? Someone like you
would

think-was

"Nobody asked you," Rex grunted in his very deep

voice. He gestured at his son, then jabbed a thumb aft. "You go back and sit and mind your shields." Roy stepped into the cabin portal, but didn't leave. He watched the adults and reminded himself that many a conqueror had been only nineteen. He sent them a mental warning and wished they were psychic. But they were too stupid to be aware of anything but themselves. That was his safety net. They were all watching the screen as though they'd never seen a Federation ship before. "Keep the tractor on," Burgoyne said. "We got no choice. Slice those ingines off the main body and bring 'em round to ayour hold. Caskie, you're gonna have to find the registry mahks and burn 'em off or nobody'll dare buy from us. We're gonna have to pynt the flippin' thing as well. Lookit all the trouble it's gonna cost us. What's Starfleet doing belchin' round in the Zone, innyway? Deadnecks dunno to steer clear or what?" "Deserve what they get," Caskie repeated. "Deserve it, that's all." He licked his thin lips and hungered at the idea of cutting and burning. Behind the Sharks, Roy Moss rubbed the fuzzy juvenile beard he was trying to grow and imagined it as thick and woolly. Someday he'd be given that beard. Someday he'd be given everything, by everyone around him. Until then . . . he'd have to mark time, and take. "Salvaged? Isn't that rather a leap of logic?" Robert April rearranged his legs on the hard deck and glanced around at his tiny audience. "I'm in Security, remember?" George grunted. "Oh . . . sometimes that does slip my mind about you. Sorry. Go on." "I'm talking about the gray market. It's a spaceborne black

market run by a mixed-bag splinter group.
Klingons, Andorians,
Orions, Terrans, anybody. Usually people who
can't even make it in
their own culture. They just band up together. They fence
stolen equipment or illegally salvage wrecks.
It's called a "gray" market
because it deals half the time in legal circles. It
runs in such wide
boundaries it's almost impossible to crack down.
Makes me sick."
George raked a fingernail on the deck until it
hurt. Helped him
think.
"Until now I've never heard of them creating their
own salvage
by attacking operational ships on the cruise.
Makes me wonder how
many vessels are logged as lost for unknown reasons
but are really
attacked, the crews slaughtered, and the ship ends up
being parted
out so they can't be recognized, then sold back
into legitimate parts
markets. Damn, it gives me the
floods to think about it."
He choked on the last phrase and fell silent
until he collected
himself.
They were all sitting now, conserving energy and letting
their
environmental suits warm up so they could at least
function in this
cold tank. The suits made them all look
slimmer than usual, even
over their clothes-a pleasant illusion that came with the
insulated
one-piecers.
When he spoke again, his voice was calmer, more
insidious. His
eyes narrowed, and he looked up at Robert.
"It also makes me want to survive so they can't do
this to
anybody else. And I've been thinking. If they
think we're dead,
they're going to want to part out the electronics and
hull of the ship.
If they drag us very far away, any hope for help
gets pretty damn
thin."
"Have you got a plan?" the captain asked.

"I'm going to bet they've never stumbled onto a Starfleet ship before and they don't realize what they're up against. That was the pause after I hailed them. They realized they were in trouble and they didn't know what to do about it. Bet they were shouting at each other, too. Finally they decided they were committed, so they went ahead and knocked us out. They figure we're dead. They think they're towing a hulk, and that gives us a little time. If we can use that time to build weapons, just enough to disable them-was "That's a big ship out there, sir," Veronica said. "Size doesn't matter. The ship doesn't matter." George waved a hand and scooted a little closer, fostering a sense of conspiracy that was as good as an injection of vitamins right now. "It's the people inside we're fighting. This kind of group is hard to keep together. They're not exactly famous for loyalty to one another." He lowered his voice, then added, "I'm going to get them to fight among themselves." Tap. "The only catch," he added, "is that once we do anything, they'll know we're still alive." Tap. Tap, tap. Their heads swiveled, all in different directions, brows puckering. Tap . . . tap . . . tap, tap. Veronica voiced a near whisper. "What is that?" "It's not mechanical," Robert offered, puzzled. "Too irregular. George, do you think-was But George was already twisting toward the companionway. He gasped, "The airlock! Carlos!" Vaulting to his feet, he was at the hatch mechanism in a second. "George, no, wait!" Robert scrambled up and grabbed him. "He's in there! He's gotta be in there!" "Wait a moment," Robert insisted. They squared off in the cubby. "If you're wrong and you open that hatch . . . we're all

dead."

Across the hold, Jimmy Kirk watched the expression on his father's face. Was the sound made by somebody in the airlock? One of the intruders boarding their cutter? Had the upper hatch been ruptured? If so, there was instant suicide in opening this lower hatch.

Was it just the quirky noise of the lasers or the tractor beam on the damaged hull? Or was it what his father thought it was?

Risk all their lives for one person? Was that how these things worked? He'd never heard of that before. He'd heard of one person risking everything for many, but never the other way around. That didn't make sense.

His father wanted to open the hatch. Captain April didn't. Who was the captain now that the mission had gone crooked? Which would prevail?

What would I do?

"I'm opening it," George said. "Everybody back."

Without further argument, Robert herded the two young people aft, handed them helmets and oxygen masks and helped them get those on. Then he put on his own, and nodded at George.

George didn't have his on, but he didn't care.

He was fixated on that noise.

Tap, tap

...

tap

...

He glanced back to see if the others were as far away as possible and had their units on.

Then he grabbed a basic wrench out of the tool caddy and banged on the hatch. Once. Twice.

Tap, tap.

Determination tightened his muscles. He pawed through the caddy for a magnetic lock turtle, found one, and clunked it onto the hatch, where it stuck like a trooper. A few seconds, and it had the

right numbers. Then it flashed a tiny green light
at him, and he
cranked on the hatch handle.
The hatch opened so fast, it almost broke
George's arm-and the
weight that piled on top of his drove him to the deck
and almost
broke everything else. He shoved it off instantly,
shot to his feet,
slammed the hatch shut again, then bent over.
"Carlos!"
Lying in a heap under him, Carlos Florida tried
to turn over.
There was a small emergency oxygen mask strapped
to his face,
sweat pouring down his neck and saturating his gold
uniform shirt,
and he looked like he'd been beaten, but he was
alive.
George turned him over frantically, and by the time
he got him
into a sitting position, Robert had tossed
off his helmet and was
kneeling there also and helping.
"Carlos?" the captain began. "Are you all right,
my boy?"
Drained of every last thread of strength, Carlos forced
his eyes open and tried to nod. He tugged weakly
at the mask on his face,
now probably doing more harm than good.
"I'll get it," George said, and pulled it off
him. He dropped the
mask and began rubbing Carlos's half-frozen arms
and shoulders.
"You okay?"
Carlos sucked air, nodded again, and whispered,
"Thanks
. . . thanks."
"Is the cabin blown?" Robert asked.
"No . . . still on
...
no air, though . . ."
"The airlock?"
"Okay
...
so far . . ."
"And you got in at the last moment?"
Veronica showed up with a blanket and handed it
to Robert, who
wrapped it around the shadow of a man.
"They . . . targeted . . . engines and life . .

. life support," Carlos gasped.
"Purposely left our main section intact."
While he stopped for breath, George said, "We
know. We figure
they're parts pirates. They're salvaging the
cutter, but they don't
know we're still here. Did you get the SOS out?"
Carlos shook his head. "They hit the
...
the SOS buoy . . . soon
as it jettisoned. Knew just what to do
...
I guess they didn't like me
swearing at them in Spanish. They hit the cabin and
that was it
...
I saw the laser port heat up
...
barely made it in there in
time."
He gestured sluggishly upward at the
hatch.
Digesting everything, George sighed and grumbled,
"No SOS."
"Nope
..."
"Well, never mind. We're gonna find some other
way. I'm sure
glad you're here."
He rubbed Carlos's shoulders, stirring up that
precious circulation, and venting some of his own
frustration and relief.
"Damn, am I ever," he added. "Thought we'd
lost you, pal.
That's not what we came out for, y'know?"
Carlos blinked up at him and panted around a grin.
"Thanks," he
croaked. "I know it was a risk, opening up the
hatch for me."
"Not enough of one," George said quietly. "Not even
close to
enough."
Still aft, still in his helmet, Jimmy stared. His father
wasn't the
tender type. So what was he looking at?
As he warmed up, Carlos reached out and
offered a solemn
handshake to George.
"What're we gonna do now?" he asked.
George Kirk straightened up, got right to his
feet, and stood there

like a gunfighter.

"I'll tell you what we're going to do," he said.

"We're going to rip

the wall off this hold and get directly into the engines and nav

mechanisms, and we're gonna drive this beast from down here.

They can tractor us all over hell for all I

care, but you can bet your

mother's silk underwear it's going to be the nastiest

bitch of a ride those spiders have ever had."

TWELVE

"Can you make out a heading? Where are they dragging us to?"

Crammed into a rectangular hole in the wall

sheeting they'd just

ripped away, George Kirk and Carlos

Florida muttered back and

forth at each other.

"Laterally," Carlos answered. "They're

dragging us across the

edge of the Blue Zone."

"Probably to a place where they can dismantle us."

"Please, George," Robert April commented from

outside the

hole, where he was trying to hold a flashlight on the

work they were

doing. "Don't use phrases like "dismantle

us." You may find it

shatteringly accurate if we aren't very industrious."

If he was kidding, he was doing it dryly.

"Or damn lucky," George commented. "You know

what's

strange about all this? They came out of the Zone at

light-speed.

Why aren't they going at light-speed now?"

"Maybe their mechanical set-up is

...

I don't know what."

"I do," George said. "I'll bet their tech is

so piecemeal, they can't

work the tractor and the warp drive at the same time.

I've heard of

that happening. At least, not without a complicated

warm-up

process. Maybe that's what they're doing. Warming

up for warp.

That gives us a little time, but I don't know how

much."

"I'll take it," the captain said. "It's all

we've got. George, it might

also explain why we're being pulled along the edge of the Blue Zone.

They may be giving themselves a way out in case any other ship appears."

"You mean if we get lucky and the Enterprise comes back to find out why we never showed up on Fara-was

"Yes. We'll be smartly pulled in there, merrily crushed, and no one will have a clue what happened. They might ruin their catch this time, but they'll remain on the hunt."

"Not if I can help it," George said. "I'm not going to wait for an opening. If they figure out at the wrong moment that we're still alive, it's all over. We've got to be in charge of that moment." He fought with a stuck cap on one laser emitter and groused, "Y'know, sometimes I'd be happier not being able to figure out how criminals think."

"Oh-we have something here," Robert said, squinting at a flicker on the bared machinery. "George, do you see this? They've shut down their tractor beam to twenty percent. We must be coming up to speed."

Confused, Jimmy spoke up against his own plan.

"Why would they shut it off? I thought they were pulling us!"

"They think we're dead," Carlos pointed out.

"So what?"

"So they're conserving energy," Captain April said. "If they knew we were alive, they could keep the tractor on and prevent us veering off."

Inside the wall, George's voice snarled, "I'm betting they're taking the time to reroute their tractor from impulse to the warp engines, getting ready to go into light-speed. That's all the time we've got."

"I'm working as fast as I can, sir," Carlos added.

"I know you are. Shut up and concentrate."

What sounded like a reprimand to Jimmy apparently wasn't taken that way. Carlos was chuckling and muttering, "You're getting power crazy, aren't you, sir?"
Beside Jimmy, Robert April smiled.
A smile, at a time like this!
Jimmy shook his head and grumbled, "I don't get it."
The captain looked at him. "It's only at warp speed that one must keep constant thrust. At sublight you get up to speed and whatever you're towing will fly on in a straight line . . . oh, almost forever.
Warp speed isn't natural, you see. Sublight and hyperlight are rather like the difference between rolling down and rolling up a hill. At sublight there's no resistance. Nothing to slow us down in the void of space. The only time you would use more power is to turn or stop or speed up. Until some force acts upon us, we'll coast at this speed indefinitely. I'm surprised you haven't gotten that in school. It's one of Newton's basic laws."
Jimmy clamped his mouth shut. All he needed was to blurt some comment about how seldom he paid attention in school. Or how often he skipped. What could he say? That he knew Newton's laws but hadn't bothered to think about applying them? Great.
"Don't worry," his father promised from inside the wall. "We're gonna get acted upon."
"I don't know what the big deal is," Jimmy said. "These are just stupid pirates. How come it's so hard to figure out what they're thinking?"
"Stupid people don't survive in space," his father cracked from inside the wall. "Never underestimate your enemy."
Beside him, Carlos sank back after failing to gain access to whatever he was working on, and sighed in frustration.
Pausing, George asked, "You all right?"
"Let me
...
rest my arms . . . I'll be-was

"Ensign Hall! Know anything about laser emitters?"

Beside Jimmy, Veronica got up, crossed the deck, and crouched before the opening. "Yes, sir, I do."

"Carlos, back out of here."

Jimmy watched from his corner as Captain April helped Florida

out. Veronica crawled right in. The hole was small and her legs were tangled with his father's legs. Jimmy scowled. He didn't know why, but he didn't like the sight of it.

"What is it we're trying to do?" she asked, her voice muffled now.

"We're surviving, that's what. We've got to live long enough to warn the Federation about these snakes. Fries my fanny that our lost ships could've been pirated rather than lost fair and square in space."

"Sir

...

I mean, what are we trying to do in here."

"First order of battle, Ensign. Disable your enemy."

"Sir, they're about ten times our size."

"They're not ten times madder than I am right now.

We're going to take off all the safeties and funnel all our power into one surge through these happy little chopper lasers. One blast at combat intensity, that's all I want."

"That's all you'll get," Carlos said from where he sat resting

between Robert April and Jimmy. "These cutters aren't exactly the cavalry or even the covered wagons. These are the choo-choo trains meant to go in well after

an area is secured. You can jury-rig until that star collapses, and there won't be enough juice on this whole ship for more than one combat blast. And, sir? We don't really know what it'll do to this ship, do we? Could knock out life support . . . the whole emissions systems might blow . . . who

knows what we'll have left? After that-was

"After that we'll do something else."

The answer was accompanied by a shriek of
mechanical strain-
metal against metal.

Carlos let his head fall back against the wall and
murmured, "He's not going to listen, is he,
sir?"

With a glance back at the work going on, Robert
April said, "Not
if we're lucky . . ."

Sitting nearer to them than he wanted to be, Jimmy
Kirk couldn't

resist an urge that nipped at him when he heard
that. He leaned

toward them and kept his voice down.

"What's so lucky about it?" he asked.

Captain April pressed a dirty
cloth against Florida's forehead and
tried to mop up some of the sweat pouring off the
helmsman.

"Those individuals in that other ship have their hands
full," he said. "They did it to themselves when they
turned us toward that

Blue Zone. That's what changed everything."

He turned then, and watched as George Kirk
cranked down on a

bolt with both hands and double-barreled rage. Elbows
shuddering.

Muscles knotted beneath the red uniform tunic.

"A commander with nothing to lose," Captain April
added, "is a

very dangerous man."

"Ey! Bobbysox! Wot about them shields?"

"When I'm ready . . . I'll tell you."

Roy Moss lay lengthwise across the bridge
floor, working upward

like Michelangelo painting the ceiling of the Sistine
Chapel. The

work was almost as exacting and twice as hard on the
arms.

"Well, wot's the rush?" Angus Burgoyne
insisted.

Twisting until he could see the captain's face,

Roy stopped

working, let his hands and tools rest on his chest, and
paused to

speak as though addressing a kindergarten class.

"These shields," he said, "are not for rushing.

They're not a wall

against anything and everything. They take

very

delicate constant adjustment against anything trying

to get through
second by sec
ond."

He lay back and gazed up at his
microcircuits. For a moment he was a poet
regarding a lake, a young man in passion.
"What we must look like to them

...

to anyone seeing us come
out of the Blue Zone alive . . . our witnesses
are nothing but
primitive tribesmen watching in awe as a man in
underwater
equipment rises from the sea

...

he is a god. He is a sign. He is
all-powerful. He is astonishing and indestructible.
Yet. . . they
can't possibly realize how delicate, how
vulnerable, he is. They
don't understand that he can kill himself in four feet of
water if he's
not very . . . very . . . careful. That's what we are

...

the delicate
diver."

He touched both forefingers to the specialized maze
above his
eyes and thought about what it all meant to him. How
long it would
take to build up the revenue he needed for his
long-term plans.

Thought about how efficiently he was using these moronic
toad

pirates to his own purposes, and they were too
stupid to realize it. Too stupid to see real
threats coming. Too stupid. Period.

"These shields," he uttered softly, "these are not a
shell. They're

a mirror. They reflect the danger of the
Blue Zone, but they can be
so easily smashed."

Angus Burgoyne licked his mustache, used his
tongue to pull the
end into his mouth, and started chewing on it.

"Dreamy tail-headed runt," he said. "Some
genius. Talkin" like a

bloke on smoke. Just get'm goin' agin." He
shoved out of his

command seat and went to yell down the shaft to engineering.

"Ey,

Dazzo! Cut the tractor beam a hundred percent. What is this 'eighty percent' bilge, anyway? We got that Sta'fleet rumrunner up to speed by now, don' we?"

Coming instantly out of his prayer, Roy wiped his bare brow with a wrist and cast mental disparagement onto Burgoyne, who was now bent over at the waist, yelling down the hole at the Klingon.

Roy raised his aching arms and got back to work with a final mutter.

"Deserves to drown."

"Here you go. Time to stop being a passenger."

Carlos Florida was still weak, but wide awake as he placed the last of eight mismatched monitors on the deck in front of Jimmy.

Jimmy frowned at the monitors lying cockeyed on the deck, and the wires and cables connecting all eight to different parts of exposed machinery in the torn-apart walls. Now there was a sea of cables and connections that everyone had to step through.

"You watch these," Carlos said. "Everything here is measuring something about that ship out there. That's your job, understand?"

"But I don't know what these are," Jimmy protested. "I can't read them."

He fanned both hands across the field of little screens and graphics and numbers, all flickering, flashing, distorted, competing for sparse power.

"We don't have automated equipment down here," Carlos said, "so we have to do it ourselves. This is the graphic image of the

ship itself. That one is the distance from us and speed. Over there is energy flux by wavelengths . . . this one is the macro-diagnostic . . . this one is power-to-mass. . . . Over there is the energy measure-was

He stopped, read the display crystals on the monitor, and called,

"Mr. Kirk?"

"Yeah?" George called from somewhere inside the

forward wall.

"The tractor beam! Sir, they've shut it down completely!"

"Great. Thanks."

"That's the opportunity we need, George,"

Robert called from

behind some crate somewhere.

Carlos shrugged and turned back to Jimmy. "The round one shows what I think is their intermix-listen, you know what?

Forget what they're for. Doesn't matter. If any of them change, just

tell us. Simple." He straightened

up, obviously still uncomfortable.

"You saw that ship first. You watch it. If nobody claims it in ten days . . . it's all yours."

He turned, winced, braced a sore hip with the heel of his hand,

and picked his way between the cables.

Jimmy watched him, marveling that Carlos could joke at a time

like this, after what he'd been through.

"What are you going to do?" Jimmy asked him.

Carlos gestured to a cracked-open panel a few paces from where the others were working. "We're trying to get maneuverability into

our hands down here. There's no auxiliary control on a boat like

this. We'll have to do everything from under the hood."

"Why do you call it that?"

"Beats me."

With a fatigued shrug, Carlos moved away.

They were all working, except Jimmy. He was supremely aware of

that, and was glad to finally have something to do. He looked at the

monitors one by one, and tried to rationalize what each one was

telling him.

And might as well have been trying to read

Egyptian. All at once

he wished he'd paid more attention in advanced computer science

class. He'd always figured the basics would be enough, and hadn't

bothered paying attention to anything more complicated. Just as he

could pilot a vehicle but not build one, he could

make a computer go but didn't know why or how it went.

Suddenly he wanted to know how

and
why.
Across the deck Veronica Hall let out a yip of
victory. "Mr. Kirk?
I've think I've got most of the power diverted."
George wriggled out of a very tiny hole and grunted,
"Percent
age?"
"I'd say fifty-five percent of combat
intensity."
"Fifty-five, fifty-five," George
muttered, thinking. "Won't de
stroy them, but they'll be good'n shook."
He picked through the cables and wires, and knelt
to look into the maze of machinery where Veronica was
working.
"Show me."
"Here's where I got a connection through to our warp
engines'
power core. And up
...
there . .
."
"I see it. Don't strain."
"comis the utility laser housing-was
"Damn, is that ever small. Are you sure that's the
right thing? Look at that little sucker."
"Yes, sir. If you follow this up to
...
right here, this is the trickle
of power to the energy-focus matrix. We can do our
beam-force heat
adjustment from this. At least, I
think
we can. But I don't have any
predictions about what it'll do to us."
"We're disabled," George said.
"If
they're disabled too, then at
least we'll be on even ground with them. We might be
trying to have
a swordfight while we're up to our elbows in
quicksand, but at least
they'll be in the quicksand too."
Veronica accepted his help in slithering out of the
hole-and
Jimmy winced when he saw his father grab the girl's
prosthetic hand
to pull her up. He expected it to pop off and start
running around
the deck on two fingers.

"Okay, huddle," George said. "What do we shoot at?"

They collected around Carlos Florida, who was on his side, crouched in the exposed machinery inside another of the ripped-

out pieces of hull sheeting, working on something.

Jimmy almost got up and left his gauges, until an overwhelming

sensation pressed him down. He wasn't wanted over there. He wasn't welcome. He wasn't a member of the crew. They not only didn't want him . . . they didn't need him.

He drew his knees up tightly to his body, ducked his head a little, turned back to his gauges, and listened.

"What do we hit?" his father was asking.

"Suggestions?"

"What about their warp engines?" Veronica said.

"If

they go to warp, we'll never get our shot."

"No good. We knock out their warp, they figure out we're still here, they turn and kill us, and duck into the Blue Zone to hide. Doesn't get us anything.

Gimme this-was

He made a long reach, snatched one of Jimmy's monitors, and

dragged it back to the huddle. Jimmy scowled at him possessively,

but had no time to think of anything to say.

His father, Captain April, and the others peered at the monitor,

which showed a flickering graphic of the spider ship.

They were

pointing at it and trying to identify what was what.

"Where can we hit that'll foul them up most smartly?" Robert

April murmured, following Veronica's finger on the graphic display.

"An impulse hit?" she said. "Wrecks their maneuverability."

Robert nodded. "But nothing else, my dear. They could still turn on us."

Next Jimmy heard his father's voice. Very quiet. Not the usual grumble or roar.

"What's on the outside that affects the inside?"

Come on, people.

Think."

"Sir," Veronica said, "I remember something from my Intro to

Propulsion Engineering . . ."

"Well, don't make me tickle it out of you,
Ensign. Shoot."

"Coolant? Isn't that right? Without coolant they
can't run
anything."

Robert clapped George on the back.

"Coolant, by God."

George was gaping back at him. "Coolant
compressors! That'll
shut down everything!" Then he paused, ""we can
shoot through their shields. That's the big question. Those
shields can keep them alive inside the Blue
Zone."

"Then what'll we do?" Carlos asked.

"We'll assume they think we're dead so they
don't think they
need shields."

"That's a devil of an assumption, George,"
Robert warned.

George flung his hands wide. "What d'you
want? Shields like that
have got to be a hell of a drain. I wouldn't run
them all the time,
would you?"

"No, I suppose not. . . but they're a complete
mystery," the
captain added. "We're guessing about how they do
something they
simply
can't

do. Heaven's sake, how do you fight something that's
utterly impossible?"

"Don't confuse me. Okay, let's find that
duct."

The finger-pointing on the monitor started again as they
eliminated possibilities one by one and questioned others,
while behind
them Jimmy shifted his haunches on the cold
floor and felt left out.

He frowned at them. They hadn't even
congratulated Veronica on
coming up with the coolant idea. Didn't anybody in
Starfleet care
how a person felt?

He watched coldly as they mumbled and pointed, using
their
fingers to follow the design, trying to eliminate the
places where the
duct couldn't be, then trying to conclude where it

could

be.

"That's got to be it."

"Starboard side, on the aft quarter?"

"What else could it be?"

"Mmmmm

...

I dunno . . ."

"It's got to be something important . .

."

"C'mon, it could be just an exhaust port-was

"Could be food storage. We'd be shooting at their dinner."

"A food port with signal lights for repair workers to see?"

"I don't see any lights."

"Right there. And there."

"That's static on our monitor."

"Steady static?"

"Listen, we've got to make a decision."

"No,

we

don't."

They all looked up, and Jimmy held his breath as his father's

voice took on a sharp finality. His father was getting up and pulling

Carlos up with one hand and Robert with the other.

"I'm the one who has to decide," he said. "On your feet,

everybody. We'll knock out that port and hope it's their cooling

system, then we'll move away."

Carlos struggled up and sighed, "If we can still move."

"We'll move if I have to get out and push. I intend to still be here

when the

Enterprise

comes looking, and I want those greedy

bastards to be here too." George stood to his full height in spite of the low ceiling, squinted in

raw rage, and gritted his teeth. "I want to arrest them with my own bare hands."

Way, way down on the floor, down underneath the big red giant

erupting at close proximity, the little yellow son blinked up and

wondered if that was really his father talking. He was used

to a scowling fellow who didn't have enough to occupy himself on

leaves.

This wasn't the same man.

Lately it didn't seem so hard for Jimmy to keep quiet. He hadn't made a nasty crack for well over an hour. Not since that one he couldn't forget.

He saw it rolling in every one of his scanners.

You got me into it.

You got me into it. You got me into it.

"Shut up," he muttered, and raked both hands over his hot face.

Since when did guilt have sweat glands?

"Robert," his father asked, turning.

Captain April looked up. "Yes, George?"

"Before it's too late, do you see any implications in this that I'm not seeing?"

"None at all, my friend," the captain said. Sad clarity swam in his eyes, which had long ago forfeited their sparkle for the reality he

had to accept. "There is no excuse for piratical acts, and should be no leniency. We must. . . fight."

"Positions, everybody."

Jimmy watched from his seclusion inside the semicircle of monitors as the Starfleet people scattered to different parts of the exposed machinery.

"Oh, my friends!" Captain April said then.

"We're forgetting one detail. We haven't the power to overtake them, and we can't strike that port from astern of them. How shall we entice them to turn and present the port to us?"

Immediately Jimmy cranked around to see what his father would say to that.

George Kirk was bent on one knee near the torn-apart access caves where Carlos was buried in the guts of the ship.

"You just said it. We're going to make them present it to us.

Carlos? In position? Hall?"

Their responses were muffled inside the caves.

"Aye, sir."

"I'm ready, sir."

"Quite ready, George."

With a false steadiness George said, "Carlos, take a fix on that portal."

"Fix, aye."

"Robert, can you steer from in there?"

"I can do some lively guessing and generalizing, certainly, George."

"What?"

"I said I'll do my best!"

"Okay, this is it, folks. Robert! Turn us forty degrees to starboard and let's move! Full speed!"

"Turning." Robert's voice came up from back there. "Best speed is point zero zero four of sublight."

"Well, full crawl, then! Jimmy! Watch that monitor!"

Holding on to his skin somehow, Jimmy jolted up onto both knees. "Which one!"

Swinging toward him, his father bellowed, "That one! That one right there! Is it doing anything?"

"No-yes!" His mouth dried up and he choked,

"They're turning!"

"They're coming about to fire at us!" Carlos confirmed. "I can see their starboard side! Sir, their laser ports are heating up!"

George swung away again. "Target that starboard compressor, Ensign!"

"I've got to eyeball it," Veronica warned, her voice muffled.

"Do your best. Funnel your power through the system. Give it everything!"

"Tunneling, Mr. Kirk. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven-was

"Get ready-was

"Five

...

four . . ."

"Aim-was

"Two

...

one

...

full power!"

"Fire!"

-- * --

"They're alive!"

Angus Burgoyne, without even leaving his captain's chair, reeled out to his right and smashed Okenga across the face so hard that the Andorian engineer went down on the deck, rolling. Electricity vomited all over the ship. The bridge was lit like the Fourth of July, and the ship was rocking and spinning off its course. Around him, members of his sparse crew were hanging on as the deck pitched. Sirens whined and sparks flew everywhere, on everyone. "They're alive! You said they'd be dead! Damn your face, Okenga, you said they'd be dead! They're not dead! They're frackin' alive!"

Around them their ship rocked and tilted against its own artificial gravity as all systems went haywire. Alarms rang and rang, as if the living things on board didn't know they'd just been hit, and hit hard.

Roy Moss, unwelcome because of his age, unrespected because of his age, held in contempt for his abilities and kept around for the same reason, clung to a companionway rail behind the others, watching.

With his elbows against his ribs as he clung to the rail, he muttered, "I'd be alive."

"Fire!"

"I can't fire again! There's no power!"

"Not

that

kind of fire! Get the extinguishers! Hall, get out of there!"

George Kirk pulled Veronica out of the wall only seconds before her mechanical cave flushed with smoke and sparks and flames. The gravity went crazy, and suddenly the ship was turning on its side

according to the perception of any living thing inside. Open
space
might not care, but the crew sure did.
An instant later Robert was there with two small
fire extinguish
ers, literally walking on the starboard wall. He
tossed one to
George, and both men stood with legs braced wide
as the cutter
tilted under them, spraying up a snowstorm.
Smoke billowed from a dozen cracks and three of the
four
peeled-back pieces of hull sheeting.
"Sir, you did it!" Carlos squinted to read the
sensors at the
source-with jabs of electricity, no screen. He
poked his head out
of the hole he was half in, wiped away the
sweat-plastered hair.
"They're disabled! It might be quicksand, but it's
our
quicksand!
They're stuck, but good!"
Victory blended with pure hatred as George
tucked his chin and
growled, "I'd like to stick 'em somewhere. All right,
crew-we're on
a better footing, but we just gave ourselves away.
They know we're
here. It's a cockfight."
"You dirty son of a scarecrow, Burgoyne, I
warned you! I
told
your dirty, smelly ass what would happen if we
didn't move out,
and now look."
"Watch'er mouth, Moss. I'm still in command."
"Command the warp drive back into place, then, since
you can
do magic! Command the weapons on line! Command this
hulk back
to full power. There's coolant foaming all over the
lower level, for
Christ sake!"
"Warm up the laser!" Burgoyne shouted. "Fire
at them!"
"Laser with no coolant?" Rex Moss said through
gritted teeth.
"We'll go up like a nova!"
"Back your fat self away from me. And lookit
who's talkin" about

smell."

As the two powerful men thundered at each other, those of the crew still on the bridge now turned to their work, even if they didn't

have any. Nobody wanted to get dragged in, to get in the middle of a

dispute. Nobody knew which one would win, and didn't want to be

attached to the loser.

Besides, if anybody got killed, there was more for the rest of

them.

"Warp drive is forget it!" Okenga called from down inside the

engineering area. "Weapons are very bad."

"How long?" Burgoyne called without taking his eyes off Rex

Moss. "How long to fix the warp?"

"Five day. Six."

"What do we have left?"

Eager to throttle Burgoyne with bad news, the Klingon technician

climbed up out of the companionway, waving at the reddish-yellow

chemical smoke that puffed up before him, and leered at their

captain.

"We can crawl around like a twenty-first-century tugger, doing a

hundred thousand kilometers an hour. Half of one percent of

light-speed. You can get out and swim faster."

Still staring at Rex, Burgoyne grumbled to the Klingon, "Go take

a wizz, Dazzo. Nobody asked your filthy face."

At the back of the bridge, Roy raised an eyebrow and murmured,

"The Sharks are now snails."

Burgoyne shot a glare at him and spat

saliva. "Get back to your goddamned shields, boy!"

"You were so sure they were dead," Big Rex Moss boomed to

Burgoyne. Sweat broke from his enormous bulk and added to the

steam in the small, hot quarter. "So sure, so sure.

"Go aheeeeed,"

you said. "Smack 'em again." Well, we smacked 'em, and they

smacked back. Starfleet people don't roll over and
kick like sailors
on some merchant scow, but would you listen?
Now look at us! No
warp speed! No power! No weapons! You want
to crawl out of here
at a tenth of impulse? Go ahead, Angus.
Let's see

...
how you
crawl."

He moved closer in the cramped bridge, his last
sentence a snarl
of challenge.

Angus Burgoyne caught the serious note, the
threat in that tone,
and pushed out of his chair. He put his back to the
viewscreen-
And a butcher knife in between himself and his hulking
crewmate.

There had always been contention between them, always a tight
string vibrating about who was the better to be in command, but
contention usually faded in the light of money in their
pockets and
bourbon in their bellies.

Today they had neither. And their quarry was slipping onto
a
dangerously equal footing.

No one looked up. No one wanted into it.
Except a bony boy huddling beside the shielding
portal where he
was working.

Roy Moss watched his father from the side of one eye
and judged
the movements of Burgoyne with his pure senses.

He could barely
see the huge butcher blade flickering, glowing from the
viewscreen's
picture of the trinary. He dared not turn, for that would
be
uncalculated and unwise. He might distract
them.

And he didn't want them distracted. He had
waited too long for
someone to legitimately challenge Burgoyne.

If it was his own
father, then it brought him closer to being in charge. If
Big Rex was
in command, then Roy knew he would get at least some
respect, if only through fallout. No, Big
Rex would give him none . . . but the other

malleheads might.

Burgoyne turned the wide blade before his nose as he glared past it at his challenger.

Cloaked in fingers of steam and crackling electrical gushers from the shattered machinery behind him, Big Rex Moss was a monu

ment to threat. He was big, he was hot, he was every bit as muscular

as he was wide, as mean as he was heavy, and he cut a dinosauric

figure with the nebula's lights and the bridge's darkness arguing in the folds of his neck. He never blinked. He took one step at a time. Almost a sense of music. A step for every sentence.

"We'll drag them in," he said. "Drag them into the Blue Zone and crush the life out. That'll give us time for fixing this hog."

Bending forward to put the knife closer to Rex, Burgoyne spat,

"And no profit. We drag it in, we get nothing out. That's not wot I'm in this business fo". But what do you know about business? You

talked us into keepin' this snot-nosey whelp o' yours on board,

gettin' a full share of our take-was

"That snotnose is the only reason we can go inside the Zone and come out alive," Big Rex said. Another step.

"He should be getting part of your share," Burgoyne insisted,

"instead of a whole share of his own. You know it's true, that's why

you're always kickin' the punk around. Admit it, y'grotesque

maggot."

Roy listened, and this time he turned to watch. He stood up slowly. Since they were talking about him, they wouldn't be

surprised if he took interest or notice if

he moved himself into a

better position. He enjoyed these little moments so.

...

Share. I should be getting their shares on top of my own. I'm the only one who keeps them in business.

I'm the shielding genius. I'm

the piloting genius. I'm the weapons genius.

What could they do

without me? Use this ship for a giant chamber
pot, is all.
Big Rex took another step. "We're going
to drag them into the
Zone. We're going to get out while we still can.
We're going to hide
and repair. You're gonna step aside."
That was when he brought out the Orion magnatomic
pistol and
pointed all twenty inches of it right at
Burgoyne's funnel-shaped head. Where he'd
hidden it until now, only his folds of flesh and
shabby layers of sweat-stained clothing knew. Only
the chains on
his wrists really cared.
Burgoyne started to shake. His big blade
wasn't big enough
suddenly.
His lips peeled back and twitched. His lack of a
chin began to
wobble.
"Put the butch down, slug," Rex told him.
Hatred boiling through him, Burgoyne discovered he
had no
choice.
Roy held his breath and continued to watch
without pretending not to.
Shaking so hard his bones almost rattled, Burgoyne
slowly
deposited the knife on what had minutes ago
been his captain's
seat. He knew it was the last thing of his that would sit
there.
At least for now.
That was how fast things could change.
Big Rex never flinched. He didn't look at
the knife, but waited
until Burgoyne backed away from the seat.
Then, satisfied, Rex nodded and said, "Don't you
ever pull nothing like that again on me
...
or you won't live to hear the
echo."
Without the slightest regard for what Burgoyne
might do to Roy,
Big Rex chuckled to let them know he wasn't
too
mad, but that he
was victorious for now. He tapped the barrel of the
Orion pistol on
his brow in a kind of warning, then turned and

headed for the
companionway.
Burgoyne let out part of a sigh of relief-
Only part of it.
Because Roy Moss saw his opportunity. He
lunged forward,
grabbed the butcher knife, and gave it a drastic
fling toward the
wide target of his father's shoulders.
Burgoyne's gasp of astonishment and panic was
particularly
satisfying to Roy, but Roy had his eye on the
blade he had cast.
The blade turned sideways and didn't lodge,
but hit hard enough
at the right angle to take a slice out of the back of
Rex's neck.
Rex grabbed his neck with his free hand and spun around
at
astonishing speed for a man his size.
Horrified, Burgoyne threw his hands out before him
in a gesture
of innocence, sucked in a gasp to explain that he
hadn't done it-
shhhhhhhwazzzzzz
A scream of pure agony, a glowing pillar of
heat and stench, and
Angus Burgoyne was suddenly the stuff of
legend. Literally-he was
now a pile of black flesh flakes and scorched
bones whose tendons
had been incinerated, settling and sizzling on the
deck.
"Always thought cremation was the best way to go," Big
Rex
Moss commented. He waved his pistol in the air
to cool it, and
turned away again. "All right, you Sharks! Guess
who's in charge
now?"
Behind him, his son licked his lips and smiled.
"This one's changing! Hey! Dad! Captain!
Somebody! This one's
changing."
Jimmy waved and pointed frantically until
Veronica Hall
dropped beside him and looked at the blinking numbers,
reading
them through static on the screen. "They're changing
course!" she
confirmed.

"What's the new course?" George asked.

"Carlos? Have you got it?"

"I was afraid of this," Carlos said. He stopped and swallowed hard. "They're trying to get back into tractor range. If they can get a grip on us, they'll drag us right into the Blue Zone. I'd bet on it."

"How long?" George demanded. "At this speed, how long have we got?"

"Well

...

I

...

wouldn't bother to start roasting a turkey, sir."

"What's that? Six hours?"

Carlos looked at him with a quizzical frown on his face.

"Sir," Veronica began.

She never got the chance to finish, because George blustered,

"Well, how long does it take to cook a turkey? My wife always takes six hours!"

"Closer to four, George," Robert supplied.

A sentimental grin tugged at his mouth.

Carlos nodded, but it was more like a hopeless shrug.

"At the very outside."

Hands on his hips, George stared at the deck and paced back and forth between stacked and strapped supply crates. Four hours of disabled ship and disabled enemy.

Four hours to gain an upper hand. Four hours to maybe lose that upper hand.

Ultimately he stopped, turned, and faced them.

His eyes were slim and angry, but a roulette wheel was spinning in them. There was a competitive sting in his voice.

"Then it's a race," he said.

Jimmy looked at him and almost-almost-

smiled. "Thought

you said it was a cockfight."

"Almost nothing left."

"Us or them?"

"Both."

"At least they don't have weapons yet."

"How do you know?"

"They're not shooting at us, are they?"

"Oh . . . right."

"I'd

be shooting."

The voices of his father and Carlos Florida did little anymore to comfort Jimmy as he sat on the deck, getting stiffer and stiffer and more antsy by the minute. Forced to lean back on an elbow because the pitch adjusters were still broken and the ship was still tilted, he watched as the two men crawled around the deck from one exposed outlet to another, pushing wires out of the way and splicing cables snapped by the power surge when they took their one shot.

"We've got to keep them buffaloed," George was saying.

"Sir, we're moving away, but at a sick excuse for sublight,"

Veronica said from inside the same wall Jimmy was leaning against.

He couldn't even see her legs anymore. Only the toe of one boot showed under a mass of disconnected chip shells.

"Maybe one or two percent sublight. We're a mess."

"But so are they," Carlos added.

Jimmy craned his neck but couldn't see where Carlos or Robert April were at all.

The hold had gone from a neat garage carrying sealed crates to a hangar of parts and cannibalized goods. Crate lids now blocked most of his view, set aside so that any tools or parts inside could be put to use. Some had slid across the tilted deck and were crowded on one side. Edges of the lids had been torn off and were being used as knives or screwdrivers.

"They're dogging us at a little better than our speed," Carlos called over a snapping of damaged circuits.

"Sooner or later they

will
catch us."
From the other side of an archaeology implements
crate, Robert
called, "Count your blessings. It's a
good
thing our propulsion's
barely working."
"Why's that?"
"Because our navigational shields are down, my
boy."
"Oh . . . right. Darn, that's right. . ."
"Hey."
Jimmy looked to his other side, where the "hey"
had come from,
but there wasn't anybody there.
"Hey, Jimmy? Jimmy."
He turned on a hip, then scooted away from the
wall-
And there was Veronica's face, visible through a
mailbox-size
electrical-adjuster hatch.
"Can you push a vise-grips in here to me?" she
asked.
He bent over, almost down to the floor. "I can't
believe there's
enough room for you to be in there!"
She batted those big pale eyes and grinned.
"Barely. Could you
get that, please?"
"You mean a regular old vise-grips? You
don't want the one with
the magnetic controls in it, or the timer, or
anything?"
"No, I just need a grab-and-holder. You know
...
an "extra
hand." Can you find it?"
Knowing he was being teased, he mumbled, "Yeah,
sure," and got
up.
Feeling green and raw, he ended up rummaging through
four
crates of excavation tools. His hands were scratched
and lacerated
before he found what she needed, and then it was too big.
Eventually he had to lower himself to asking his
father where he
could find what she needed, and got little more than a finger
pointed
at a wall rack of hand tools.

Finally he was poking the correct grips through the tiny hatch at
Veronica's face.

One of her prosthetic fingers caught it by its metal teeth and

pulled it in. "Thank you very much," she said.

Jimmy got down on his stomach and peered in. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure you can."

He lowered his voice. "How come it's good that we're not going very fast?"

"What? Oh

...

I see what you mean!" Louder than Jimmy wanted her to be talking, she asked, "Don't you know what navigational shields are for?"

He winced, knowing everyone else could hear her even though she was inside the wall.

"Navigating, I thought."

"No, no. They're for safe travel at sublight," she said. "If we go much faster than this without navigational deflectors, any two molecules of space debris could slam through our hull like bullets through cheese."

Behind Jimmy, his father got up, stretched his aching legs, and stepped to them. "Hall, say that again."

"Pardon, sir?"

"The shielding."

"Sir, I don't understand. I was just explaining to-was

"Bullets through cheese . . ." George knuckled a lock of sweaty

dark red hair over his eyes and gazed at the deck.

"That gives me an idea . . ."

Suddenly the dim utility lighting flickered, just before they heard

Robert's gasp from somewhere in the tumble of equipment toward the aft.

"Ouch! Oh, my lord!"

A second later Robert April

tumbled from the open ceiling where

he had been working, and landed somewhere back there on the cluttered deck behind some of the crates. Several

pieces of small but

heavy equipment fell out on top of him.

That sent Jim's father plunging across the tipped deck, around the crates, shoving aside anything that was in his way. "Robert, what happened? Don't move-don't! Let me get this off you. What happened up there?" "Bit of a backfire, I'm afraid . . ."

There was a shuffle behind the crates. Then George lifted him to his feet. "You all right? Can you stand?" "Just a twist. . . that's why I had to become a captain, I always say. I'm a country gardener when it comes to mechanics-oh . . . lord, the shoulder . . ."

Jimmy tensed and got up on one knee in case his father needed help with Robert. Losing the two engineers and almost losing Carlos had left them all on edge. But his father's voice, when it came again, was heavy with relief. "Go sit down for a few minutes. I'll do this." "Oh, George, you're already trying to do so much-was "Look, don't argue with me. I've got ten perfectly good thumbs to work with."

"Mmmm . . . suppose I can't challenge self-confidence of that caliber, can I?"

Over the crates Robert April appeared and straightened up. His gentle features were crushed in discomfort, brown eyes pinched and dull as he supported himself on the angled wall and moved away from where he had been working. His brown hair was mussed, but he was on his feet. Wincing several times, he managed to pull out of his smudged Irish cardigan and drape it over a piece of bent-back sheeting. Rubbing his left shoulder, he stepped back so that Jimmy's father could climb up into the ceiling-or practically walk up, the way the ship was tilted. George's upper half vanished into the ceiling right under the impulse engine, one of those places where mistakes really counted.

Huddling in self-imposed seclusion in the corner,
Jimmy turned away and settled back to watching his
eight disembodied monitors
rather than having to witness the technical activities
he couldn't
help with.
The monitors-just as disturbing. They flashed,
crackled,
buzzed, and snapped at him, trying to get power from
each other
through the web of wires. Machines just didn't have it in
them to
cooperate or share, or work together in any way.
There was
something profound about that right now, but Jimmy didn't
feel
like being poetic.
He ended up staring at the monitor that showed the
relentless
pursuit of the spider ship, coming closer by the minute
in the
emptiness of space.
A glance showed him his father's legs dangling from the
open
ceiling, never quite relaxed, always with a strained
purchase on the
hold's flooring, and he glared with bitterness.
He turned away again.
It's his fault. We wouldn't be here if he hadn't
come up with this
stupid idea. The captain wouldn't be here. Maybe
Thorvaldsen and
that other guy wouldn't be dead. They said they only
came out here
because April wanted to do Dad a favor. Give
him an excuse to haul
me into space. That's the only reason he's working so
hard to get us
out of this. It's his fault and he knows it.
He talked and talked and talked to himself, feeling
sorrrier by the
moment for the fellow he was talking to, but no matter
what, he
couldn't get past the fact that everybody
else was handling the fear and working through it.
But here he was, stricken silent and unable to make
himself
useful, so he was blaming his father.
Useful? He couldn't even think straight.
"Jimmy Tiberius."
With a flinch, Jimmy looked up.

Robert April sat down beside him, holding his left arm and moving stiffly. "Feel all right?" Jimmy shifted and wrapped his arms around his knees. "I guess," he said. Then he pointed at the captain's arm. "I should ask you that." "Oh, I'll get along, never fear." He settled and tried to find the best position possible on a floor that was meant for crated cargo. "So . . . they've made you master of the hold, have they?" "What?" "You're in charge of the ship's hold." With his good hand he indicated the arc of monitors flickering around them. "Every ship must have a master of the hold, a ship's boatswain, chiefs of deck, people to whom responsibilities have been delegated. No duty is too small or too menial aboard a ship. If a chap fails to do his duty, then someone else must do it. Things can't go undone, not even the tiniest thing. Quite old traditions, and quite efficient." "Even on a starship?" Jimmy asked. "Especially," Robert said, "on a starship. You know," he went on, "your father came up with the name for the Enterprise. Did you know that?" Perplexed by the change of subject, Jimmy tried to be cold. "No, I didn't know that." "Oh, yes. He was involved in her first mission. We rescued a distressed colony from their disabled ship far within a very nasty area of space. I had been planning to name the starship Constitution, but after George risked so much, I thought he deserved . . . oh, a little reward, let's call it."

"That's some reward," Jimmy droned, trying not to be impressed while still at least being passably polite to the captain. "What was the big risk?"

The captain looked at him, brows up. "You mean he never told you?"

"Never told me. Surprise, surprise."

"I see

...

I suppose he took it seriously that some parts of the mission remain top secret. . . but not the part about the rescue. I

went down with a head injury, and your father took over the whole

operation. And it was a great deal dirtier than anything on the books, I can tell you."

Jimmy gave him a sly look. "But that's all you can tell me, right?"

"Well . . . yes."

"That's what I thought. What are they doing over there?"

He pointed to where Carlos was joining his father at the aft end of the hold.

"They're cannibalizing some of the interior flux conductors and rechargeable gadgetry in there."

"How come . . ."

"Beg pardon? How come they're doing it?"

Lowering his voice, Jimmy dared to ask, "How come . . . you're not in charge?"

Modestly, the captain tilted his head and said,

"Oh, there can be

only one captain to a mission, my boy."

"So what? You rank my dad, don't you? Why's he making all the decisions?"

"I do, yes, but this is his assignment, not mine, you see." Robert

let his head drop back against the hold wall and tried to relax. "I

appointed him charge of the cutter, observation of the trinary, and

the voyage to Faramond. I can't arbitrarily take it back now, can I?

We would lose the consistency of command. All sorts of things

could go wrong. Someday I'll turn the entire

starship over to
someone else, and the future of Federation space will be
in hands
other than mine. There are styles of command as surely
as there are
styles of dance. Any good commander must understand that, as
must any good crew."

Jimmy glowered and fixed his gaze on his father and
Carlos as
they tampered with the mechanisms.
After a moment he asked, "How are you going to keep
other
people from using the starship and all that power in ways you
didn't
intend?"

"Oh, I'm not!" the captain said
emphatically. "Diversity isn't any
good if it's only one man's diversity. Now, is
it?"

Such a quick answer, so well thought out. Obviously
this wasn't
the first time such a problem had dogged Robert
April's conscience.

Yet he seemed utterly comfortable with what he had just
said.

The idea settled softly around them, all its open
possibilities and its inherent strifes gurgling with
promise.

Unable to pop off a challenge-probably because there
really
wasn't a good one-Jimmy tucked his chin between his
knees and

muttered, "Guess not."

He felt the captain smiling at him. Maybe
saw it out of the corner
of his eye.

"You see, Jimmy," Robert said on a
philosophical sigh, "I think
humanity is all right. Mankind is cunning and
artful, enthusiastic,
and ultimately smart. Oh, we blunder from
time to time, sometimes
a bit butterfingere while we build on some
unclear vision, but we
always learn from our blunders and we rarely forget. And
we never,
ever . . .
stop trying."

The enthusiasm in his voice, the faith in his tone, the
ease of
his

posture, all belied this environment and the damnable
hum of their
straining engines.

"So we're stubborn," Jimmy said. "So what?"

The captain ignored all the so-whats coming out of this
boy and
smiled warmly again.

"There are a dozen other civilizations more advanced
than
humanity, just in known space," he said. "The
Vulcans, Orions,
Andorians, the Alpha Centaurians

...

a few others. Yet they keep to themselves while
looking down their noses at us. What good
is
that? Humans have been the only ones to reach out, to ask
others to
join us in our common future. We're the only
ones to initiate a
galactic unity. Oh, how I love the sound of
that. . . ."

Jimmy didn't want to look at him, but couldn't
help sensing him
there and feeling him there, and drawing strength from him.
Somehow Robert April made the death around the
corner seem a
light-year away.

Just when Jimmy was thinking he might get out of this
conversa
tion with his ego intact, that gentle voice came
back with a new
suggestion.

"You don't trust others very readily, do you,
Jimmy?"

Cold warnings flushed through him at the captain's
statement. He
swallowed hard.

Then he asked, "Who've I got to trust?"

A long, burdened silence picked at them.

Jimmy's own words lay
hard around him until he could feel the weight on his
legs and his
heart.

Then the captain asked, "What about your father?"

This was the question he dreaded most, and had known would
inflict itself upon him sometime in this conversation. He thought
he

was ready for it.

"What about him?" he challenged. "I don't see
him that often."

"Don't you? That's odd . . . I remember signing several leaves for him. How much is 'enough,' according to you?" Embarrassed to find he had no answer, Jimmy offered a shrug as a miserable facsimile.

"He left my mother," he said finally.

"Ah, that lets a little light in," the captain said.

"You've resented your father on your mother's behalf? Not on your own?"

"I can take care of myself," Jimmy indignantly verified. "She can't."

"Can't she? That's odd . . . she married him while he was a guard at Starfleet Headquarters. She always knew what it meant. There was some difficulty at first, of course-they were both so young

...

in fact, they were on the edge of divorce until he went into the Security Division. Their relationship has always been best off at

...

well, at a distance, if you understand." Captain April paused, thinking back with a puzzled nostalgia on his face. "As a matter of fact, I don't recall their having any serious strain between them until

...

oh, I'd say two years ago. Perhaps three." Color raged across Jimmy's freckled cheeks. He didn't have to think back to realize who had been the cause of the two or three years of tension.

"He didn't have to drag me into space," he said.

"I like Earth. I like sailing. On real water. It's always space with him. He can have it."

"Oh, yes

...

space is a jealous concubine, I know," Robert said.

"It demands a whole heart from those of us who tend it. You see, the

Federation doesn't have an iron-bound coast. It's incumbent upon Starfleet to constable the settled galaxy wherever we're called upon.

Our colonists depend on us, as do our allies, and, frankly, anyone else who needs help, friend or foe. There's so much to be done, so many fragile details to tend

...

no one's life is perfect. If you're waiting for perfection, you're liable to spend your life deeply disappointed."

"I might never get the chance to get disappointed," Jimmy said.

"Not if we're going to sit here and-was
"And get whitewashed, yes. I understand. But it certainly isn't your poor father's fault."

"He's the one who hauled me out here, isn't he?
He's the one who had to be in Starfleet, had to go off to space. He's the one, not me."

Robert lay a hand on his own chest in a knightly fashion. "If you want to blame someone," he said, "blame me. I dragged your father kicking and screaming into Starfleet. Then I talked him into staying when he pondered going back to Earth. It's my fault, Jimmy."

He tapped his chest with the flat of his hand, as though to borrow a bit of his heartbeat to swear his oath upon. Then he added solemnly, "Men like your father don't come out of every dozen. A man willing to gamble, willing to take his turn at the wheel

...

we simply need people like him so very badly."
They sat in silence for a few minutes, aware of the disembodied monitors flickering and burping in front of them.

The captain leaned forward once, adjusting something he didn't like on one of the screens, then settled back again.

"A Security Division commander has plenty on his hands these days, with more and more interstellar traffic launching every day, every minute." He gestured forward, at the only

screen that showed
a staticky picture of the enemy ship closing on
them. "These fellows
out there, they know they're in trouble. That bit of
hesitation after
your father hailed them . . . they know they've stumbled upon
Starfleet. That means they're not only in trouble for
attacking us,
but even if they can explain that-claiming they thought we
were
someone else or some such crockery-they're still
subject to the
theory of infection and contracts of affreightment and
other laws of
interstellar commerce . . . likely they don't have
those things, so
they can't let us go now even if they made some kind
of mistake in the attack. It's like picking an
argument in a pub and finding you've
picked one with a professional boxer. All the little
laws and
regulations and treatises we've had to hammer
into shape to form
interstellar law-each one has been an adventure
in itself. I'm sure
your father's told you about some of them in his letters-that
reminds me! Did your brother Sam manage
to stick out those
insidious ten-hour sessions in the lab and get his
extra embryology credit?"
Irritated at hearing about his smart older brother,
Jimmy hugged
his knees and grumbled, "I don't know. I guess
so."
"Oh-that reminds me about something else. How did the
fishing pond work out? The one you dug out behind your barn?
Quite industrious for a boy of fourteen. I
recall George reading that
and asking if I had a connection whereby he could get
fish eggs to
stock that pond for you. My goodness, seems like
yesterday . . . did
the eggs take? Did you get any fish out of it?"
Puzzled at the way the conversation had turned,
Jimmy drew his
brows together and muttered, "Got some trout out of it."
The captain chuckled softly and gazed at the deck.
Finally he
shook his head and smiled.
"Oh, the ribbing your poor father takes for those letters!"
he went

on. "For going to the trouble of sending real paper letters
instead of
transmissions . . . he's endured more hounding than
a plebe at the
Academy, but that connection is precious to him

...

to know that
his family is touching the paper that he touched."
Sitting on needles, Jimmy fidgeted and stared
past his knees to
where his father and the others were working at such a
fevered pace,
but all he saw was the past.
"How do you know so much about my family?" he asked.
"How?" Robert raised his soft brows as though
he'd been asked
how fish swim. "My dear boy . . . you're all
he talks about."

Those words floated around them like the last stanza of a
patriotic song, carrying a sentiment above the ground
and refusing
to let it fade.

Troubled, pensive, and thoughtful, Jimmy found out
what shame
tasted like. His lips parted, dry. The moisture they
needed was in
his eyes.
For the first time since leaving Earth, there was no razor
blade in
his response.

"I

...

quit reading the letters."
He sounded like a criminal confessing a crime.
Felt like one too.
Beside him, Robert April's soft voice
turned bleak and disen
chanted.
"Oh, Jimmy . . ."
"Where's my goddamned tractor beam, boy?"
Big Rex settled with appropriate grunts
into a chair meant for a
much thinner man.
The captain's chair. Though this was satisfying after
all these
months of putting up with a scavenging dog like
Burgoyne, Rex had
to do some down and dirty tucking to get himself between the
chair's arms.
"Boy!" he called again. Now that he was in the
chair, he couldn't

turn any farther than the chair would turn, which
wasn't much of a
swivel on this model.
"I'm right behind you. No reason to bellow." Roy
Moss buried
his contempt in steadiness and glanced at the back of his
father's
bloated neck. "We have only ten percent
tractor beam. We can pull
them, but we'll have to get very, very close
to get a good grip."
"Let's do it, then. Okenga! Dazzo! Can't you
idiots get any more
speed out of this hog?"
The Klingon poked his head up from the engine room.
"Not before the coolant compressor is back to twenty
percent.
You want to push it? Come and do it yourself, human."
Down he went, without waiting for a comment from the new
leader.
Unlike Burgoyne, who would've demanded more speed
at any
cost and taken offense at being called "human" even
though he was
human, Rex Moss didn't argue. The engineers
would want to catch
that Starfleet ship as much as he did. They didn't
dare let it go.
They'd work hard enough without his hammering at them, and
probably work better.
Behind him, his son noticed the silence and paused
to cautiously
evaluate it. After a moment Roy ventured,
"Aren't you forgetting
something?"
Big Rex tilted his large head without turning.
"Like what?"
"Like trying a few . . . other things before we
decide to drag them
into the Zone. Things that may let us keep that ship and
its
mechanisms. Those alloys and the new programming .
. . wait until
the shields are usable-was
The captain's chair cranked to its full third
around. Now Rex
could glare at his son sidelong, hard, mean.
Suspicion and familiarity did mutual damage
between them. Big
Rex deserved every nickname he had ever been given,
yet there was

a keen, diamondlike edge to his sense of what others were thinking, especially when he felt threatened. He could smell subterfuge. His eyes carried an immutable dare as he looked at Roy now. In spite of the difficulty of getting into that chair, he grunted forward and levered his bulk out of it. He never took his eyes off Roy as he stood up and turned away from the main screen. Backdropped by the flickering image of the ship they were pursuing, he moved toward his son. One step, another. Still holding his micromechanical tools, Roy didn't get up. That could get him killed, and he knew it. This wasn't a good time to be three inches taller than his father. The slightest hint of challenge, the wrong kind of flinch- His father's wide shadow fell upon him, blotted out what pathetic light was left on the bridge. In the harsh threads of red and blue worklights stabbing from the deck rims and the garish contribution of the Rosette Nebula from outside, this massive man became a gargoyle in a burning temple. "Are you telling me," he began, "that you agreed with that bag of kangaroo crap . . . and you didn't say anything?" When Roy didn't speak, but only stared up at his father with a calculating eye, Big Rex took that as an answer in itself. A yes. The huge man's eyes grew even thinner. His face glistened with sweat under the tiny backup lights. He took another step, up onto the work level, butchering his son with his glare. Slowly, he grilled, "Why . . . not?" Throat drying up, Roy knew he'd better come up with something comj the right something. His father wouldn't buy platitudes

or tolerate lies, and knew what both sounded like.
Roy knew better
than to wave the bloody shirt of challenge when his
father had his
innate radar so obviously clicked on.
"You wouldn't have listened to me."
Roy took great care not to shrug as he said it. He
needed to seem
submissive without showing too clearly that he was
pretending. His
father knew him, but how well?
Well enough to know there was more to his motivations?
At moments like this, Roy Moss couldn't simply
shrug off his
father as the same kind of moron as the rest of the crew.
He couldn't
comfort himself with dreams of having been switched at
birth and
imagine that he was really carrying the brains of some
unknown
genius.
At a moment like this one, he could clearly see whose
sense of
self-preservation he had inherited.
The scarlet-blue mountain of skepticism moved
another step
closer, squashing Roy's drifting thoughts and yanking
him back to
the moment. If Angus Burgoyne had been
dangerous because he
was quarrelsome, Big Rex Moss was dangerous for a
dozen better reasons, all subtle.
Below, Roy tried not to give away the
fact that a parent could still
terrorize, no matter how old a child became.
All of a sudden,
nineteen wasn't old enough.
Rex Moss glowered, grinding his teeth as he
digested his own
suspicions.
"You
wanted
him dead," he surmised finally. "You wanted that,
didn't you?"
It was no question. He rolled his tongue inside a
fleshy cheek and
added two plus two. His eyes fermented as he
leered down at his
own son and asked the ugliest question of a voyage that was
turning
ugly.

"Who . . . threw that knife?"

"They're gaining on us, Mr. Kirk. If they grab us with their tractor again-was

"Don't remind me," George snapped.

"I've got an idea. Where's the jettison tube on this model?"

Carlos puckered his brow and said, "Abeam on both sides."

"Okay." Clearly hatching a plot, he stooped near Jimmy and looked at the monitors. "Which one of these is the mass-to-thrust ratio of that ship out there?"

Although Jimmy had been watching the monitors for a long time, he suddenly realized he knew nothing about them. With his father hanging over him, he felt particularly unfledged.

"There it is," George said, picking on one very small monitor with a divided screen showing two wobbling graphs. "Good . . . just might work. Heads up! Here's the project. I want you all to collect anything that's expendable. Anything broken, anything we don't need. What's in these crates anyway?"

"Archaeological implements for Faramond," Robert provided. "Toys for the children, farming and gardening tools, household appliances for the colony-was

"All of it, into the tube."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Hall! Get out of the wall. Carlos, come here!

Jimmy, get up and help with this."

For twenty minutes they did the craziest thing Jimmy had ever seen. They ripped the bent-back sheeting right off the walls and stuffed it into the port side jettison tube. They stuffed everything in there from little bolts and pins to big saws, pitchforks, shovels, computer parts, spatulas, kids' toys, and even their garbage from lunch.

He only paused once to ask why they were transporting all these hand tools to a modern colony, and all he got back was Robert April's British lilt-"No one's ever

improved on a good old shovel,
dear boy."
So he quit asking questions.
All the time they were doing it, Jimmy was trying to
think.
This
had something to do with those two molecules Veronica
had
mentioned, and something to do with the thrust-to-mass gauge.
He
found himself plunging whole-soul into helping his father
peel back
pieces of the ship itself and cut them off and stuff them
into the
tube. Somehow this wasn't the same as going through the
motions
of building a fish pond or stepping a sloop's
mast, though he had done those things with his father too. This
wasn't the same as his
father doing something
for
him, or him doing something because
Dad said so, or because Dad had come back from space
to put time
in with the family.
Suddenly he winced-and not because he'd scratched himself
on
the sheeting.
Is that the way I always saw it? Damn-did I
ever say it
to him that way?
He glanced at his dad's face, blotchy with
effort, hair shaggy as red seaweed, arms straining,
and for the first time he saw some of
himself-if only in the shape of his father's shoulders and the
way
the muscles knotted up. They had the same
muscles, the same knots. The same furrow in the
brow, the same mouth when it
tightened with effort, with determination.
For the first time, Jimmy looked at his father and saw some
of
himself.
Always . . . always . . . "Jimmy, you look just like
your mother!"
"Why, Winn, he's the spitting image of you."
"I don't believe how
much you boys look like your mother. George, didn't
they get
anything of yours? "
There was always laughter following lines like those. Some

joke
between his parents and their friends.
Suddenly he wanted desperately to have something of his
father's. A muscle. An expression. A
bad habit. Anything.
Our eyes aren't even the same brown-
"Enemy ship is getting awfully close,
Commander." Veronica's
announcement cracked a diligent silence that had
fallen as they
stuffed anything and everything into the tube.
Jimmy paused, panting, and stared at her. Enemy
...
"How close?" his father barked.
Kneeling at the monitors, Veronica said,
"They're nine hundred
sixty thousand kilometers behind us and closing at about
three
thousand kilometers per second."
"Damn! They're on top of us."
"Gives us about five minutes," Carlos added.
"Likely they're attempting to close in to use a
weakened tractor
system, George," Robert pointed out.
Jimmy was about to ask a question-probably a stupid
one-
when he pulled open a breadbox-size hatch in the
forward bulkhead
and found himself staring at four beautifully
mounted hand lasers.
He backed off a step and stared at them. Weapons
... why was
everything so new all of a sudden? Why were his knees
locked and
aching?
Somebody moved beside him, and without turning his head from
the row of lasers, he asked, "Are these supposed
to go
...
with the
rest?"
Please don't let it be Dad next to me-
"Pardon me? Oh, Jimmy, the hand lasers, of
course," Robert
April uttered. "No, my boy, those we keep."
"But they're in a whole other ship. We'll never
get to use them.
Shouldn't we shuck all the weight we can?" Jimmy
said.
"No, no," the captain said. "There's a

spacefarer's rule of thumb
that started, oh, a century or so ago, I
believe, with our first
establishment of space forts. We call it
"W and W". . . water and
weapons. At all cost, in a survival situation
those two elements you must keep. You can do without food
much longer than you can do
without water, so you must keep water. Weapons can
provide
protection, power, and heat in space, which has no
heat or power."

He wagged a finger toward the neat row of hand lasers.
"Two ships
or not. . .
those
we keep."

"Okay, that's enough!" George bellowed from behind
them.

Jimmy flinched, thinking maybe he and the captain had
stopped to talk too long. Then he turned and
realized his father was talking
about enough stuff being pushed into the jettison tube.
His father closed the double-thick hatch, shoving in the
jagged
corner of a cracked lamp lens before he could get the
thing closed.

"It's a brilliant plan, George," Robert
said as the hatch clacked.

"The king would approve."

Jimmy cranked around. "What plan? I don't
get it. Aren't we just
shucking extra weight?"

The captain hung his good arm over Jimmy's
shoulders, steered
him toward the monitors and gauges, and pointed at
the one with
the shattery graphic of the enemy ship.

"Watch."

George Kirk straightened up in his son's
periphery and said,

"Carlos! A hundred and eighty degrees about."

"One-eighty, aye. Coming full about, sir."

The irritating hum of the strained impulse engine
strained even
more as thrusters pushed and burped against the natural
course.

That was the "force" acting upon the vessel-and it was
turning.

The captain's arm over his shoulders was suddenly
pitiful protec

tion as Jimmy felt his jaw drop and his heart fall to his socks. He felt suddenly cold-he even shivered.

"We're going to play chicken," he gasped, "with a ship ten times our size?"

"Look at this. Hey, Caskie, get a blink on this."

"What?"

"The idiots are turning around."

Big Rex hunched forward in the command seat as much as his

bulk allowed, and threaded his fingers as though anticipating a hot meal.

Beside him, Lou Caskie's nearly toothless grin broke wide as the

old man gaped at the forward viewscreen.

"Walkin' right into our tractor beam. Walk right in, walk right in."

"They know they can't outrun us. By damn, they're gonna fight."

Together, and knowing their Andorian engineer was standing on the engine room ladder, also looking, they watched the Starfleet hulk complete its turn and begin an approach.

Yes, it was a hulk-a wreck. The proud white neo-enamel coating

on the outer skin was streaked with burns and ruptures now. A recognizable pennant that had once said

"Starfleet" now said only "leet." The sensor pod on top was open like a used eggshell, still drooling threads of fluid and frozen atmosphere.

A magnification inset showed the limbless gore left over from two, maybe three people still strapped into what might have been observation harnesses. The main cabin wasn't much better after a direct laser cut, with a surgical slit opening it from bow to amidships. Random electrical threads and sparks still searched for a connection.

Behind the captain's station of their own damaged ship, now filthy with scorches and oil stains, bleeding out the corner of his

mouth, Roy Moss kept his voice low.

"We don't have shields," he warned quietly.

His father's glare burned into his back.

The young man turned.

Big Rex sat in the command seat, bulbous and huge and angry, still rubbing his knuckles from the little reprimand he'd given his boy.

Roy gazed back at him sidelong and touched a tongue to his bleeding mouth. Reprimands were such interesting times, such times of study. Would he ever be bigger than his father? He was already taller, but when Big Rex stood before him and said, "Come over here," there was nothing to be done but walk over there and be punished.

Roy knew about that. Once, he had refused. Not anymore.

Who threw that knife? Who threw that knife?

They both still heard it in their heads.

Both knew the answer now. But the question still rang and rang,

because there was defiance at its core. The real kind, not just the

smart-mouthed kid snapping back because he was annoyed.

Rex glared and rubbed, and his son heard the message of the knuckles.

Never again, tail. Don't manipulate me again.

I'll find out.

A shudder crawled through Roy. His sore, recently beaten thighs

and shoulders told him to keep quiet and do his job.

His father turned away finally and squinted at the ravaged

Federation vehicle.

"Whoever's left over there, they gotta be in the hold," he chewed

out. "Driving the mechanics hands-on."

"Cannot be done," Okenga said from the ladder. "Must have computer control."

Still keeping his voice on low guard, Roy tried to get on his father's good side by saying, "He's not talking about Andorian

scavenger engineers. He's talking about Starfleet pilots. They don't

just steal technology. They invent it."

Without taking his eyes off the Federation's crippled ship as it

hobbled closer on the viewscreen, Big Rex

warned, "Back to your

work, runt. I'm not through with you. Right now I want that tractor

beam."

"You're going to need deflectors."

Lou Caskie dropped his rotted grin and advised,

"Nobody asked

you. Didn't hear nobody ask you."

He didn't turn around. Neither did
Big Rex.
Rex's enormous body jiggled in a dozen
places as he suddenly
laughed at what he saw on the screen. "These
weeners are going to
play chicken with
me.

I love when suckers play my game

...

my
way."

Okenga abruptly jumped, looked down, scowled,
then climbed to the top of the ladder and made room for
Dazzo to come up. But not
enough room apparently. The two argued and snarled,
each trying
to get the best position to see the screen. When they
noticed Roy
watching them in contempt, the Klingon pushed Okenga
aside, put
his teeth together, and ordered, "Back to your
deflectors, boy!"

Settling onto both knees and pretending to do as he
had been told, the younger Moss reasoned not to argue
aloud with these
wastes of time. He spoke only to his tools and the
quivering circuits
in the open floor beneath him. "My name

...

is
Roy,"
he mur
mured.

He made a few halfhearted adjustments on the
crashed deflector system-his perfect,
beautiful, delicate, special brand of shielding
program that let them go places no one else dared
go. He would
mend them, yes. But he would hold back. Make
sure these porks
kept on needing him. At least, as long as he
needed them.

In the privacy of his mind he relegated repairs
to one side and
kept doing them, but indulged in adding up how much
he'd
skimmed off these porkers' stash. They were so
mallet-headed, they
didn't even realize he'd been stealing from them even
while they

were stealing from their victims. When he had enough . . . that would be a day with one sun. Himself.

No one was paying attention to him anymore. He slowly stood up and turned to the viewscreen.

On the screen, the Federation ship was heading straight at them, closing fast even for open space.

"What do you think, boss?" Caskie was asking.

"What they doing?"

"Assuming we're stupid, that's what," Big Rex huffed. "They don't know how to think dirty. That's their problem.

Always has been. Gonna be a bigger problem for 'em the further they fly."

"Farther," grumbled an unwelcome correction from behind.

"Warm up the pokers," Big Rex said, waving his right arm at the Klingon.

Dazzo limped to the shabby, pieced-together mass they called a

weapons control board and checked their power.

"Some. Less than one quarter."

Satisfied, Rex wobbled his head from side to side and grinned with one corner of his mouth.

"That's all I need."

They fell into a predatory silence. The ship out there looked mighty small.

Roy stood up and moved forward, his eyes, his mind, his sense of survival all on that screen.

"Back off," he said. "Stop us."

Big Rex said, "I don't back off."

"You'd better. Something's going on." He moved another step forward. "They've got something up their sleeves."

"Like what?" his father argued. "They know they can't outrun us, so they're turning and pretending they've got something left to fight with! It's that stupid nobility coming at us. Starfleet white knights."

"You'd better stop this ship."

"Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you! We'll crumple them like a piece of paper!"

Abruptly Roy spun to his father and shrieked,

"Don't you think they know that, you moron! This is Starfleet you're laughing at!" Glaring up from his seat, Rex Moss slashed out so hard and with such impulse that he almost rolled onto the deck, and struck his son across the cheekbone. Reeling, Roy stumbled and caught himself somehow on Dazzo, who shoved him off, then slapped him hard enough to drive him to the deck. When Roy turned over, bleeding and dazed, his father's wide shadow fell across him and he blinked up at a mountain of a man. "What'd you call me?" Rex demanded. "What

... did you call me? Call me that again." The shadow fell darker, closer. "They're practically on top of us!" Caskie called. "I got the laser locked on 'em. You want me to shoot?" Big Rex ignored him and moved closer to Roy with a surprising sense of drama for a man his size. He glared down. "I want to hear it again," he said. "Let's hear that word come out of your skinny neck again, smart boy." Roy scooted backward, but dared say, "How did you survive before me? Don't you understand the physics of space?" Rex paused. Anger gave way to experience with his son-he narrowed his eyes, thinking, sensing. Roy took those seconds to crawl to the manual controls and get himself to his feet, never taking his eyes off his father. "Hey!" Caskie called then. "Hey, they're doing something!" Big Rex turned. "Doing what?" "Opened their jettison tube . . ." Shock breaking on his wide face, Rex lumbered around again, pointed at his son, and shouted, "Cover! Cover! Give me shields!" Behind the command center Roy twisted a lean upper body so fast that his own ponytail slapped him in the face. Hands on

deflector controls he knew were still useless, he
skewered his father
with a demonic glare.
"There . . . are . . . none!"
Finally, too late, it sank into Rex that what they
really needed was
protection and not size. Size had always helped
him, and for the
first time was failing. He pulled himself around, gripping
the back
of his chair so hard that it squawked, and howled at the
horror on
the viewscreen.
Suddenly the Federation ship ducked straight down and
vanished
from the screen at point-blank range. And in its
place-
Pitchforks, jagged metal, jars, buttons,
cans, broken glass,
cracked parts-
"Turn!" Big Rex bellowed. "Evasive!
Turn!" He plunged and got
Caskie by the back of the neck. "Turn,
goddamn you!"
"I'm trying!" Caskie howled. "Can't do it!
Can't do it fast
enough!"
Dazzo shoved away from his console and bellowed,
"Debris! Still
moving at their speed!"
"Lasers! Fire the lasers! Fire! Fire!"
"At what!" Dazzo demanded.
Crrrraaackckclatatatat-
Big Rex's unintelligible bellow was sore
accompaniment as their
ship was turned into a dartboard.
Bits of junk moving at thirty thousand miles per
second slammed
into their hull like buckshot, puncturing it in dozens
of places.
Chemical fountains spewed and hot sparks erupted
all over the
forward portions of the ship, coughing smoke until they
could
barely breathe or see.
"Fire!" Big Rex kept choking. "Fire at
those bastards!"
The ship tilted upward as though it had
taken a punch under the chin, and started to spin. The
crew shouted and blamed each other
while desperately trying to get control back.

Somehow, in the middle of chaos, Roy Moss dragged himself from the deflector access to the weapons panel and did what his father had instructed.

His hand came down on the targeting preset, twisted the beam-width to maximum, and slammed the firing mechanism. Even as he went down on the deck hard on his side, as the ship buckled beneath him, he knew what he'd done.

He knew he'd made a hit.

If he lived . . . both ships were his

...

Part Four

COMMAND SENSE

"Spock, step down here."

When the captain called, the other captain—who was acting as

first officer, science officer in his old, most familiar, most comfortable capacity—turned fluidly and stepped down to the center of the bridge as though expecting the call.

The two of them had been like that for a long, long time.

Decades,

now. Fluid together. Been like that through promotions and medals

and commendations, even promotions that had put them up too

high for a time, to positions neither wanted nor enjoyed.

Flattering,

but just not right.

Not right? How could anyone not want to go from commander to captain and take on the glory of commanding a ship?

How could

anyone not want to give up the day-to-day drudgery of ship

command to be admitted to the Admiralty of Starfleet?

As the two men came side by side now, James

Kirk silently

reviewed all the reasons, and the fact that so few of those reasons

could be effectively voiced. They'd both been

asked, plenty of

times, and both had stood blinking, looking for words that would

make sense.

But this didn't make sense to any who hadn't been on a ship, in a

trench, in a lifeboat, or clinging to a mountainside

when flags were
down and instincts were on line. Command through the ages had
been tinctured by a tiny fact that some people were under- or
overpromoted, and other than in the field itself. . .
there was no
way to know. How many sergeants had been followed
by gasping
lieutenants, frantic when the moment came down
to decisions?
How many resentful glances had he himself gotten when
given not
only a captaincy at the age of thirty, but command
of the first
Enterprise?
How many experienced and deserving forty- and
fifty-year-olds had wondered what connections he
had-and whispered
in dark corners about his father's friendship with Robert
April?
Why else would Starfleet hand over one of only
twelve fabulous new
ships to a thirty-year-old? Couldn't be any other
reason. April's
hand in the pie.
Oh, well, those were past whispers. He had gone
past the
I showed
'em
stage, and into the
Who could blame them?
stage. Even the
echoes were dead, killed by James Kirk's
time-after-time survival,
discovery upon discovery, and his bearlike parentage of
anyone
within the realm of his command. April may have pulled a
string or
two, may have steered the path to a particular ship because
Robert
April was a sentimental man as well as a wise
one, but Jim Kirk had
pulled mountains down in the course of proving himself,
and April
had been standing by for a long time. Nobody had whispered
for
years.
Through it all, even before they'd known each other well,
Spock
was the only one who had never questioned him, never pushed
or pulled him, had stood silent behind his shoulder,
right where Kirk

needed him-in spite of the fact that Spock might
indeed have
made a more sensible and stable captain many, many times.
Spock had never wanted it. Still didn't. Some people
just didn't.
And there had to be a little bit of arrogant
want. . .
Kirk knew
the taste of it. There had to be a bit of grated
jealously from
somebody else's shelf on top of his Captain
Cake, that was part of
the recipe.
Captain April had told him something like that, way
back then,
hadn't he? The echoes started turning in his head.
He shifted from leaning on one elbow to leaning on the
other, and
looked at Spock.
"I've got a file," he said. "It's
a technical file, high science section,
half-century old. I need you to investigate it,
analyze it, and get
familiar with the science and the theories it's built upon.
We may
need you to recognize and extrapolate. I'll
punch the recognition
words right into my chairside, but you might have to do some
hunting."
Spock, standing there as he had a thousand times, his hands
casually clasped behind him, simply nodded, but also
closed his
eyes and opened them again as though in some kind of mellow
salute.
"I shall do my best," he said.
Jim Kirk nodded back at him.
Permission to step back updeck.
Permission to go up there and back me up.
Spock turned to the quarterdeck again, then nested
himself in the
science cubicle and accepted the punch-in from the
captain's chair
computer access.
Just that simple. Ask, get. Spock knew there was
something
deeply significant to the captain about what he was
doing, yet he
would do it as though in a cloak, as though striding along
the brick
down a dark street after a rain at night. Why?
Because he knew it was important and he knew it was

private.

Spock and instinct.

"Logic, hell," Kirk grumbled. He twisted to the other side.

"Commander Uhura?"

She turned and responded, "Sir?"

"Tie me directly into Starfleet's computer banks, historical

section. Then notify Dr. McCoy that I'm going to want him to

review something in a moment. Tell him it's private."

"Aye, sir

...

tied in

...

and . . ."

Bleep, blip, knock, knock, mutter, mutter.

"Dr. McCoy is standing by."

Then he punched the comm on the other armrest. "Dr. McCoy?"

"I'm here, Jim, in my office. Privacy assured."

"I've got a psychological file I want you to review and analyze."

"Go ahead. Whose is it?"

"You'll find out."

"Oh-you want me

to do the identifying."

"Could say that. I want your unadulterated opinion, Bones."

"Send it down, Jim. I'll do everything I can for you."

"Uhura will send it as soon as we get it from the historical

archives. Commander?"

"Aye, Captain," Uhura anticipated.

"Receiving. . . relaying to sickbay. Completed, sir. Starfleet acknowledges."

"Acknowledge receipt."

"Aye, sir."

"Jim? This is a half a century old!"

"Damn near," Kirk said, leaning and lowering his voice a little

more. "It was in the archives almost that long. Some of it is

personal."

"Oh . . . yes, I see. I'll keep it that

way, Captain. Be right back to you. McCoy out."
Kirk jabbed the comm off line, then looked forward at
the helm
of his ship, a ship that was highballing through open space
at
unthinkable, inhuman velocity, just because he told it
to.

SEVENTEEN

Forty-five years earlier . . .

USS

Enterprise,
orbiting Vega 9 as Federation
presence to deflate a planet-possession dispute
"Commander Simon, message coming in over
subspace. Priority
two."

"Hmm? What?"

"Message, ma'am," Isaac Soulian
repeated from his navigation
console. He got out of his seat, went around her,
stepped updeck to
the unmanned communications station, and tapped into the
signal.

"Recorded message, sent via long-distance
subspace."

"Oh, put it on, put it right on. Ought to retire
here and now, go
down to garden deck, put me up a little Mexican
hammock, get a nice nap-was

"Enterprise, this is Faramond Archaeological
Sub-base, date April
27 on Earth-standard calendar . . . Requesting
location of Captain

Robert April and party . . . We expected the
cutter to arrive twenty
hours ago . . . Our Starfleet intrasystem
cruiser has been unable to
find them anywhere near our star system. Signal
buoys have been
posted, but we thought you should know. Please notify us
if you have
information and tell us what we should do. Thank you.

Faramond
out."

Lorna Simon shook off her doze and sat bolt
upright-well, as
upright as old bones would bolt.

"Verify that!"

Soulian tampered quickly with the console, then said,
"Fed
eration channel

...

an authorized signature numbers as required . . . and . . . the encoded identification checks out." He turned and added, "It's definitely them." Simon pressed down a puff of her white hair. "Twenty hours-is that what they said? I didn't hear that wrong?" "They said twenty hours, Commander," he confirmed. There was clear worry in his voice as he turned to face the command arena. "What could've stopped them from getting there? There's nothing hostile in that area

...

all they were doing was observation of the trinary-how could anything go wrong with something that simple?" "Get Lieutenant Jamaica up here." "Ma'am?" Soulian looked at her, puzzled, then said, "Oh! You mean Lieutenant Trinidad. I mean Lieutenant Reed." "Whichever. Bring him up here." "Lieutenant Reed, report to the bridge immediately. Lieutenant Reed, report to the bridge." Simon stretched her short legs and got out of the command chair. She didn't like to sit down while she was trying to think. "Dang arthritis," she complained. "Wide-range scan of space in the direction of the Rosette. Look for SOS signals

...

or residue of explosion . . . and send emergency calls to all bases and colonies in this quadrant to do the same. Hard telling how far a little ship like that can go off course. Don't want to take chances. Yeoman-I'm sorry, I forgot your name-was On the upper deck, a very young science intern stepped forward to face the woman half his height and three times his age. He had a very high voice and hadn't yet learned not to stand at attention on the bridge. "Jones, ma'am!" "Jones-seems like I could remember that. You don't look like a Jones. Duck down to my quarters and get the

arthritis pills on my bed stand. Deck Nine, Cabin Four. And a glass of water."

"Aye-aye, Commander!"

"With a slice of lime in it."

He nodded, shouted, "Lime, yes, ma'am!" just before the lift

doors opened, then he stepped aside to let Drake Reed onto the

bridge. They changed places, then the lift doors hissed shut again.

"Lieutenant Francis Drake Reed reporting as howled at, madam."

"You always talk like that?" Simon asked. "Like you're directing

a band while you talk?"

"There is reggae in my blood, madam. Not my fault."

"You men in Security, you spend too much time standing guard, I

think. Step down here."

Drake's tawny face expressed surprise and confusion, and he

paused up there. The walkway light overhead flickered on his curly

black hair and made him look like a puppet about to dance.

Simon noticed the pause and didn't like it.

"Well?"

"Oh-coming," he said as he stepped down to her.

"Have I done

something naughty?"

"No, no. You were assigned to watch the Delta-Vegans, weren't

you? Where are they?"

"On the observation deck, in their eighth or ninth hour of spitting

at the mayor of the settlement over the Federation adjudicator's

head."

She waved her hand. "Kick them all off the ship."

Drake put a hand to his heart and grimaced.

"Kick them? You

did say 'kick them'? I don't think we are authorized for diplomat-

kicking, madam."

"We're leaving orbit. If they can't solve their problem in the next

five minutes, they'll have to find somebody else to transport them back to Starbase One."

"Eh, pardon me, but

...

is this a Starfleet Command order,
madam?"

"No, it's my order. This ship isn't just a
taxicab, you know. The
starship program isn't meant for carting
diplomatic baggage
around. Today we're going to make sure that becomes a
good solid
precedent."

With a shrug Drake started to turn. "As you wish.

I shall

commence kicking."

"That's not all I called you up here for."

He turned again. "Sorry. My brain is soft from
standing guard."

"I need you to tell me something."

"And that is?"

"How well do you know this George character?"

"George? My George?" Drake pursed his
lips in thought, then

something else came into his mind and he let go of
any remarks that
were about to pop out. He stared at her, buzzers going
off in his
head. "Why

...

do you ask?"

The old woman hesitated, but knew all along that
there were
some things that couldn't be eased into or made to sound
nice. He
was looking at her, so she went ahead and let some of the
natural
worry show up in her face. Human nature would
take over-he
would see the worry, and that would be the segue.
As his brows knitted slightly, she knew he was
getting the sense of
events.

"They never arrived on Faramond," she said.

"They're twenty
hours late."

The animation dropped from Drake's dark face.
She looked past him to the communications station and
ordered,

"Ike, tell the flight deck to warm up a
transport. And tell those
diplomats that they're having dinner on the planet
instead of here."

Soulian nodded and sat down at the comm station to do all that.

"Aye, Commander."

"And get somebody up here to man the communications.

Just get

the whole bridge crew. We need the duty engineer and helmsman

back up here on the double."

Simon could tell she was making Drake nervous, ringing the

chords no one wants to hear. Decades of

Starfleet experience sent

her instincts in a dozen directions at once. She

wanted to protect

Reed from what she was seeing in his eyes, but she also needed the

raw truth on her side.

"I know Robert April," she said as she

contemplated the cocky

Security officer. "He's not given to bad

judgment, or even bad luck.

And now he's missing. That leaves something for you to tell me

...

what do you know about the luck and judgment of this George of yours?"

Swept by momentary flashes about what could have gone wrong,

how the utility cutter could be stuck somewhere with a malfunction,

or just off course, or trapped in a storm, or so

caught up in viewing

the trinary that they lost track of time, Drake found

himself in a tornado of fears and imaginings and

wishes.

His throat tightened up. He had to clear it and swallow a couple of times before he could speak.

"If there is a hornet's nest anywhere on the sugar plantation," he admitted,

"George Kirk

will

step in it."

Lorna Simon's fifty-plus years of

experience didn't like that answer, but she did understand

it. She'd seen plenty of that type of person in

Starfleet since the beginning—in fact, that was the very

type Starfleet attracted with its thousand pretty

flickers in the night

sky.

"How is he," she asked, "at fielding a disaster?"

The choice of words wasn't exactly reassuring to anyone on the bridge.

Least of all, Drake Reed. Suddenly the lieutenant looked very young to her.

His expression crumpled with worry. "Usually he has me at hand, with whom he beats off the hornets . . ."

She distilled that comment, along with a sense that Drake really

wasn't meaning to joke, but that some inner guard had clicked on to

keep him from panicking.

She'd seen that before too.

She poked the comm panel on the captain's chair with a finger that hadn't always been so crooked.

"Transporter room, this is First Officer

Simon. Tell the flight deck

to forget about using the transport. We're in a

hurry. Beam those diplomats directly off this

ship and tell them they're on their own. Then advise

Starfleet that we're warping out."

The bridge came to life as people and systems jumped to comply

and calls for officers to report to the bridge

thrummed through the

huge white ship.

These were always the worst moments-between discovering a problem

and being able to move on it. The moments of tidying up

bothersome details that had to be swept off the

bridge before action

could take over.

It was during these tight few moments that Simon

allowed herself

to look again at Drake Reed.

She watched him for a long time, because he didn't

notice her. He

was staring at space beyond the planet, on the big

forward

viewscreen. His dark eyes had no glint in them

now, and even failed

to reflect the distant stars.

His whisper barely surfaced over the bridge

noise.

"George

..."

"Lock it down!"

"They did the same thing! They hit our

coolants!"

"Are the failsafes coming on?"

"Where are they down here?"
"Port aft control access!"
"Stay out of the stream! Carlos, get your head
down!"
"I'll get the environmental support-was
"Why aren't the emergency lights coming on?"
"Cryogenic environmental-backups-was
"Just do it!"
"Stay down, Jimmy, stay out of the way."
"Failsafes coming on!"
"Get out of that smoke, Ensign!"
"Li fe support on secondary
backup-switching priority to respi
ratory systems . . . grav generator is down
to one-eighth. Inertial
potential varying-was
"See if you can't bleed it for stability."
"Aye, sir!"
"Robert? Where are you!"
"I'm starboard of you, I believe."
"Are you okay?"
"I believe so."
"Can you reach the ventilators?"
"Ah . . . yes."
"Be careful of your arm. Don't hurt yourself again."
"Thank you for thinking of that, George."
"Everybody sit down till we can see."
"I feel like I'm floating-was
"Well, hang on to something until he gets over
there."
Click-
Little frantic ventilators began to whine in three
places, and
grayish-brown smoke piled in those directions. It
never did clear
completely, but in a few seconds the crew could at
least make each
other out in the near darkness and move without tripping
over one
another.
A moment later a few of the last-ditch emergency
lights flickered
on in the forward side of the hold.
None of them was spared the shock of what they looked like
to
each other after the laser hit. They were smeared with
filth,
coughing, beaten, and bruised, as though they'd spent a
month in
the woods without a decent meal. The hold around them
had erupted into a junkyard of detached plates,

burn streaks on the
walls, crates turning lazily on their edges as
though floating along a
streambed, and squirts of fluid, gas, and sparks
from a dozen
broken conduits and power veins.
Carlos and Veronica immediately started pushing around the
cabin, closing off whatever they could.
Jimmy was clinging to a loading dock utility handle
when his
father pulled himself around a smoldering crate,
lowered his voice,
and asked, "You all right, Jim?"
Blinking the sting out of his eyes, Jimmy hoped the
moisture
wouldn't be mistaken for tears. "I guess. Got
something in my
eyes."
"Chemical fumes. We'll put the air on
priority as soon as we
stabilize the gravity."
"The gravity's out? Is that why I feel like I
weigh thirty pounds?"
"It's on, but not much," his father said.
Jimmy managed a shrug, and only then noticed that
his arms
were trembling. He tried to ignore that and said,
"Well, it's one way
to lose weight."
His father looked at him, paused, wiped a dirty
hand across his
own mouth, then said, "Great-great. Try to hang on.
You're doing
fine."
He moved away, toward where Carlos was
shoulder-deep in the
open wall.
Jimmy blinked after him and wondered what he was doing
fine at. Not panicking? He didn't dare.
Nobody else was.
Guess we'll all panic later. Maybe that's
how it works. Just keep
putting it off.
That had to be it, because he sure wasn't being much
help.
Great. He was doing a fine job not being an
annoyance. There was
something to take home.
If they ever got to go home . . .
Home. The place he'd tried to get away from.
He shoved himself away from the handhold. "Dad?"

George turned. "Yeah?"

"Do you want me to try to stop some of those coolant leaks?"

Maybe I could plug them up some way."

"No," George said. "Only trained personnel are allowed to tamper with exposed coolant tanks.

You just sit tight. But

. . . thanks."

Frustrated, Jimmy settled back and realized that all he was good

for was staying out of everybody else's way. Not a very noble way to

go. Not much of a story to tell later.

Maybe he could help Veronica.

More swimming than walking, he bounced awkwardly across the

cabin and took a hell of a lot longer than he expected to get to her.

Halfway there, he felt like something was pulling him back, and two

feet later felt like he was being tugged upward.

Nauseating, but he ignored it.

"Can I help you with anything?" he asked when he finally got

over there and pulled himself down to where she was working inside a hole in the flooring.

Veronica looked up at him, managed a halfhearted smile, but

immediately went back to her work. "Oh, I don't think there's

room . . . well, know what you could do? Hold my legs down, can

you?"

"Oh . . ." Hoping for something more glamorous, Jimmy started

to feel disappointed, then decided not to, and put himself to use

where he was needed-ballast. "What is it you're doing down

there?"

"Trying to stabilize the gravity."

"No, I mean what are you . . . y'know-doing."

"Can you see this saucer-shaped thing under my elbow?"

"Uh-the red and black thing with the manufacturer's name on

the side?"

"Right. That's the superconductor. A gravity generator. Inside,

there's a pressurized gas. It spins around and

provides a gravity field. Basically, it's not able to spin fast enough to give us what we need to feel normal. All I'm trying to do right now is make it work enough so we don't get smashed up if we manage to get the cutter moving."

"Why would we get smashed up just from moving?" he asked.

"Wouldn't it make more sense just to turn it off completely and float around, and put all our power into life support? Or the engines?"

"Gravity is life support," she said. "If Florida gets even part of the propulsion going, we'll need artificial gravity or our acceleration would have to be so slow that we'll never get away." Jimmy frowned, annoyed that these things weren't making sense fast enough for him. Any other time he would have just ignored whatever he didn't understand.

This wasn't any other time. "Gravity has something to do with acceleration?"

"Artificial gravity is what compensates for acceleration," she said, wincing as she tugged on something down inside the hole. "If you accelerate in a matter of moments even to something like one percent sublight, you'd be slammed through the back of the ship. Unless gravity is tugging you in the other direction, compensating like crazy, I mean. Even in airplanes a long time ago-jets-they could turn so fast that the pilots would black out. So they wore special suits that squeezed the body during a banking turn and kept the blood pushed up into the brain. And one percent sublight is a lot faster than they went. Artificial gravity is just something we've got to have. If this thing isn't generating at minimum rpms, we might as well hand ourselves over to those people out there." All of a sudden a bit of reality that Jimmy had almost ignored

turned on him and got particularly unignorable.
He watched her work with the generator, and noticed he
was
listening to his father, Robert, and Carlos talking behind
him as
they surveyed what few were left of the monitors and
gauges.
"Life support's on secondary
backup. I wish we had more
light-was
"We've beastly little technical integrity left
to be repaired."
"And nothing to repair it with . . ."
"We can pick at things indefinitely . . . but not
if there's no air to
breathe."
"What condition are our friends in? Can we tell?"
"Look at this screen. They're barely two
kilometers away. I'm not
even using the magnification. They're right
there,
hanging off our
bow."
"And they're still alive. Some of them, at least."
"How can you tell?"
"They're not spinning . . . their failsafes are coming
on. See the
spurts cutting off one by one? Some sections are
ruptured, but their
automatics are still protecting somebody."
"There've got to be places to hold out on a ship
like that."
"We're both floating hulks. Can't
seem to get an upper hand,
either of us."
"And they've got a lot more to work with than we do."
"Hall? How're you doing over there?"
Under Jimmy, Veronica pushed onto an elbow,
rested a moment,
then said, "Nineteen percent, sir."
She nodded at Jimmy to let her up, but suddenly
Carlos Florida
pointed at one of the gauges and yelled-
"Mother a' God, the compressor! It's not holding!
It's gonna
blow! It's gonna blow!"
Drowning him out, a plume of supercoolant broke
from the
burned upper part of a port side sectional tank
and turned loose a
solid blue-white sheet of spray, cutting

Jimmy and Veronica off
from the others and splattering them all with what felt like
needles
of ice. If it filled the cabin-
Frantic shouts erupted almost as loud as the
dangerous gush.
"Lock it down again!"
"The discharge buffer grip's on the other side!"
"Veronica!"
But Jimmy realized he was still lying on top of her,
holding her
down against the minimal gravity, and that put him in the
best
position to move. He held an arm near his eyes
to take the spray and
looked for the discharge cutoff next to the tank. Was that
it? That
red handle under the two blue ones? Had to be!
SECTIONAL COOLANT GRIP -- AUTHORIZED
USE ONLY
Made sense-if he could pull that handle down, the
sections of
the tank would seal off. At least, that's what he
figured would
happen, and things couldn't get any worse, so he
determined to take
the risk himself.
"I'll get it!"
He pushed off Veronica, forgot all about the
gravity, and virtually
flew toward that handle-almost flying into the spray. He
caught
the handle with one finger and kept himself from plunging right
through the spray, and levered himself back.
"Wo,
no!"
Was someone shouting at him? Was it the hiss of
coolant spewing
six inches from his head?
He fumbled for a grip and to get his feet against the
wall for
leverage. Something hit him from behind just as he got the
leverage
he needed and cranked down on the handle. A force
hit his
shoulder, shoved him sideways, and at the last
second he glimpsed
Veronica's synthetic hand close around a bright
orange compensa
tor fishtail and crank it sideways.
The plume of spray turned into an umbrella and

enveloped half
of Veronica's body!
She screamed-it was a horrid, gulping scream-as
she was
blown in a heap toward the opposite side of the
hold. An instant
later the spray dropped to a bitter hiss and the last
of it was slurped
back inside the tank's cracked shell in some kind
of automatic
suction.
Jimmy pulled himself over the top of a seed storage
box and tried
to see through his watering eyes.
The girl lay on her side in a puddle of
expended coolant fluid that
was quickly changing its chemical composition with
exposure to
air. It changed, as they stared, from ice-blue to a
wine-pink as the
supercold crystals melted. In moments, even before
anyone could move, it would be inert.
But not soon enough for Veronica.
She lay with her pale hair soaking up the fluid.
Stunned, as they all were, George Kirk was the
first to move to
her, to touch her. Carlos stepped in behind him and
knelt there.
Pushed her over, gently . . .
Her prosthetic hand stuck to the frozen metal
floor-and tore
part of her arm off with it. Hair on the right side of
her head
snapped like dry straw. Her right thigh tore almost in
half length
wise, clothing and all, leaving a gaudy section of
torn muscle on one
side and a patch of gore on the other.
George sucked a breath through his teeth. Carlos
shuddered,
fighting not to throw up on what was left of his
crewmate.
They hovered over her, helpless, as the torn thigh and
arm
crinkled with crystallized blood and skin cells.
Mind empty, hands spread, legs bent, breath coming
in puffs,
Jimmy hovered a few feet away, staring in some
kind of automatic
disbelief.
He barely felt the hands on his shoulders.

"Jimmy," the captain said, "come away from there.
Come with
me."

"She-she's-was

"I know, my boy. Come with me."

"But that's not

...

that's not how it's supposed to be

...

the

girl's not supposed to . . . it's supposed

to be the guys who-who-

get-was

"Our poor Jimmy," Captain April sighed,

"you're an old-

fashioned lad, I'm afraid. . . ."

Letting himself be led away, Jimmy went on

mumbling over and

over.

"That's not right. . . it's not right, it's not the right

way-that's

not supposed to be how it is-was Then he suddenly

gaped, "What happened? What'd I do wrong?"

"You didn't understand."

"Tell me

...

I've gotta know . . ."

"The pressure compensator has to be in the on

position before

the safety buffer is activated. Or the

whole tank could blow up

under the pressure of sudden cutoff."

Only authorized personnel are allowed to tamper

with exposed

coolant tanks.

"I didn't know . . ."

"We realize that, my boy. We understand. Sit

down . . . that's

right. Don't move for a while. I'm going to see

to the others."

Trembling so hard he thought his bones would fall out,

and only

vaguely noticing Robert moving away from him,

Jimmy stared

across the deck at Veronica Hall's mutilated

form. His mouth hung

open, his throat drying.

He wanted to make this feel unreal, like a dream,

that's how it

was supposed to feel-

But it didn't.

It felt damn real. Damn real. She was
dead?
And all for him. She'd knocked him aside so he
wouldn't be lying
on the floor, half frozen.
Until now, giving lives for others had always been
song lyrics.
He'd never seen a group like this Starfleet bunch.
They weren't
losing their heads. They weren't giving in to the terror
chewing at
them all. They were obeying orders one by one, step
by step, to
accomplish something very specific. They even obeyed
orders when
there didn't seem to be a reason to do a particular
thing. They
didn't ask why. They asked what, but never why.
When are you going to realize that rules exist for a
reason?
The echo of his father's voice
...
he looked for his father,
needing to see him.
And there he was.
Crumpled in a corner with his back against the hull and
his knees
up, his arms braced across his bent knees, his head
down. The
perfect quintessence of misery.
Robert April was kneeling beside him, touching
George's shoul
der, gripping his friend's trembling wrist in a
simple human bond, ready to listen, since there
wasn't much to say that would help.
Before long a pathetic sound rattled from George.
He didn't look
up.
"Robert, what've I done?"
In a soft, scolding, troubled tone that couldn't
nurture away the
guilt, Robert simply murmured, "Oh,
George."
George shook his head and pressed his other hand to the
back of
his neck.
"I can't do this . . . Robert, I can't handle this
. . . she's just a
kid
...
it could've been Jimmy

...
it could've been
my
kid

...
what the hell have I done?"
There wasn't a sliver of hardness or rigidity
left in him. His
saw-file temper was utterly gone, invisible. His
face was parchment,
his eyes glass, ready to shatter. Insufficiency
weighed him down.
"There's nothing left to fight with," he said. "Nothing
we can do
is enough . . . can't save ourselves . . . can't stop
those bastards
from doing this to anybody else . . ."
His voice fell away as though expended, and he
closed his eyes,
consumed by the impoverishment of hope from the bottom of
his
soul.

Even in the big hold, even with broken machinery
hissing and
crackling and spitting, Jimmy heard his father's
voice as though
tuned specifically in.
"What'd I drag him out here for?"
George Kirk murmured.
"You couldn't have known," the captain said. "There could be
accidents on Earth just as easily."
"This isn't an 'accident.' This is plain wrong.
You and I know the
risks. We chose this for ourselves. He didn't
want to come and I
made him. I chose for him and that's not fair.
He's right

...
I got
him into this."
His heart twisting, Jimmy heard his own words and
felt them
rush back to bite him, to infect him.
"You got me into this."
When he'd said those words he was after the quickest, sharpest
hurt he could inflict. He hadn't given a thought
to how long words
can last. The future had always been ten or twenty
minutes. He
rarely considered that something he said could come back to do
damage later.

At a moment when there might be no "later," he was
finding out
how long words could go on hurting. As he saw how
bad his father
felt, he realized that he would have to learn when
not
to talk-when things he might say could last a hell
of a lot longer than the anger or
passion that made him speak.
He knew he'd lied in that old fit of anger.
He knew he'd gotten
himself into this.
Yet never once had his father said, "I wouldn't be in
this mess if you'd behaved yourself."
He gazed at the two men who had tried to change
him against his
own will and suddenly saw a vision of his father that was
utterly
new.
still
thought he was goofing off on some pretty planet with
some pretty
technician

...

thought he left us and went off for fun and games
and irresponsibility in space

...

thought space was easy for him.
But his father hadn't been out gambling or taking dips
in an alien lake or schmoozing on some cushy
starbase.
He was out here. Doing hard, hard things.
Staying on Earth would have been the easy choice.
The easy choice . . .
It left a bad taste. Jimmy bit his lip and
tried to get the flavor of cowardice out of his mouth.
These people-people he'd come to
admire-Captain April, Carlos Florida,
Uncle Drake, First Officer
Simon, the engineers, Veronica

...

his dad

...

all said they
wouldn't want to be anywhere else, in spite of the
risk.
They can't all be stupid. For all these people to go out so
far . . . there must be a lot out there.
Robert was holding on to George as though one of them

going over a cliff, and it was hard to tell which one.
His expression
ran through changes, from pain to empathy, to a sad,
regretful
Mona Lisa smile that had some true misery behind
it. Somehow
right on Robert April's gentle face, it still
wasn't even close to what
smiles were for.
Finally he regained control, patted George's
shoulder as though
to awaken him, and asked a question both official and
personal.
"Would you like me to take command, George?"
Jimmy's attention snapped around. He held his
breath and stared
at his father. What would happen?
He never found out.
Carlos's sudden cry was both dream and nightmare.
"George!
Come here, quick! She's alive!"
Jimmy sucked in one sharp breath, then quit
breathing until his
chest started hurting and reminded him to start again. Two
shocks
hit him-that Veronica could somehow still be alive, and that
Carlos was so moved as to call George by his first
name.
George scratched to his feet and shot
to Carlos's side with Robert
right behind him.
"She's got a heartbeat," Carlos gasped.
"Let's do it. Can we do
it?"
They were all trembling, breathing in little gusts, trying
to think straight, trying to stay calm.
"We have no facility to treat this," Robert said.
"Supercold
burns . . . blood cells crystallized . . .
destroyed
...
ice crystals in
the cells themselves-exposure killed the flesh and
muscle . . ."
"She'll never use the right eye again," Carlos
added.
The tones of voice were recognizable on almost an
instinctive level. No hope-but responsibility
to try? Try to save her under
these conditions, only to die later

because
of the conditions?
"What should we do?" George asked.
Jimmy winced. He felt crushed between the
half-dozen terrible
answers to that question. History class. World War
II. Troops
struggling on foreign soil, behind enemy lines, in the
middle of battle, when choices were nightmarishly
few. Soldiers so badly
mutilated that their unit mates gave them
morphine-then more
morphine-then all the morphine-until death came
to help them
all.
Decent people forced to do these things-
Was that what the question meant?
To face death
...
to see someone mutilated nearly to death-
two different things, two distinct horrors, and a
weird sense of
choice.
Then he heard his father ask, "What would Sarah do?"
"Oh, Sarah . . ." Robert murmured
his wife's name under his
breath as though wishing she were there at the same instant
as being
glad she wasn't. "Immobilize that arm, wrap
the leg, stabilize the
vitals, first-aid that facial burn. Make her
comfortable."
"Thermal sheets?" Carlos suggested.
George swallowed a clump of frustration. "We
jettisoned them.
Damn, that was stupid!"
"Maybe the pressure suit. We can warm her
up, strap the wounds,
keep her from bleeding to death, but. . ."
There's nothing we can do, not here, not like this.
The unspoken truth dangled around them, twisting with
residual
puffs of electrical smoke.
They felt a jolt from outside the ship-a yank that
almost would
have thrown them off their feet if they hadn't already been
down.
Without being asked, Carlos crawled toward a
monitor that was sitting on the deck with its own cable
twisted around it. He studied
the grainy image, then frowned and spoke as though he

couldn't be surprised anymore.

"Tractor beam's on us again . . . only about one quarter its original power." He turned to the others. "But I don't think we've got anything left to break it with."

George blinked painfully, his eyes creased.

"They're going to pull us into the Blue Zone. They're going to crush us once and for all."

Beside him, Robert April touched the forehead of the injured girl

as she began to move her head and to groan faintly.

Gently he said, "We must face facts . . ."

"Jimmy," George called. "Jim, can you give Robert a hand?"

Maybe they were trying to keep him busy.

Jimmy wasn't interested in reasons anymore.

He pulled Veroni

ca's spacesuit back out of the locker, along with two of the personal

emergency medical kits, moving like a zombie in a strictly-for-scare campfire story.

Elsewhere in the ravaged hold, his father and

Carlos Florida were

doggedly trying to repair their haven before the atmosphere all

leaked out, plugging holes the autosealers couldn't handle, welding

torn sheets of the inner hull in case there was another laser hit,

generally seeing what was left.

Moving numbly and without thinking, Jimmy felt as if his mind

was on magnification 10. Details, exaggerated before his eyes,

possessed him as though crowding out the encroachment of bigger

truths. As though dressing a doll, he helped

Robert draw the suit

onto Veronica's body, over the wrapped remains of her leg and the

tourniquet on the stump of her right arm, now destroyed almost to

the shoulder.

By the time he and the captain closed the suit over the girl's chest,

taunted by her shallow breathing, too steady because of the painkillers they'd given her almost to the

point of overdose, Jimmy

couldn't even remember putting the suit on her

legs and arms.

The suit had a built-in retractable cervical collar that the captain gently tugged out to hold Veronica's head immobile. He had to be careful around the right side of her head-her fluid-caked hair and what was left of her eye now covered by one of several patches on that half of her face.

The patches didn't look right. This wasn't the way a hospital would put them on

...

no one here was a doctor. . . .

Dulled by shock, Jimmy just watched as Robert broke the silver seal marked "Emergency Only" and poked at the tiny controls that put the suit into medical mode. Jimmy heard the captain's calm explanation of what the suit was doing every step of the way- automatic monitoring of her vital signs, ongoing intravenous feed of medications, and anything else the captain put into the suit's medi-guard brackets. From the medical kits he took several finger-size vials and attached them to the brackets. One of them was anesthetic, one was blood coagulant, one was antibiotics, another was something else . . .

Jimmy heard, but couldn't listen.

"If her heart or breathing stops," Robert was saying, "the suit will even do cardiopulmonary resuscitation. There are pumps and respirators built in. They have a limited functional time once on the go, of course, but they've saved plenty of lives in space during these critical first few hours."

Jimmy nodded, but most of it went around him. The suit would take care of her.

Hours. We don't have hours. . . .

"Captain?"

"Yes, dear."

Feeling his forehead crinkle, Jimmy blinked and shook himself.

He hadn't said anything. As he opened his mouth to ask what was going on, he saw Robert April's pliantly animated face easing the moment, gazing downward, touching the girl's left

cheek-
comz Veronica blinked up at him with her remaining
eye.
An electrical flinch went through Jimmy's
body. She was awake! She was not only alive-she
was
awake.
His mouth dried up as he realized he might have
to talk to her.
What could he possibly say?
Veronica's undamaged left eye was slightly
dilated, and she
focused with some effort on Robert as he pampered
her with his
gentle expression.
"I got lucky again, didn't I?" she
murmured.
Robert managed a very peaceful grin.
"Veronica," he coddled,
"brave as ever."
She swallowed with great trouble and licked the side of
her mouth
that wasn't taped under the patches. "What've I
...
got left?"
Even through his shock Jimmy could tell that Robert was
battling
to press the misery out of his expression.
"Mmm, yes," the captain began, "your right thigh
is a bit torn up,
and part of the same hip. I can't tell about your eye,
but I'm
certainly no expert. However, there's . . . not much
left of the right arm, darling."
She digested his expression through the fog of medication.
"That's okay," she whispered. "It's . . . still under
. . . warranty."
Robert chuckled, but he was fighting himself. Several
moments
went by as he gathered his composure and fought to keep his
expression benign. He leaned a little closer and
brushed her one
bare cheek with his knuckles, clearly frustrated that
it was the only
part of her that he could touch. He couldn't even dare
hold the hand
she had left.
"Is it any wonder," he said finally, "why
Starfleet wanted you so
badly?"
He wiped a bit of moisture from her left eye,

and her cheek puffed
into a little white ball as she tried to smile.
"At least," she began, "it didn't get my good
arm."

Jimmy sucked a painful breath as his chest
tightened. How could
she lie there with half the cells in her body
killed, the ship around her falling apart, and say
something like that?

"How do you feel, dear?" Robert asked her.
"Don't feel much," she said, as though she knew that
was what he
wanted to hear. Even in that condition she was trying
to make the
captain think he'd done enough for her.
Incredible.

A clatter rang through the metal walls from forward,
and he
flinched out of his thoughts and turned to look.
Under the forward airlock his father and Carlos were doing
something to the hatch that had apparently just
fallen off.

Jimmy shook himself and forced a lucid thought out of the
cotton

wadding in his head. Fallen off? The hatch wouldn't
fall off. They
must have taken it off on purpose. Maybe they were
going to use it
for a big bullet. He couldn't guess anymore.

He'd never imagined all
the bizarre jury-rigging they'd done in the past few
hours, or the
strange ways they'd found to use seemingly ordinary
things that
were lying around. When he first came down, he'd have
sworn the
hold was barren of anything that could be used in a fight,
yet here
they were, hours after the first deadly attack, still
alive, still picking
their way forward, and they'd even managed a couple of
counterat
tacks.

Maybe not enough, but it was something.
"Jim," Robert said, "stay with her. I'm going
to help your dad if I can."

Jimmy scooted a little closer to Veronica and said,
"Yes, sir."

In a moment he and Veronica were alone. She was
trying to turn
her head, to look at him now that the captain was gone.

Sensing that she needed a human face to cling to,
Jimmy moved
even closer and leaned over her, no matter how it
squeezed his heart
to have to look at her damaged face.
"Hi," he began.
She whispered back, "Hi."
When she smiled at him, he almost choked. "I'm .
. . I'm really
sorry . . ."

That was all he could get out before his throat knotted
up.

"Oh," she murmured slowly, "they'll fix me.

One arm . . . one
eye . . . just call me Admiral Nelson."

He frowned. "Who?"

Picking back through endless classes he'd sworn were
too boring

to commit to memory, he sifted out the lesson about
events in

history that changed history. If this hadn't

happened, that never

would have. If so-and-so hadn't been decisive, or
had lived two

years longer, or had given up when he lost that
battle or that

argument, or that arm or that eye

...

"Yeah," he uttered, "Horatio Nelson! I
remember that! The
ship-my dad wanted to take me to see that ship of
his. It's still

sitting in cement in England! God, I remember
that-was

"Classic navy," she said. "He was . . . always
my inspira

tion

...

at the Academy. You know . . . one arm."

"That's right," Jimmy breathed. "He lost an arm
in a battle at

sea. And then he lost an eye, and he still commanded the
whole

British fleet. Hey!" He snapped his fingers.

"Trafalgar, right?"

"Right," she gurgled. She drew several long,
even breaths,

mercifully dazed by the medication, but wasn't fighting
what the

suit was doing for her.

"I can't believe I remember that," he went on,

fixing his eyes on
the medical cartridges but seeing something else. "I
failed the
stupid test. . . how come I'm remembering it
now?"
""Cuz you need to," she said. "Makes all the
difference."
She pulled the answer out as easily as drawing a
business
card-as though she kept it handy in the emotional
survival kit
she'd built for herself.
She licked her swollen lips again. "Did you get
to see it?"
Jimmy came back to the present abruptly.
"See what?"
"The
Victory?"
"Oh," he uttered. "No, we never
made it. Kind of a
...
busy summer that year."
"Maybe we'll go sometime," she said.
He shook off the self-embattlement and forced himself
to look
squarely at her. "If I have anything to do with it,"
he said, "we sure
will."
Her sore mouth tugged into a smile again, and her
whisper had a tiny, courageous lilt.
"Hey . . . something to live for!"
So much bravery in such a weak noise. The steel
rod of it went through Jimmy, and he clung to it and
determined that it would straighten his spine and that the fear
would be backpocketed from
now on.
Used to thinking of himself as the only person bearing a
load, he was suddenly aware of the banging and creaking
behind him as his
father worked to save them all. There wasn't anything in
his father or in any of the others that was concern for themselves.
He had blamed his father for this tragedy, for the deaths of the
engineers,
and been completely wrong to do that. These were
Starfleet people
and they all knew their chances of dying in space. They
were doing
what they believed was best and right, death or not.
All these other people-they left their families too.
Maybe he
thought that was normal

...

or

worth it. . . all he saw around him
were Starstleet people doing the same thing.
Jimmy knotted his fists, and relived the awful
lesson that things
he said didn't necessarily go away thirty
seconds later and he
couldn't do damage control on whatever popped out of
his mouth
when he wanted a fast sting.

You got me into it.

"I'll apologize," he muttered, eyes wide
and fixed again on the
survival cartridges.

Veronica blinked her one dilated eye at him.

"Mmmm?"

"I'll find the time," he said. "There's
gotta still be time-there's gotta be a couple
seconds. I'll get him alone for a couple
seconds
and just say it."

"Jimmy, come here for a minute."

His father's voice was a trumpet out of the night, and
suddenly

Jimmy couldn't wait to do anything they asked him
to do-

anything. They needed him! They needed his help! He
still had a
chance.

He spattered an insensible phrase to Veronica,
and she uttered

back that he should go without worrying about her, and he was
on

his feet, scrambling his way forward to where the three
men were

huddled under the open companionway.

"What can I do?" he asked.

Robert April took hold of Jimmy by an
elbow and said, "It won't be easy, my boy."

"That's fine," Jimmy shot back. "I'll do
anything."

Hearing that seemed to disturb them more than
reassure them.

Just as he was wondering what to do about that, his father sighed
and said, "Well, okay . . . Carlos, explain it
to him."

Obviously on edge, he gestured with the
screwdriver in his hand

at the hatch they were just now reattaching to the bottom
of the

companionway, and he busied himself working on it. His lips flattened with effort and his elbow went up and down as he put his strength into what he was doing. Carlos faced Jimmy and pointed up at the companionway. "This tube is airtight, and it's detachable for easy maintenance. We're almost done jury-rigging a portable life-support system-I don't guess you need to know all the details . . . but it's kind of a lifeboat now. Kind of an escape pod. We hooked up an automatic SOS beacon, and emergency flares. We also attached several little candlepower thrusters which we pulled off the docking directionals of this hold we're in. I'm trying to get them to work."

"They'll work," George ground out with determination. "I think so. It'll be a decent lifeboat if we can just find a way to clamp that respiratory support unit onto the regulators."

"There's got to be some way to do it."

Carlos turned back to Jimmy. "The Enterprise should be back in this sector in about thirty hours, and they should be able to pick up the beacon-was

"You're sending me out?" Jimmy choked. "You're ejecting me in that thing?"

"It's your best chance to survive," Robert said sedately. "You'll have to accept the chance, my boy."

Frantic that they didn't understand, Jimmy said, "Oh, I'll do it! I'll bring them back for the rest of you! I can do it!"

He almost bounced on the hope of it. Finally-something he could do right!

Then he paused in the middle of his excitement and jabbed a finger upward. "But what about those outlaws? Are you going to be able to hold them off till I get back?"

Nobody answered him.

He looked at Robert, then Carlos, then back again at Robert. Why

weren't they answering?

The captain seemed thinner and emotionally drained, his brows

moving like soft caterpillars, his maple-sugar hair glittering with

metallic dust under one of the meager utility lights that was still

working. He looked at George, eyes full of something that only

George Kirk could decide, commander or not.

Only then did Jimmy notice that the cranking of the screwdriver

had stopped in the middle of a crank.

His father was kneeling there under the hatch on one knee, elbow

up, where it had stopped, the glow from that same little light

turning his hair a dirty terra-cotta, and he was looking at Robert

from underneath that arm. He resembled a bad boy who'd been

caught breaking into the toy chest.

The arm went down. His shoulders sagged. He tapped the palm of

his bruised hand with the screwdriver and struggled through some inner argument with himself.

Then he said, "Tell him the truth."

Senses suddenly on fire, Jimmy started to pull away. His shoulder

bumped an open panel and stopped him. "No . . ."

"They're pulling us into the Blue Zone, Jim," Robert said.

"We've barely two hours before we're swallowed up."

"After we eject you in the airlock," Carlos said, "we'll flush the

impulse drive with any power we've got left and blow off the aft end

and slam forward through their tractor beam right into that ship.

The explosion'll take care of them." He tipped his head toward the

outside, where their attackers chugged relentlessly through space.

"And us too."

"No-was Jimmy repeated. "I can-I can bring the starship back!"

"There won't be time," his father said. "As soon as they pull us

into the Blue Zone, we're all dead anyway."

Robert nodded and patted Jimmy's shoulder.
"It'll be your job to
advise Starfleet of what's happened here."
Seeing the protest rise on his son's face,
George went on. "We're
going to do what we have to do. As soon as you're out of
range, we'll
blow the aft end, ram into that ship, and demolish them
so they
don't have a chance to throw another tractor on you.
We'll all go up
and that'll be that. At least they won't do this to anyone
else." He
stopped, took a harsh breath, collected himself, and
added, "You'll understand someday."
Jimmy stood before them with his mouth gaping and nothing
coming out of it. Thoughts clogged his head, excuses,
arguments,
defiances-
But nothing that would make any sense.
Two hours. The
Enterprise
coming back in thirty.
As soon as they entered that Blue Zone, they were
dead. Even if
they managed to launch him in the airlock, the others
were still
dead. Captain April, Lieutenant
Florida, Dad . . . Veronica, who
had already paid her price . . .
He licked his lips and could almost taste the nobility
with which
the others were facing death for his sake. His sense of
obligation
started to scream. If anyone should sacrifice, it
should be him. He
was the only one who hadn't given anything yet.
Forcing himself not to stammer, he asked, "Why don't you
send Captain April? He's got a better
chance than I do. He knows more about-was
"Jimmy, we don't have time for this," George said.
"You're just going to have to do what I say."
He stuffed an O-2 canister into Jimmy's hand.
Standing there holding the canister, Jimmy squinted at
him.
What had just happened?
There was something seriously different about his father's
voice. A no-kidding difference. A this-is-it
difference.
"We'll be ready in about five minutes," Robert
said, steering

Jimmy away. "You go and get into a pressure suit. You'll need to have it on as a backup. Go ahead

...

see if you can't get used to the idea, eh?"

Just like that. Get used to it?

He stood a few steps away, holding the canister in one hand and nothing in the other, without a clue what to say to make the

situation any better.

Someone handed him a pressure suit-he didn't even notice

who. Limb by limb he pulled it on, staring mostly at the deck.

The others were back to work, as though they'd just told him he was going to have to be late for team wrestling practice.

"I still need a clamp."

"Where are those vise-grips Veronica was using earlier?"

"Welded into the wall, holding the ship together."

"What about the other ones?"

"In the walls."

"Damn."

"Gentlemen, there must be one last bit of resourcefulness left

between us to hold this in place, surely."

"Can't we tape it into place? Medical tape, maybe?"

"Wouldn't hold. The unit vibrates."

"Maybe it can free-float."

"I wouldn't trust it. One bump, and it could start leaking. Cut his survival time in half."

"There's gotta be something left. There's gotta

be something."

"Sir

...

sir .. ."

Out of the jumble of voices Jimmy found himself roused by the weakest one. He spun around, and saw Veronica blinking at them from across the deck, where she lay in the puffy white spacesuit.

Surprisingly, it was George who pushed his way past the others, past Jim, and knelt at her side.

"Yeah, honey? What do you need?"

"Use my hand," she said weakly. "You know

...

as a clamp."

George gazed at her.

Not four feet away, the disembodied prosthetic hand lay on the

deck in the puddle of pink fluid, looking pasty but too human, right

down to the end of the wrist, where the attachment cowl showed its

synthetic muscles and connections still partly attached to the

torn-off piece of her forearm. The fingers were still spread in that

position of shock and surprise, reminding them all of what Veronica

must have felt as the coolant blew over half her body. The ring

finger was even twitching a little.

No one else moved.

Veronica seemed to sense the reluctance, and she was ready. She

blinked up at George.

"It's just a tool," she murmured. "Let me help save him."

A few feet away, listening, Jimmy Kirk grew up ten years in ten seconds.

He watched as his father flattened his lips in a regretful excuse for

a grin, brushed Veronica Hall's bangs out of her remaining eye, then

made very little ceremony about doing what she asked.

He simply

reached over her, scooped the prosthetic hand from the deck, shook

the pink fluid and torn muscle tissue off, and got up.

"Good suggestion, Ensign," he said.

"Thank you, sir," she gurgled up at him.

"He's

...

a good shipmate."

George nodded awkwardly-the moment was very hard for him,

hard for them all. Then he hurried toward the airlock.

As he passed, he took Jimmy's arm.

"Come on, pal. Let's do this."

Carlos Florida strained to point into the two-foot-diameter

airlock at what he was talking about, without crowding his student out entirely.

"You've got these little candlepower thrusters here, here . . . there, and up there. They swivel, like this. I've got them set

to steer you away from the trinary and back toward the spacelanes.

Here's the light. Sorry there isn't any more than that. It's on a very

small battery, but I know nobody likes to sit

in the dark. Up there is the observation window. It's

narrow, but it goes all the way around,

although I don't know what you're going to have to look at. On the

bottom left is your SOS attachment. It'll

automatically broadcast

on subspace, and you don't even have to touch it. We

couldn't get it

to fit very well, so try to not bump it or anything.

Somebody"11 spot

you easy. The

Enterprise,

or somebody. Think you understand

everything? The SOS? The flares? The distress

signals? And how to

alter your course?"

Carlos wrapped up his crash course in

survival, and couldn't keep

his emotions from bumping up against a touch of pride that

they'd managed to do this.

Unable to speak as his own throat dried up, Jimmy

managed a

nod. He knelt there at the bottom of the

airlock, holding his survival helmet, all the

lessons about how to work it still floating loose in his

brain. Pull it on, yank this latch, it'll

automatically attach itself to

the suit's cowl, the airlock could rupture, the

suit'll offer another ten

hours of such-and-such. The whole contraption,

airlock, suit, and

all, the whole plan wasn't exactly

foolproof. The whole thing

assumed their attackers were too damaged to throw

another tractor

beam on the airlock as it puffed merrily away from

the scene of their

crime.

Carlos fidgeted. All these things were going through his

head too.

"Now, you realize . . . could be days before anybody

spots your
signal. . . right?"
Obviously he was afraid a sixteen-year-old
who'd never been
hungry might not understand.
Determined to make him feel better, Jimmy said,
"Well, you
know how teenagers are always trying to get time alone."
There was some ballast in seeing that Carlos seemed
reassured.
"Wish you luck," Carlos said. He
offered a handshake. "You're a
good shipmate, Jim."
The handshake was surprisingly soulful in this chilly,
struggling
environment.
Jimmy started to point to Veronica and stammered,
"That's what
she-was
He cut himself off and just returned the handshake as
warmheartedly as he could, not wanting to diminish
Carlos's
compliment. He was absolutely set on not complaining
or arguing
or saying the wrong thing, or doing more than he already
had to
make anybody feel bad.
That effort almost twisted his neck off as they led him
to the airlock and prepared the vaultlike panels that
would come down
just before the airlock could be detached.
As Carlos and George worked on the vault
panels, Robert April
collected Jimmy to one side and plied him with that
soft-spirited
gaze.
"Best of British luck, old fellow," the
captain said. "Brace up, be
stalwart. Just do your job, no questions . . . it's
all that's asked of a
member of the crew, eh?"
Jimmy cleared his throat and said, "Yes, sir
...
I'll do my best."
"That's the spirit."
Dauntlessly, Robert didn't make a scene in
spite of the sensibili
ties bubbling on his face. He offered an
emboldening handshake,
just as Carlos had, then patted Jimmy's hand once
he got hold of it.

"Proud to have had you aboard, my boy," he said.
"You've been a
good shipmate."
Jimmy couldn't manage to respond. Was there something
about that phrase?
Or maybe just the idea . . .
Shame chewed at his ankles. What if they were just
being nice to
him so he wouldn't feel bad that they were all going
to die for him?
Worst of all was the half-truth. He sure
hadn't started out to be a very good shipmate. Suddenly
all he wanted was to
really
be one.
"Panels are set, sir," Carlos said from the
port side.
George nodded and simply said, "Thanks." Then
he motioned
Jimmy toward the airlock hatch.
The others left father and son to do this alone.
Typically a man to whom tender moments were faux
pas waiting
to happen, George Kirk simply pressed his
lips tight, furrowed his brow, and when the right words
eluded him yet again, called upon the simplest ones.
The two stood simply looking, as though trying
to memorize each
other's face.
He swallowed, parted his lips, and said, "I just
want one thing."
Jimmy squinted in empathy, shrugged, and uttered,
"Guess I can
handle one thing."
George blinked at the floor, then found
whatever he needed
inside himself to look up again.
"Promise you won't watch."
As though caught in two nets, neither moved. The
sound rolled
and rolled. The idea haunted their imaginations.
Then George added, "I'm sorry, son."
A sound of pain. The words hurt him, simple or
not. The pain
showed in his face.
Helplessly, he motioned Jimmy up into the
companionway.
Perhaps a kind of shock took over; there would never be
a
satisfactory compilation of the emotions gripping either
of them at

that moment, but Jimmy found himself up inside the tube, where there was room to turn around, but not much more. The ladder had been padded into a kind of cot, and he was lying on it, wondering how the longest hours of his life suddenly seemed to have flashed by. Wasn't he going to get a few more minutes? He needed only a couple more- Below, George reached up, rubbed his son's knee the way he used to when little Jimmy was afraid at night. He tried to speak, but couldn't. Jimmy gazed back at him from the top of the tube. Then someone said something. Robert April's priestly voice. The captain's hand came into the picture, and George stepped away. His father's face

...

the last thing Jimmy saw before the hatch bumped closed and the vault panels were drawn to make the hold safe once the airlock was blown. That was it. That was the difference! The new thing he heard in his father's voice-a tone that said they would never see each other again. The past no longer mattered, because now there was no future for them together. In the nearly dark tube, lit only by two small orange backup lights, Jimmy touched the inner skin of the airlock. "Dad?" They couldn't hear him. They were right out there, inches away, but they couldn't hear him. The airlock was soundproof, airtight- "Dad?" he said again, louder. "I'm sorry, son . . . I'm sorry, son." Jimmy stared at the tiny thruster switches and the blinking lights. Right, left, up, down, reverse. Like a child's toy. He stared and stared. For the first time in his life he saw a true choice of paths-and he had his hands on the controls. TWENTY "They're launching something!" "You're spacesick. That's a research cutter.

How can they have
anything to launch?"
"You come and see for yourself, then."
Big Rex took a long time to hoist himself from his
seat and appear
at Lou Caskie's side and shove him away so
they could both see the
secondary screen. The crackly main
viewer in front of the com-
mand station was now showing only a corner of the Starfleet
ship,
enough to prove it was still being pulled along behind them.
The little viewer, clearer than the main one, showed a
little blue and silver tube slowly moving on its
own.
Big Rex squinted at the frosty screen.
"Maybe it's another SOS
buoy. Split the main screen and stick it up
there."
Caskie swore at his controls as he pecked and
pulled at them. The main screen fizzed, flashed,
then divided to show a poor view of the
ejected tube over the partial view of the cutter.
"How big is it?" Roy craned his neck and
called from where he
was feverishly trying to restore their shields.
Caskie shrugged his knobby shoulders. "Size of a
coffin."
"Oh, that's all," Big Rex said. "They're
giving themselves a
funeral!"
Laughter rolled around the dark helm area.
Behind Big Rex and Caskie, the
Andorian engineer and a handful
of the crew from below decks had come up to watch the win-a-
kind of tradition among thieves-and now they laughed
and shook
each other's hands. Big Rex's body wobbled like
a pile of water
balloons as he chuckled his way back to his command
seat.
Behind them all, Roy hunkered at the deflector
auxiliary, tight-
lipped with sequestered rage. Progressive
stupidity had allowed
them to damage their prize, and now he had to get the
shields back
before they could go into the Blue Zone and finish wrecking
it. Just
to survive. That was all they'd get out of this one.
If these fools had listened to him, they'd have hulled

the Starfleet
cutter in several small places with a surgical
laser, let the crew die,
then collected their "salvage." Instead, the
morons were laughing and backslapping each other and
celebrating a disaster as though
they'd won something.
But this. Th.
Pushing his moment of control further and further into the
future, just as he had drawn it to his fingertips.
Keep the goal in mind. Do whatever it requires.
Tolerate anyone.
He felt the future ticking. This Starfleet
cutter must have been a
supply ship for Faramond. Nobody would come out
here just to
look at a couple of stars immolating each other.
They were going to
poke around Faramond with the rest of those
archaeological
bughunters. They thought they were just looking for
artifacts and
small cultural revelations from an old
civilization.
How long before one of the fools found out what he had
found
out?
A race against time and chance, but a race that he could
run just
so fast. Maybe a year. Maybe six months.
Everyone would get out of
his way.
He crawled out from where he was working, unfolded his
legs,
and looked past the back of his father's fleshy neck
at the
viewscreen.
"Hit it with the laser," somebody from the crew said.
"Coolants are blown," the Andorian engineer said.
"All we can do to make the tractor work."
Lou Caskie dabbed at the open cut on his head from
the buckshot
hits they'd taken before. "Why don't we dump the
cutter and suck
on that little thing? They're dead in space anyway.
Ain't going
nowhere."
"Even a rabbit can smell a trap," Roy
spoke up. Contempt
dripped from his tone. "They could want us to bring it on
board."

Before his father could snap an insult, a skeletal human from the crew, whose name Roy didn't even know, blurted, "A bomb? You mean it's a bomb?" Roy lifted one shoulder. "I might do it if I were them." Then he eyed the mob he was reluctantly running with, and added, "Considering."

"Let's push it away, then!" The bony man twisted around, looking from one to the other of the crew, trying to find somebody to agree with him.

"If it's an SOS," Big Rex said, "they could be wanting us to push it away for them."

"That's right," Roy said.

He enjoyed how everyone stared at him, surprised. Defending his father? Ah, to keep them guessing, to remain unpredictable-a good game.

"They hit our coolants," he added. "They know we have tractors but no lasers."

Their cook, a mask-faced, pug-nosed Tellarite, asked, "How do they know?"

Roy's delight fizzled. He glared at the Tellarite and spelled out, "Are we shooting at them?"

The Tellarite blinked around, trying to see through his receded eyes, which Tellarites couldn't do very well, and was typically insulted just by being answered in some other way than he wanted, but said nothing else. He was new enough in the crew that he hadn't started an argument yet, though he and the Klingon had been spitting at each other so much, the rest of the crew wouldn't even walk between them unless they had their backs to each other.

"If it's a bomb," Big Rex went on, "it'll just blow up out in space. If it's an SOS, it would take fifty years just to get out of the solar system on those tiny thrusters. They're betting

we'll get nervous and
spin it out of the area and do their job for "em." He
hunkered down
and glared at the split screen. "Why don't we have
a backup tractor
beam?"
"Why use up time and power?" Dazzo rumbled from the
port
side controls. "We never needed backup
tractors before. We attack
only one thing at a time."
Big Rex slumped forward, shook his head, and
complained,
"Can't you measles ever think ahead?"
Staying where nobody could hear him, Roy arched his
aching
back. "Question answers itself."
When nothing happened in the next few seconds and that
small
blue and silver tube just puffed and turned on the
split screen, their
unappointed new leader shoved out of his chair and
lumbered
toward the aft of the bridge, one eye on the forward
screen as he
made his decision.
"We'll be in the Blue before that little turd gets ten
thousand
miles out. It'll be a hundred years before
anybody stumbles on a pea
pod that size in a sector this wide." He waved
his sausage-thick
fingers at the screen and added, "Just let it float
away. You slugs get back to work. We've got
a sucking mess to repair all over this crate.
We'll go back and blow that thing up later."
He hoisted himself to the upper gallery, where his sparse
hair
brushed the ceiling and made him feel taller than
he was wide for a
change.
There, he stopped.
He glared at his son's face.
At the grayish eyes of a woman he'd sworn he
would forget. At the
tag-along hatreds he'd run away from.
Suspicion, which to Rex was the same as knowing, had
told him
his son had manipulated him into killing
Burgoyne. In an odd way,
he was proud. He'd have had to ax Burgoyne

sooner or later
anyway. The ponytail had just provided the right
excuse.
If he wasn't my own kid, I'd be
scared of him.
Roy was glaring back in that silence he did so
well. The kind that
whined in everybody's ears. That said he was thinking about
whoever he was looking at. Making decisions.
Judgments. Plans.
Calling them names in his head.
Big Rex balanced most of his considerable weight
on one foot.
Sweat tracked his wide face in two places.
Acrimony crusted his
warning.
"You can stay right there," he said. "We don't need
your help."
The airlock turned slowly. The tiny thrusters
alternately puffed
and then shut off, seeking their prerecorded heading.
Through the clear band of unbreakable aluminum that made
a
window, a boy's eyes creased.
As his tiny metal prison turned in space, he
lay on his back
against the padding, arms down, fingers closed on the
sides of the
ladder so hard that his hands were cramping. How
far away would
he have to be before his father would blow the cutter into a
million
pieces?
were they waiting until he was on the other side of the
cutter, so
the explosion would push him in the right direction-away
from
the Blue Zone and toward the spacelanes?
The thoughts were ugly, unavoidable, and persistent.
He didn't
expect to see beauty ever again.
Yet there it was.
It came to get him as his tube stopped turning and
found its
course.
Came even in the middle of tragedy. A savage
beauty, but a
beauty he could finally see. Glazed fire in
space, pearly in the
centers, licking outward at each other, then braiding
and twisting

toward a common center.
His lips tugged apart, and he breathed, "Wow . .
."
The trinary.
The hungry neutron star pulled and sucked at its
two compan
ions, and would keep on even after its witnesses were
long gone.
In the core of crisis, Jimmy discovered in himself
the ability to
pause for a few seconds, suspend all
worries, and appreciate beauty.
Better to have had those few seconds, in case things
didn't work
out.
"I'll remember," he whispered. "Dad, I
see it now ..."
He stared at the gorgeous fire of the trinary and
wanted desper
ately to tell somebody. He didn't want to have his
father die without
knowing that his son finally
saw.
He didn't want to have his father die. Period.
The first time, he had run back home and cowered on
Earth and
in his unconnected, irrational fourteen-year-old
mind had blamed his father for his having to see
what happened on Tarsus.
Now he was two years older, and this time he felt
different about
what was happening. He'd once thought all his growing
up was
done, except for getting a little taller. He'd
seen an execution, so
he'd seen it all. He'd seen space. There
wasn't anything more. Go
back to Earth and act damaged.
But this time he was two years older and knew this was the
fault
of those pillagers out there and not his father.
Two years, that was all. Two years, and he saw
everything
differently than the last time. He'd never noticed
before today, but
he was changing with every month that went by.
What would be the difference between sixteen and eighteen?
Eighteen and twenty? How much would he change?
Why had he always admired the pioneers of the
American West
but not the pioneers of space? Too close,

probably. Too familiar
with people who'd been there. History tended
to make heroism
bigger and cleaner.
But it was the same thing. His father and the others-would they
retreat? Veronica sure wouldn't. Jim had seen
that his father
wouldn't. Because they were Starfleet, and this was their
reason.
Starfleet smoothing out the rough spots in space, the
U.s. Army
setting up forts and hammering out the American
frontier for the
pioneers, the Canadian Mounties-all the
forerunners going out in
remote areas, into the spines of danger, insisting that
even way out there the laws of common decency and
individual rights should be
adhered to. He realized how easy it had always
been for him and his
friends to crow about being advanced, but somebody else had
gone
out before them and taken the big risk, stood up, and
demanded that civilization be civilized. They'd gone
out and done the hard
part of their era. They'd averaged a grave every
hundred yards, but
the pioneers had never stopped pioneering. They
hadn't run home
and acted damaged.
Where would humanity be otherwise? If not for the
Robert Aprils
and George Kirks of Earth's past?
Still shivering in the alleys of Europe, probably.
And here he was, holding a chance to do the hard part of
his own
era.
What if he'd been two years wiser and two
years angrier and had
been there to take some wild cowboy action against the
executioner
on Tarsus?
What would he do today?
"Something, that's what," he said aloud. "I'll be a
stampede of
one."
He didn't know, and neither had the others known, whether
he
could survive at all in this tin can, so why waste the
chance he might
have to change the moment? He'd seen their faces when

they told
him he'd be all right in here, that it would all hold
together. Then
they put him in a pressure suit and gave him that
kind of handshake
that everybody recognizes.
One plus one equaled four of them and one of him, which
didn't add up.
"It's not right. . . it's not
right."
His own voice buzzed in his ears like something coming over
a speaker, but he clung to the sound.
Moving in the cramped space, under the tiny faint
lights, with
Veronica's disembodied hand clamped onto the
respirator unit an inch from his face, he nudged
the thrusters and turned his capsule
until he could see the ship that had attacked them.
He saw its
engines. Not so different from any he'd seen before.
He knew what
engine exhausts looked like, impulse or warp.
Those were basically
the same anywhere, anytime, any ship.
And being basically the same,
any
engine could build up to
explosion . . . especially with a detachable
airlock crammed up its
back end.
He didn't listen to the little voices shrieking in his
head. The voice that made him always protect himself,
always consider
himself first-he wasn't going to listen anymore. He
was ready to
give.
In spite of the clumsy work gloves attached to the
pressure suit,
he got his hands snugly around the thruster controls.
This was going
to take more than just puffing and turning.
This would take steering and ramming.
"Well, Dad," he uttered, "I promised you
I wouldn't watch, and
I'm not going to. I'm too busy."
He aimed the capsule as best he could using only
his hands and
eyes. When he thought he was pointed right and
trajectory was
right, he fired up all the thrusters.
Suddenly the crawly green and black ship

in front of him was very
big and getting bigger damned fast.
The engines' exhaust expanded before his eyes as though
made of
rubber, stretching in all directions. Inside, there
was the Hades of violent energy popping and boiling
unsteadily. That unsteadiness was the destruction his father
had done to their enemies.

Wider, hotter-closer-
Jimmy crammed his eyes shut. He was two years
older, yes. But
still not old enough to want to watch death coming.
"No! Jimmy! No, no!"

"George!"
Robert April held on to the bigger man and dug
his heels into the
deck, trying to prevent this unthinkable turn of
events from killing
the father as well as the son, and called across the darkened
hold.

"Carlos! Are you sure?"
Carlos Florida gripped the breadbox-size
monitor with both
hands as though about to crawl into the screen. "He's
turning-he's
under power and heading right for their engine exhaust!"
"My God, I gotta stop him!" George
bellowed, yanking free and plunging for the gaping
exposed machinery in the forward hull.
Robert scraped after him and got him by the arm again.

"You
can't! You'll tear us apart if you counterthrust that
tractor beam!

George!"

"Let me go!"

Then Carlos's voice, heavy and beaten, cut right
through them
both.

"It's gone."

Locked in a grapple, the other two men froze and
glared at
him-two distinct expressions, the postures of
devastation.

"I can't see it anymore," Carlos said. He
couldn't look up. "I
can't see it at all

...

might have bounced off and disinte
grated . . . crashed

...

or it could've gone into their engine core

and-was

The captain cut him off by simply saying,
"Carlos."

Carlos let his shoulders sink and dropped the
officiality he was clinging to. "Sorry, sir."

Robert wanted to be in two places at once, but
George needed
him more than Carlos did.

George Kirk's face turned almost as red as his
uniform. His hand
bit hard into the bent-back hull sheeting, so hard that
the ragged
edges cut him. Blood broke between his knuckles,
slowly traced his
fingers, then gathered and trailed down the gray
metal.

"Why'd he do that?" he gasped. "Why'd he do that
..."

"For us, I'm afraid," Robert balmed.

As George sank to his knees on the deck,
doubled over by
anguish, Robert forced him to loosen his lacerated
hands before
permanent damage took over-as if it
hadn't already.

George never even felt his hands being cut, or the
cuts being
wrapped with gauze. He sat slumped on the
deck, filthy with dust
and metal shavings from the drills they'd used to try
to save
themselves, and he stared at his own bent knee.
Past it, he saw Veronica's supine form lying in
its white survival
suit, mutilated for the sake of Jimmy.

"His mother'll never even know what happened
..."

"Where the hell is it!" Rex Moss thrust his
huge body forward to
the edge of the creaking command seat and bugged his eyes at
the screen. "Where'd it go? Caskie, find out where it
went!"

"Got no sensors on that side!"

"It bounced off and fell apart," Dazzo cracked
from the port side.

"Sensors are not working on that quarter."

Big Rex twisted against his own bulk. "No
viewers? No nothing?"

What are you pigs good for?"

"We're so banged up," Caskie said, "beats
me we can move at

all."

"Keep looking for it."

"How? A little thing like that?"

Dazzo backed off from his controls a step and kicked the housing.

"Half our sensors down and no shields! How can we tell you where it went?"

"I'm the captain," Rex said. "I ask, you find the answers."

"Captain the sensors back on line, then."

"Drop dead."

He stood up. Not a castaway task.

The forward viewscreen was his enemy. He stared it down. His

voice was smoke.

"I'm done putting up with this bullshit," he said.

"Screw the Blue

Zone. Get me some engine power and let's turn this crate around."

Caskie and the Klingon both turned, glowered at the unexpected

order, and didn't move to follow it. Caskie

asked, "What're you gonna do?"

Sour red and yellow lights cloisonned Rex's domineering mass in the center of the control room.

"I'm gonna do what I should've done in the first place," he said.

"I'm gonna put the construction claw on those suckers, rip the sheets off their hull, and kill 'em all right now."

"Jimmy, what were you thinking

..."

Unshrouded agony pressed George Kirk to where he sat on the

deck and held him down. His surly talent for digesting the unthink

able almost immediately betrayed him this time just by existing.

No shock. Just raw, unpadded devastation.

At his side, demanding composure of himself, Robert April

labored through his own grief, clutched to the core by the sound of his friend's misery.

He arranged himself off his aching knee and sat down beside

George, against the tilted wall.

"Jimmy didn't want to watch the game from the bench," he said

pacifically. "He knew we meant to sacrifice

ourselves for him and
for any who might stumble this way in the future.
He's the same
blood and thunder as you are

...

a prodigality you should be proud
of tonight." He swallowed dryly and added, "We must
be proud of
them both tonight."

Together he and George gazed across the dim hold at
the white
spacesuit and the motionless girl whose face was
fortuitously
turned away from them. Her chest moved up and down in
carefully
regulated shallow respiration.

At least she wasn't awake to know what had
happened to Jimmy,
to know that her sacrifice had been for nothing.
Across the deck, Carlos Florida looked also,
then turned away
and huddled even closer to his monitors,
doing a job that a few
small hours ago had been Jimmy's.

The hold divided into private places.
Robert allowed himself a cemetery sigh. "He
knew Veronica
risked her life for him, and perhaps hoped to return the
gesture. At least he believed he did that much.

Our two young people . . . both
valiant under fire."

"Both dead," George trembled out. "Like us."
His face felt like shriveled fruit. Pain
drummed behind his eyes,
and around his heart, which his son had thought was made of
marble.

Robert let his own throbbing head drop back against
the hull
wall. A ruddy British pink appled his cheeks,
and his otter-brown
eyes filled with warm esteem.

"When an officer disobeys direct orders for the
sake of his crew,
he's either hanged

...

or promoted. That's because of the character
of decisions made in the unkind arbiter of the
field. Jimmy chose to march into a cannon's mouth
on our behalf. And he knew we could see it all
happening . . . perhaps he left a message for you in
his final

defiance. He wanted to show you that he'd learned what
you
brought him here to learn."

Despite the timbre of his words, his Coventry
accent painted a
quiet English lane for them to stroll, made
sparrows sing where
there were only sparks, made a lake with reeds where
there was only
puddled lubricant, and flew flags where there was no
wind.

"You understand, don't you, George?" Robert
hoped. Salient
emotion rose on his face, drew him through a
half-dozen expres
sions, any one of which might have been a tearstain upon
a letter
home. He turned and pliantly gripped his old
friend's hand, in spite
of bandages, in spite of blood, to put to flesh the
precious thing for which a boy had sacrificed
himself. "He was thinking like a man."

He tensed. He waited for it. Wondered if it would
hurt much.

Brrraaackkk-
were all the superstitions and wishful thinking right? Was
there life after death? If he opened his eyes, would
he see heaven?

With my record? Better keep the eyes closed.

He'd felt the strike, the airlock hitting the
enemy ship, felt the
muscles of metal give, then the jolt of hitting
something tougher
than the thing he was in, and a sudden stop. No sound
other than
the shriek of his tiny, pressurized tomb as it was
crammed beyond
its capacity to withstand. Just a hard hit, and a hard
stop.

He opened one eye.

And found himself alive.

That didn't make any sense. How could he still be
alive inside a
big hot engine?

There was only one answer to that. So he opened the other
eye

and looked around.

Both boots smashed against the inside of his tube.

"A garbage dump!" he grated. "I killed
myself in a garbage
dump!"

Looked like a junkyard with walls. Except that the piles of junk were strapped to the walls and the floor and the ceiling with elastic straps and industrial webbing, and anything else that could hold it.

His voice rang bitter and ugly in his ears.

"Great job. Now we know what legends are made of."

Another failure. He'd failed again.

He grumbled at himself, giving himself a sound to cling to, and a

sense that maybe he wasn't as terrified as his insides were telling

him. He was cold and realized he was trembling with in his survival

suit, his spine straight and locked, his legs the same. Hard to breathe

...

his chest hurt.

He'd missed somehow! Missed the engine exhaust entirely, and smashed through one of the gashes in the ship.

Probably one his

own father had put in this ship with his buckshot trick.

Through his

narrow viewband he could barely see the ragged edge of torn metal

and shredded insulation and layered hull material, now a colorful mess like a club sandwich with a big

bite taken out of it and the

mustard leaking.

Now what?

Color-there was some light in here.

Jimmy craned his neck and spotted two small

intermittent docking lights or maybe loading

lights, both yellow, both blinking sluggishly.

Between them, they made some light most of the time.

That was why the hull insulation looked like mustard.

Yellow

lights.

Hsssssssss

Jimmy heard it-but only for a few seconds. The

sound was

fading away. The sound of leakage.

The tube! Leaking!

He scrambled for his helmet. Hadn't even bothered

to put it on-he hadn't needed a helmet on to go

blow himself up.

Where was it? Mounted behind his head. Right. He cranked backward, arching his spine, which ached and told him how

tense
he'd been until now, how tense he still was.
Clumsily he pulled the
helmet on and yanked the thing Carlos had pointed
to. The cowl
activated itself instantly with an airy
thok,
and the suit sucked tight
on his body. All at once he had oxygen-rich
air to breathe and a sensation of lightheadedness.
Pressurized.
Now what?
They were going to barge in here, find him trapped
inside a stupid-looking cocoon, and they were going
to slaughter him.
"Well, they're not gonna kill me in here," he
snapped. He
pounded the viewport material and shouted, "You're not
gonna kill
me in here!"
Was there a way out from the inside? There hadn't been
much to
work with. What if there were no way out? They'd be down
here any
second-
He looked up at the vault hatch. No handle.
The original had
been cannibalized for the propulsion unit-there
hadn't been
anything left to make another one. He tried
to bend, but there was
no way for him to reach the bottom hatch. With boots
on, he had no
way to pull the latch off its housing with his feet.
That meant
...
no way to get out.
The pirates were on their way down, and he was a
sitting duck!
In anguish he hammered his fists against the sides of
what could
very well be his coffin, even now-and his right knuckles
bumped
what felt like flesh. It startled him, and
he looked. Beside his face,
valiantly clamping the respiration unit, was
Veronica's pale hand.
Yellow lights from out there buttered the skin. The
crafted fingernails looked like hers. Unpainted and
slightly tattered. The fingers
were long-boned and waxy, knuckles pronounced and a

little pink.

"Okay, all right," Jimmy huffed.

Even with gloves on he was bothered by the idea of touching the hand. If it hadn't been attached to a friend once, things might be different.

He forced himself to grab the bare wrist. Lubricant squirted back on his glove and he flinched, but didn't let go. Holding the wrist with one hand, he reached inside the open end with his other fingers and tried to find whatever mechanism made the limb work like a real hand. There had to be something mechanical. It couldn't all be computer signals. Somewhere inside, there had to be strings that acted like muscles and a structure that pretended to be bones and joints. He had to find those-fast.

"Uch

...

oh, this is sweet. . ." He winced as though it were his

own hand being violated. "Sorry, sorry, sorry-was

All at once the hand undamped, fingers flying as though startled, muscle reaction thrust it backward into Jimmy's face shield, and he batted it off in a childish reflex action, then barely managed to catch it before it got knocked to the other end of the tube, where he

couldn't reach. That would be too stupid. Then he'd have to kill

himself again just to avoid letting the story get around. Bending upward, he arranged the hand's fingers on the housing

where the vault latch had been taken off, then stuck his own wet,

gloved fingers back inside the wrist and hunted awkwardly for those

contracting muscles. A moment later, the strong mechanism so

daintily disguised as a woman's hand was doing a great imitation of a pipe wrench.

"Please hold, that's all," Jimmy muttered as he grasped the wrist

firmly with both hands. "One, two . . ."

He cranked hard. The delicate-looking hand

held, but so did the
latch housing. Sweat broke on his face. He
kept cranking, his legs
braced against the inside of the tube until he thought
he was
breaking his own kneecaps. His teeth grated
fiercely, but he didn't
stop. More and more muscles in his body knotted against
the strain.
He had to get out. He had to. Any minute they
could come in and
hit him with a laser. If he could get out, he might
still die, but he
wouldn't die idle.
His arms suddenly flew sideways as though he'd
thrown a punch
at a bad dream and missed. His entire
body twisted, and half his
muscles pulled. There was fluid on his face
mask.
The latch! It was down!
Without pausing, he put his shoulder to the vault hatch
and
shoved-
And found himself flying across the open area, right into a
pile of
garbage.
Then he bounced off that pile and flew sideways
into another pile,
then a wall, then caught himself with one hand on a
parted-out tail
fin from some kind of atmospheric aircraft.
He hovered there, panting, sweating inside the suit,
gathering his
wits, trying to figure out what had just happened.
Across the open
area he saw his tube, stuck halfway through a
horrible gash in the skin of this ship.
"Weightless," he gasped. "Why didn't I think
of that? Why don't
I
think
of things?"
Made sense. Why waste energy putting gravity and
pressure in a
storage deck used for storing salvage? This way,
all they'd have to
do was open those big segmented folding doors over there
and
swallow up any ship they . . .
Suddenly his arbitrary analysis turned deeply

personal. Resentment surfaced, and anger came close under. Anger made him determined.

He let himself be angry. It was easier than being afraid and made him want to do something.

Trying to assess where he was, he forced himself to calm down, to breathe deeply and slowly in spite of the claustrophobia of being inside a helmet, and to look around.

On two sides of the big, dirty, cluttered area were stenciled the words trunk deck.

Clear enough. Below that were handwritten numbers on a board, the words LOAD DRAFT, HEATED CARGO AREA, and the letters L. D. P.

Familiar words, but didn't apply to what was being stored there.

This might once have been a Federation loading deck, though nothing around indicated Starfleet. Probably an Earth merchant vessel. Probably old.

Old, and full to the gills with parts of hulks, whole engines, entire computer cores and pieces of others, struts, sheeting, ribs, rolled insulation, small warp nacelles from little interstellar ships, generators, jacketing, coils, frames, shield grids-almost anything, in no particular order, most of it broken.

So his father was right. This was a salvage ship that attacked ships, wrecked them, killed the crews, and thereby created its own salvage for a melting-down market with no questions.

All around the trunk deck was the evidence. Jimmy pulled himself slowly along the industrial webbing, and discovered a tragic gallery opening beneath him.

Pieces of vessels, torn apart so they couldn't be identified, huddled against each other, cold and shamed, stolen from the

dignity of transportation and shoved into the realm of
contraband.
Jimmy touched the ripped side of a personnel
transport-he
knew that's what it was because there were two windows still in it
and a bolt where a seat had once been attached. A
seat where a
living person had been sitting. A seat where terror
had gotten
somebody by the throat.
He turned above the blackened, scorched
transport section and
floated to the other side of it, and there he held himself
still for a
moment, his heart beating in his throat.
Blood was smeared across the broken part. Some of it was
just a
grotesque spray. The rest was even more gripping,
for it was
smeared into letters, drawn by a human finger.
HELP
SOS
ATTACKED OR-ROS AX-8
DEC

HELP
Jimmy shuddered and sucked his breath as though he'd
run a
mile. The reality of danger and the violence around him
plunged back on him and made him cold again. This
was real blood. The
blood of a slaughtered crewman. Maybe a
family member
...
a
mother, a child, a father. It was all they'd possessed with
which to
write a message no one would ever be able to answer.
December 4.
Which year?
No year. Of course not. Nobody would put a
year on an SOS.
Whoever they were, they'd hoped to live longer than
another
month.
Nauseated, haunted by thoughts of what he'd been
wasting his
time doing back in December, Jimmy dug deep
through regurgitat
ing fear for that anger he'd had a few minutes
ago. He needed it.

With his gloved hand he touched the long-frozen, crusted
plea for
help, and drew the anger from there, from the blood of those
he
hadn't been there for. Maybe all they'd needed was a
quarrelsome
plain dealer with a good right hook.
They'd needed him, or his dad.
They handed him their hope and their strength through the
connection of crusted blood. He hovered there and got
angrier and angrier, adding their loss to those he'd
already endured. He would
need this rage to get out of the trunk deck and do something
for his
own people that had come too late for these.
In his heart he made a promise to the blood people.
They were part of his crew now, and they hadn't died for
nothing.
Through his anger came another sensation. One that filled
him up, one that helped. If only he had been there
for those others, he
could have changed everything. He was glad he could be there
for his father and his friends, and suddenly wanted to be there for
any
who came after. A glimmer of why they had all come
to space, why
Starfleet was here at all, expanding like crazy,
flashed in his head,
and warmed him up fast.
In fact, he was hot now. Good and hot.
Hot to get at the targets of his anger-the foul
lowlifes who didn't
even have enough dignity to wipe up the blood of their
victims.
He could still change everything! He had a chance
to survive! If
he did things right, maybe they could all survive!
Dammit, they
could all still live-he might still have the chance
to make every
thing up to his father, make it up to his mother, tell
them what a jerk
he'd been
...
go back to Tom Beauvais and Quentin and Zack and
Emily and all the others, and tell them everything, go
back and
show the whole world that he wasn't an idiot after
all! He had to
survive, and he had to make sure his father
survived.

But the Blue Zone burned too close. The
cutter was going to be
blown up any second.
He pushed himself off with a snap of aggravation, and
deter
mined that if he didn't find a door, he'd chew
his way right through the wall and teach these scavenging
maggots a lesson.

There it was.
His way out. A man-size vault door, a big
version of the hatch on
his tube. A conventional airlock-a way out.
With a shove he flew off the plundered pile
and back past his
tube, where he caught hold long enough to retrieve
Veronica's
prosthetic hand from the hatch housing. He wasn't
going to leave
any part of her in this dump, and if possible he was
going to give the
hand back to her. This sorry excuse for a voyage
wasn't going to cost
her any more than it already had.

Tucking the hand into the straps that would ordinarily be
used for
tools, he yanked a jagged piece off an
unidentifiable piece of junk
and swung it like a bat a few times. He now had a
weapon.

"That'll work," he breathed.

It would have to work. They must be waiting for him to come out.
They must not have pressure suits, so they were waiting
outside that
airlock for him to come dodging through.

Preparing himself for the street fight of all street
fights, he shoved
off again for the vault door.

Expecting trouble with the door, he got a
surprise when the thing
opened with a simple one-two-three combination that was right
on

the wall beside it. Apparently these pirates didn't
expect problems
down here. Probably they'd just never thought about it.

Jimmy paused, glowering inwardly, his eyes
tightening to
crescents.

"I can use that

...

I can
use

it. There's got to be a way to use that."

There was only one of him. He couldn't punch them each in the face-well, he could- but there had to be a better, smarter way. He decided to start collecting anything these guys didn't think enough about.

It had no pressure, but there was gravity activated in the airlock. He knew, because he stepped through the vault door and fell flat on his butt. His weapon clunked over his shin, and he found out it was doggoned heavy. He sat on the floor of the airlock, gasping and trying to remember what it was like to weigh this much. He hadn't felt his normal weight since the laser attack. This was like dropping onto the dock after being stranded in water for a day. With arms heavy as iron bars, he crawled to the trunk deck hatch and put what felt like tremendous effort into yanking it shut. The gaskets compressed, and he hauled down on the locking handle.

One down.

On hands and knees he turned around, pulling his weapon along with him, and crawled the four feet to the inner vault door that he hoped led to a pressurized deck or a corridor and not out into some ripped-open section. This ship was almost salvage bait itself, thanks to Dad and Captain April. He hesitated. Once he opened that door, he'd have to be ready to fight. There had to be somebody out there, setting a trap, and here he was with bricks for arms and legs. He struggled to his feet, then lifted his jagged piece of metal into swinging position.

"What the hell," he grumbled. "Been dead once already."

Feeling as though there were a buffalo corpse on his back, he got a

one-handed grip on the other hatch handle-a bolt of shock went through him when the handle snapped down and the gaskets expanded!

"What the hell-was he gasped.

Open! The vault door was open! Why hadn't it waited for him to tap in the open signal?

He looked accusatorily back at the other airlock door. Why hadn't the safeties come on? One hatch open should automatically prevent the other from being opened without proper pressurization.

Any decent airlock had double and triple backups! At the very least, both doors wouldn't be allowed to open at the same time. He could

just walk back there and open up that trunk deck door, and whooosh-

depressurization. The whole section of the ship would collapse on itself.

Either this ship was busted up bad, or these jerkweeds didn't even

bother with safeties on their airlocks.

Shivers numbed Jimmy's arms, and he called these guys names in

his head. He knew the type a lot more intimately than he wanted to

recall right now. He could too easily look

back, not very far, and

hear himself saying, "Forget the safeties. Who

needs 'em? We know

what we're doing."

Rules exist for a reason.

Authorized use only.

With his hands on the heavy white latch handle,

Jimmy closed his

eyes for a moment, drew a steadying breath, and demanded of

himself that he not forget.

He shoved the flat of his upper arm against the vault

door, raised his jagged bat, pushed-

And spilled himself out into a dimly lit corridor,

legs spread,

weapon back, and yelling, "Hah!"

Holding his breath as he waited to be hit by a guard

or caught in a

trap, he looked from side to side.

Nothing. Not a thing. Nobody.

No safeties. No warning lights. No red alert. Big ship, little tube, no pressurization backups, no shields, no alarms. No organized damage control, nobody here to attack him . . . The revelation went up like a flare. "I don't believe it!" he choked. "They don't even realize I'm here!"

Possibilities spun in his head. This was a whole new game all of a sudden, with new rules. This meant he could make setbacks for them, provide unseen chances for his own team. He could be tricky.

His dad and Captain April would figure out ways to take advantage . . . sure they would! As long as they didn't blow themselves up or get dragged into the Blue Zone before he could do something-he suddenly had double the chance.

The stupidpisspots don't even know I'm here! Don't do anything, Dad! Don't blow up the cutter! I'm working! I'm working! He started thinking ahead. What could he do for his team if they

did get dragged in? He'd have to be ready for that. A click, and his helmet dropped to the black deck. He glanced one way, then the other. A triangular corridor with a black floor of some kind of hard rubber, ribbed with red structural members whose padding was sparse and worn, and lit from a single long panel in the bottom of each section. Some of the panels were flickering. Some were completely dark.

"It's going to get a lot darker," Jimmy promised through gritted teeth. "These pigs got a hundred-sixty-pound worm in their apple now."

Cradling Veronica's disembodied hand to his chest, he picked a direction and ran off down the narrow corridor.

"We're going to do it."

"I beg your pardon?" Robert blinked himself out of his sad reverie about Oxford and Coventry and fishing in the Cotswolds and Jimmy and never being able to show his godson a few simple

things before life got too complex. He looked again to his left, at his greatest immediate concern. "Sorry, George?" George didn't look back at him. He thrust himself up on numb legs and wavered, but there was nothing unsteady in his face.

"We're going to do what we planned to do. We're not going into that Blue Zone. We'll blow the whole sector apart if that's what it takes, but my son's not dying alone out here. We're going with him, and we're taking those black-hearted bastards with us." He gathered every ounce of fury to push down the grief so he could function, and crossed the deck. Carlos was lying prone on the deck, his head resting on one outstretched arm as he watched the monitor with reddened eyes.

Kneeling beside him, George touched him and said, "Still with us, pal?"

The other man flinched, glanced at him, regained control over his expression, and sat up. "Oh, yes, sir

...

"I'm with you all the way." Warmed by the devotion on Carlos's face, the willingness to go with him into the fires of hell if that's what he chose as their leader today, George had to swallow a couple of times before he could talk.

"You know what we have to do, right?"

"Yes, sir," Carlos said quietly. "Sure do."

"Want help?"

"No, sir. I think this is one I'd like to do by myself. I don't want to have time to

...

ask myself any questions, if you know what I mean."

Solemnly, George nodded. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

He helped Carlos to his feet and only then noticed that the starship helmsman was still limping.

"You okay?" George asked.

Carlos hesitated, almost answered, then gave him a quirky little smile of all things, and commented, "What difference does it

make?"

Something about that smile, without a touch of irony or
resent

ment, made George's own mouth tug upward on
one side. "Not
much, huh?"

They chuckled briefly, then moved to two different
parts of the
hold deck.

George joined Robert at Veronica Hall's
side. The captain was
running his finger pointlessly along the medical
cartridges that were
trying so hard to keep the body inside alive.

O ther than her chest
moving slightly up and down, there were no signs of
life from

Veronica now. She was pale and clearly on the
edge.

"I was about to change the life-support
cartridges," he said, "then
I realized . . ."

"Just be glad she's unconscious." George
gazed at the girl, let his
eyes go out of focus, and thought about Jimmy, who'd
been wide
awake at the worst moment. His chest squeezed
hard.

He felt Robert watching him. They both knew
there was nothing
more to be said.

They got up and started to walk together, but George
paused,
looking at Robert.

"Something's wrong," he grumbled.

Robert's brows popped up. "Excuse me?"

"Here." George reached over an open crate and
retrieved the

Ba* cardigan that was now dusty with insulation fuzz.

"Put your
sweater on."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Just looks right."

"Oh

...

of course. Thank you, George." The captain
wincing as George slipped the cardigan over the
injured arm and up onto his
shoulders.

"There," George said. "That's how I want to-was
He made a

feeble gesture, but stopped talking, not wanting to sound as if they'd have a chance to remember this. "It just . . . looks right."

But Robert grinned that sentimental grin of his, and took the moment to appreciate that he meant so much to George. He patted George's back as they walked together across the tipped deck.

Carlos Florida sat cross-legged before the open panel where double insulation had been cut away to expose the critical machinery to the engines' reaction-control flow. Though he had his fingers on the mechanisms, he wasn't doing much. Most of the work had already been done and was waiting for them to make that final decision.

He knew George and Robert were behind him, but didn't look up at them.

"All set, Commander," he said. "On your order . . . I'll flush all our power trickles into the impulse system and overload it. They're small engines and they're pretty sick right now, but they've got enough juice to make a nice big boom. All we have to do is point at them and follow their own tractor emission right up to the source."

He shrugged, then sighed. "Wish it sounded a little fancier, but I guess . . . ready when you are."

George nodded stiffly. "Thanks, Carlos."

He and Robert retreated into a slow, solemn handshake that lasted a few seconds longer than either intended.

Soft brown thatch on one side, a whip of oxblood red on the other, one face made of pipe smoke and tweed, the other of hatchets and hammers, brown eyes, both, but not the same.

They stood there, the extract of the Federation dream-different people, different goals, different ideas, different styles . . .

Diversity.

Still holding Robert's hand, George put his other palm on Carlos's shoulder.

Simply and firmly, he said, "Blow 'em."
Raise hell. Rattle them at every turn. Make
them mad. They
couldn't think if they were mad.
That was the theory, anyway.
Of course, Jimmy was mad and
he
was still thinking.
Sort of. In a panicky, press-lipped,
nose-breathing sort of way.
He had to get as far from the trunk deck as he could
without being
found. That meant keeping low, ducking past open or
broken door
panels, not making noise any louder than the
bangs and shouts of
these sidewinders as they fought to keep their ship in one
piece long enough to win.
The amount of damage over here was staggering. A few
little
Starfleet cowboy tricks, pulled off with rubber
bands and fingernails, had knocked these people on their ears
and bashed this ship
into a knot of gasping sections. As Jimmy dodged
and sneaked and
ducked around, half the doors and sections he
passed were bolted
off and red-flagged for nonentry. Probably breached
to open space,
or contaminated.
Some of the smoke was rancid and chemical.
Some of it was from
simple burning. That meant two kinds of damage.
If only he knew
about chemicals . . . he'd heard engineers and
mechanics talking
about being able to smell what was wrong, but he'd always
figured they were nuts.
He rounded a corner, filled up with conflicting
thoughts, and
tripped on something big and thick. Before he even
realized what
had happened, he was lying on his side on the deck,
wincing and
confused.
Turning over, he found himself staring into a pair of
bugged eyes
and a mouth open in shock.
Stunned, Jimmy jolted backward, away from the
corpse. Human
or humanoid-he couldn't even tell. The body was

too battered
and too burned, stiff and pasty. In death it had
released its bowels.
He'd heard of that. The smell almost sent him
retching.
He held his breath, stumbled to his feet, and ran.
How many were left? How many people were still alive on this
ship for him to face? How many thieves were in the den?
Again he wished he had paid better attention at the
important
times in his life. How many people did a ship this size
and type take
to run?
"What difference does it make?" he sputtered as
he skidded around a corner and paused, glancing
back and forth along the groaning walls. "Ten or
ten thousand. They're just second-story
burglars. Doesn't take any brains."
Even rough and grumbling, his own voice was an
anchor line and
he hung on to it in spite of the hurricane he'd
steered into.
Again he ran through the twisting, smoky corridors,
then slowed
to a tiptoe stride when he thought he heard
voices-too close.
Imagination?
No-definitely voices.
And coming closer!
He ducked into a bulkhead crack under the
strut that had fallen
and cracked it.
Two aliens and two humans ran toward him,
involved in their own argument, shouting at each other about
repairs and calling
each other names while they came closer and closer.
Panting, Jimmy flattened himself behind the shifted
strut and tried to get control over his breathing.
Didn't want to be heard
gulping for air, and wanted to be ready if he had
to fight. Behind his
strut, as his breathing fought him and his heart throttled
against his
ribs, Jimmy realized they couldn't possibly
miss him. They'd see him, and he'd be dead, just like
that.
He balled his fists. Maybe he could just take one
of them before-
"Hey!" a voice shot out of the creaking, moaning
ship. "You
savages, where do you think you're going?"

As Jimmy peeked down the smoky corridor, the four men stopped running at a T-intersection with another corridor and looked down it. The voice was coming from there. "Why do you care?" one of the men responded. "I care. Why is none of your business." The voice materialized into a young man-very young in fact, fairly tall, with brown hair sloppily yanked back into a ponytail. A kid! Hardly much older than Jimmy. Maybe eighteen. Maybe a little more. A kid, barking at these pirates as though he thought they should be listening to him. "Why won't the tractor beam release?" he demanded of them. "It's locked on, that's why," one of the thieves said. "Locked on and jammed." A Tellarite poked a finger up at the kid and snarled, "What difference does it make? Where we go, they go!" The kid wasn't intimidated. "We're going to come about and smash that ship up right here and now. It's going to be a starboard turn, so get your flabby thighs moving and secure that tractor beam." One of the humans held out a hand and asked, "Why don't we just turn around and smack 'em?" The kid cocked a hip, annoyed. "Because our maneuvering thrusters are damaged. We're going to have to push out and come around in a wide arc. Want me to draw a picture for you and your little buddies, McKelvie? I'm going back to the bridge, and you better be ready to recalibrate when I get there. Go on." Nobody moved. They didn't seem to like taking orders from him. The kid paused as they stared fiercely at him, then drew a harsh gust of breath and shrieked, "Go . . . on!" Jimmy felt his skin contracting at the kid's tone of voice and the undisguised insane flare in those eyes. The kid wanted to be listened to, was frustrated that the men might not listen, and there

was a
dangerous intensity about him.
Not in charge . . . but someone to watch.
The four criminals glanced at each other, then two
of them
about-faced and headed back the way they'd come; one of
them
went with the kid down the T-angle, and the Tellarite
headed
toward Jimmy.
A Tellarite. They'd fight at the untying of a
present if it wasn't
untied their way. Jimmy would have his hands full if
he didn't get
the jump.
So Jimmy ticked off the paces, then flew out of
his hiding place
and yanked the broken strut down on top of the stumpy
alien. They both went down.
The Tellarite sucked a gasp, reared back, but
too late. The strut hit him in his squared chest,
and he was pushed down backward.
His furry head hit the deck, and he was out before
Jimmy could
even get back on his feet.
Jimmy scampered to the alien, yanked the
Tellarite's braided belt
from his thick waist, and wrapped it around the
neck. Then he
started to twist it, tighter and tighter.
And . . . gritted his teeth, then stopped.
Kill him, you idiot.
He tightened the belt again. The unconscious
Tellarite started to
gurgle through his porkish nose.
"Aw, dammit!" Jimmy thrust the ends of the belt
down on the
Tellarite's masky face. "I've got no
guts!"
Life-or-death situation or not, he pushed off the
deck and stood staring down at the unconscious
alien, not knowing whether to be
proud or ashamed.
Should he waste precious moments tying the
Tellarite up and
hiding him, since he didn't have the nerve to do what
he knew he
should? Confused, he grabbed the belt from around the
Tellarite's
throat-then changed his mind again. There wasn't time.
As soon as they could get this horse and buggy turned

around,
they were going to kill the Starfleet ship.
He didn't have a week to
pick off these guys one at a time. He knew he
couldn't just run, hide,
and run.
Stuffing the leather belt next to Veronica's hand in
his shoulder
strap, he dashed down the corridor again,
deliberately not going in
the direction that
kid
had gone. That was the way to the bridge, and
he didn't want to get trapped up where the command
center was.
He had to stay down here, in the core of the ship, and
do
something. Hurt these people.
Gas? Poison the air? Kill them all?
"Damn," he snarled. "Why didn't I keep
my helmet-was
Starboard turn, starboard turn . . .
His cold hands and the shuddering in his thighs told him he
wasn't as ready to die as he thought when he touched the
thruster
controls in his tube. He'd accidentally lived, and
now simple animal
fear was ahold of him again when he thought about dying.
Funny
how nerve could come and go.
On the defensive-hiding-wouldn't do him any good
...
he could stow away all year and it wouldn't help his
father and the
others. He had to do something, anything, now, before these
dirty
dogs could act on their plan to slice up the
cutter.
Anything. Anything to throw these quarreling animals
off their
track.
Something his father and Captain April would be able to see
on
the little screen. Something, something-some-
ENVIRONMENT MAINTENANCE CELL
Gas 'em . . . poison 'em . . . black
'em out somehow . . .
Maybe if he could get in there, an idea would
surface that he
could live through himself. He had to survive. There were people
to

talk to and a hand to return.
He scooted across to the environmental cell door.
It swung on a
full-length metallic hinge, or should have. Stuck,
jammed, bent, jarred slightly open-he put his
shoulder to it and summoned his
strength. The door budged a couple of inches, hinge
squawking like
an alarm, but then Jimmy was plunging forward. He
landed on his
forearms and knees on top of the collapsed door
inside the garbling,
noisy roomful of struggling equipment.
Pain dazed him and he stayed down too long. The
survival suit
might be happy to keep him breathing out in the vacuum
of space,
but it sure didn't do anything against bruises.
Both elbows
throbbed, both knees were jarred, and the outside edge of
his hand
was lacerated on the ripped hinge. Blood
splattered when he shook
his hand as though to push away the wound.
Trembling, he rose to his knees and looked. The
side of his hand
was gashed open the long way. A garnet flow ran
down his arm. He
was used to blood coming out of the corner of his mouth after a
fistfight, or the side of his head after a scrape,
or a kneecap after a
fall, but not this.
Brash understanding struck him of how slow and gruesome a
death could come his way here. He might not get that
sudden heroic
way out that people would want to write stories about or
tell their
children. He could die here in a way that nobody ever
wanted to
describe to a child. If he was having even the tiniest
shred of fun or
adventure underneath the danger, that shred dissolved now
and
suddenly.
His heart pounded fiercely. He could feel it in his
head, neck, and
chest. What looked like a lot of blood was
dripping, smearing all
over the floor. They'd find him if they saw. He
was leaving traces of
his presence, his whereabouts-

His heart throttled harder. Breath came in gusts.
Do something, do something . . .
He shook his hand again. Blood splattered on the
scuffed floor, and spotted the red base of a
cylindrical mechanism and the black
polymer legs that held the housing in place.
Saucer-shaped. Red. Black . . .
Pressing his cut hand against his thigh to slow the bleeding,
Jimmy gathered his wits and crawled closer. Was this
what he
thought it was?
Looked the same . . . bigger, but in general the
same. Even the
same colors. Probably contracted by somebody in
the Federation.
On the far side was the stenciled word
superstator.
Stator, stator, super . . .
"Superconductor!" he blurted out.
"Veronica!"
With his good hand he gripped the synthetic hand tucked
in his
shoulder strap and offered a victorious squeeze.
Smaller stencils said
electroplasma, cryon gas,
something about
dampers and conduits and wavelengths, and lots of
hands-off
warnings and maintenance directions.
Veronica's voice tickled his mind-what gravity
compensators
were for
...
why they needed this during acceleration and decelera
tion or
...
a turn . . .
"I'm no environmental engineer," he rasped.
"Guess I might
break something."
All he had to do was
hurt
it.
Lips pressed flat, eyes kinked into knives,
he looked around the
small room as though suspicious of the walls
themselves. He needed
something that could hurt.
How long did he have before they turned off the
tractor beam and
started to turn? What was it Veronica had tried

to explain to him
about physics and gravity?
For the ship to accelerate or turn, this would have to be
working.
He had only minutes, or only moments.
As if to taunt and call him, the gravity
compensator began to hum, then hum louder. Glaring
at it, he gritted his teeth and
narrowed his eyes in bitter rage. The turn!
Staggering to his feet suddenly, Jimmy pushed off
the floor, slipped on his own blood, but in
seconds he had a wall-mounted
hand-held emergency fire extinguisher in his grasp.
Simple, basic, easy. A heavy little canister
that shot stuff out of it.
Hadn't changed in a couple of centuries.
Science had come up with
a dozen fancy chemical mixtures to put out more
fire, faster, with
more damage to the flame and less to the thing that was
burning,
but the stuff inside still had to come out of one end of a
canister and
come out fast. That meant pressure.
Pressure. Enough of it could keep delicate
life-forms alive where they were never meant to live.
Too much of it could melt steel into
putty. It could save or destroy. Depending on
how it was used.
And Jimmy Kirk had a handful of it.
With that and a hatchet, he could save the universe.
A tremor of anticipation almost knocked him off his
feet as he
stumbled over the collapsed door to the opposite
side of the cell.
He needed a tool. Heavy, preferably with an
edge.
The best he found was a set of antimagnetic
screws. Not enough.
Slumping back against a heating system, Jimmy
shuddered and
closed his eyes as he dealt with the pain in his hand and
both arms.
Injuries he hadn't felt happen were starting
to surface. His body ached until he couldn't
tell the difference between what he was
feeling and the constant throb and hum of struggling
environmental systems that confused
him
and clouded his thoughts. Fatigue made
him dizzy, demanded that he rest.

No time. He forced himself to his knees again and ignored the aches that twisted down into his calves. There was some way. He had to find it. Or make it. All he had to do was cut the valve off the top, and he'd have a little rocket. "Cut it off, or knock it off." He chewed his lip as he fought to keep his head clear. "Where's a rock when you need one?" He looked around again, and reset his thinking. He wasn't going to get the right tool. He'd have to settle for a wrong one. What he needed right now was a Frenchman with a portable guillotine in his pocket. There had to be something in there that he could use. Sure couldn't risk tiptoeing all over this ship, hoping to find- A maintenance dumbwaiter! With a door that slid upward. A heavy door. Heavy enough? Jimmy shot across the environment cell again, shoving piled parts aside to reach the wall and the dumbwaiter. It was mechanical, not meant to be hand-hoisted, and so the door was solid as a frontier iron stove. "Perfect," Jimmy gushed. Ignoring his injured hand, he forced the thick black door up a few inches, enough to cram the fire extinguisher under it and keep it open. The door squawked and moaned as though to complain that it hadn't been used in years. A puff of dust came out and choked him. He backed off and paused to gather the strength he would need, then used the time to overturn a little portable light stand and rip one of its three legs off. Leaning the leg against the wall under the dumbwaiter, he ignored his own huffing and puffing and once again put all the power he had into raising the dense door as high as it would

go. More dust
and cobwebs wheezed out and clouded around him. He
coughed,
tried to find clear air, then held his breath. Using
his shoulder to
keep the door up, he struggled to grab the leg-not
knock it over
and have to do this again-then he crammed the leg under the
door. It had to go in at an angle because it was a little
too long, but it
did keep the door up.
Not for long, though-under so much solid weight, the
hollow
rod was already bowing under the strain.
That meant he had only seconds more before his own time
ran
out, as well as his father's.
Confiscating two insulation pads from a tool
locker, he dragged
them back to the dumbwaiter and put them to one side,
where he
could reach them. Working so fast his fingers
tangled, he positioned the fire extinguisher with the
valve facing into the dumbwaiter shaft
and the bottom of the canister facing the gravity
generator housing.
Then he tied one end of the Tellarite's belt around
the light stand's leg, and backed off to the other end.
If only he could feel the ship turning . . . but
there was only the
taunting hum from the stator spinning in its casing. A
starboard
turn. He had to brace against-that wall over there.
Using one hand, he put the insulation pads up against
the wall to
his right, the starboard wall, toward the back. He could
barely reach
the back part of the cell. He'd probably be
crushed a few paces in that direction, but it was best
he could do.
The stator was still humming. Now it was working for him
instead of against him. They were still turning for the kill.
He closed his eyes briefly, then gasped, "One
. . . two . . .
three!"
With both arms he yanked t he belt.
The leg shrieked and popped out. The dense
door panel came
down-yes, just like a guillotine blade-and smashed the
valve.
The extinguisher canister jiggled crazily for an

instant, then shot
across the cell like a missile, spraying a yeasty
mist all over the cell
and Jimmy.
Flattened against the insulation pads, holding his
breath, Jimmy saw the canister hit the gravity
casing.
A giant fist hit the ship.
A seizure of raw natural power smacked the
vessel bodily in the gut with cyclone force. Its
whirlwind outbreak made a mockery of
technology and turned the universe into a senseless
lather.
Nausea flushed Jimmy a fraction before he was
pulled off the wall
by a sucking force and propelled across the cell and right
out the
open door, angled upward toward the corridor
ceiling, helpless even
to pull his arms and legs forward. Pieces of the ship
went with
him-anything that wasn't tied down flew for
freedom, heedless of
its path, or whether or not there even was a path.
Bolted-down
equipment ripped right off housings and hurtled in the
most direct
line, smashing through the walls as though everything had been
changed into a bullet.
Whatever couldn't smash through was destroyed by the walls.
The weaker force was destroyed, whatever it was,
alive or not.
Sounds of smashing and crashing, breakage, explosion,
and screams
erupted all around him, but he was caught like a leaf
in the cyclone.
The door frame whipped past. All the lighting
changed. The
corridor wall rushed at his face, struts
spreading like the arms of a
great black bear.
The last thought Jimmy had was about the physics of a
starboard
turn, that the wall rushing at him was the one he should be
braced against, and how this was a really pointless way
to die.
"They're on to us! They're moving off!"
Dripping sweat, Carlos Florida raked a wet
hand across his
forehead.
"Now, Carlos!" George shouted. "Blow the

engines!"

Carlos gritted his teeth and winced as he hit the switch.

Nothing happened.

George shoved past him and slammed the switch with his fist. And again. "What the hell's wrong! What's wrong with it!"

On the small screen before them, the enemy ship was already hundreds of kilometers away and coming around in a wide semi circle.

Carlos frowned and said, "They're coming about."

"I don't believe this," George groaned.

Despondent, Carlos shook his head gravely.

"There must be a leak in our system. The buildup's being purged somewhere. It won't blow up."

George plastered a palm over his eyes and battled the sudden draining weakness that made him lean forward on Carlos and groan.

Unfulfilled anticipation sucked the strength from his back and down into his legs and right out the bottom of the cutter. His

head sagged and breath came in shallow gusts.

"God," he wheezed. "I can't even commit suicide right. . . ."

This sorrow-sick noise was the voice of the brokenhearted. Worse than the concept of sacrifice and dying for this cause was the

prospect of somehow surviving a situation that had taken the life of his youngest son.

Burdened and guilty, driven spiritless by the failure of their final act, he knew none of them would get back the strength to do this a second time. Such resolve was hard to stoke and almost impossible to rekindle. Could he ask of Robert and Carlos to try again?

The enemy ship was racing nearer with every second, and was again practically on top of them. There was no more time, no

chance to do anything else.

"They've got us," he murmured. "We've lost."

He felt Robert's hand on his elbow and a squeeze that was meant to be some kind of support or sympathy, but there was nothing to

say that would wipe away the fact that they'd failed.
From now on, when these criminals attacked any other
ship in the future, it would
somehow be Commander George Kirk's fault. He
and his son and
his crew, and his friend Captain April, the founder of the
Federa
tion Starship Program, would simply disappear and
become a
mysterious statistic in the history of space
exploration. This area of
space would become known as some kind of quicksand, but
nobody
would know why.
Under his wet palm, Carlos suddenly stiffened.
"Look!"
Before their eyes the attack ship buckled against itself in
the
middle of its swing around, spitting
flotsam like an animal vomiting bones.
Crystallized air sprayed out of scissures all
over, and in other
places the hull material caved in even as they were
watching. Slits
opened up along seams, and some chambers blew open
and spewed
everything inside.
"Good God!" Robert uttered as they all leaned
closer to the little
staticky picture. "What on earth-?"
"Right in the middle of a turn!" Carlos choked out.
"Their
gravity compensation went!"
And a hideous sight it was. The enemy ship spun
sickeningly on a
point, pocked with holes torn by entire consoles that
had come off
their mountings and smashed through deck after deck to shoot
right
out the hull. Whole sections were blown open.
Atmosphere sprayed
in frozen funnels from a dozen places. Squinting
in empathy, they
watched the backups shutting off portions
of the ship where
atmosphere spat. Some funnels pattered and
closed off quickly, but others sprayed until the
atmosphere in that area simply petered out.
The two circumstances looked different somehow
to trained
eyes . . . one had a little more control than the other

in a situation
where control was a shabby wish.
Chunks of ship and machinery, tools and parts, food
and lamps
and boots and bottles, flew outward from the enemy
vessel, small,
large, and even the grotesque remains of crewmen
slaughtered by
the impact, some blown out holes while still alive and
then torn
apart by the vacuum of space, others crushed by flying
machinery,
then driven through the shattered hulls crammed into open
space. Headless bodies, bodiless heads,
limbless torsos-all had a sort of
expression of horror endemic to living creatures,
bodies in a state of
surprise, the last second's emotion
recognizable by anyone who
lived and breathed and saw.
A wild, demonic ship's nightmare. A
tempest of physics. A ship
with its gravity shut down in the middle of a turn.
"What happened?" George rasped. "What
happened to them?"
Robert April closed the few inches between them.
"I'll tell you
what happened, old boy-was
He coiled an arm around George's shoulders and
howled enthusiastically.
"Your
son
happened!"
Klaxons honked obscenely, shrieking what the
crew already knew.
Alarms demanded attention that wouldn't come soon.
Nerve-
ripping screams and frantic shouts from below shot up
through the
crawlways.
"What happened! Caskie! What stopped us!"
"How d'l know?"
Lou Caskie spat broken teeth out of his
mouth and fingered his
nose and a cheekbone, both broken. Smoke poured
from some
where and nearly blinded him. The bridge stank and the
heat was
almost unbearable. Through it all he heard Rex
badgering him
again.

"Ask Okenga, then!"

"I ain't asking him!"

"Why'n hell not?"

was 'Cuz he's . . . ask him yourself."

"Aw, Jesus Christ, why can't that blood-sucking
yorker stay on
those engines, where he belongs! Okenga! Get up
off your back, son
of a bitch!"

Big Rex Moss stumbled forward, off balance because
the deck was

hoisted up to nearly a twenty-degree angle, which
made him

virtually lift his own bulk and pull himself along the
destroyed

control panels. He skidded on something slick and
looked down to

curse the flow of lubricant.

But it wasn't lubricant under his shoes. It was

Okenga's innards.

The Andorian wasn't on his back on the deck.

In fact, he was still

standing, fitted grotesquely into an indentation in the
side-mounted

starboard control center, a dent that was form-fitted because
his

form had crushed it in. Across his lower body lay a
three-foot shard

of torn computer casing, half of the navigational
console torn right

out of its base and thrown across the bridge into the
consoles on the

other side. Only Okenga had been standing there in the
way.

He looked sag-eyed at Rex with a perfect
opera-house stare, waiting for the music to start. His

blue complexion was pasty, stumpy antennae

shifting slowly, lips hanging open and oozing

fluid, but moving-open, shut, open, shut-as though
trying to

form a sentence.

The alien reached out toward Rex. Beryl

fingers gnawed the air. A

plea, an accusation-all this was on his mottled face
as it rapidly changed from blue to bleached white.

On his hand, tangled in

fingers that should have been mending machinery, hung a vine
of

intestine.

Open, shut, open, shut.

"Christ!" Rex gagged. He staggered backward,

away, wagging his hands. "Don't touch me! God!"
The whine of the ship trying to keep itself from falling apart, blowing up, or blowing out smothered his shouts. He dragged himself past Caskie to the crawlway, straddled it, and shouted down into the billowing smoke and fumes in the engine room.

"Dazzo! Munkwhite! Smith! Gowan! Get up here! Clear out this junk and get this corpse off the bridge!"
There were no answers. Only howls for help, groaning, panicked accusations, the crashing of broken machinery and whole sections collapsing fifty feet below him.

From the deck, a voice cut through him, quiet and stable.

"At least give him a chance to die first."
Purple with rage, Big Rex thrust around to snarl at his son. "If we had those shields, none of this would be happening! We'd be in the Blue by now!"

Lowering his voice, though he was in no position to challenge, Roy had to ask, "What've my shields got to do with this? The gravity went haywire!"

"Find out what happened," Big Rex snarled. "You, boy, you find out. They did something to us! I don't know what and I don't know how, but they did something! They made the gravity turn itself off."

Panting as if he'd run through the ship, Roy pulled up from where he lay with legs curled under him and his knuckles crushed against a spurting vein in his left calf and gave his father a you're-stupid look.

"Gravity doesn't turn itself off," he said. "There's compensation as long as the stator is spinning. Either plasma power has to be cut or the housing has to be ruptured. The power wasn't turned off. The backup compensators are still working, since we have some gravity left, but the main system-was
"What's all that mean?" his father bellowed. "Quit

sucking your tail and give me an answer! What does it mean?"

Shuddering under his father's vast shadow and the form that cast it, Roy licked at the salty taste of blood in his mouth before he could answer.

Then he said, "It means we've got a worm." George Kirk stared at the small screen. His legs were thready, eyes red and moist, his voice heart-pricking. "He's . . . alive?"

The pathetic whisper wanted desperately to be an answer and not a question, but there simply wasn't enough assurance in it to carry beyond the small sound of a parent's hope. His hands trembled and had nothing to do. He opened and closed them in nervous spasms.

"At least," Carlos said, "he was a minute ago."

The fact struck them all as they pushed for a view of the tiny screen and the sickening picture of the ship. Robert uttered, "Somewhat of a determinist, isn't he? My Lord, look at it. They must've had a shattering blow . . . perhaps they're ready for a stand-down."

With a taste of irony in his mouth, George complained, "What're you gonna do? Swim over there and say, 'Checkmate'?"

Indulging a passive grin, Robert said, "Wouldn't that be a jolly moment. Well, we can't destroy ourselves in such a way that we would take them with us, and we can't cross the little mile between us and board them, so what can we do? We'll have to reassess the situation, gentlemen, but I warn you, we're still dancing on a hot griddle."

"Sir?" Carlos grunted as he stood up and faced them. "If there's a purge in the power system, that means there's enough coolant left in the system somewhere to keep the failsafes on line so we couldn't overload."

He looked from one to the other of his commanding officers, and

knew his analysis hit its mark when Robert strode off a pace or two and muttered, "Oh, dear." "So," George said, looking at Robert then back at Carlos. "What's that mean?" Carlos shifted nervously. "Well, it means I might be able to find some electroplasma in the system and funnel it into the cutting torches. I might be able to get you a couple of low-power laser shots. At this distance," he said, pointing at the very close enemy ship on the monitor, "even industrial lasers'll slice that ship in half." Knowing what he was suggesting, he paused then and spoke more quietly, only to George. "If you . . . want to, I mean." The moment's irreducible weight sat again on George Kirk. He breathed heavily through cracked lips, and stared at the cluttered deck. Wrapped in the thorns of his problem, he felt his two shipmates' sympathetic eyes, but couldn't force himself to look up and meet them. Cutting lasers at less than two kilometers. It'd kill everybody over there, no question. One last-ditch hair-brained idea. One last chance-again. How many last chances would they get before their deadlock was broken and they started backsliding? How long before somebody else would pay the price? "Get on it," he said. "Get me a shot before they get their shields back up." His voice cracked. His expression was heart-melting, crusting over quickly as he summoned his saw-file temper to protect himself. Putting space between himself and the others, he warned them with his posture to leave him alone. "Aye, sir," Carlos said sadly. Robert saw the dark wall descending, and stepped across the deck. "George-was But the other man didn't look at him. Words snapped between

them like the crack of a leather whip.

"Don't talk to me, Robert."

The galaxy moaned in the rapture of unconsciousness. Pain misted its stars. Plenty of stars, everywhere. Vibrations tortured the vessel. A relentless force, wave after wave.

Jimmy swam back to awareness through a contaminated sea. He groped through darkness, stroked for the surface, lungs crying for relief. Salty bubbles clogged his mouth and nose. He moaned aloud and nearly choked, but the sound gave him something to swim toward.

A relentless force held his arms and legs down. His muscles were helpless to do their jobs, and they whined with frustration and effort. Paralyzed?

In a daze, he moved his head from side to side.

His tongue worked inside swollen lips. Moisture squished between his teeth.

The bubbling, and the warm, salty taste, was blood.

Internal damage. Maybe his lungs. Maybe his face or his head. Why couldn't he feel the pain? He had a moment ago

...

he felt his eyes blinking now, but though vaguely aware of straining lights above him, he couldn't see through a pinkish blur.

Was he blind?

If Veronica could take being ripped in half, then he could take being blind. He made that decision before he even attempted to sit up and account for his injuries. Whatever it was, he would get through it.

As thoughts about Veronica and his father and the others came back, so did the pain.

Nothing to worry about. Dad would take care of it. The thought bulldozed him. He hadn't had a thought like it for years . . . this idea that he was being taken care of

...

that he was better off than somebody else might be

...

that he owed anyone
anything . . .
His chest pounded. He groaned aloud again. The sound
pulled
him up fast, like being pushed upward out of a grave
into the light of
consciousness. Lying on hard rubber . . . faint
bands of light, in no
particular direction. The smoke. The smell-
The corridor. The enemy ship. The gravity
compensator!
What a mess he must have made. The whole
ship was whining,
groaning, hissing spray and smoke from ruptures
up and down the
adjoining corridors. His chest pounded from inhaling
whatever
gases and fumes were spitting out.
"God . . . damn . . . was . . . that. . .
stupid. .
."

He had pinpointed the gravity thing, tried to imagine
ahead of
time what would happen to the ship, tried to recall
everything
Veronica had explained to him so that he would get it
right, and
kept the presence of mind to brace himself against the
wall.
"The wrong wall," he sputtered.
New rule. . . always, always,
always keep a mental map of your ship. Three
dimensions, jackass.
Three of them.
"Wait'aaa

...
tell Dad."
Jimmy laughed at himself as he lay there, fighting
delirium. He laughed first at his mistake, then
laughed again at the anticipation
of telling his father, so they could laugh together.
The ship whined beneath him. The ceiling creaked and sounded
as if it wanted to cave in on him. He'd done it.
He'd hurt them. The
confusion was palpable right through the hard rubber deck, and
announced itself in a dozen alarms, crackles of
shattered machin
ery, warning whoops, and howls of life-forms in
agony.
All around him, the trumpet of destruction
proclaimed his

win-at least, for the moment.
He'd bought this moment for himself and his shipmates.
What
could be done with it, he hadn't the slightest clue.
His plan hadn't gone into the what-next part of the
tourist map.
And he was still flat on his back, gasping. He
felt his own weight,
so the backup gravity must have come on already. But the
ship- he'd made a mess.
Air raked in and out of his damaged innards,
each breath a
shudder. He felt the stretch of every muscle and the
expansion of
every rib, then each contraction. The heat here was like a
closet in
August. Stuffy, hot, moist. Feeling as though
he were being cooked
inside his survival suit, he began senselessly
clawing at the straps
and closures until the suit relaxed its grip
on his chest. Without
complete awareness of what he was doing, Jimmy
clumsily peeled
the suit off. He was on hands and knees in drenched
off-duty
clothes, his head sagging. Blood pushed into his head
and rolled
him toward blackout again.
Consciousness surged, faded, surged. Jimmy fought
to keep it
when it surged, and to stay on his hands and knees
until the waves
passed and he thought he might be able to get up.
The survival suit was puddled under him, a moist,
shimmering
white rag. In a fold, Veronica's hand waved
at him, fingers out and
thumb folded in as though showing him the number four.
It must
have been crushed between his body and the corridor
structure
when he hit, he figured.
Four . . . four seconds . . . four minutes
...
no, that didn't make any sense. The hand wasn't
telling him anything. But did remind
him that he was on borrowed time now. These outlaws would
struggle to recover from the damage, fight to put
themselves and
their ship back together, and they would come looking for the

saboteur.

Jimmy Kirk, worm in the apple.

He had to move. Get away from here. This was where they'd look first.

Determined not to make the kind of mistakes he'd been making,

Jimmy crawled to a crack in the corridor wall sections, dragging his survival suit with him, and stuffed the suit into the crack. He wished

he'd had the presence of mind or the experience to have done the

same with his helmet. If they found it, they'd know what to look for.

He could only hope they wouldn't be looking down in that

unpressurized storage section until later.

He hoped they wouldn't have time.

As he got to his feet, he recognized the sensation of weighing less than he was used to. That made sense-he'd blitzed their gravity system. Probably relying on partial power, or backups, if these morons had any backups.

Supporting himself on the wall, fighting to ignore the pain in his

chest and legs, Jimmy scooped up Veronica's hand and tucked it

into the elastic belt of his trousers. At least if they found him, they'd

wonder for a minute what kind of mutant they'd picked up.

What the hell . . . maybe it'd give him a moment's advantage.

Flushed with fever, limping, gasping, fighting blurred eyesight and a foggy, thunderous pain in his head, Jimmy struggled down

the corridor. He had to get as far as he could from this section of the enemy ship.

He had to hide.

"Dad," he gurgled, "we'll laugh together about this . . . even if it kills me. . . ."

"George, turn around."

"I'm serious! Don't talk to me."

Gnawing dread crawled through the hold. The sense of backslid

ing offered an almost physical pressure.
Not even hotheaded petulance could hide a father's
anguish
under a commander's responsibility, nor could it
disguise the
ruptures and fissures of simple human doubt.
George's hands dug hard into the edge of a crate
lid. His cheeks
were blotched and ruby with heat, his hair
clawing his forehead in damp claret thorns. He
didn't look up as he felt Robert's
unwanted
attention and responded with another snap.
"Don't look at me either."
But Robert April was a commander of souls as well
as ships, and
he wasn't about to turn away from this. He did not,
however, come
any closer.
Before him, George boiled like stew. His bandaged
hands
clenched hard and his knuckles went as white as the
gauze. His
shoulders and ribs constricted within the scarlet
Starfleet tunic with
such exaggeration that the tunic itself seemed alive and
writhing.
A wrong moment. Perhaps the moment would never come right for
them, but Robert stepped off to the side, knelt beside
Veronica,
and consumed the moment by replacing the spent medical car
tridges.
The girl was unconscious, pale, and breathing very
shallowly. Her
face was clammy and cool, her eyebrows slightly
raised as though
dreaming. The survival suit in its
medical-nurse mode struggled
visibly to keep her alive, applying doses of
whatever was needed to
counter losses it read in her body, keeping dabs
of silver nitrate on
her slaughtered limbs to reduce bleeding. In
spite of all that, the
right side of the suit was beginning to turn cherry as
blood defied
effort and soaked slowly through.
As he stood up again, Robert noted that Carlos was
deep inside
the mechanics again, applying himself to his purpose,
only his legs

showing as he attempted to follow an order that had them
all by the
throat.

There would be no good time, so he turned again to the
surging
lava.

"You're not thinking, George."

"That's a lie," the crust shifted.

George pushed off and paced the length of the hold.
Robert watched him but made no attempt to close
him in.

Seconds ticked away. Both men were barbed with
awareness of each
other.

"There's only one way out of some things," George
finally said.

"We've got a responsibility to people who come after
us. If it were
anybody else on that ship-was

"It's not anybody else," Robert said forthrightly.

"It's your son. No one would ask you to do this."

"We're not sure he's alive."

"We're fairly sure. Don't ask more of yourself
than anyone else
would ask of you."

"I don't have a choice."

Passively, Robert repeated, "No one
expects you to kill your own
son. It's not part of the oath."

"Yes, it is."

"No . . . it's not. Now, listen to me."

"I can't listen to you, goddammit! These people are
dangerous!

They've killed before and they'll kill again if we
don't stop them

now. If that gravity slam didn't kill

Jimmy, they've probably found

him by now-how long do you think they'll let him stay
alive on

their ship? I can't make this decision based on

...

on a guess."

His throat almost twisted apart with the emotion surging through
it. The words came out skinned and raw.

Robert pushed his hands into his cardigan pockets
as though

to supplement the tension with a dose of calm. "You're
over-

compensating, my friend. If he weren't your son, you'd
be clearer-

headed. You're trying too hard to go by the book-was

George wrenched around, one hand out in a bitter plea, his brows knotted into a single copper pipe.

"What do you want me to do? Let those bastards live because I hope Jimmy's still alive? What if he is alive? You want me to leave him over there and ignore what they might do to him? Torture him? Murder him? We don't know who or what's driving that ship! They could be slave traders! They could be cannibals!"

"George, stop that kind of talk!"

"Why are you making this hard on me? You know I'm right!" A bandaged fist slammed into the hold wall, and way down the deck made Carlos's legs flinch. "If I could, I'd stand in front of them myself, and you know it!"

"I do know it, yes."

"Then don't get in my way. Carlos, what've you got?"

From the wall, the answer was "Maybe one blast, maybe a third power, sir. This close . . . it'll do the job."

Robert shook his head slowly, firmly, and moved closer. "George, you'll have to pay attention. If it were me over there or if it were a stranger, you'd consider another option. You're not allowing your self that. Your judgment's clouded. You're not even giving Jimmy the consideration you would give a stranger."

"Don't you get it?" George jammed a finger toward open space.

"He's probably dead! One of those"-he couldn't say the words, but waved his hand frantically-"was probably him!"

"We don't have those facts. We're guessing. You're so aware it's your boy that you're afraid of making a decision based on that fact. You're afraid others might die in the future, but we're not liable for the future at moments like this. You must make yourself understand, George. Some junctures have no precedent to call upon. We have to make one to fit-was

"Fine!

You
invent how we're going to get across the mile of
vacuum between us and them! Out of all of outer space
we've got
this one little mile, and we can't do anything about it
except fire at
them!"

The subject was shifting, becoming confused, garbled.
Science and physics were sneaking in where Robert
didn't want them. He lowered his voice to a tone
that said he wasn't going to argue.

"No, George," he said gravely. "Jimmy's
not only your son. He's
an underage civilian who swore no oaths of
risk or enlisted with
reasonable perspective. He's not Starfleet. You
can't apply the same articles to him. As your
commander, I'm not letting you sacrifice an
innocent civilian, and as your friend . . . I'm not
letting you kill
your son."

"Carlos! Get the laser on line and bring us around
to firing
position!"

The exhausted helm engineer crawled out of his hole,
sat sweating
on the deck, and looked with dismay at them both.
He'd heard it all, of course. He looked from his
captain to his commander, then back
again.

"Carlos," Robert overruled, "get the
laser on line, but there will
be no firing yet."

George spun at him and whined, "Don't put him
in the middle!

That's not-what-what're you doing? What kind of
behavior is
that?"

"Mine, I s'pose."

"This isn't a joke!"

"Believe me, I am
not

joking." True to his words, Robert was
uncommonly grim as he lowered his chin
to schoolmaster level and
added, "It's not up for debate."

Undeniable plangency gave weight to his tone, his
years of
experience rising as they rarely did even at such
times. His eyes
were utterly still.

Astounded and speechless at what he was hearing,
George
gawked at him.
Only after seconds of disbelief, he stammered.
"Are you
...
are you pulling rank on me?"
"That's right. Sorry."
It seemed absurd, with Robert standing there on a
cocked hip,
hands pocketed in the much-beleaguered Irish sweater,
the cream
wool collar bunched up around the back of his neck
and his brown
hair just brushing it. His natural probity stood
behind him like an army of trees that refused the storm.
He might as well have been
standing on a reedy shoreline holding a fishing pole,
saying "sorry"
for having put the wrong bait in his creel.
Battling astonishment, eyes ringed and glaring,
George shook
with frustration.
"You-you don't have any right!" he breathed. "There's
no
regulation that lets you take command at this point!"
"I don't care about that."
"I'm not injured, I'm not irrational, I'm not-was
"Regardless," Robert said. "You can keep command, but

simply may not make this decision. I won't
allow it."
George aimed a shoulder at him and mocked,
"What're you
gonna do? Duke it out with me?"
"We're not
doing
it, George. Find another option."
The grist of their problem gurgled and broiled, and
refused to be
dismissed. The worst of all moral dilemmas
crushed in on them
from two directions. Not a right and a wrong, but two
wrongs. Kill
Jimmy, or leave him to these people to kill him and chance
these
criminals killing others in the future.
Two terrible options, knocking up against each other,
both
relying on guesses and hopes.
Now what?

Soulsore, George cranked away from the others and found a corner. There were no rules to fit this situation. The rules that did exist were inadequate to the grave emotions and plagues on him now.

"Captain!" Carlos called suddenly. "The energy readings-was He was squinting through the dimness at the monitors on the floor.

"Yes?" Robert asked, turning. "What is it?"

"The sensor screen, sir! Third from the right. I think their shields are starting to go back up!"

A lead ball landed in the pit of every stomach. If those shields were going up-

George plowed out of the shadows. "Fire! Fire, Carlos!"

"No!" Robert challenged. "I told you, we're not doing it."

Carlos had his arms inside the wall, hands on the connections to make a laser bolt happen for them, but he looked back and forth at them, baffled.

"I said fire!" George called.

Robert was damningly calm. "Absolutely not."

"Sirs, their shields are activating!" Carlos cried. "I've got to know

for sure what to do! We've got just a second!"

"It's not for you to decide!" George bellowed down at him. "This

isn't gonna happen to anyone else! You're under my command here!"

"No, Carlos," Robert said, "you're not."

"Oh, God," Carlos moaned. "Please

...

I

...

I can't-was

George rounded on the captain. "I told you I don't want him in

the middle! You don't put your crew in the middle of something like this!"

"There is no middle," Robert reminded sternly.

"We're not firing

to destroy a ship where an innocent child has been
captured. I'm
not doing it. Nor are you."
Sweat pouring down his face from the effort of the decision
itself,
George panted out a savage frustration. It had
to be now-now
or-
"That's it," Carlos said, crawling to the row of
monitors and
tampering until he was sure of what he saw.
"Yeah, that's it," he
sighed. "They've got a higher level of screening
back on line than
we've got laser power. Wouldn't do any good
to fire on them now, even with full torches. We just
. . . waited too long." He looked up
at them both. "Sorry, sirs."
Lips pressed like two parts of an iron pot,
George glowered at
him, then at Robert. His eyes could have lit
matches.
Hounded by the loss of a chance, he gestured at
Carlos, glared at
Robert, flopped his arms in anger, and stormed
farther away from
them, all the way to the other end of the hold again.
No matter how many simulations Starfleet
gave its trainees, they
never had to kill more than numbers going up and down
on a chart.
Training told
what
to do, but never could say whether a person had
the mettle to actually do it.
Robert saw that unfortunate kink in the noble armor
right before
his eyes today. Here with him was a man who had the
mettle, and
whom fate would test if allowed. Now they had lost
their chance to
know which was the better answer.
To prevent fate from getting its way, Robert had
stepped in, and
now they might never know. He had learned a long time
ago that he
could turn comets if he stepped at the proper
moment. Even if the
comet was about to self-immolate.
He glanced back and tactfully said, "Carlos,
see what you can do

about rerouting what you had there and gathering us a little maneuverability, as long as we've found some power in the system."

Uneasy, Carlos hesitated, and grumbled, "Aye, sir."

He drew a couple of weak breaths, then disappeared inside the wall again.

That element taken care of, authority in place for the moment,

Robert strolled across the deck to where he was trying to mix oil and water in a very hot caldron.

With that truepenny candidness glowing in his eyes, he leaned one elbow on a crate, hands still balled in his pockets, and hoped

the subservient position would give him a tad of an edge as he gazed

at the man he had just shot down.

"George . . . please try to understand. We're not merely corn

mentators to how life and law will be in space," he

said. "There are no precedents, because we're the ones out here first, making them."

A humane pause gave a lift to his condolence before he softly added,

"That's why you don't know what to do."

Seconds broiled past in silence.

Anxiety chewed at them both, each feeling at some distance the

soldierly stoutheadedness of the other, yet neither able to give in,

until George found it in himself to speak the most bitter sentence he

had ever tasted in his own mouth.

"I

did know

what to do," he ground out. "I managed to make the hardest decision of my life . . . and you stopped me."

He pressed his cheek to the quivering metal and wept with joy. The

metal moaned and shuddered as though responding to his nearness

and his touch.

Beneath his outstretched body, the ship was staggering, limping,

dazed, but

his

part was right again. They had come back to him and were ready to give again. Joy came back, because his personhood was knitted to these coils and conductors.

"Oh, my shields . . . my shields .

.."

Tears broke from Roy's closed eyes and dripped
the few inches to
the deck he lay upon, and he murmured senseless
blessings to his machines for their coming back to life.
He had suckled and cooed
them back, in spite of the invertebrates around him and
their
weak-minded shilly-shallying, in spite of the victims
fighting back
this time and the worm in the ship.
His guardian angels were back. His Blue
guardians that made his future surge and swell.
He would have all these jugsuckers indebted
to him someday. Soon-months, perhaps weeks. They would
all rely upon him and speak well to him and call him
"sir." There
would be shameless extravagance of gratitude to him.
He felt tired in his mind. Tired of somebody
else being in charge
his
whole life.
"I'll get it," he whispered.
The deflector mechanism hummed softly back
at him as it
pressed into his cheek. He heard a
corresponding velvet bip-bip-bip, and knew the
beautiful blue light on the control panel above
was going on, off, on, off, its activity proof that
there were shields again. This was the only beauty on the
bridge of the
Shark.
The
Shark.
As if this was one ship, and not a stitched-together
Frankenstein without a soul. That's why nobody
knew for sure what
the ship looked like-because it was constantly changing,
weekly
added to or subtracted from, built upon or
repaired. None of their
victims had survived so far, and even if they had,
there would be no
describing the
Shark,
because the looks of the ship kept changing.
So his shields had to keep changing. Bigger,
smaller, angled beam fragments, intensified here,
reduced there. And no one knew how to
make it work but him.

"You can get what I need," he murmured.

"We'll have a reputation of our own. Our destiny will arrive."

"Who you talking to, tail?"

Big

Rex's

bark bit off the moment of adoration. His vast form loomed overhead, carrying with it its own smell and a corona of

heat. "Don't you know how freakish it looks to other people when

you talk to the scrap? There's always been something wrong with you. Swear I'd pay to fix it if I knew what it was."

He backed away, since he was too big to turn in this cramped

section of the bridge, then lumbered away on his tree stumps.

Roy ticked off the paces until he was safe, then grumbled,

"Devotion on the hoof."

Having his father in charge had rallied him the resentful silence

of the others, but not the respect he coveted. No one seemed to

realize that his shields were the only reason they could hide and

pounce as they had, make careers for themselves rather than shoveling manure on some subsidized colony, which was where

most of them belonged. They knew

his special delicate deflectors

were their lifeline, yet they didn't quite realize

how heavily they

already relied on him.

Nothing else had gone right this trip, and they were back to

relying on him, whether they knew it or not. The ship was stumbling

around, blown open in a dozen spots, a third of the crew dead or

dying on the deck. They were back to relying on him and his shields

to pull the Starfleet cutter into the Blue Zone and crush it.

They should realize their dependence. He shouldn't have to tell

them. He shouldn't always have to remind them,

"It's all because of

me, and only because of me."
The words buzzed on the end of his tongue day after day,
and
especially at moments like this, when he could still sniff
the essence
of Big Rex lingering on his own clothes like smoke.
He'd stopped
saying it out loud long ago. Ever since he was
fourteen he'd said it,
then somebody would hit him. So he stopped saying it
aloud.
Five years . . .
He lowered again to his task, his body stretched out
on the deck
as he shouldered his way deeper under the cracked and
chipped
control panel, and parted his lips against the cool,
murmuring
deflector mechanism.
"Sooner or later," he whispered, "we'll
convince them they can't
survive without us. They won't have any choice.
It's on our
calendar . . . it's fate. It's
destiny." A squint through damage haze
showed him the sweaty, stubbly rolls of his father's
neck. "He'll learn. Even he can learn.
We'll convince him
...
to let
me
be in
charge."
Pure common sense, after all. At barely
nineteen, he had more
intellect and better brains than any ten of these
others. They just didn't know brains from beans, or
they'd put him in charge right
now. Everywhere, it was like that. Recognition. That's
all he
needed. The whole Federation would be indebted to him
someday.
"It's on my calendar," he murmured, and turned
back to his
fine-tuning.
"Shut up, I said!" Rex glared at him with one
eye, because he
couldn't turn all the way around in the command chair.
The eye was glistening grotesquely in the
bad light from the main viewscreen, on
which the ravaged Starfleet cutter hung helpless.

A handful of other men on the bridge twitched when he waved at them also and blared, "Keep working!" Lou Caskie interrupted as he appeared in the open crawlway and cried, "We found blood!" Coming up the rest of the way, he showed Big Rex a piece of shattered plastic with blood splattered diagonally across it. "We found it in the E-cell. He was there! The main stator casing has a hole in it!" "Can you patch up the hole?" Big Rex asked. "Well, yah, but all we got is backup gravity, backup respir-was "Do it, then. If you can't live on backup, get out of space." Behind them, the voice of aggravated youth clipped, "There was a hole?" The two antitheses turned to him. "Said that, didn't I?" Caskie lisped at him. "No weapon," Roy muttered. "What kind of blood is it?" "Who cares?" Big Rex huffed. "Maybe it's his," Caskie bug-eyed, then laughed, showing where some of his teeth had been knocked out-the ones he'd had at the start of this, at least. "Go retch," Roy snapped back as he got to his feet and tried to see through the stinking tendrils of smoke. "Is it red?" "Red," his father said, "pink, green, who gives a rat's ass." "Dark red?" "Here!" Big Rex held the plastic out at him. "You wanna lick it and see what it tastes like too?" Roy screwed his brows together, looking at the splatters. "Red . . . dark red." Caskie gurgled another laugh, but Big Rex paused. "Mean something to you?" Straightening his tortured back muscles, Roy paused too, enjoyed the moment, and let it go on as long as he could. When he spoke, he

did so in such a way as to make theatrical use of the
curling haze and
the silence on the bridge.

"It means," he said, "we're looking for

...

a human."

Big Rex threw his arms up. "Well,
goddamn! Think of that! We're
looking for a human! And to think we've got only
thirty-nine people
on board and only thirty of 'em are human!
Why, hell, why didn't
we think of that! What were the odds! I'm surprised
enough to shoot
my cookies! Damn, boy, damn."

Burning under the sarcasm, Roy felt his face go
hot. The other
workers paused, and were looking at him.
He shifted uneasily, bitterness rising in his
mouth.

"It means we can flush him out," he attempted.

"We know what
air he needs to breathe, and how often he needs
to eat, and what will
kill him."

The strategic line of thinking didn't impress
Big Rex at all. "If we
were a shipload of Tholians, that might do some good.
What do you
want me to do? Let all the oxygen out and see who
chokes? That's
great."

"It's great," Roy responded, "considering there are
only sixteen
of the thirty-nine left on their feet since you took
command. Don't
you even know your manpower numbers?"
Heavy silence erupted and held them all hostage
for a few
seconds-the terrible kind of silence that says
throats are being
held the hard way.

Lou Caskie backed off a few steps, just in
case. The other crew
barely breathed. Some were poised in the middle of
carrying a part
or twisting a bolt, but they had stopped and
were watching to see
whose orders they'd be taking ten minutes from now. On
this
ship-ten minutes was about average.

But Big Rex only glared at his son for a beat,
then said, "Thanks
for telling me. Couldn't keep your mouth shut, could
you? Had to
blare it all over that we're down. Yeah, boy,
that's command material. I ought to just step aside, eh?
Hand the old crown on
down. People used to say you were a smart little kid. I'd
like to have
'em here now and let 'em listen."
Roy flinched so violently that the clipping tool in
his hand bit his
thigh and drew blood from the big muscle.
Human blood.
The pain gave him purpose.
"I'll find him," he said. "I'll find him and
show you."
The hand-held tracer wasn't exactly
state-of-the-art, but it had
been confiscated from one of the less sophisticated
ships they'd
plundered a year ago, and he'd been tampering with it.
He had it set
to pinpoint blood of the type found in the E-cell,
and project the
find visually on a small screen, with the blood
showing up as green on the black and white screen.
Worked fairly well.
Well enough, since he hadn't showed anyone else
how to use the tracer and they'd all have to tell him he
was smart for knowing how
to track a chemical compound.
He looked forward to that. If it didn't come today, it
would come
months from now, when he took over and they thought back
on
these events. Sooner or later, it would come.
He moved one step at a time through the ship, having
started at
the place where the worm had done the sabotage. Not
easy-the
crew were already repairing the G-stator, stomping their
big fat feet
all over the traces of evidence. Good thing he'd
gotten there in time
to get a big enough sample for his tracer
to read.
Then he found lots more of the same blood anyway,
out in the
corridor. The tracer lay in his palm, happily
displaying chartreuse

smears. The worm had taken a pounding out there.
Caught in his
own gravity trick.
Roy snickered and enjoyed, thought about how he would have
avoided the same mistake, then turn his tracer
on the corridors.
Three directions, one at a time-
There was a dot. Very small, but very green. Roy
followed it.
No weapon, and injured. So the worm would want
to stay low,
probably the bowels of the ship. Probably
engineering. Clever
enough to use the fire extinguisher to smash the stator
housing, but
not smart enough to hide the pressure suit helmet
they'd found
outside the trunk deck. Forward thinking only.
That meant. . . more destruction. The same trick
twice, that's
what people with forward-only thinking would do. Not a
takeover attempt, or a capture or a trap,
but destruction. Physical damage to
stall the ship. What this worm had done once, this
worm would try
to do again.
What
would he try to damage?
Engineering.
Roy licked his lips with anticipation and let his
logic guide him to
choose the right corridors when there was no dot, no
smear of blood
for his tracer to pick up. His intellect served him,
as always. Where
there were expanses with no blood, he would aim for
engineering,
and ultimately there would be a dot or a streak of
green, and he
would know he was right.
The bowels of the ship. That's where a saboteur who
had no
weapon would go. Wounded too. Time might be a
factor, weakness,
fatigue, success the first time
...
all these were elements to consid
er. Roy had a good time considering them and playing his
game of
plot and stealth, until it paid off.
He peeked into an eight-inch-diameter porthole

in the door of an
engineering subroom, and there was his-
A kid? A curly-haired teenager with dirt on
his face and a crowbar
in his hands, working at ripping and smashing the mechanics
in

there? A squirrel storing nuts.

"Oh, this is too easy," Roy mouthed in near
silence.

Also in silence, he reached sideways to the door
panel controls
and very quietly turned the locking mechanism. Then
he fingered the intercom.

"If you had any brains at all, you'd realize
there's no power in
there. We already rerouted."

Inside the subroom, Jimmy Kirk slammed
backward with shock
and dropped his crowbar. It clattered as
though to call attention to
the smug face in the eight-inch window. He knew that
face already.

He knew the two wings of brown hair flopping from
the middle

part. He knew those eyes.

He knew he was sunk.

"Disorderly conduct," the face said snidely. "Just
pranks. I
realized I could take your one little naughty as a
pattern, and it
worked. I found you. Here you are, trapped like a
bug."

"Who are you!" Jimmy demanded.

"I'm Roy John Moss and I'm about to kill
you. Say good-bye."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I'm Jim Kirk and I'm
about to spit in your
face."

And he did.

Saliva dribbled on the window, mixed with blood,
illustrating

how it would have gone right into Roy's left eye if he
hadn't been

covering behind glass.

Jimmy sheered with satisfaction. He'd seen this

Roy flinch when

he spat. There wasn't as much confidence on the other
side of the

wall as the bluff pretended.

Maybe he could stall.

"I had a good time," Jimmy said, and waited to see

if curiosity
popped up in the face.
Roy frowned. "Doing what?"
"Being a worm in your apple."
"Worm?" Roy shorted. "That's what I called
you."
"Guess we think alike."
Roy grimaced with true distaste and muttered,
"Oh, go retch. As
soon as the engines have enough maneuverability, we're
going to
pull your pals into the Blue Zone and crush the
guts out of them. Then I'm going to open up a
solid waste chute and flush you too,
maggot."
"Come on in here and we'll see who's about to kill
who," Jimmy
added.
"You . . .
have picked on the wrong people."
A match flickered in the other young man's eyes.
Brown brows
closed together.
"Just say good-bye," Roy insisted.
Fear crept in on Jimmy and squeezed his throat
shut so he
couldn't say anything else. He was trapped, and there
was no fixing
that fast enough.
The face, Roy John Moss's face, was still
steaming up the
window, but Jimmy could see the shoulder moving out there
and
knew Roy was doing something with the controls to this
subroom.
When it got hard to breathe, he knew what was being
done.
And his pressure suit was gone now. And he'd
left his helmet in
the back alleys of this ship.
Pressure
...
he felt it now . . . the air was slowly
being sucked
out of this room.
In his mind he imagined the dial on the side of the
wall there, outside the door, and Roy's hand on the
dial. It was an old-type
mechanism, meant for a medical unit, and made
to fit onto this
engineering cubicle. So was the door, and the

porthole. He could
scoop up his crowbar-break the window-then came the
realiza
tion that a confiscated medical pressure-chamber
door wouldn't
have a breakable window in it.
Mustering his most defiant expression, he tried not
to show how
much the effects of depressurization were starting
to hurt. His ears
popping and crackling
...
his eyes hurting, starting to push
out. . . head pounding
...
his lungs crying, expanding . . . like
flying too high, too fast
...
it was getting hard
...
to breathe . . .
Black barn doors closed slowly in on his
vision. At least he would
be unconscious when the truly gruesome part came and
his body
was blown apart from the inside.
As the blackness engulfed him, he focused through the
strip of
vision on the face of Roy Moss, and his last thought
was to curse
himself for having been predictable.
"George?"
"Hmm."
Robert knelt beside his personal thundercloud, but
made no such
commitment as sitting down, for both their sakes at the
moment.
Mellowed by his natural Lake District
affability, he gazed at George
in genuine concern, and tried to read an expression that
to a stranger would be simple crankiness served on a
slab of crust.
Robert knew George Kirk, and knew there was
much more going on
behind that ruddy face.
Ultimately he asked, "Are you all right?"
George didn't look up. The answer was a
rasp. "I guess."
"Awfully quiet, is all."
"Yeah, I'm quiet."
"Any reason?"

"Because there isn't much left to say, Robert."

"Oh, now . . . mustn't pout. Why don't we stop all this crepe-hanging and say our sorries, eh?"

"Because I was right."

The ramrod statement hit hard. Hit them both.

Robert's

forbearant grin dropped like stone.

After a pause he did sit down, for they were at least back on some common ground.

"Never said you weren't," he offered, and quirked a scolding,

amused gaze that didn't really fit the moment, then a sigh of regret

to show he knew it didn't fit. "Now, did I?"

"Guess not."

"Listen, old boy, Carlos has a new twist for you. He's found that

he can turn on our tractor beam, what's left of it, and in combina

tion with theirs it might pull us closer to that ship out there without

their realizing it straight off. We can move in on them slowly. What

do you think?"

"How slowly?"

"One to one and a quarter meter per second. We should close the

distance between us in roughly-was

"Twenty minutes."

"That's they don't happen to notice our closing in."

"How the hell can they

not

notice?"

"We'll do whatever you want, George," Robert said, "although

I'm not certain there are many cards left to draw."

They fell back into the pitiless,

unyielding silence neither of them liked. There wasn't anything to like. It wasn't really a lack of words,

but a silence of the soul.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

Robert smiled, though not at ease. "Shall I tell him to do it?"

A half-dozen snide replies flashed on

George's face as he ran

through childhood tantrums, the strain of puberty,

and the ground
work of what it was to be an adult all over again in
about four
seconds. Maturity forced him to be more resilient
than he either felt
or looked at the moment.
After an uncomfortable few more seconds he sighed and
simply
said, "Yeah, tell him to do it."
Relieved, Robert raised his head and waved a
hopeless hand at
the smoke that still snaked around the hold as though confused
by
one-third gravity.
"You have the go-ahead, Carlos," he
called. "See if we can't get
up against them. Perhaps we can find a way to disentangle
ourselves
from this yet."
"Aye, aye, sir," Carlos called back, then
retreated somewhere
among the machinery behind the shattered and scattered
crates.
So the two of them were alone again, listening to Carlos
clacking
and tapping back there.
Robert perfectly well knew from experience that there
was more
than just cantankerousness keeping George silent.
Though dis
turbed, the captain couldn't bring himself to regret his
decisions or
his actions.
Somehow, he knew, his lack of regret was coming across
in his
tone, and he tried to curtail it as he turned
to his old friend and
again tried to douse the burning thatch.
"George," he prodded softly. "George,
we've known each other a
long while. Your sons are my godsons, our
wives have become
friends because they both knew they couldn't pry us apart .
. . you
and I have trod together through passages I wouldn't wish
on a pair
of geese slotted for a harvest table. Please
let's not have this one be
our tide level from here on in, eh?"
He waited for a response, but received only
blustering cold, so he

shifted, wrapped his aching arms around his knees, and
tried again,
lubricating the moment with that poet's touch he kept
in not very
tight reserve.
"Oh, don't do this, George," he went on.
"You'd have put a
staying hand on me as well, had the score been
reversed. Isn't it
better, after all, to err on the side of caution? Be
a bit canny on these things?"
"There's a difference between being canny and being downright
tentative," George chopped. "Everybody out in
space is
somebody's son or daughter. Jimmy's
probably dead, and I've accepted that, whether you have
or not. If the situation was
reversed, I'd be advising you, not taking over, even
if sometimes I
advise with my fists instead of my head. Advise
is different from
what you did to me. Everything's different now."
He stood up in a manner clearly abortive,
then loomed down at
Robert.
"From now on," he finished, "I won't know which
decisions
you're going to allow me to make. It's dangerous,
Robert, damn
dangerous. And I don't know what to do about it."
"Hey, Dad! Got the oars?"
"I got oars, I got sandwiches, I got the
rods and reels, you name it, I
got it. You, me, Sam, the Upper Peninsula,
Hiawatha National
Forest, canoeing the Millecoquins and a whole lot
of places with
really old names! What d'you say we hit the
skylanes and get there
before noon?"
"I say go, go, go!"
"Get your brother out of his book and let's fly."
Go, go.
Warm rubber underneath. Fresh water lapping on the
canoe's
side. Dunes backdropping the fishing trawlers.
Then home again.
Always home again too soon.
"Sometimes I think you're all better off without me
than with
me. . . Sometimes I think I can be a better

example for the boys at a
distance. Sad clowns don't look very good close
up.

...

I know I'm
rash and brusque- his
"And temperamental."
"I just admitted that, didn't I?"
"And caustic, and unsatisfied, and always on a slow
burn- his
"Thanks, Winn, I got a faceful of it tonight. I
don't need to hear
any more from you. I always take care of the
three of you, don't I?"
"Yes, you do. You always have the boys' best interest in
mind. I tell
everybody that, George. I can't help it if you
take every glance and
look from our family and friends and my colleagues as
some covert
attack. If we didn't live in such a rural
place, you wouldn't notice. It's
just that almost everybody here is home most of the time- was
"And everybody out in space leaves their family to go
do what we
do out there! When I'm in space, I feel like I
should be home. When
I'm home, I feel like I'm dumping my duty
on somebody else. How
come I don't feel right in either place?"
"Shhh. The boys'll hear us."
It was a hot world with cold sheets to lie on.
Acrid smells rolled in
the air, confusing the nature of dreams and guiding them
in wrong
directions. Was he at home? Was he canoeing in
Michigan?
Sam? Mom? Dad. . . Dad? Are you
there? . . .
"Did you see the look on Jimmy's face today?!
never saw that look
before."
"George, you're imagining things."
"Like hell I am."
"Will you at least keep your voice down?"
"What difference does it make now what he hears?
He hates my
guts, Winn . . . my own son hates my
guts."
Air clogged in his throat.
He choked.

I don't! Dad! Dad!

Had he yelled the confession out, or was it still itching in his throat?

Dad, we're not better off without you-

Now there were more voices, the voices of strangers, and Jimmy

knew he wasn't at home.

"He's coming around. Back off."

"What do you drag him around the ship for? Why did you fail to

kill him when you had the chance?"

"We need a hostage."

"We need no hostage! We have shields and in minutes we'll have engines again. We'll haul the Fleeters into the Blue Zone and crush their meat."

The venom of contempt dripping through Jimmy's veil made him rouse to reality. The veil was unconsciousness again. He recognized it from the last time. He was still alive?

A bestial growl and a dirty body odor told him there was a

Klingon bending over him. The other voice, unsolicitous and grim,

was the one he'd heard before. Roy John Moss.

He didn't open his eyes. He just listened to the acrimony in the

voices and made his deductions. A plan started to form in his

clearing mind.

"Well, I'm glad you're here to tell me all about dinnertime on

Klingon, Dazzo. How many times have we said that, only to have

them pop up with some new trick? Oh! I

forgot. If you learned from

mistakes, you'd still be in the Klingon fleet instead of scraping a

living off the Federation's garbage pail lid, wouldn't you?"

"You smell, boy."

"Lick it, Dazzo. You can't do anything to me and you know it."

The contempt wasn't just for the Starfleet people who had foiled

the scavengers' plans. These two had open and obvious contempt

for each other. A sour excuse for crewmanship.

Jimmy hadn't heard anything like this from anyone in

Starfleet, so he clung to it as something he might be able to use.

As he breathed and his battered ribs expanded and contracted, he forced himself to deduce where Veronica's fake hand was pressing against his breastbone, inside the partially open front of his suit.

Where were his own arms?

Eyes still closed, keeping his face passive, he twitched his fingers imperceptibly, just to see where they were.

Right arm almost straight out to his side, left arm kinked between his side and the Klingon's boot.

On his left. He made calculations in his mind. Rehearsed his plan a couple times, then-

"Yaaaaaaa!"

His shout took the two other by complete surprise-and there's nothing as grotesque-looking as a surprised Klingon.

The Klingon, the one called Dazzo, was a lot more surprised when an Earth teenager vaulted at him from flat on the floor, drove him back against the wall, and clamped an artificial hand at his throat.

With all the force of his legs and body driving against the shocked alien, Jimmy gritted his teeth, thrust his bent elbows forward on either side of the Klingon's head, pushed his hand into the fake hand's wrist cowl, and cranked.

The Klingon's wolfish howl of shock and fury was cut into a gargling choke as Veronica's fingers popped the skin of his throat and clamped together on the inner side of his esophagus, then clawed it apart.

Air and pink blood sputtered and spat all over Jimmy Kirk and the astounded Roy Moss behind him. He knew Roy was there, but he also knew he had a chance of fighting a human close to his own age, and no hope of fisting down a Klingon in a fair fight. The

Klingon simply had to go first, and he would take his chance with the other one.

The plan was pretty good, and Jimmy missed only one element that didn't hit him until the splatter of blood hit him too. He hadn't ever killed anybody. Certainly not with his bare hands.

The blood surprised him almost as much as he had surprised

Dazzo, and he thrust off the Klingon's sinking form. Dazzo scraped

down the wall, clutching with frantic ferocity at the artificial claws

deep in his throat, but there was no getting the thing loose. He

reached toward Roy for help, but the other teenager did nothing but

stand a few paces back in nothing but mild disgust, watching the

Klingon gag to death.

Gasping, Jimmy also sagged against the opposite wall, and let his

best chance for another surprise sink away. His hands, his bare

hands . . . Veronica's wonderful miracle, used to murder . . .

Roy moved a few steps closer, as though fascinated by what was

happening to Dazzo. The Klingon lay in the crease between the wall

and the deck, gawking up at Roy and reaching for him with one

hand, while the other hand clawed uselessly at the thing at his

throat. Every time he pulled at

Veronica's hand, his ripped wind

pipe bowed out and gurgled.

This didn't go on very long.

Roy enjoyed every second and all but licked his lips when the last

rattle came out of the Klingon and Dazzo's pleading arm fell to the

deck.

Finally, Roy backed off a pace.

"Hmm," he huffed. "Darwin would understand."

Jimmy collected the bland profundity of it from

Roy's smirk and

the fact that these people weren't willing to put themselves on the line for one another.

Roy watched a few seconds longer, then without taking his eyes

off Dazzo's intriguing remains, he drew an electrical stunner from his belt pack of tools. Even though Jimmy hadn't seen one like that before, the shape of the little weapon and its pronged business end had a very obvious purpose.

"This'll knock you buzzy," Roy said, "so don't try anything. You might not have the rocks to go through with what you start, but I do." He looked up and down at Jimmy's now-filthy suit, with its burgundy trousers, white shirt, and brown waistcoat, and said,

"What do you call that Star-fancy-fleet uniform? Doesn't look like one."

"It's an off-duty uniform," Jimmy said caddishly. "You wanted me in standard issue, didn't you? So you could show me off? Tough luck, bub."

With only a rude glower, Roy snipped, "It doesn't matter! Now, turn around. Walk in that direction. I'm going to parade your little Federation butt in front of my father."

"That ship's getting closer."

"No, it ain't."

"Like hell it ain't," Big Rex Moss insisted.

"Look at that screen!"

"You're lookin' at magnification," Caskie told him. "It's all

bollixed up. Visual's banged up inside."

"Get Dazzo to fix it, then!"

Jimmy heard the voices and measured them as argument long before he was forced up the ladder at the point of that stunner of

Roy's, through a hole, and onto what was apparently the bridge of this Frankenstein ship. Unlike some of the other parts of the ship, the bridge hadn't been taken off any type of vessel that he

recognized, and it was manned by a mismatched gaggle who had

nothing in common but the dirt on their clothes.

Roy Moss shoved up behind him and pushed his way in front.

"Dazzo's dead," he said.

The gaggle of subhumans all turned to look at

him.

The announcement was taken with accusative glares that made

him shrug and add, "Death by stupidity. It was just evolution at work."

By their expressions, the others let out the little secret that they

were pretty sure he was crazy.

An enormous man, enormous in every possible direction,

grunted out of the command seat and hoisted around to glare at the

chunky boy who had just stepped out from behind Roy.

"Who'n hell is that?"

"Prisoner," his son crowed. "I found him. Said

I would, didn't I? I can find anything. See

what he's wearing?"

The big man lumbered a step closer and bellowed,

"What about

it?"

"That's a Starfleet off-duty suit."

"Looks like a who-cares suit to me."

Ignoring the sting, Roy pointed at the Starfleet

cutter on the

screen. "That ship

is

getting closer."

"It's not getting closer. We've got

malfunctions."

"Picture, but bad readings," a wide-shouldered

man on the upper

deck grumbled down.

Keeping to one side in a place where the odds were too

much

against him, Jimmy bit his lower lip to keep his mouth

shut, but

noticed that the ship did look awfully close.

Could've been just enhancement on the flooey, but. . .

The bridge seemed undermanned by the five hands on

it, and he

assumed they were down on manpower and couldn't watch every

thing. The way this tin can was put together and the way it had

been

torn apart in the past twelve hours, nobody could

watch enough to

know what was really going on inside the mechanics.

Over to one side, at what might be part of the

engineering

section-never mind that the whole console was smashed in and

stinking with moist gore from some poor dead

stooge-Jimmy
shifted his eyes to the submonitors and tried to read
the ones that
were still working.
Picture, but no readings? No numbers? He
tried to add up what
he knew about graphic readouts to what was
going on around him,
tried to remember the hours he spent reading the
monitors Carlos
Florida had given him to watch, and tried to pick
out which of these
just might be the distance between this ship and the Starfleet
cutter.
Could have been either of two, he decided. One of them
showed
no changes at all. But the other one

...
the numbers were slowly
decreasing. A few decimals per minute.
Maybe the cutter
was
getting closer. How? Had his father and
Captain April figured out something new? Found a
way to make use
of the extra minutes he'd yanked out of nowhere for
them?
Maybe his father was trying to get over here!
A father whom he had once thought didn't care.
Everything he'd done, and his dad was still taking crazy
chances,
risking everything to get to him.
If it was true, then these people were misreading their own
gadgets-or maybe they just didn't trust one
another to know what
was going on. He thought he heard that in their voices.
If so, was
there a way to keep them guessing? Prevent them from
trusting one
another?
Possible with these others, but Roy Moss was smart enough
to
notice the statistics sooner or later. Roy was
definitely the smartest kid in class.
Not if I keep him distracted. Needle him,
irritate him, don't let him
think-
"Well, kill him. Break his neck."
Jimmy snapped back to the moment as he heard those
words,
because he knew they were about the wrong "him."

"You'll like it," the huge man said. "It feels great to break a neck with your bare hands."

"We haven't won yet," Roy argued. "Until the Starfleeters are dead, we might need a wild card!"

"The tail might be right, Rex," the wide-shouldered man said.

"Keep the punk around. Hostage."

"Mind your own party, Munkwhite." The man called Rex didn't even turn around to toss the comment back. He glared at Jimmy with the look a hungry bear gives a turkey with a broken leg.

"Fine," Munkwhite gruffed. "Do what you want."

He turned back to the battered controls. Jimmy felt as if he'd been abandoned, even though he would gladly have stuffed a shoe down any face in there, including one that suggested they keep him alive.

The man called Rex, the one apparently in charge, had to use both hands to hoist himself up the step to Jimmy's level.

"Yeah," the big man said, "I think I'll exercise my grip. C'mere, kid. I want to teach my boy something."

Jimmy backed up, but there was nowhere to back to. The head of this crew was enormous, outweighed him by two hundred pounds easily, and intended to use him to show Roy how to murder.

"No!" Roy stepped between Jimmy and the approaching mountain.

Rex Moss jolted. "What're you doing?" he bellowed at his son, jowls shaking.

"It's too good a chance!" Roy countered. He extended a hand toward Jimmy. "Look at him! He's a snot-nosed whelp! He's a cherub! A kid! They'll try to save a kid! Don't you get it?"

"If you're not man enough to do it," the father said, "then move aside, ponytail."

Roy did step aside, but only as far as a

particular panel with an
open mechanical cave under it. He reached down under
there
without taking his eyes off the big man, and did something
with his
fingers.

Plink-

"Deflectors just went off again!" Munkwhite
wailed. He spun at Roy. "You peach-ass
punk! We're almost into the Blue Zone!"

Then, from the hole that led to engineering, an Orion
popped up

and hoarsely howled, "What happened
to deflectors! Get deflectors
back! Blue Zone is right here! We'll crush!"

"Turn 'em back on, tail," the man called
Rex said. "Don't you
defy us."

"Not until I get my way," Roy countered.

"I'm not giving him up.

He's my prisoner. He's
mine.

I found him. If you kill him, fix the
shields yourselves."

Rex's small eyes turned catlike, and he
leered at his son.

Even from the side Jimmy recognized the kind of
anger. He'd seen it broiling under his own father's
skin-but there had always
been control.

There was no control here.

"You pick a pretty piss-poor way to try to be
a man," Rex rumbled. "I'm not gonna forget
this."

Roy twitched, but didn't back down.

"We're getting awful damn close to that Zone,"

Munkwhite ground out. Again he glared at Rex.

"He's your kid . . . you do something about him!"

Apparently affected by the hint that just maybe some of this
was

his fault, Rex forced himself to back off a step. But
he never took his eyes off his son.

"Keep your pet hamster if you want to," the
huge man said, "but

you mind him and keep control of him. Now, turn your
shields back

the hell on."

Jimmy caught Roy's eyes at the last second

as the tall young man stooped enough to put his hand under again,
and did his

magic.

A few things changed on the bridge-lights here and there, buzzing and humming that hadn't been there a moment ago, and that Jimmy hadn't noticed until now.

"Hey!" Munkwhite shouted again.

"Look!"

They all turned.

On the main screen, well beyond the possibility of screen illusion,

the Starfleet cutter appeared to be flying into their very faces.

"It's not the magnification!" Munkwhite spat out.

"I tried to tell you it wasn't! They're getting closer! They're trying to dock with us!"

"Speed up!" Rex blasted. "Get us into the Blue! If they get aboard this ship, we'll have a goddamned civil war on our hands!"

"Everybody secure? Suits? Helmets? All secure? Carlos, you got Ensign Hall?"

"Affirmative, sir! Ready when you are."

George yanked his own helmet over his head and secured it, then waited the longest four seconds of his life while the suit pressurized

and became independent of the ship they were about to abandon.

"Robert! Distance?"

"Twenty-eight meters and closing! We're almost on them,

George!"

"Get ready!"

"I don't believe they let us get this close,"

Carlos muttered as he

pulled Veronica tight against him and made sure her helmet and suit were properly pressurized on top of trying to keep her alive medically. That suit had a lot to do.

George flashed him a glance from inside the helmet's shield. "I

don't believe we found a way to use our hand lasers in a fight out in

space. Okay, Robert, you give the word at ten meters. I'm going to

pop the hatch. You stay at least fifteen feet behind me."

"Affirmative . . . twenty . . . eighteen .

. . fifteen

...

ten

...

eight

comsix, five, four-was

"Here goes!"

They were hit by a tornado of spinning crates and monitors and general trash from their troubles as George dropped the hatch

where once his son had been imprisoned in a removable airlock,

and let the pressure out into open space.

They huddled until the hold equalized-equal to the vacuum of

space-then George climbed up.

But now there was no airlock. There was nothing but the shat

tered, open area that a few hours ago had been the pilot cabin, now

torn to the point of the unrecognizable. Even the observation pod

was entirely gone, along with most of the upper half, and in its

place, looming bigger and nearer than George ever hoped to see it,

was the spider ship that had pounced on them out of the impossible.

And there was a tractor beam-wide as a tree trunk, gory, ugly, a

gigantic klieg light of contracted phosphine yellow, the beam spilled

like arsenic over the cutter's magnetic

center, making the hulk shimmer and tremble-and right there was the port where it

emitted from.

The only place on the spider ship that wasn't covered by

impenetrable shielding.

Without pausing to be scared or impressed, George crawled out

of the ripped hull, grabbing for sparse and unforgiving handholds in

the zero-g, and trying to keep himself from floating in the wrong

direction. He made his way toward that beam, carrying with him an

industrial extender claw and a neat little grenade cannibalized from

the four on-board hand lasers. What people couldn't do when they got desperate enough . . .

He edged closer. The beam would happily, hungrily, crush a

living body, or anything without enough tonnage or the right alloys in its construction to fight back. Too

close . . . hard to

move . . . even through his pressure suit he
felt the tractor beam
licking at him, sucking for him, tasting him. He
edged closer as the
last few inches closed and the two ships physically
bumped.
A shower of electrical reaction rained over him as
the cutter
rubbed against the enemy ship's special shields.
Suddenly it was
like fighting with a prisoner and bumping up against the brig
shielding.
The cutter waved off a few inches, but kept
brushing those
shields, kept throwing electrical spray over
him every few seconds.
He moved sideways against the ravaged hull of his
own ship, or what was left of it, trying not to touch the
shields of the other ship.
Who knew what would happen to an environmental
suit if it rubbed
up against those shields?
It took him an eternity to reach the tractor beam
source, but he
did reach it.
Then he stretched toward the emitter port and pushed

industrial claw outward, with the makeshift grenade
in its teeth. For
a horrid few seconds he could barely hold
on-and he had to. He
had to make sure the grenade went deep into the
tractor beam, not
just caught in the edge.
"All the way," he grunted, teeth clamped,
"all the way in-was
His arms were almost yanked out of their sockets as the
tractor
got a good grip on the banded laser weapons, and
suddenly reality
turned a bitter yellow. George let go not at
the last second, but
during it. The claw went too, and almost took him with
it, striking
his rib cage as it flipped and was yanked into the
emitter core.
An instant later the laser grenade ignited,
ruptured by the tractor
beam and the impact of being sucked in there.
The explosion blew outward like a giant's last
gush. What had

been an orderly, if fuming, yellow tractor beam now became a savage red hell. George felt his body lifted and slammed to the opposite side of the cutter's remains, then sucked back again into the core as energies conflicted. In a flash of irrationality he tried to signal to Robert to follow him into the two-meter rupture with the others before the deflectors closed over the hole, but he was thrown forward hard into a wall of smoke and shattered inner core. There was a tremor of activity around him-the others? He couldn't see, couldn't feel anymore. He groped his way forward before automatic shutdowns in the tractor mechanism took over and trapped them all outside. Like a fireman moving through the visionless void of a burning building, feeling and groping and hoping his way, George stumbled forward until the tug of outer space left his body and he thought he might be in a pressurized area. How could that be? In a vacuum one moment, inside the ship in another- Was that what Jimmy had gone through? Thrust by violence into more violence? A great shudder rocked through the skin of the vessel around him, and his instincts started ringing. The Blue Zone! It had them! They were in, they were committed. The cutter was a crushed pancake, just a few feet back there. That was the crunch he'd felt through the deck- Robert! Had the others made it in? They were just a few feet behind him-but a few feet in a situation like this . . . Had they gotten Veronica in? All at once a force grabbed him and pulled him down. Gravity! It drove him to his knees. Frustrated at not being able to see, he tore off his helmet and collapsed, waving weakly at gushes of smoke. He waved and crawled, or at least he

thought he was crawling. He
felt pressure down there on his knees. Where was the
ceiling? Which
way was up?
"George! George!"
Robert's voice . . . Robert's hands . . .
"George, you all right?"
"Are we in?" he choked. "Are we inside?"
"Yes, we got in! We got in a few
seconds behind you, just as you
calculated. The shields closed right behind us.
Look at me-are you
all right?"
With both arms coiled around his plundered rib cage,
George
sucked at air he couldn't get enough of and shoved himself
up on
one elbow. He was lying on his side, his eyes
focusing on a sheet of
black deck insulation.
"Robert, quit-asking me that-will you? I'm a
wreck-that's
how I am. This whole-situation's
...
a wreck. What happened?
Why is there air in here?"
Robert knelt beside him and held on to him. "I
told you. Because
the shields closed as soon as our ship was destroyed
by the Blue
Zone, and this ship repressurized. It was a
remarkable lesson in
timing, old boy! Just remarkable."
"Great-let's get moving."
"No, don't move! George, you're hurt. You
can't ignore it."
"Wanna bet? Don't make me feel fragile
right now! I wanna feel
mean."
Taking that as hopeful, Robert hoisted him to his
knees, then to
his feet, and managed to keep him up by leaning him
against a
scorched wall. Unable to stand without the wall,
George blinked
and tried to get his burning eyes to operate again.
Robert's helmet was off too. How long had those
few seconds
been?
Out of the brownish-green billows Carlos
Florida stumbled at

them, yanking off his own helmet, and grabbed George by an arm and gasped, "George, you all right, sir?" "Oh, for cripes" sake!" George pushed off from between them and staggered away. Gaping helplessly at him and then at Robert, Carlos babbled, "Wha-what'd I say wrong?" "Nothing at all we can help, my boy," Robert soothed, stepping close to look him over too. "How about yourself? Hurt anywhere?" Ignoring what was going on behind him, George winced his way out of his survival suit. "Damn, I hate these constricting things," he grouched as he stomped the suit to a shimmering lump under him. "Is Hall in here?" he called. "Is she safe?" Carlos turned. "Over there. Still alive, sir." "Where are we?" "Inside, someplace. And we better move out. If they figure out what we did, all they have to do is turn off their deflectors and all our air is gone." "They can't," Robert said. "We're inside the Blue Zone. The deflectors have to stay up from now on. It buys us a few moments, at least." "If this ship's designed anything like a Federation ship," Carlos said, "the tractor emitter core would be on the lower decks, forward of impulse, but topside of warp drive." After clearing his throat, George said, "I'm not making any assumptions. Look around. Find out for sure where we are in relation to ... anything we can use." "Aye, sir, I will." George pointed a warning finger at him. "You be careful." Smiling hesitantly, Carlos muttered, "Thanks . . . I'll do that too." Limping back to where Robert was just peeling off his own scorched pressure suit and confiscating its

reserve packs for Veronica, George breathed heavily and winced out his words.
"Well, that took care of our hand weapons.
We're down to
thumbnails and spit."
Robert nodded and straightened up to eye him. "You
sure you're
all right, George? You don't look good."
"I don't feel good, okay? I might be
horn-mad and jaundiced, but
at least I'm consistent. We're on level ground
with these axe
murderers now, and I intend to make use of that."
"Let's think calmly, shall we? See if we can't
get ourselves
disentangled from this after all. Perhaps we should find a
place to hide and rest for a few moments."
"I'm not waiting a few moments. They've got my
son. And
nobody . . . takes my son."
"That's your father?" Jimmy asked, leering at his
captor.
Roy Moss gritted his teeth. "Let's
just say I came out of a woman
he used to know."
Now, with his hands tied, Jimmy had only his best
cold-teenager
particularization to aim at Roy Moss as they
climbed down to the
lower decks. "What kind of a woman would get
close to that?"
"Shut up!" Roy roared. "I might have to drag you
around, but I
don't have to listen to you."
"What're you going to do? Stick a shock collar on
me?"
"I might," Roy grated. "Just shut up. I'm
busy."
"Busy keeping those deflectors up, right?"
Jimmy nagged. "We
hurt you, didn't we? We smashed you up. Now
you've got to tamper
all the time to keep the shields up. Glad I'm
here to come along and
watch. Maybe I'll learn something."
Below decks, through the dimness and the smoke, Jimmy
allowed
himself to be shoved through the scavenger ship,
all the while
memorizing the layout and counting whatever pirates were
still

walking around. When his father and Captain April needed information, Jimmy was determined to have it. Those oxygen-deprivation dreams had reminded him of things bitterness and selfishness had caused him to forget—that adults had a life to live too. That his father hadn't come home and spent his leaves sitting around, relaxing. He'd come home armed with outdoor gear or a ticket to an adventure park or a new museum. Always doing things with his boys, that was George Kirk . . . until his oldest boy grew up and his youngest boy decided to count only the hours apart. Guilt burned under his skin. But now he knew the key. The memories were helping him. He understood Roy Moss as though looking at a horror story that flashed his own future. Roy was provokable, and Jimmy set out to heckle the skin off him. "You'll learn something," Roy grumbled. "Your shipmates might be on this ship someplace." "They're aboard and you know it," Jimmy crowed, hope rising in his heart. He pushed it down and kept his tone belligerent. "And you're all dead." "Maybe they are! Fine! I've still got you! I don't intend to run into them and have nothing to bribe them off me with. You're my personal little shield. So shut up and shield!" "Why should I shut up?" Jimmy kept pestering. "Why do anything you say? You're just their hatchet man. I can go back to Starfleet with my father. At least he's a commander and supposed to tell people what to do." "Mine's a captain!" Roy shot back. Through a grinding pause, Jimmy actually smiled. The right kind of smile, the dissecting kind that everybody told him he would outgrow. "A captain?" he snorted. "Your father's no captain." Teeth on edge, Roy bristled. "He's

...
in charge

...
of this
ship."

"I used to be in charge of a gang too. Didn't
make me a captain,"

Jimmy said, "and it didn't make them a crew.

I found out what a
real captain and crew are when you insects swarmed
us. You people

have the ethics of swamp lice." Fulfilling his
role as Roy's personal fault-finder, he

ticked off a couple of seconds, then added,

"Guess I

should thank you for that."

They went down the next corridor to the engine with
Jimmy

heel-nipping all the way and Roy snapping more than
once, "Leave

me alone! Leave me alone, I said."

Finally he shoved Jimmy aside in an engineering
subroom, aside,

where he could keep an eye on him, then knelt under
a console and

tried to work.

"Captain April called you trap-door
spiders," Jimmy badgered.

"He was right. That's all you are. A shipload of
dirty dealers."

"April?" Roy blurted. He suddenly stood
to his full height and

stiffened. "Robert April? Founder of the starship
program?" He

thrust himself closer to Jimmy, armed with a rude
glower. "Are you

off a starship? Are you off the
Enterprise?"

Realizing he'd said too much, Jimmy kept
red-flagging the bull in

a different direction. "Aww, what's the matter?

Miss your chance

for cushy duty like that? Talk to your father, why don't
you? At least

my father came out here to make things better for other people.

Yours came out here to make things worse."

"At least mine kept me with him. Yours was just
another Starfleet

widow maker. I know the type."

Jimmy bristled at Roy's intuitive pinning of the
truth. "We were

all right and he knew it," he said. "He went out where he was really needed. He didn't have to provide a perfect life for me. He was out here trying to build something better for everybody. Me . . . you . . . we're the same kind. We're the cause of our own problems."

"Don't try to distract me! I know that's what you're doing." Roy stumbled past him and hit a wall comm unit with his fist. "Bridge!

Bridge! Does anybody hear me up there?"

"What d'you want?"

"I think there's a starship after us!"

USS

Enterprise

1701-A

James Kirk got up and paced around his command chair. Damn, if only he had more to do than just stare into that screen. He opened and closed his fist. Nothing to do with them. That was Command's biggest problem-no job to do. No hand on the wheel. No hand on anything, really. On a ship with a crew bigger than ten, the captain really didn't touch anything. Been like that for centuries

...

so why wasn't he used to it?

"Captain?"

He spun around, toward Spock. "Yes?"

The arrowlike eyes were reassuring. Spock didn't come down. "I've analyzed this entire file, and reviewed all encyclopedic files related, and found I had to trace it through fundamental Starfleet Engineering archives. This is a basic anchor in exploration, and aggressive and defensive engineering science for starships. It is the main reason starships can broach areas impenetrable for other types of craft, and endure situations of violence intolerable to lesser mounted vessels. It is a structural member in Federation expansion."

"I realize that," Kirk said. "Do you understand the science itself?"

The deflector technology and everything else that

came out of those incidents involving Faramond?" Spock nodded. "To the molecular level," he assured Kirk.

Kirk sighed with relief. Having Spock know made a big difference. It would continue to do so when things got dicey.

"Captain." Pavel Chekov spoke up in a tone that said he could tell he was interrupting private thoughts. Kirk nodded to Spock, then turned to Chekov.

"Report."

"Reading the planetary system of Faramond on the long-range sensors, sir. No reading of the Bill of Rights yet."

"Secure from warp speed in five minutes," Kirk said. "Ahead standard sublight."

"Secure from warp speed in five minutes, aye," the new helmsman said. "Ahead, point eight sublight. . . arrival at Faramond Colony is approximately twenty minutes to orbit, sir."

"Keep the crew at stations at least until we come within hail of her," Kirk said, "assuming we find her."

"Aye, sir," Uhura responded from behind him.

"Maintaining full alert and emergency stations," she echoed. Then the disturbing quiet fell again, and the high-speed waiting resumed.

Kirk wished there were more to be said. Getting used to the few words required for efficient command of a ship had been one of the hardest lessons Starfleet had taught him. What was he about to find in that solar system? Was he about to discover that he had failed to be there when Roth needed help? He still saw Alma Roth as an ensign . . . and he still felt parental.

He rubbed his palms. They were moist. Cold. The palms of a frustrated man whose arms were never quite long enough. Trying to compose his dread, he turned away from the main

screen and found himself once again looking updeck.

"What am I going to find, Spock?" he asked quietly.

Spock stepped closer, lowered his voice. They both knew how to converse in such a way that no one else heard, even in the confined environment of a ship's bridge. And there was something about a conversation between anyone and the captain that made others turn their faces away and allow the privacy. Any ship was like that. Crew learned this one thing fast-there were some moments the captain didn't want to be approached.

"I have been isolating and arranging scattered data on Faramond, sir," Spock said, his tone even and perhaps sympathetic. "It is an archaeological dig of an ancient culture which was highly advanced, far beyond us, but they are extinct

...

or have gone away. It is a multispecies dig, quite a vast project, in fact, and-was

"And Captain April is supposed to break ground with the Golden Shovel," Kirk murmured.

Spock's brows gathered like two fireplace pokers falling together.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"As in most archaeology," Spock continued fluidly, "writing is a critical link. Any recording material that survives is considered valuable. Commonality is the key. Discovery of the same language on two continents is an indication of seafaring, and on two planets is an indication of possible space travel, yet raises endemic questions. For instance, discovering Sanskrit on Mars . . . did we go there, or did they come here?"

"We went there," Kirk prodded, intolerant of illustrations today.

"Go on."

Something in his voice made Spock pause, then step down to the

lower level with him. The Vulcan's posture was relaxed, as though to silently comment on the captain's impatience, and that some things would have to be explained point by point, slowly. "Not everyone carves on stone," he said. "Some people write on the backs of envelopes, or jot notes on table napkins. With the advent of computers into daily life of the average person, such things tended to lessen with time, but use of paper, as you know, has never lost its appeal and tends not to in societal cultures. This is fortunate since formal records are rare in archaeology."

"I know," the captain said. "What do we have from ancient Crete? We have inventory of the king's olives and oils and breads. We don't have the letter the king sent to the high priest of Jupiter."

Spock frowned, this time for a different reason. "High priest of Jupiter, sir?"

"It's a joke. Move along."

"Yes . . . you have the essence. We have political graffiti, but we do not have Sophocles's plays."

"Are you being facetious?"

Pausing, Spock appeared to understand the accusation without understanding how anyone could possibly have any good reason to be facetious. "Not at all," he assured Kirk. "You must understand that volumes of poetry are nearly unheard of in archaeology. Library material is simply not found. Archaeologists build their careers upon the middens of vanished peoples. . . refuse heaps . . . things in intestines of mummies. That's why finds such as the Fabrini Lexicons or the Rosetta Stone are considered so precious."

"I get it," Kirk said impatiently. "We have the scratchings about who to elect and how they were going to liberate one another from whatever religion had hold of them, and my ancestor invented the wheel but unfortunately he didn't leave me a

note. What's your point?"

Spock shifted and rearranged his hands behind his back. "At Faramond, the archaeologists have been working for forty-five years, and last year reported a major leap in the dig."

"Which was what? A shoehorn with the manufacturer's name?"

The word for "toilet bowl" is the same in two places? Don't make me beg, Spock."

Spock stepped closer. He dropped his attempts to preface and simply blurted out what he had to say.

"They think they have discovered a basic chemistry book," he said. "Perhaps a children's text."

Kirk paused to remember his grade school chemistry and get an idea of what might be in the book, then forced himself to sound more patient. "What does that mean to them?"

"It means we can begin to read the language. We are now on the way to translating the language, by way of universals."

"Universals," Kirk interrupted. "The laws of gravitation, physics, comsimple science?"

"Yes, sir. Water is water, hydrogen is hydrogen. That is the key to an alien language . . . there are no metaphors for the laws of physics and chemistry. Newton's law of gravitation cannot be described in a parable. We know this Old Culture was a spacefaring culture, and a people who can't communicate in basic science terms can never get into space. With science, we can communicate brilliantly without a single vocalized word."

"So we're on the verge of discovering what was the big attraction

on a cold planet." Kirk paced a step or two away, then back.

"Always wondered myself."

"Yes." Spock seemed somewhat relieved. "The planet has long been inert. Any settlers had to bring their own heat and respiration, which lessens its appeal for any kind of work. We have been baffled

as to the reasons the Old Culture settled there at all, and especially how they left. There is no

evidence of ships. No fuel or lubrication residue, no vessel technology, no docks, no markers for spacefaring, no maintenance facilities, and no remains of workers or farers. That has been the standing confusion of Faramond for nearly half a century. We know they departed in a single exodus, but we do not understand how. An enduring question for Federation archaeologists, Captain."

"I have a different question," Kirk said, pacing again.

"What happened between the discovery of that chemistry book and the Bill of Rights' arrival? A cold planet, in a cold solar system, that had to have domes built on it before a single pick could be stuck in the ground, that wasn't used for farming or mining, but was developed.

What's there? What's there that caused antiproton flashback, when the only thing known to our science that causes flashback is the explosion of warp engines? I hate it, Spock

...

I hate asking myself what's on Faramond that could've caused the Bill of Rights to

explode. An Excelsior-class starship doesn't. . . just explode."

He knew he sounded angry. He'd been through this before-the death of an entire ship, of an entire planet, or a solar system-but that didn't make it any easier for him to swallow or even to comprehend. Not even forty-five years' experience could sweeten that poison.

He knew it showed on his face, and didn't care.

"You may have to make a bet, sir," Spock said.

Kirk paused, turned, and squinted. "You're telling me to make a bet?"

His Vulcan friend gazed at him steadily with a reassuring quiescence.

"Yes," he said.

He didn't have to say anything else.
More than logic was at work. Hope was at work.
Defiance of
hazard was at work. Belief in the skills of Roth
and those young
people who had trained under Jim Kirk was at work.
Serving with
Kirk and these humans over the decades had taught
Spock to do the
one special thing that humans did better than
anybody else in the
known galaxy.
Gamble on themselves.
Abruptly the main bridge entryway
hissed open, and something
told Kirk to swing his chair and look.
There stood a presence of glowering weight. Skinny,
but glower
ing.
A moment, and McCoy had brought his glower down.
"Bones?" Kirk prodded.
McCoy closed his eyes in illustration, shook his
head, then
opened the pale blue glower again. "Biggest
psychological spider web I've stumbled into in
years," he said. "I think you'd better fill
me all the way in. And at this speed, you'd better
talk fast."
Forty-five years earlier . . .
USS
Enterprise
1701-A
"Picking up body parts, Commander Simon!"
"Specify! Human or what?"
"Difficult to specify, but definitely organic
tissue masses in small
amounts. Some of it could be legs or arms. Also
getting debris
that's nonorganic . . . hull
material. . . mechanical parts, includ
ing some pieces that are clearly identifiable as
Starfleet issue."
"How clearly, Jones?"
There was a pause. One of those that anybody can read.
Then . . .
"Stake my rank on it, ma'am."
Lorna Simon, under any other circumstances, would
have enjoyed pointing out how that wasn't much of a
testimonial coming
from just an ensign, but this time there was more on her mind
than

a cheap joke.

"Order battlestations," she said.

The bridge jumped to action at key points, and an instant later, the entire starship echoed.

"Red alert. Red alert! All hands come to battlestations. Battlestations!"

The starship

Enterprise

hovered just outside the Blue Zone, her red sensor disk washing the area down, her crew disturbed by what was coming out in the rinse.

None more than Drake Reed, who had watched his best friend

and a boy he felt he'd raised go out into this bizarre area of space only a few hours ago and was wondering if he would be able to see them come back.

Now came the bad moments of imagining how long his friends had suffered-or how short a time-and if they were still suffering just out of his reach. Or

if mankind should stay out of space unless there was a starship

like this around them. But how many of these special ships would

there ever be to go around? And not even a starship could be in ten places at once.

He'd been through times like this with George Kirk before, but

this time . . .

"A ship! Commander! I'm picking up something just inside the

Blue Zone!"

Simon cranked her ancient frame around with notable difficulty

and more than a little cantankerousness, and barked at the cub

minding the science station.

"Inside?"

Repeat that!"

"Affirmative-inside! And intact! Moving under power, I

mean!"

"Impossible."

"Correction!"

"I thought so."

"It's not one ship! It's two!"

"You sure you're reading that thing right, son?"

"Clearly power-regular . . . not just debris."

"You're telling me they were just pulled into that mess?"

"It reads as the cutter and some other . . . thing.
It's just pulling them along in there."
"Are they docked?"
"Appear to be docked, yes."
"Oh, that's enough! Let me have a look at that."
Simon hobbled
to the upper deck, peered into the submonitor, then
shook her head.
"I'll be slam-dunked . . ."
"Tremendous interference," Ensign Jones said, "but
regular
signals. I don't know what to make of
it. Maybe leakage ... but it wasn't just torn
apart in there. I don't know how," he added, "but
they're still in there."
"Pinpoint the source."
"I tried. It won't pinpoint."
"Hey, Trinidad. Step up here."
Drake spun around from his hopeless gaze at the
natural terror on
the main screen, the trinary and its dead zone, and
knew his friends
were in there and that nothing could survive in there.
Reluctant to
move backward instead of forward, even though that made
no sense
at all, he did as he was bade and joined Lorna
Simon on the
quarterdeck. He felt the sensor readout making
odd lights on his
tawny complexion.
"Madame Simon, ma'am?"
"This loose screw George of yours."
"Ah . . ."
"Troublemaker?"
"Oh, tut
...
not maker, per se . . . attractor, perhaps . . .
handler, possibly . . ."
"He's good at handling trouble?"
"Oh, better than handling normalness, I might
say! A good rascal
to have on your side."
"Doesn't give up at the drop of a hat?"
"Ma'am, this George of mine doesn't give up
at the drop of an
anvil."
"Even to finding a way to survive inside the Blue
Zone?"
Drake put a hand on his chest and said, "Commander, you
ask

big questions for a mere continental like
moi.
But I see these screens, and I see something pulsing
in a place where nothing
should pulse." He hesitated, measured his chances of
finishing the
next sentence, then said, "George Kirk would be out
here betting on
us with all his credits if the situation were backward."
The weathered woman glared at him for a long count
to see if he
would back down in his faith, and he didn't.
She nodded once, then stepped down to the command arena.
"Here's what we do," she said as she settled back
into the
command chair as though she'd been there for decades. Which
she
had. "Channel as much of the warp-drive power as you can
through
the tractor beam."
"Warp drive?" Isaac Soulian raised his head
from the science
station. "You want us to reroute it?"
"Engineering'll know how. Get Marvick on it."
Ensign Jones gave her the kind of look nobody
should ever give an
officer. "Just ask the circuits to do something they
weren't made to
do?"
She cast him a glance. "We're not under drive,
are we?"
"No, Commander-was
"Then use the power for something else. Just do it, son,
they'll
figure it out downstairs. I want the strongest
possible traction with
the best possible beam integrity."
"Yes, ma'am . . ."
"I want you to start "plucking" at the Blue
Zone." She used her
craggy old hand to pick at the air as an
example, although their faces
said they all had the idea. "See if you can . . .
grab
anything."
"Florida! What've you got?"
"We've got a one-way ticket, sir,"
Carlos said as he joined George
Kirk in an isolated corridor. They were both
scouting ahead while
Captain April stayed behind with their injured

Veronica. "Our ship reads as falling apart.
What I wouldn't give for a ten-second glance
into the formula for these shields-was
"What about the recon?"
"The what?"
"Reconnaissance. Looking around in here. What've
we got
here?"
"Half the compartments on this ship are open to space,
so they're
blocked off. We'll have to find our way around
indirectly. It's a
pretty sizable ship, but it's all battered up.
We'll have to be
careful. . . not open any locked panels or
hatches. A lot are sealing
off ruptured areas."
"We also have to be careful not to damage the ship itself
too
much. Hurt these shields, and we're all dead."
"Oh-that's true . . . and also they know their way
around, but
we don't. Those are our disadvantages."
"And no hand weapons."
"Oh . . . right. Sorry, Mr. Kirk. I'm
just not used to this kind of
thing."
"After serving with a luck-buster like me? Sure you
are."
Carlos smiled, shrugged, and turned a little red at
the reminder
that his only forays into near-death had been at
George Kirk's side.
"Here's how it goes," George told him. "I
scout ahead about fifty
yards at a time. You come next, and fifty yards
later, Robert'aa do his
best with our little girl. Got it?"
"Got it, sir. You can count on me."
"Let's get the captain and the girl, and find my
son, and get our behinds out of here."
"Fine. I admit it. There's a starship coming after
you. You're
sunk. Starfleet's coming after you now."
"What do you know about it?" Roy snapped at his
prisoner's
relentless picking as he prodded Jim Kirk
to walk in front of him
through the ship.
Why did the ship seem so empty? And it was too
quiet for a full

ship with a lot going on. The damage was obvious, but where were all the men? Where were all the white and black and brown and blue and mottled faces he usually found handy to cuss out? "I don't have to listen to you," he said to his only company, grabbing for a moment's assurance. "You're going to be dead and I'm going to still be alive." They stepped over two badly burned bodies. Roy tried not to be affected by the bodies, though he was noticing there were fewer and fewer of the crew visible in the corridors. Where was everybody? "No," Jim Kirk tossed over his shoulder, "not this time. You've blown it this time. You attacked a Starfleet research cutter. You got caught-you're in the brig or dead. And there's not any border patrol coming after you. There's a starship. They won't buy guesses about ships getting lost or sucked into the trinary. They know a Starfleet crew doesn't just "get lost." What can a pack of racketeers do about it? You're thieves. You're nothing but pirates." "We're not pirates!" "Why not? Because you don't call yourselves that? You only do everything pirates do. Sorry. My mistake." "We're Vikings." "And murderers. You justify your actions by convincing yourselves that your victims deserve what they get. You're smugglers. Hoods." "Leave me alone! Or I'll take my father's suggestion!" Roy's shout stabbed through the barren, smelly corridor as he forced Jimmy to walk. Jimmy did as he was bade, walked where he was told, climbed whichever ladders were put before him, stood aside and worked at the tough vinyl bindings on his wrists when Roy had to stop and fix something, but he wouldn't shut up. He wouldn't quit picking at the malignance he'd seen between Roy and

the others on this ship. Unlike those moments on board the Enterprise or the cutter, here he knew what to do. These people were people he understood-too well, he was ashamed to realize. These were what he had been headed toward becoming until a few short hours ago. He could still get out of it, and get his father and his friends out of it with whole skins. To do that, the one to watch, the one to manipulate, would be Roy Moss. Following a few classic moves of strategy and some not so classic, George Kirk sneaked through the enemy ship one corridor at a time, doing everything possible to annoy anybody who might go before or come after him-anything, at least, that would not damage the outer protection of this ship. That had to stay. But everything else-he turned off lights, he dried wet areas and wet down dry ones, broke every corridor access control panel he passed, and when possible he locked any doors and panels. Maybe he couldn't fight every one of these people, but he could sure lock them in and hinder their paths and keep them from talking to one another. He kept the others moving about a half corridor behind him, and made them duck and hide frequently while he scouted ahead. Ordinarily that wouldn't have been necessary, but they had Veronica Hall to carry and to protect, and that meant being more responsible for their own well-being. A man could always be more reckless when he had only himself to care for. He had scouted the upcoming corridor and was about to wave a come-ahead to Robert and Carlos, when he suddenly found himself waving them back and ducking for cover himself. He heard voices. One . . . two voices. He ducked under a piece of collapsed ceiling, then craned his neck to see if the others had managed

to double back and hide. They must have-he couldn't see them.

"You know, I never used to get mad just on principle," one voice said, "I always like stories about the Old West-was George almost shouted. Jimmy! His son's voice!

Alive! Jimmy was alive!

He forced himself to remain hidden until he could case the situation . . . now he heard footsteps!

"Goody," a second voice spat out.

"comp stumbling on each other and clashing," Jimmy went

on, "border disputes, culture wars, conflicts over law and land, the way the future's going to be etched out and whose rules are going to

be the best for everybody . . . but is that what you're doing? No. You lowlifes are just trying to make a few coins for your pockets. This is no interstellar dispute, no encroachment on somebody's space. It's just brainless piracy."

George ducked and held his breath. He had no weapon other than a short pipe. All he could do was peek out and see-

The tall, thin man shoving Jimmy around a corner!

No-not a man. Another boy. Hardly older than Jimmy, at second glance. Maybe a year or two older, with the teasings of a mustache that hadn't really grown yet, shoulders that would be wider by the month, no waist at all, and long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Both boys were battered and looked as if they'd been picking through a junkyard for parts.

A knot twisted George's heart. Jimmy's hands were tied, his clothes filthy and bloodied, his face smeared with blood too, and the tall boy was holding some kind of palm weapon on him.

"I'm warning you," the tall boy said. "Keep your mouth shut."

"Take it, then," Jimmy whiplashed. "Why are you hanging around with these people? Ever since we left the bridge you've been steaming and spitting about these lugheads you have to yes-sir.

They're just a gang. No purpose. Just ganging

together because
nobody else in a civilized place'll take
"em. Not what I'd want to do
with my life. These dumb funguses around you-they're
not a
team. They use your talent and your
inventions, but they don't give
you any respect. What are you really getting?"
"B. . . out!" Roy breathed through flaring nostrils.
Suck, hiss,
suck, hiss. "Nobody"ll ever tell me what
to do again. That's what
power gets you. You just shut up and . . . shut up."
Jimmy knew he was hearing just the right level of
annoyance in
Roy's voice, and stopped dead in his tracks. As
George watched, not daring to breathe, his son turned
on the other young man and stood him down right there in the
smoky corridor.

"You resent that you're not in charge, don't you?"

Jimmy
challenged him. "You don't like following rules you
didn't invent or
don't see reasons for yourself. You can't get anything
past me. I
know all the excuses by heart. You're annoyed with
life and you
want to get on with it. So why don't you?"
Backing off a telltale step, the other boy
demanded, "Why don't

I

...

what?"

"You want something. You want more than this," Jimmy
bad

gered. He felt his hazel eyes burn in a
glare. "What are you doing
here with these idiots? Anyone who would hang around here
has to
be an idiot himself. I don't know what you want and
I don't care, but I know you'll never get it
here."

He paused after the last statement to see the reaction
to it.

And there was one. A good one.

Jimmy's eyes narrowed, and he was reading the other
boy's face.

"I'm using these people!" he insisted. "This is
temporary! It's just
bad luck that I'm here for the moment!"

"I don't believe in luck," Jimmy said.

"Show me "luck" and I'll beat it."

"What about you!" Roy accused Jimmy. "What're

you

doing

here? You could've escaped in that pod! You

think those idiots in

that other ship appreciate what you did?"

Jimmy pushed forward so fast and so suddenly, with

eyes so

enraged, the other boy stepped back a pace.

"Those people were willing to lay their lives on the line for

me!

They're not perfect, but at least they're trying!

They have as much

in common with you and your crew as a stallion with a

cockroach!"

George clamped his mouth shut tightly and begged

for the

situation to change so he could go out there and grab his

boy and

hug him. The words warmed his aching ribs and made him

grin in spite of what was happening.

Jimmy had paused and realized he was losing

control, and

quickly changed to get it back. He lowered his voice

for a touch of

drama.

"Then there's these pigs you ship with," he added. "Ever

dawn on

you they might be using you?"

The tall boy stood there stiff, boiling, staring, with the

hell being annoyed out of him.

As George hid and watched, he tried to deduce

what was

happening so he could help his son, and figured that

Jimmy was

jockeying for position.

And not just position for fists and kicks-position for a

psycho

logical advantage!

"I'll be damned," George whispered as he

skewered the tall

quarry and tried to analyze that face.

Whoever the captor was, he wasn't a happy

captor. Jimmy was

getting to him.

George watched as his antagonistic son wagged

bound hands in front of his captor's flaming eyes.

"Never thought of any of this, did you?" Jimmy

persisted. "How

much have

you
gotten out of this? I can guess that you invented
those shields, not these other clowns. You're so
stupid, you don't
even realize what you've got. You've found a way
to survive inside
the Blue Zone and you're trying to pick parts of a
salvage and sell
them? You're the only one who can work on them, right?
What's it gotten you? The pennies you can scrape
up out here in deep space?
You know how much that's worth? Talk about stepping over
dollars! You could've sold that science and had anything
you want!
Not only could you have had anything you want, but you'd have
been Roy Moss, the hero!"
George almost got up and applauded. He had
to fight the
inclination and force himself to keep hidden and keep
collecting
information.
So
that
was the story-this kid had invented the special
shields.
The one called Roy Moss stood there, virulent,
jaundiced,
gawking at a brutal fist of reality that had
bruised him square in the
face. His eyes went glassy-this meant something
to him.
A hero . . .
George saw Jimmy grate his teeth with
satisfaction, and realized
his son had this other boy figured out. This
pony-tailed wetsock
wanted people thinking well of him. That was the key.
Jimmy had the key in his hands.
Dig, dig, dig-
"You've been with criminals all your life,
haven't you?" Jimmy
picked at him. "It never occurred to you to go
legitimate, did it?
You could've had people thinking well of you all over the
galaxy!
What are you instead? A common crook. Now you'll
be lucky just
to live long enough to grow a beard."
Roy Moss looked like a child about to have a panic
attack. He
seemed to know the other boy could read his reactions, and

looked
as if he were fractured in a dozen places. He
aimed a finger at his
antagonist's freckles.
"Look, razormouth," he growled, "someday they're
all going to owe me! I'm just making sure I get
what I deserve."
Jimmy retreated into satisfied silence, but not before
George
heard him mutter, "So am I."
George twitched until his legs hurt. His
teeth ground and his jaws
ached.
Jump them! Go on-one, two, three. . . . Do
it right
now. . . . Nobody takes my son.
His legs wouldn't work. Training had drilled bolts
through his
knees. He couldn't go up against a wild-eyed
kidnapper with a
weapon after finally seeing proof that Jimmy was all
right.
Down the corridor where the two boys had gone,
doors swished
and squawked. His chance was gone.
Now what? Had he done right?
This scouting-ahead business had its drawbacks.
He couldn't be just Jimmy's father right now.
He couldn't
suspend Robert and Carlos and an injured girl
who were trailing a
corridor or two behind him. There was a job to do,
four people
under his command, not just one.
And Jimmy . . . wasn't exactly whimpering and
crying for
Daddy.
George backed up a step and forced himself to think.
Keep
gathering information, get familiar with the terrain, find the
point
of command and the points of weakness, don't leave anything
unchecked-
"Hold it! Freeze!"
Including the corridor behind him-
Damn!
Caught off guard, George did as he was
told-froze solid in the middle of the nasty,
broken, smoky, damage-littered corridor, just
as he was ordered by the sizable individual of questionable
plane

tary background who spotted him.
There was proof. Thinking too much about one
member of the
crew instead of the whole plan-and he'd let himself
get spotted.
Okay . . . shift to plan two.
He turned slowly, hands up.
In front of him was a craggy human holding some
type of
mean-looking hand laser. George didn't
recognize the make, but the
weapon made him hungry.
He wanted it.
He'd burned his up in the tractor beam, and now
he wanted that
one.
His son was on this ship, working on weakening a key
mind; it
was up to George to weaken other things.
Ticking off five seconds, he hoped Robert
and the others were
using the seconds to hide. Then he put both his
hands up and said,
"I give up."
The crag lumbered toward him.
George put all his experience to work and tried
to look submis
sive. He dropped his pipe and put his hands on the
wall and spread
his legs, just as he liked his own prisoners to do.
"I give," he repeated. "I'm lost. I can't
find my way around your
ship."
"Yeah," the large, dirty man said. "We like it that
way." As he approached George, he paused and
poked a wall communication
panel. "Bridge! This is Munkwhite. I got
one of 'em! They're down
here on the anchor deck!"
He waited, but there was nothing but static responding.
He punched the buttons harder.
"Bridge! This is Munkwhite! Somebody answer
me!"
Static. Crackles.
"Damn it, what's the matter with this thing?" He
kept an eye on George while cranking on the
tuning knobs for a few seconds and
cursing.
"I busted your system," George offered, peeking
over his own shoulder. "Didn't want you creeps
talking to each other."

"Sure you did! Shut up!" The man turned his frustrated attention back to his captive, came toward George, and started patting him down for weapons. George didn't resist. In fact, he held his breath, hoping- Pssshht Munkwhite's expression of anger turned to one of surprise. His eyes went wide, he staggered back, gasping, "That's not fair! That's not f-was His eyes glazed over as he stared at the hand he'd been using to pat at George's clothes. He staggered back, legs spread, then fell over like a stone and hit the deck full-length. George drew a long breath and pushed off the wall, wincing at his own wounds and trying to control his limp. "Good idea," he commented. "Always pat a prisoner down." From his pocket he'd pulled his booby trap one of Veronica Hall's medical hypodermics. He expended the used cartridge which Munk-what's-his-name had so accommodatingly injected into his own hand, then replaced it with another dose, just in case some body else got a jump on them too. Of course, now he was armed . . . with the laser weapon he had so recently coveted. Then he opened a wall storage panel and ungraciously crammed Munkwhite into the wall to sleep it off where he wouldn't leave a trail, and with a few not-very-kind shoves man aged to close the panel almost all the way and get it nice and jammed. "Don't worry," George added. "Three or four hours and you'll feel . . . just terrible. Besides, nobody promised you 'fair.'" Robert! Come on! I'm going to corner these bastards on their own bridge!" When Roy Moss dragged Jimmy back to the bridge to report to

Big Rex that everything was broken or sabotaged and a lot of the crew were missing or unconscious, there was a distinct difference in the tone of voice from the nineteen-year-old knot of frustrations. Jimmy deduced it might be one of the first times, if not the first time, that somebody had gotten the best of Roy in an argument without using fists. These deadnecks around here had never been any competition for Roy, and he didn't like being told he was an idiot by somebody smart. His intellect was all he had to hold over these other bandits. He wasn't big like his father, or tough, or powerful. He was used to being the smartest kid in class. Everyone else had fallen easily under his "everybody else is stupid" catch-all. Now Roy had this Kirk kid around, who might not be a science wizard, but who knew how to plumb for feelings and annoy them out. He wasn't used to having someone around who could smell traps and figure things out and anticipate trouble. This Jim Kirk had an amazing survival instinct and was trying to get under his skin and find out why he was doing what he was doing. Whenever Roy had said anything, it hadn't gone over Kirk's head like it did all these brutes around them. Jim Kirk caught and deduced every thing. Not just words, but glances, looks, grunts, grumbles, posture. Figuring out mechanics was one thing, but being able to sift motivations . . .

"The whole ship's falling apart!" Rex Moss was howling as the two boys came back onto the bridge. He rounded on his son.

"Haven't you got the intercom mended yet?"

"You said it yourself," Roy grumbled. "The ship's falling apart."

"Well, get it back together!"

Roy had started to pick at the control boards, but now turned to look past the frantic bridge crew, what few of them were left, and glared down at his huge father.

"Don't you understand?" he accused him. "It's them!
They're sabotaging the ship! I warned you every step of the way, but you didn't listen! They're on board now, and I don't know what I can do for you!"

"Nothing," Jimmy piped up. "You can't fight Starfleet on equal terms and win."

Both Mosses turned at the same time and howled, "Shut up!"

Jimmy settled back in satisfaction, one eye on Big Rex Moss, and one eye on Little Roy Moss, and enjoyed the steam coming from both. The malignance between father and son was like a sumptuous appetizer, and he wallowed in his talent for siccing them on each other. There was enough antagonism on this bridge to stoke and light, and Jimmy felt strangely at home in the odium. He felt an evil side rising in himself, a side that knew just what to do, just how churlish to be, and just how to tease acrimony into erupting. There was a brute inside him, a cad who seldom got the chance to fledge, and now was its perfect time. Pick, pick, pick-that's what Jimmy Kirk did well.

Suddenly somebody screamed, "Antimatter leakage!"

The alien who had yelled was down the deck from Jimmy, arms stuck halfway into an open wall panel and reminded Jimmy of the jury-rigging and faking-it that had gone on between himself and the others in the cutter's hold. He remembered Carlos Florida's phrase comunder the hood.

He recognized the alien as an Orion, and knew better than to get close to an Orion who was panicking.

And this one was.

So was everybody else. Antimatter leakage?

Bad?

He kept back as the thieves dodged this way and that, shouting down crawlways and pounding on unresponsive panels, then dodging again.

"What can we do?" Big Rex Moss shouted. He turned from one crewman to the next, grabbing them each by the collar or the sleeve as they scrambled past him. "Stop the leak! We'll blow up! Do something!"

Jimmy surmised that the best he could do was stay out of the way and let them panic. He surmised maybe his father was doing something to fake a leak or create the illusion of a leak. If so, it was to his advantage to stay calm. If the leak was real, it was to his advantage to stay out of the way and let it get solved.

"The port warp engine!" the Orion shouted into a small screen that played erratic lights on his face. "Detonation thirty seconds!

Twenty-nine! Twenty-eight! Twenty-seven!"

"Do something!" Rex Moss called.

"Twenty-six!"

All at once, everybody on the bridge turned not to Rex, not to the Orion engineer, but to Roy Moss.

Big Rex himself lumbered toward his son.

"Well?" he bellowed.

Roy straightened and looked down at him.

There was something different. For the first time Jimmy noted that his words from the corridors hadn't gone unrooted.

There was something distinctly changed between Roy and Rex Moss.

Some thing beyond a son's fear of a brutal father.

This was a coarse glare of challenge and offense.

Roy glowered down at his father and rancorously said, "Yes?"

His father looked like a man about to have a heart attack.

"Do something!"

Tension broiled raw on the grill of the Mosses.

Finally the son shifted his weight and asked, "Why should I?"

"Reading antimatter leakage!"
"From inside the Blue Zone?"
"Affirmative! Heavy waves!"
"That's what we've been waiting for, kids."
Lorna Simon tried to make her voice sound
calm and reassuring
for the young folks aboard, and especially for this Drake
Reed, who
had the look of a man watching his best friend walk up
the
guillotine ramp.
She couldn't help standing up. There were times when even
the
command chair of a ship like the
Enterprise
wasn't enough.
Not when antimatter leakage came out of a place
where some of
her children were lost. And she'd been thinking about retiring
again . . . just couldn't make herself do it. Times like this
kept
pulling her back.
"Get your sensors cracking!" she snapped.
"Pinpoint it! Reed, get
down here and take the navigation chair! Let's put
our tractors into
that mess and get our people out of there!"
Nobody was moving. All sweating, but nobody
moving. All
stared at Roy.
He let them sweat. His advantage reaching its
strongest moment, and he used it to add friction. Not
even his father knew what to do.
"Fifteen! Fourteen! Thirteen! Twelve!" the
Orion engineer
shouted.
Roy stepped down to his father's level. "Get out
of my way, you
imbecile."
Big Rex Moss had no choice, and apparently
he knew it.
Hating the universe, he stepped aside.
On the port side, the Orion's voice
cracked. "Eight! Seven! Six!"
Roy stepped past Big Rex as though he were
nothing.
The effect was astonishing for Jimmy as he
witnessed the other
things that can happen between a father and son. His young
captor,
who just minutes ago had been so surprised at the

idea of taking
over, now seemed to figure that his father wasn't
worthy of respect
or fear any more than these other low forms of life.
With one hand-as though to make a point-Roy reached
into a
section of the open port side mechanical panels
and worked some
unexplained magic, then yanked on something.
They had only two seconds to spare when the
countdown stopped
and the Orion choked on the phrase, "Port engine
is ejected!
Starboard engine is still stable!"
An instant later the ship shifted under them and
knocked them
off their feet. Jimmy grabbed for balance and
realized that the discarded engine had just blown up and
knocked them with
backwash. He struggled to keep himself up in spite
of his hands
being tied and curtailing his balance, and only when the
ship settled
again did he realize he'd missed a chance. He
should have hit
somebody or kicked something or jumped somewhere.
Another little lesson to log away for the future.
Roy enjoyed-as much as that hideous, spiteful
expression could be called enjoyment-having gotten his
father and the others out of
a situation that would have killed them all if he hadn't
been here.
He straightened, and faced Big Rex.
"I'm going below," he said. "I'm going to secure
the shielding and
do whatever else needs doing so that doesn't happen
again.
You . . . just stay here and be the big man."
Rancor dripped from his tongue.
He stepped aft, scooped up a utility tin
marked
chemical rinse,
and gestured for Jimmy to lead the way out.
Below, once again in the corridor, Roy fell into a
callous silence
that Jimmy read with all but obvious glee.
Finally Roy took one too
many of his captive's snotty glances and said,
"You're pretty cocky
for a noxious runt with his hands tied up."
Jimmy cast him a glance of pure flint. "I'm

not the one consider
ing patricide."

"Oh, shut up! Where'd you even learn a word like
that?"

"Heard it in a play."

"Well, keep it to yourself. You don't know what
you're talking
about."

"Yes, I do," Jimmy insisted as Roy shoved
him into one of the
engine rooms and pushed him off to a safe distance.
Roy grumbled something unintelligible, then crawled
over a
dangerously jagged pile of electrical parts and
circuit boards that
had fallen from the ceiling. He ended up on all
fours to get over the
pile, then crouched in a corner, opened the tin he'd
brought from
the bridge, and began selecting fine
pieces of equipment and
dipping them one by one into the chemical cleaner.
Between them, the pile of shattered boards crackled and
occa

sionally snapped with live electricity, as though
laughing at the two
human boys trying to keep their noses above the
water in a very
serious adult business.

Jimmy stayed aside. He didn't have duking it out
with Roy Moss in his plan-yet. He'd used his
fists enough in his life, and this was
a new adventure. He was going to see how far he
could annoy this
one.

Tenacity kicked in again. He discovered he was
pretty good at
reading other people, but until today, until now, he
hadn't read himself very well. He determined
to survive, not just sacrifice
himself, but live through it, and let his father know.
He erupted out of his private thoughts and glared at
Roy.

"I can't figure you out," he said. "You're
obviously brilliant, and
your father thinks it's some kind of parlor trick. When
it gets him
something, maybe then he'll respect you. Until
then, you're noth
ing. If you don't realize that, you're stupid
too."

Roy buried himself in his dipping and cleaning, mumbling incoherencies, not really conversing at all, but just growling out his frustrations.

It was working, Jimmy knew. He could goad Roy by making him feel stupid, because that's what he knew would work on himself. He felt the whole future was lying out before him in Roy Moss-the perfect example of what his father had been trying to avoid happening to Jimmy in two or three years. An angry young man who wasn't sure about the Tightness of what he was doing.

"Stupidity . . . stupid people can make a living . . . undisciplined people can't. . ."

Roy was muttering louder now, and Jimmy was catching some of the phrases.

"Idiots claim part of it

...
never give it up

...
mine and all
mine . . . scratching Faramond like lice . . ."

"Faramond?" Jimmy went so straight against the wall that he hit the back of his head. "What about Faramond?"

Roy looked up, eyes wide. A tiny electrical chip dripping fluid from his fingers to the floor. He looked like a trapped squirrel.

"What interest have you got in Faramond?" Jimmy badgered.

"None of your business! Who do you think you are-Sherlock Holmes?"

The look on Roy's face said it all again that he wasn't used to having somebody around who could figure things out, smell traps, make deductions.

He tried to go back to dipping and cleaning.

Jimmy pushed off the wall and pointed his bound fingers.

"You've got something on Faramond that you aren't telling your father about!"

"He's still my father!" Roy bellowed. "Shut up!"

The guilt came back to prick at Jimmy as he

read the other boy's
face. Roy had shown him what it was like to have a
really
bad father,
yet Roy was showing more loyalty to Big Rex than
Jimmy had
shown to his own father.
"You know something nobody else does," he kept
on. "That's
right, isn't it? Sure! Why else would you put up
with this shipload of
maggots? That's why you keep your mouth shut, isn't
it?"
Roy's arms shook violently, his face turned
red, and he visibly
broke. "I don't need them! I'm well on my
way to taking over! I've
been funneling off my own stash, stocking for
my future!
My
future!
Which isn't going to include these cretins!"
Jimmy edged along the wall, forcing Roy to turn
away from the
main corridor doorway. "What is it?" he
teased. "Bet you've been
dying to tell somebody. Why not me?"
"I don't need to tell anybody! It's mine!
When I get all I need, I'm
going to take what these fools have stolen and blow them
all out into
space! They wouldn't be alive anyway if not for
me, so it won't
really change anything! I'll get everything I
want! And when I do, I'll
get rid of these people! They don't mean anything to me,
and I'm not going to feel bad after I do it! Darwin
would understand!"
"What about your father? That include him?"
"Look, he's my father! I'm stealing from him for his
own good!
Doesn't mean I have to kill him! He'll understand
when the time is
right for him to understand! He won't have any choice! You
saw
what just happened on the bridge! I'm in charge
now! I've got
something on Faramond that's worth a lifetime's work,
and it's all mine! It'll make me an emperor!"
Jimmy didn't say anything.
He didn't have to.

The shadow being cast from the meager corridor light said everything. Roy spun around.

Big Rex Moss stood in the anteroom doorway.

And there was nothing fatherly left in his eyes.

Young Roy Moss transformed from a dominant bastion of the

future to a shriveled victim in three seconds.

He even got shorter.

He shoved upward against the wall, an electrical piece in one hand

and the tin of fluid in the other. The tin was heavy, and dropped the

few inches to the floor, sloshing, but landing upright.

"I'll share everything with you!" he whined as his father moved

slowly into the anteroom. "You heard me

tell him that! It was going

to be for us! The two of us!"

The offer came too late. The idea alone that

Roy had been

stealing from his own people kept scorching the air.

But Big Rex Moss wasn't in a mood for teamwork.

"I shoulda killed you a long time ago," he grated.

"I'll do it now.

I'll kill you just like I did your mother."

Rex Moss never took his small, hot eyes off

his son. He started

climbing over the hill of collapsed parts and conduit boards. The

pile crunched and snapped as his feet pressed

down, then his hands,

one by one. Parts groaned under the weight as he

crawled closer and

closer, giving him a platform from which to lunge down upon Roy.

Jimmy was ranked by the very presence of the enormous

man, but he knew an opportunity when he saw

one, and started sidling

toward the doorway. If he could just clear it-

A hand caught him at the throat. Or was

it a catcher's mitt? So big

that the palm alone spread from his ear to his shoulder, the hand

drove him deep into the room and slammed him into the

side wall

so hard, it left him dazed and numb.

"Siddown!" Rex Moss roared. "You're next!"

The voice echoed like a kettledrum.

Cut down to size, Jimmy Kirk realized he was
being given a crash
course in the anatomy of open murder, and there was
nothing he
could do about it. Big Rex Moss could reach the width
of the
anteroom to either side without even leaning. There would be
no
getting past him.

Tyrannosaurus Rex was going after his own son
again. He
climbed right over the pile of trash and snapping parts
in the center
of the room and got Roy by the throat.
"Where's my stash?" the father demanded. "Where've you
been
putting it?"

Rex was choking Roy to death. There was no doubt for
any of
them. But he was so enraged and choking Roy so hard that
Roy
couldn't have answered if he'd wanted to.

Terrorized into action that had never been raked up out
of him
before, Roy suddenly raised the electrical chip in
his left hand and
raked it across his father's flabby cheek as though
scraping paint.

Rex bellowed in rage and pain, hoisted Roy
clear into the air
overhead, and pitched him across the room.

Dizzy and tingling, Jimmy struggled to get to his
knees and keep aware of what was going on, but he
couldn't muster enough dare to
challenge the giant again. Not just a giant, but an
enraged

giant. . . one who had been personally betrayed.
Rex came again over the pile of half-connected
machinery,
crunch by crunch, grab by grab, ignoring short
circuits snapping
right under his hands and knees.

"Where's my stash!" he demanded. "I want
all
of it!"

Before him, Roy shook and moved his mouth, but no sound
came
out. Bruises were already forming on his neck.
"Steal from me?" Rex went on, coming closer and
closer.

Roy tried to maneuver away, but there was nowhere to go

other
than along the wall back toward where he had been
before. He
edged sideways, confused and unable to think, eyes
flashing from
side to side, fixing on his father every second or
two, for Rex was almost over the pile again, almost
to him-
His boot bumped against the tin of chemical cleaning
fluid and
almost knocked it over. The liquid splashed.
Roy grabbed for it and, miraculously, he got it.
Perhaps he meant only to discourage his father, perhaps
to splash
some of the fluid in the hideous face coming
nearer and nearer, but the tin had other ideas. The top
came off completely, and the entire
contents of the tin, a half gallon of chemical
fluid, fanned out across
Rex Moss, and across the pile of parts under him.
The pile of charged and connected parts, half of them still
flowing
with power.
A funnel of sparks went up in a giant short
circuit. Big Rex
bellowed to a pitch no man his size should be able
to hit, and he
froze stiff, then started to shake.
His eyes bugged out, then out farther. Electricity
broke into jolts
through his arms and legs and set his hair on fire.
Sizzling like an ox on a spit, Rex Moss
started to fry. His clothing
burst into flames as though someone had cast a spell
on him and
was burning him in effigy somewhere. Locked by ugly
science to the
material under him, Rex grabbed convulsively with
both hands at
the mountain of metal, eyes still fixed on his
son. Lightning surged
through him and left scorch marks on his forehead as
wave after
wave permeated his enormous body, the soaked
clothing and wet
metal conducted electricity with nothing short of
passion, and he
started to cook.
There was nothing for him to do but hang there, and fry
...
and

fry

...

and fry.

Jimmy dodged for cover, betrayed by his tied hands, and barely got under a broken chair as the sparks rained and splattered around him. He glimpsed Roy dodging for cover too, his face redefining astonishment.

The stink of burning chemicals and blistering flesh was nauseating as the liquid soaked in and crackled viciously. The big man collapsed, his body poaching where it lay, flabby face bubbling as though it had been blow-torched, eyes wide with pure horror, but still fixed on his son as the life seeped out of them.

Ultimately, the last grab fell from his fingers.

He lay there, a sizzling heap on top of a sizzling heap, slowly being cauterized by electrical heat.

Overcome by terror and scalded by splashed fluid and sparks, Roy lay almost on his back and stared through his knees at his father's broiled body.

Suddenly he cringed against the wall, slammed the wall with his fist so hard his fingers could have shattered, and he shouted bitterly.

"Why did you make me do that? Why'd you make me kill him!

That's not supposed to happen! He was a big man!

Now, look at him! Look at him!"

Rex was still staring at his son, and neither of the boys could tell if he was even dead yet.

Suddenly Roy jolted to his knees and closed the distance between himself and Jimmy with staggering speed and held the stunner at Jimmy's head-the stunner that Jimmy didn't even realize Roy still had.

"You'll pay for this! I'll make you pay!" Roy spat, half sobbing and half enraged, unable to take the blame for his

father's death

himself.

The fried junk under Rex Moss shifted abruptly and the huge body shifted too, drawing Roy's attention again.

He turned away from Jimmy and spoke to his father's gawking,

blistered face.

"Not my fault

...

not my fault. . . it's not. . ."

Jimmy came out of his hiding place and looked, but not with the

regret or compassion that Roy demanded. There was simply

nothing left in him for these people, who had possessed chance after

chance to mend their mistakes and hadn't done it.

"Now you can render him down into soap," he droned.

"Get

some use out of him."

Shuddering, Roy leaned against the wall, both knees bent, breath

coming in sucks and blows through his nostrils, his teeth gritted,

lips closed tight. Every cell in his body was shaking with palsy, as

though he were ninety instead of nineteen, and he couldn't stand up without leaning.

Expression after expression came and went, none of them partic

ularly rational, but Jimmy could see that Roy was rallying his mind

and trying to get it to override his emotions-of which he had

plenty.

An interesting process to watch. Insanity taking seed.

"Destiny," Roy said finally on one of those gasps.

"Makes

sense . . ."

Scooping his ever-present nerve stunner from where it had fallen

beside him, he pushed himself off the wall and stood over his

father's body, shoulders tucked down and inward, feet out, knees

in, trying to keep balance. He still looked old.

"It knew," he murmured. "Forced me to take

over . . . grow up

before I was ready

...
it knew maybe I
am
ready

...
I just didn't
believe it. Destiny . . ."

He straightened a little, seemed to be gathering his inner strength, almost against his own will. Being in charge was something he had thought about all his life but had never considered within reach.

Unwilling to walk too near Big Rex's body, he sidled along the wall until he could extend a long arm and get Jimmy by the collar.

"I've got to get to the bridge. Get moving."

Veronica Hall let out a bone-shattering groan as her shipmates dragged her through a jarred door panel, then lay her down in the

corridor as they gathered their wits and their options.

George panted, sweated, and tried not to let his hands clench too

tightly as he watched Robert and Carlos replace Veronica's medical cartridges for the fifth time since coming aboard this vessel. A

strange ritual, this lurking about, covert, dangerous, in danger, all the while hauling an injured girl who needed nursing as diligently as

if she were lying in an infirmary.

While watching this again and feeling the acid of responsibility

and inadequacy peeling the paint off his heart, George made a decision that tasted bitter as he forced himself to speak up.

"Robert," he began.

"Yes, George?" Robert responded with monklike calmness.

"I'm going to go on ahead."

"Yes, I understand."

"Can you hold out here?"

Robert looked up at him, pale and gathering all the will he had

left. He glanced at Carlos in a comradely manner, then back at

George.

"We'll do whatever is necessary," he assured him.

"You go take charge and find your son."

"Where

is

everybody?"

Roy ground out his words while pulling at a drawer of circuitry in the corridor wall.

The circuitry was dead, the intercom didn't work, the sensors didn't work, a good seventy percent of the doors didn't even open anymore in the passages leading to the bridge.

Off to one side, just out of kicking distance, Jimmy clamped his lips shut, rubbed his hands to keep the blood circulating in spite of

his bindings, and didn't respond. The ship did seem peculiarly,

eerily, empty. The crew was missing, communication was down,

everything was down except those special shields.

"What are your people doing?" Roy demanded. "Do you know what they've done? Do they have a plan? Do they follow a policy? If

you tell it to me, it may help keep us all alive."

Bobbing him a glance, Jimmy shrugged. "How should I know?

I'm just a kid. Besides, how can a few Starfleet gorillas compete

with an intellect like yours? You know . . . Darwin would under stand."

Roy actually growled at him, teeth locked and nose wrinkled, and threatened him with the stunner.

Jimmy had been proud of himself for one or two good jabs, and

here was his father in eight places at once. His father and Captain

April-he tried to imagine Captain April clunking somebody on

the head, and just couldn't see it. Robert April would sit them down and give them a good talking-to, and the guys would feel guilty and give themselves up.

Then

George Kirk would hit "em.

A main insulator door opened before them and they went into the

upper level of the ship, and came around a corner to a horrid sound

of pounding and banging, easily traced to a torn-up section of corridor wall. There, right on the wall, a line of locker-type doors were rattling, which they traced down to one particular locker.

"Stand back," Roy ordered, gesturing Jimmy well out of kicking range. Keeping one eye on his captive, his "personal shield," he traced the banging to what could have been a locker or a control panel with a hinged door.

Whatever it was, the door was ajar and somebody was in there, rattling like crazy and trying to get out. Roy grabbed the door and tried to pull it open, but only the top quarter would budge.

"Open it!" a voice roared from inside.

"Munkwhite?" Roy attempted. "Is that you?"

"Get me out! Get me out of this hole!"

"It won't open."

"Open it!"

"Would you like me to spell 'won't'? It's jammed. Who did this?"

"Those Starfleeters! They're here! They jumped me! Just get it open!"

Roy rattled the door halfheartedly, obviously thinking more of himself and the fact that several Starfleet people were loose on his ship, then gave it a final kick and said, "Well, it's your tough luck for being stupid." He turned to Jimmy again. "Come on, you. Let's make hay while the sun shines."

Nervous and ready to use his stunner, he yanked Jimmy in front of him again and off they went, with Munkwhite hammering away in the background almost until they reached the bridge itself.

There, Lou Caskie was alone, wide-eyed, frozen with pure terror.

He looked twenty years older-and he was already old-and on the ravaged bridge, with chunks of machinery the size of sofas and chairs collapsed across almost any sensible path.

What Roy had inherited was a miserable ruin now, a hulk of hissing

parts and
spitting leaks, and one old man who was panicking.
"What's left?" Roy called over the crackles
and noise.
"Where's your father!" Caskie shrieked, his voice
snagging.
"We're gonna get killed in here! We're
gonna die like rats!"
"Where's the rest of the crew?"
"I don't know! Nobody answers! The sensors
don't work any
more! Intercom's down! Crew don't answer!
They're all dead!"
"They're not dead," Roy droned, climbing over a
big chunk of
junk and going down to the bridge center. "But they're
going to be."
He gestured to Jimmy. "You-get down here too.
Stand over there
where I can see you. What are your friends doing? You
tell me!"
"How should I know? Just a kid, remember?" Though
he did as
he was told, Jimmy had no cooperation in his
voice when he
taunted, "Ship sure is quiet, isn't it?"
"Shut up! You shut up!"
"What're you gonna do?"
"I'm going to play my last card, smart-ass.
I'm going to turn off
the heat everywhere but right here."
Jimmy felt the cockiness drop from his face. "You
can't!"
"They'll all freeze," Roy said with
flaming satisfaction. "And
we'll have Starfleetsicles."
"Keep talking," Jimmy antagonized.
"Sooner or later you'll
believe yourself."
Enraged, Roy turned on him and started closing the
space
between them, using his nasty little nerve-stunner to bridge
the gap.
"I've had it with you!" he grated. "I don't
need you anymore.
This'll shut you up!"
From behind them-
"Stop right there, bud."
Jimmy thought it was his own voice, but he and Roy
turned at the
same instant and found themselves staring down a laser

pistol barrel and over that toward one of the engineering
crawlway
openings-
At George Kirk.
Clamping his lips, Jimmy had a flash-thought about
not giving away his dad's disadvantage-the fact that
the kid was

kid-
but from a low point behind the crawlway Lou Caskie
appeared on
the other side of the bridge, brandishing a sharp piece
of metal.
Without even thinking, Jimmy shouted, "Dad, behind
you!"
His father reacted almost as spontaneously by putting his
foot in
Caskie's face. Clearly, that's how he had
been explaining his way
through the ship. An instant later, the old man was out
of the
picture.
But while George Kirk was occupied with
Caskie, Roy wasn't
standing idle.
He dove for a panel and put his hand under it-the
shield
controls-
"You can't fire that faster than I can move my
finger!" he shouted,
trembling. "You can kill me, but not before I turn
off the deflectors
and we're all dead! You can't put me
down fast enough! You can't!"
He was right.
"You'll die! Your son'll die! Your frs'll
die! I'll do it! I'll do it!
Give it to me!"
"All right!" George barked.
"No!" Jimmy interrupted. "Don't do it,
Dad. He'll kill us anyway. That's the way
he is." With a dissecting glare at Roy he added,
"We can't let him win. You were right. This shouldn't
happen to anybody else. Better we all die
here."
His father straightened and stared at him. "No kidding?"
Jimmy offered a duelist's nod. "You bet no
kidding."
"Shut up! Shut up! I'll do it!" Roy
howled.
With eyes made of smoke, Jimmy took a step

toward Roy. "Then
do
it. What's taking so long?"
On the upper deck, separated from the two boys by a
huge chunk
of collapsed machinery that he would never be able to get
over in
time, Jim's father said, "No!"
Jimmy stopped and looked at him with a "b" in his
eyes.
"Back down, Jim," George said firmly.
Roy crouched there with his finger on the switch, watching
the two Kirks and trembling so hard his teeth
clattered.
Broiling, Jimmy felt a hundred arguments
rise inside him. He wanted to be defiant, but
somehow defiance didn't fit the bill
anymore. It wasn't real. It wasn't right.
Both hands out in a subservient posture, George
lifted the hand
laser's barrel a few inches, raising the aim off
Roy, then stepped
forward just enough to lower the weapon and set it on the chunk
of
machinery.
"Get it," Roy snapped, and waved at Jimmy.
"Pick it up by the barrel and hand it to me."
"Get it yourself, chicken," Jimmy snarled. "I
got my pride."
"You get it for me or I'll do this, I swear
I'll do this!"
"Jim," George said steadily, "do what
he says."
Perplexed, Jimmy frowned.
"Do what he says," George repeated.
He connected looks with his son in a manner so
honest and so
private that both felt the magnetism.
Jim said, "He won't do it, Dad. He won't
kill himself."
On the upper deck, measuring his options in inches,
George Kirk
studied his son's face. There was a certain quiet
communication
going on between the two of them that hadn't been there in
years-and he was sure he wasn't imagining it. He
could see just
looking
at Jimmy that there had been a change. Jimmy had
a look of
confidence-confidence in

him.

Slowly George added, "Orders."

Without understanding why, without waiting until he saw the reason, Jimmy simply said, "Yes, sir," and followed an order that he disagreed with.

With a winning smirk on his face about having somehow pulled

his tail out of the fire again, Roy Moss was closing his white, cold

hand around the laser. He licked his lips, stood up, and aimed the

weapon squarely at Jimmy's head.

Roy was knotted from head to toe, keyed-up and nervous,

excited, scared, and elated to the point of giddiness that he'd won,

and he had to rub their noses in it.

"I knew you couldn't beat me! Nobody beats me. You thought you had me. I know you did. People think that all the time about

me, and they're always wrong. Now everything's going to be mine

and you're just going to be dead. You should've listened to your son,

Mr. Kirk," he said. "Now you can watch him burn."

The weapon leveled at Jimmy's head, and Roy squeezed the molded firing handle.

Jimmy didn't wince. He was ready for any scenario, and his trust

in his father was riding an all-time high. If he had to catch a laser

beam in his teeth, he'd do it just to make the point.

He'd learned.

Fffsssst

...

The weapon whimpered.

Horror dawned on Roy's face that he'd been gulled into taking a

useless weapon, that he'd been made a laughingstock-the one

thing he couldn't stand. Being suckered by ordinary idiots was too

much.

He had barely realized the weapon wasn't working when he heard

Jim Kirk's father let out a yell.

Abruptly the whole ship was yanked sideways-everyone, every

thing, was thrown. The Kirks hit the same wall at the same time, and Roy turned, saw something flying at him-and part of the collapsed ceiling glanced off his chest and knocked him sideways. Though Jimmy was pressed against the bulkhead by gravity and by shock, George had the advantage of knowing what was happening to their ship. He thrust himself against the whining new gravity and got his hands on Roy, and threw him as hard as he could.

George Kirk's attack drove Roy toward his shield controls. With a shout of pure, incredulous fury, Roy dove for the panel that controlled his shields again, but that card had been played and the Kirks weren't going to let him table it a second time. This time Jimmy had an extra second in his own favor and used it for a headlong plunge, tied hands joined in a hammer. He knocked Roy to one side, then tackled him and laid him out flat. They ended up lengthwise on the littered deck, pressed against the bulkhead, George Kirk knee-down on Roy's spine, coiling the boy's hands with a discarded length of insulation tape- Then George grabbed for leverage and shouted, "Hang on, Jim!

Hang on!"

"What is it!" Jimmy yelled over the whine.

"What's happening to us?"

"You know what it is, pal! It's a starship!"

"Ah, here's our Artful Dodger even as we tickle his ears."

Robert April's charming voice took the entire hospital deck of the starship

Enterprise

and somehow made it a stage play, complete with popcorn and curtain calls.

The popcorn smell came from the eight or ten different medica

tions being pumped into what was left of Veronica Hall's body as she lay on a complete life support diagnostic bed. The curtains-

they were everywhere, blue and white, some for sterility, some for privacy. All for Veronica.

"Sir," Jimmy began as he limped to where the captain sat in his best British visiting position. "You all right?"

Captain April wore a sling on one arm and a notable bandage on the other forearm, which made Jimmy remember the condition

April had been in when they'd last seen each other. And that voice, which could make any situation a poem.

"I'm quite fine, my boy, thank you," the captain said. "How are you doing?"

"Bad leg and about forty bruises," Jimmy said.

"One cracked rib."

April nodded. "You must be disenchanted such that we'll never

entice you back toward the service. Twice in space, and twice attacked. However will we convince you to stay?"

Jimmy dropped him

an aweless look and grinned. Somehow he felt on more equal footing than he ever had before with this man. "What's the big deal about making me stay?"

Robert smiled. "Oh, let's just say there's a certain martial tradition I see fledging in the Kirk nest

...

a rare muster of those who will stand on a volcano if tactics beckon . . . hmm?"

"Hmm," Jimmy grunted back. "How's Mr. Florida?"

"Carlos? A bit stretched in the pinfeathers, but we're all here,

Jimmy, we're all here . . . not without due commendation to you."

Jimmy found himself blushing, and turned to Veronica.

"Can I talk to her?"

"She's been waiting for you," the captain said civilly. "Then I'll take you to your father."

He approached the diagnostic maze with the cold fear of those who still have all their limbs. It was like suddenly joining a silent guilt society.

The girl's skin was glazed white-from the inside or outside, he couldn't tell-and made him think of the girls he'd been drawn to before, in better situations, and the moon under which he'd been drawn to them. Every vein that could be reached in her body was attached to a tube, a tape, or a bag. Her right arm and leg were missing, those arteries and sterilities taken care of artificially. Everything looked blue. Her skin, her curtains, her hair, her eyes as she blinked at him- He flinched. It was like having a corpse blink at him. "Hey, crackerjack," she murmured. Wasn't much of a voice. He just hadn't expected to be talking to her. Veronica smiled a tiny little smile. "Heard you used some top-notch stopgaps when you got on board their ship." "Bet you can't say that twice," Jimmy said. "Bet I can't either." "Just old-fashioned," she said. She stopped to swallow, and her eggshell cheeks grew more hollow. "Captain April always talks about old-fashioned ways getting us through . . . guess he's right." "Yeah, I guess he is," Jimmy uttered. "How do you feel?" She seemed to think the question was funny. "You mean with one less arm and one less leg? I feel okay, considering . . . I'm alive, aren't I? Lucky to be here. That's the bottom line . . . don't worry, Jimmy, they'll fix me. . . . Starfleet knows how to fix anything . . . the big bird pulled us out, after all, right?" "The Enterprise, right," he said quietly. "Jimmy, you did great. Captain told me what you did . . . how you didn't let them take you easy . . . thanks for giving me a chance to live."

A grilling guilt overwhelmed Jimmy as he frowned at the reflection of himself in her respirator. Bad enough he felt this way because she was lying there after saving his clumsy life—bad enough he'd blundered his way to somehow getting out of this—but here she was, thanking him. Thanking him. He was getting glory in a cheap way. He was getting it through those who had done the real giving.

Touching what was left of Veronica—hopefully a wrist and not just a main umbilical—he scooted a little nearer. "Veronica," he began, "it wasn't me who was the hero. Look at you. You're the one who sacrificed. You're the one who really gave." "But I couldn't be here to talk about it," she whispered, "if not for you

...

I know . . . they told me everything . . . solves a lot of questions about this area . . . now we can clear up the Interstellar Maritime Laws for this area and rules of the road . . . rights to search . . ." "What?" Jimmy leaned over her and tried to find the focus of her eyes.

"Signal a merchantman to lay to

...

leakage and breakage . . . apply the negligence clause . . . according to the Interstellar Code of Signals . . . two intermittents . . ."

"Veronica?" Jimmy stood up and leaned closer, but there was a hand on his shoulder, drawing him back.

"She's dreaming, Jim," Captain April said.

"She's taking her

Academy tests over again. Let's leave her alone to study, shall we?"

Jimmy straightened, and sought comfort in the captain's gentle

face. "She won't have to, will she? In spite of

. . . his She'll still be in

Starfleet, right?"

Robert April's soft features turned into that pondside smile he

gave when he needed to be believed on an

extraordinary level. He
slipped his good arm around Jimmy Kirk's shoulders
and walked
the boy toward the intensive care door.
"Starfleet never abandons its own. Once
commissioned, always
commissioned. All rights and privileges ascertaining
thereto
...
no
matter how much of the dirty side that person may
carry, and
indeed sometimes because of it."
"Sir . . . you lost me," Jimmy said. "You
might have to put that
one in English. I mean-American English."
April smiled, sought help at the ceiling, then
drew a long,
contemplative breath.
"Trapped me," he murmured. Hanging a hand on
Jimmy, he
said, "You survived because you have a bit of the dirt in
your soul
that let you understand those men."
Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Gosh, thanks."
"Now, I'm sullenly serious and you'll just
have to bear it. That's
why I laugh when your father frets that you'll turn out
to be a
hoodlum of some kind. I tell him he's seeing
only the streak that
will save you some day-may save a lot of people. Who can
tell the
future? You see, Jim," he said softly, "a
clean soul can't fight a dirty
one and win. I couldn't have, and I've always known it.
That's what
you have, and men such as I lack. This isn't the kind of
advice I'd
ordinarily offer gents of your age, but, Jimmy,
keep that bit of the gangster in you . . . you may need
it to do things that men like me
can't find the grit in ourselves to do. Know the rules,
my boy, but
know when to break them."
Captain April's words lay before them like a carpet
as they
walked the corridors of the great starship. They
looked at each
other, and each knew the other understood-everything. All

ugly everythings that life was really made of.
"There," the captain went on, "isn't that a
naughty bit of advice for me to give you, officer
and gentleman and Englishman that I
am? You won't tell a soul, though. You're one of
mine, I know. Now,
let's closet that and go see how our favorite
copperhead rattlesnake
is interrogating your prisoner."
The interrogation grid down in detention was a lot
different from
intensive care. Just as ugly, but with a clearly less
noble purpose.
Jimmy had heard the phrase "rogue's gallery"
somewhere before,
but until now he'd never limped the halls of one.
The two of them had to go through four separate levels
of security
before they were allowed to open the door of the interrogation
room.
There, inside a small cubicle, the first thing
Jimmy saw was the
old family friend and general pest, Drake Reed.
Drake was doing his
see?-rm-a-Security-guard-of-the-nrst-o
rder
imitation in a corner. His brown face was stoic,
brows up, collar just
a bit raised, sidearm pushed forward on his belt,
and his hands
behind him in the at-ease position.
In spite of all that, he flashed Jimmy and
Captain April a
Caribbean smile that was all teeth, then instantly
fell back into the
on-guard face.
Jimmy hoped that meant things were going all right.
Sure meant
Drake Reed was glad to see them both as they came
in slowly and
heard the door panel lock behind them.
They stayed very quiet.
At a small, plain black table, wearing a gray
Security prisoner suit
and looking spookily correct, sat Roy
Moss. He bore damnably few
scars from the ordeal he and his father had put others through.
His
hair was even combed and his ponytail nice and neat.
Across the table, also sitting in deference to a
bandaged left calf

and the narrow sling on his own arm, was George Kirk.
As Jimmy first saw his father, he felt guilty
again. He had a few
bandages of his own, but he suddenly wanted to take
on some of the
wounds others had taken and deal with those for them.
Suddenly he
was aware that he was limping, but that was all that showed. His
father had both hands bandaged, and even a small one on
his right
cheek. If his dad had a sling and Captain
April's shoulder was in an
immobilizer, why couldn't he get a sling or a
crutch or something?
Just as he was realizing how stupid that sounded, Jimmy
was
pressed by the mood of the room and by Robert
April's firm hand to
stand silent against the closed door panel.
"You better start opening those pretty lips, boy,"
George Kirk
was saying in a growling tone. His bandaged hands
gripped the
edges of the black table as though in pain.
"I want the names of the
ships. Every last one."
Roy not only didn't respond, but didn't
react. He shifted casually,
seeming not to understand that he was expected to participate.
"We've downloaded most of your computers,"
Jim's father went on, "and I just got the list of
most of the ships you've attacked, and
it's incomplete. It's damaged. You can complete
it. You're going to
if I have to peel your face, and I wish to hell I
was joking. These
mysteries that just got solved . . . have you got any
idea of the
pain
...
the strain, and the anguish you've caused? The people who
didn't know what happened to somebody they loved?
Don't you
understand why we want to know?"
He leaned forward toward his prisoner, and the
interrogation
lights fell on his red hair, there dividing into tiny
strand-by-strand
spectral patches. His hands gripped the
table so hard that Jimmy
and the captain winced with empathy.

George shook his head and stared downward, dizzied
by the pain he described.
He looked up again.
"Don't you get it?" he demanded. "It's one thing
to have a person
die, to have a memorial service and know what
happened . . . but
do you know what a mystery does? What
not
knowing feels like? Have you even bothered to keep track
of the people you've killed?
The families you've tortured?"
There was nothing in Roy's face. The most
excoriating nothing
imaginable. A
nothing
that could be boxed and preserved.
Roy Moss was the box. A professional nothing
holder.
Jimmy glared at the nineteen-year-old statue and
saw what he had
been aimed toward, what he could have become. Not
only could he
have died on one of his crazy rebellions, but he
could have done
worse. He could have turned into this. Mr. I'm
Right. At the
expense of any-
A sharp cackle of furniture broke Jimmy's
self-recriminations. The chairs crashed to the
sides. The table struck Jimmy's leg and drove
him back into Captain April, and suddenly a
carrot-topped
thundercloud was crushing the shocked prisoner up against the
closest wall.
"Dad!" Jimmy plunged in before his father could hurt
himself or
his reputation, or even hurt Roy. He had his
fingers around his
father's knotted arm, tangled in the sling that was being
ignored
right now.
Drake Reed flew out of the at-ease position,
leapt right over a spinning chair, and suddenly became
a fully functional Security
man. But, surprisingly, he didn't push
George Kirk away from the
attack-in fact, he helped smash
Roy Moss flat against the wall and
made sure it didn't turn into a brawl. He
held Moss's wrist and knee

against the wall and waited to see what would happen.
Jimmy was trying to figure that out when something pulled
him all the way back until he had to let go of his
father. Captain April's voice brushed his ear.
"Jimmy-let your father handle this."
What? Passive Robert April stopping him from
letting his dad
peel Roy's face?
But adults didn't understand reality-no
...
he knew better
than that now. Those old traps wouldn't catch him
anymore. Smart
people weren't that simple. There weren't molds or forms
for men
like Robert April or George Kirk.
I'm going to be a man who didn't come out of a
mold. I'm going to
be like them . . . like both of them, somehow.
His fists had been twisted in his father's uniform
shirt, but now
he backed away. With a small nod he
let Captain April know that he
understood.
Some things just deserved doing.
The room was small. The table and chairs were on their
sides
now. All the action was happening near the door
panel. All the
tough decisions. There, under the ugly and unforgiving
entry lights.
George Kirk's face was as red as his hair.
He pressed his prisoner
tight to the wall, eyes watering with pure sore
fury, not just for the
dead but for those who had lived with the mystery. His throat
muscles twisted like the cords on a sailing ship
hard to the wind, and his teeth were gritted and bared all
out.
Held by both men, spread-eagled against the wall with
George's
fists under his jaw, Roy Moss didn't want
to be hit, but there wasn't
anything else there. No appreciation for
why
he was being hit, or for
the emotions that were driving him to be hit.
He was just Roy, all
out for only Roy. The pressure of gauzed hands
against his
esophagus put only the fear of street bruises

in his face. He backed
tight up against the wall, an inch or two taller
than his assailant.
George's forgotten sling batted casually against
both their elbows.
Drake didn't move, but didn't relent in
holding the prisoner from making any countermoves.
He waited. Jimmy connected a glance with him, but
everyone was waiting.
George saw the fear in Roy's face. Didn't
bother him. But he also
saw the silky skin and hairless jaw, the smooth
brow and the eyes without lines, and that he had knocked
loose a few strands of lush brown hair to fall
forward with youth's bounce. He saw a tinge of
what might be genuine scare. The kind that truly
doesn't under
stand because there's not enough experience. He didn't know the
boy.
The boy, the boy.
"I can't," he gagged suddenly.
He pushed backward, still holding Roy there, and
glared down at
the tiles of the floor between his feet and Roy's. His
arms were
straight out, trembling now. He started gasping.
"I can't. . ."
Captain April stepped around Jimmy, got
George by the shoulders, and pulled him away.
Drake stepped back also, keeping Roy
Moss at arm's length, and glaring warningly.
Keeping one eye on Roy too, Jimmy found the
presence of mind
to right a chair so his father could sit down again. As he
arranged
the chair, he looked at Roy.
Somehow Roy's expression hadn't changed, but
somehow-
there was a nasty victory in his face. Maybe it was
the sudden relaxing of
his eyebrows or a new set of his upper lip, but it
was there, and it was nasty and Jimmy didn't like it.
Roy hadn't won. He
hadn't.
Why did he seem to think he had?
Jimmy could only hold on to the back of the
chair and glare at
him.
You didn't win, you snot. Don't stand there,
blinking at me.
Beside him, his father let himself be steered into the chair, then

leaned against Captain April and shook his head over and over, gasping, "I can't

...

I can't hit a kid. . . ."

That was enough. Jimmy sidled away from them, took hold of Roy's elbow in an authoritative grip, as any good Security officer would-

"I can," he said.

In the textbook of street survival, it was called a roundhouse right. In Jimmy Kirk terms, it was short, low, quick, and a big surprise, and served a little pouched lip on top.

A bit of the dirt.

In anybody's book, the blockbuster punch knocked the cockiness right out and left Roy Moss flat on the interrogation room floor.

Drake Reed scooted backward on all ten toes, hands in the air, and blurted,

"Per-cussion!"

Near the toppled table, Robert April held George by the shoulders, looked down, and just chuckled irreverently. George was still gasping, but now it was a happy gasp.

"Wow . . . how 'bout that. . . ."

Part Five

HARD ABOUT

USS

Enterprise

1701-A

"Captain, massive power drain!"

"All stop! Shut down."

Something in the way the captain responded made the bridge crew know that he had expected this. Or at least he had expected a change, had been thinking ahead, and was saving up those four words.

The bridge crew flew into response.

"Navigation, all stop, aye!"

"Helm, aye! Full drift, sir!"

"Engineering, aye, all remaining thrust shut down, sir."

"Long-distance communications just buckled, Captain," Uhura said loudly but calmly. "Unable to communicate with Starfleet."

"Don't try," Kirk snapped.

"Aye, sir, silent running."

"Mr. Chekov, calculate our ahead reach and make sure we're not going to hit anything."

"Ahead reach, aye," Chekov responded, already frowning over

his navigational instruments. "Calculated, sir."

"Transfer it to the helm and stand by."

"Transferring . . . standing by, sir."

The ensign with the pretty eyes at the starboard submonitors-

Devereaux-suddenly gulped a chunk of air and blurted, "Reading

flushback again, sir! Magnitude nine!"

"Confirmed." Spock's baritone supported her squawk. "But this time-

we

are the source."

The captain absorbed that statement and all its dozen implica

tions, then moved only his eyes.

"Funny," he said. "I didn't feel us explode, did you?"

Still peering into his monitor, Spock said, "According to any

recorded science, the only source of antiproton flushback is the

explosion of warp engines. The only source of warp engines is hyperlight vessels." With

unmistakable curiosity, he turned his

head and somberly added, "And I can confirm that we did not

explode."

Kirk didn't wait for reports from anyone else in the bridge crew.

He ignored glances from the two engineers behind him, went

straight to his command chair's commlink and tied himself directly

in to Commander Scott in main engineering.

"Scotty, Kirk here. Start talking."

"Captain, this is Engineer's Mate

Tupperman-Mr. Scott's un

able to respond-he's hands-on up in the tube, sir!"

"Throw a communicator up there."

his

Yes sir, he asked for one . . . but we had to call down to supply- his

"Scott here, Captain. It's a core-invasive dampening effect at the

matterstantimatter mix level. It negated our
warp field. Power slipped
in one big drain down to twelve percent before we could
grab it back,
but I've got the twelve in abeyance. We've
encountered this type of
damper before, and I'd bet a bundle we can
isolate the invasion and
use our remaining twelve percent to push against it.
On your orders."

"No, Scotty, stand by on use of the power.
Isolate the invasion
formula and prepare to act against it, but for now I
want you to
maintain an illusion of total shutdown. Keep the
twelve percent in
abeyance and in the meantime let's pretend we had a
total shut
down."

Scott paused, then said,
"You're implying it's not natural? There's
someone you want to corner?"
Jim Kirk got a clean mental image of
Scott's squarish face
buckling into a combined snarl and furrow, one eye
narrowing as
the chief engineer anticipated going after somebody who
would do
this to their
Enterprise.

Scotty and the
Enterprise.
Duck and pond.

"That's right," Kirk said. "We may need that
twelve percent later,
and I want to keep it in my back pocket. For
now, play dead."

"Whoever's doing this, we may need to distract them
while we're
doing the necessary technological voodoo."

"I know how that works," the captain said. "I'm
usually the
distraction."

Uh. . . aye, you are, at that. I'll buzz as
soon as we have the
option, sir. Scott out."

Without turning, Kirk tossed over his shoulder,
"Uhura, get Dr.

McCoy back up here. Spock, anything?"
Spock's elegant form straightened in the upper
deck shadows,

and he turned to speak quietly to the captain.

"Sir

...

I believe I have a fix on the
Bill of Rights,"

he said.

"Alive and intact."

A cloudburst of relief crashed over the bridge
with such palpable
force that every crewman physically wobbled and engaged the
purely human tendency to look around to see if
anybody else was
wobbling.

James Kirk stepped up onto the quarterdeck
to Spock's side and
asked, "If

Bill of Rights
didn't explode, then what caused the
flushback?"

"Evidently it is related to the dampening field that
has stopped
us."

Kirk got up out of his command seat and prowled the
bridge,
glaring at the forward screen, which showed him nothing more
than
the barren Faramond system and its little star.

"What's the location
of the Bill of Rights?"

"She is in stable orbit at the Faramond
excavation planet, but
otherwise appears immobile."

"Can we adjust our drift? Come within hail of
her?"

"Possibly."

Spock didn't like to guess or bluff, or take
half-informed stabs,
but he had learned to do all of those after decades
among humans,
who would try anything rather than give up. He stepped
closer to
the captain and offered a theory that would have
turned him inside
out two decades ago.

"The dampening problem is more an envelope than a
curtain, if
you will forgive my metaphors. Your order to review
the earlier
encounter with Faramond has given me some pause
regarding
deflector shields, and I analyzed the changes

in shield technology
over the past fifty years. In keeping with the
original design, this
ship was mounted with older-style starship shields, of the
type that
can be focused to specific types of energy. The
type meant for
hard-core exploration rather than exploration,
research, patrol, and
transport."

"In other words," Kirk said,

"Enterprise
shielding was made for a
savage, unsettled galaxy, meant to guard us when
we didn't know
what was past the next star."

One of Speck's brows lanced upward.

"Bluntly accurate, sir.

Bill

of Rights"

shields are stronger inch by inch, but are more general
and less selective.

Enterprise

may have a chance that

Bill of Rights

did not have. We may also be able to actually extend

our older style

shields to include the

Bill of Rights."

"And communicate with her?"

"Exactly. We may also be able to protect her

long enough for her

to rebuild her own power."

The captain's eyes grew slim and sparkled with

angry anticipa

tion. "Do it, Spock," he said.

Spock nodded toward the helm. "Gentlemen . . .

dead slow."

"Dead slow, aye."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain?" Uhura interrupted. "I'm

getting something from

Captain Roth

...

I think."

"Why do you think?"

"It's an old code . . . very faint blips."

She leaned toward her

equipment, her wall-relief eyes taking on

severity, and she tam

pered with her earpiece and the equipment that fed it. "Part

Morse,
part Lonteen's Light

...

I believe it's intended to be that way—a combination."

"Definitely Roth," Kirk said. "Definitely someone who served in my crew. She knows you're a specialist in old codes and not every starship has you. It's a bet I'd take. Can you read it?"

"Yes," she responded with a touch of hesitant humility now that

he'd crowned her. "Attention . . .

Enterprise. . .

have posses

sion . . . Faramond diggers . . . beamed

whole colony . . ." She

frowned, gritted her teeth at her equipment, then

shook her head. "Blotted out, Captain.

Interference from a third source. Direction is

vague

...

a planetary source."

Kirk swung around to Spock, partly to leave

Uhura alone with

her aggravation, and partly to grab the sense of impending advance

he felt picking at him. "They beamed up the

archaeologists!" he said. He looked hungrily

at the main viewer, which showcased

the dinky star system, its ornery little star, and the four

unimpressive planets of which Faramond was one

deep space chunk of dirt.

"Better hostages aboard

Bill of Rights

than sitting in a cave on

Faramond. Uhura, stop attempting

to communicate with

Bill of

Rights.

Try to break through to Faramond."

She turned toward him. "Will there be anyone there now, sir?"

"We'll know in a minute."

"Yes, sir."

She tapped and annoyed her instruments until they chirped at

her.

"Sir, you're right," she said. "Making contact. I can give you

audio."

When she gave him the nod, he stepped down to his command center, turned to that main viewer, and talked to open space.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise.

I want to speak to Roy Moss."

A dim, eerie pause held the breath of all who heard. Clearly, there was someone on the other end, listening.

Everyone on the bridge knew what that sounded like. It was

different from the sound of no contact.

The pause was broken only by the meager interruption of the

turbolift door emitting Dr. McCoy. He came down to the captain's

level just in time to hear a new voice from the machines.

Kirk concentrated on the screen and repeated, "This is the USS

Enterprise,

James T. Kirk commanding. Is Roy Moss on the

planet?"

He almost felt foolish asking again, but the whole idea was

foolish. Just a hunch. Just a guess-

"This is Roy Moss. Who up there knows who I am?"

"I'll be damned," the captain whispered.

He circled his own chair, one hand lingering upon it.

He digested

that voice. Tried to hear the sound again in his mind, then reach

back forty-five years to see if it was the same.

He couldn't tell.

Forty-five was a lot of years for a voice to stay the same.

"This is James Kirk," he said again.

"So?"

Dr. McCoy stepped down and leaned toward him.

"He doesn't remember you, Jim," he murmured. "It all fits."

Kirk wanted to commend the doctor for having done his home

work, but the torch of anger that burned through him caught all his

attention.

"He almost killed me, but he doesn't have the

humanity to
remember. I remember every crewman and even every
enemy who
died under my command, but he doesn't remember me."
McCoy leaned even closer and muttered, "People
don't impress
him."

Kirk's brows tightened downward and he raised his
voice.

"You've come a long way from the Blue Zone,
Moss. But you're still
a petty little tyrant, aren't you? Still just stealing."
"Who

are
you!"

Another pause like the first one—a pause of thought or
realiza
tion.

"Ohhhhh! . . . Jim Kirk! I know who you
are! I haven't thought of you in years!"

"Nor I you," Kirk shoved back without a beat.

"How did you find me? Why did you come?"

"You're holding a starship hostage. Did you think
we wouldn't
notice?"

"How did you even know? They can't contact you, there's
no

long-distance blipping, they can't move or signal—was
Squinting bitterly, Kirk taunted, "Maybe
we're smarter than you
are."

"Yes, you're brilliant as ever. Kirk, caught
in the same trap as the
other ship. Sure, I remember you now. I ought
to leave your ship dead
in space for what you did to me. What the hell, I
just might. I don't
need two ships."

Kirk started to speak again, but Ensign Devereaux
squeaked,

"Sir-uh-oh!"

"Specify, Ensign," Spock told her.

"There's a

...

some kind of a laser hitting our hull, sir. It's
old

and weak, but it's heating up on our unprotected
hull."

"Scott to Bridge. Captain, you might have to use
that twelve
percent you're holding back for the shields. That's

a weak wee heater,
but it's building up on us. Permission to power up?"
"I agree. Maybe we can make a deal. First you
tell me what this is
all about. What is it you want this time, Roy?"
"Why don't you just beam on down and I'll show you."
"Why should I?"
"Because you're itching to. For the same reason you
couldn't just
get away forty-five years ago and had to bust your
way onto my ship.
And I want to see the look on your face
when I make your whole
career meaningless."
"I'd like to see you try," Kirk said. "We're not
in transporter
range."
"Hah! That's beautiful. Not in range. That's
poetry, it's really
poetry. Yeah, a transporter's not much good from
way out there, is
it?"
Nervous at Moss's odd sense of humor
regarding the fine,
dangerous science of transporting, Kirk moved
along the back of his
command chair. "Why don't you let us come
into transporter
range?"
Roy Moss just laughed and laughed.
"You'd love that, wouldn't
you?"
"What's so funny?" Kirk challenged.
"Afraid I'll beat you
again?"
The laughter stopped abruptly, and that hideous
pause reprised.
"You never beat me,"
Moss said.
"Come on down in a shuttle.
Then you'll really appreciate what I've got.
But you come down
alone, got it? All alone."
"I've got it."
"If you try to screw me up, I'll drag that
other ship right down into the atmosphere and burn her
into little pink bits of metallic dust. You
got that?"
"I said I did. I'll be right down."
"You be forewarned. . . I'm not a teenager
anymore."

The threat made everyone on the bridge look up. There was something very cryptic and not at all silly about the last words as the communication abruptly cut off and the bridge went silent.

The captain sensed what was happening, but ignored it. "Neither am I," he uttered.

Kirk swung around to Uhura and made a slicing motion across

his throat. When she signaled that communication was definitely cut off, he vaulted to the upper bridge. "All stop."

"All stop," the crewmen at the helm responded in chorus.

"Secure from battlestations. Go to yellow alert."

"Aye, sir, secure from battlestations . . .

secure from red alert,

aye . . ."

"Yellow alert, aye, sir."

Spock seemed uneasy with the level of cross-grained bluffing and restraint, but contented himself with technicals as he said, "This

man obviously fails to understand his own science. He possesses a

warp-dampening field. Each time the

Bill of Rights

attempted to go

into warp, the field would be countered and drained, sending

out waves of antiwarp, or flashback. The

flashback reaction moves at

hyperwarp, faster than a ship, and can be detected light-years away.

He can lure a ship to the planet and hold it there, but does not understand that his trap launches its own warning signal."

"He's a genius," McCoy added, "but there are gaping holes in his

knowledge. He accepts ninety percent knowledge as one hundred

percent. He didn't realize this thing could be

detected from so far away. He's always been this way, hasn't he, Jim?"

"Always, considering a forty-five-year hole in my

knowledge about him," the captain droned. "Roth must have

bluffed him somehow. Or outguessed him fast enough

to beam up the Faramond archaeologists." He

aimed toward the turbolift, fists

knotted, and turned at the last moment.

"We may be able to use that somehow . . . before he can

make
good on that threat. I didn't come all this way
to find the
Bill of
Rights
intact just to lose her again. All hands, general
quarters until
further notice. Commander Chekov, you're in charge
until Mr.
Scott's engineering voodoo is ready.
Communicate with Captain
Roth if you find any way to do so. Mr. Spock,
Dr. McCoy, both of you come with me. Mr.
Chekov, notify the flight deck to prepare a
shuttlecraft for launch. The three of us will be down
on
Faramond . . . being damn distractive."
He mounted the short steps toward the turbolift-and
found
himself blocked by Dr. McCoy and a very fierce glare
that was part
country doctor and part pioneer gunfighter.
"Jim, what's making you do this?"
Kirk glowered at him. "Do what? Go down and
take care of the
problem?"
"No. Go down and take care of this
particular
problem. Do you
really know what motivates this man?"
"It's just revenge, Doctor. Stand aside."
But McCoy wouldn't get out of his way. "Revenge
doesn't
motivate Roy Moss," he said. "He
doesn't care about those things.
Doesn't understand intangibles like duty,
self-worth, satisfaction,
and betterment-only that he has a bigger pile of
whatever than
anybody else."
"Make your point," the captain demanded.
"I am making it. You're the one who ordered me
to become an expert on this man, and I did. Roy
Moss never grew up. He's still
nineteen years old. He hasn't learned a
damned thing in forty-five
years."
"I'll tuck that away."
The captain started to step past him, but McCoy
actually
bumped into the frame of the lift door and grabbed the

captain's
upper arm in determination to stop him and get his say.
By now the
whole bridge was watching.
"Where would you be if not for Roy Moss?"
Kirk's shoulders squared self-consciously. "Where
would still be?"
"Oh, yes. You thought I was paying attention just
to facts on those
archives you send down to me. A chief surgeon
has to also be
trained in crew psychology. I know you were out in
space for only
the second time, and I know what happened the first time.
Those
pirates would never have attacked your ship without
Roy's shields.
Without Roy Moss, would sixteen-year-old Jim
Kirk ever have
become the Jim Kirk of Starfleet? You
probably wouldn't have gone
into the Academy, and you certainly wouldn't have made it
if you
had. And all the things pioneered by you and your crews
and the
Enterprise
might never have happened." The blue eyes flared
suddenly. "You didn't think about any of that, did
you?"
"He wanted to bring glory to himself, not to me. Get
to your
point."
"We never get over some things from our teenage
years," McCoy
pestered-truth in the form of needles. "I'm just
asking, is this the
best thing for you to do? If this wasn't Roy Moss .
. . would you go
down there at all?"
Suddenly on a roll, McCoy sucked a breath
and kept hammering,
heedless of the taupe fire in the captain's eyes and the
tightening he
saw in the captain's jaw. He took no warnings,
but kept on.
"Despite all you've achieved," he drilled,
"could it be that you
still want to best Roy Moss in a one-on-one
contest? Could it be that
after all these years you still have to prove who's the better
man?"

Could it be that
you're
the one who wants revenge?"
Kirk felt his face flush. His eyes started
to feel like pincushions, prickled and burning.
"It was his psych file I had you analyze,
Doctor," he warned, "not
mine. Now, get yourself the hell out of my
way."
The gritty, druidic landscape crunched under his
feet as James Kirk
stepped out of the shuttlecraft after piloting through the
narrow
tube that led them inside the atmospheric dome on
an otherwise
unlivable planet. The domes themselves were
impressive-five of them, each ten miles long,
three wide. Ah, technology.
He paused and gazed at the planet's
purple-on-gray surface. It
looked like elephant hide with crystals spilled
on it.
"Well, Dad," he murmured, "forty-five
years late, but I made it."
"You say something, Jim? Lord amighty, who'd
want to set up a
colony on this dry cracker?"
Kirk was deciding whether or not to respond
to McCoy, when a
bright, violent curtain of screaming light struck
them and they
huddled. Blinded, they stood their ground, but all
arms came up to
protect their eyes, and Spock shouted over the
whine, "Sensors,
Captain!"
With a nod Kirk said, "Stand your ground!"
The sensor screamed and crawled over them, then a
voice
bellowed as though through a bullhorn. "Drop the
phasers and all
three communicators. Smash the communicators.
I want to have
the only one."
"Golly, who can that be?" McCoy dryly
grumbled as the light
snap ped off as suddenly as it had hit them.
"Do what he says," Kirk ordered.
A few seconds were lost as they blandly removed
their weapons and dropped them on the dirt, then ground
the communicators into

the dust with their heels.
Kirk scouted the land, then walked the necessary twenty
yards
and confronted Roy John Moss as though they'd
seen each other
yesterday.
"All right," he demanded. "What's so
funny?"
Roy Moss stood a few feet above them on a
raised piece of
ground, holding a phaser on them in one hand and a
fairly basic
non-Starfleet communicator in the other. There was
something
hooked to his belt that looked like a control box
chirping for
attention like a baby bird, but he ignored it.
He seemed more fascinated by the forty-five years"
difference in
their appearances, and scrutinized his old adversary for
every line
and every curl that was new, trying to see through the decades
to the
scrubbed, freckled, muscular blond boy who had
given him such trouble at that key time in his life.
Moss himself had taken on a coarseness that hadn't
been there in
his youth, was grayer and somewhat thicker at the waist,
but other
than that he was recognizable by anyone who knew what
he was
looking for-and Kirk did.
Yes, this was Roy Moss. Even the ponytail was
still there. Iron-gray, but still there. So was the distrust in
the eyes. The
startling intelligence right on top of the distrust.
Yes. The same
person.
There were ghostly lines and glimpses of Rex Moss
in his face
now that he was so much older, none of which had emerged
yet at
the age of nineteen. Back then, he and his father
hadn't appeared related at all. His nose was
meatier now, as Rex's had been, and
there was more flesh at his throat. There was a beard now,
a
Galahad-type pointed beard, a few shades
lighter gray than the
ponytail, and small mustache that was almost white.
That's what the years had done-put the father into the son.

The
age around his lips, the yellowish-whiteness in his
eyes, the thinness
of hair in spite of the persistent ponytail, the
color of his skin-
those were from Rex. Sometimes resemblances
took twenty years to
show up. Or forty years . . .
Do I look like my father now? Are there hints of him
in my eyes
that my mother would recognize? The way my cheeks
crease when
I'm angry, or the tuck of my chin?
Ghosts from the past.
The eyes were the recognizable. Strange, Kirk
noted, that the
glare could look so familiar after so long. A
chilling sensation . . .
Moss involved himself in his memories for a few
seconds, seemed
to relive the whole experience on the
Shark,
then leered with a
weird fascination at Spock and McCoy as they
came to Kirk's side.
"Said you'd come alone," he pointed out.
"I lied," Kirk said.
Moss tipped his head, and after a moment even nodded.
"That's
good. I like that. I'da lied."
He gestured them toward him, but he was
holding a phaser on
them from enough paces away that they couldn't jump him.
"It helps me," he went on almost as though he were
talking to
himself. He attached the control box to his belt
next to his
communicator, made a long grab for McCoy, and
yanked the doctor
toward him. "It keeps you under control. One move
from you, or the Vulcan and I'll shoot this other
guy. I know your type. You'd
rather I shoot you than him, so I'll shoot him if you
do anything."
Spock made an instinctive move to put himself between
McCoy
and Moss, but Kirk motioned him off with just a flick
of his brows.
Moss would indeed kill McCoy if he decided
to. Moss would
kill-there was no reason to doubt it forty-five years

ago or now.

"They're each here for a reason," Kirk told him.

"What reasons?"

"You figure them out. You're the genius."

"All right, I will. Just give me some time.

And if any of you try to

knock me over, I'll just shoot wild. See that

dome over us,

pretending to be a sky? That's what I'll hit.

Then we're all dead. I

guess that's simple enough, even for you tough guys,

right?"

Kirk didn't even glance up at the poor

excuse for blue overhead.

He knew this was a lie. Roy wouldn't hit their

only protection.

But Roy's eyes still had the glint of assumption, as

they had in his

youth, and the Starfleet officers took this as the warning

it was

meant to be.

Kirk looked past Moss to McCoy-the one who was

here to

deduce Moss's psychological condition.

The doctor bit his lower lip and raised his brows in

an expression

Kirk had seen before.

Don't push.

"So," Moss said, "you're here in the

Constitution-style ship,

aren't you? Sounds familiar now that I think about it.

Kirk . . . captain . . . weren't you an

admiral for a while? I remem

ber the colonists babbling about this. Now you're back

captaining the old version of starship?"

"The first version," Kirk corrected. He didn't

care if arrogance

came off in his tone.

"Thicker walls," Moss said, "trimmer decks,

different thrust-to-mass ratio, touchy intermix

formula," he rattled off, "and nothing

inside but a few hundred crewmen. I wouldn't

trust that many

people. Of course, all the ship is, really, is big

speed. Just big fast.

That's all your old starship is. Basically a

house for its own engines.

Weapons and science labs can be mounted on a barge,

after all.

Starship isn't a starship unless it's fast. . . and

I'm about to use one of them to make them all

obsolete."

Kirk glanced at Spock.

The Vulcan offered an expression in only his eyes that the captain read as a shrug. Use the

Bill of Rights

in some kind of experiment?

Three Starfleet spines suddenly went rigid, and they stopped and glared at him.

"Keep moving!" Roy ordered, jamming his weapon into the soft place under McCoy's ribs. "I'll slaughter him first and your old ship second."

"It's not an old ship," Kirk snapped. "It's the second starship Enterprise.

A remake of the first Constitution-class sh-was

"Who cares? It uses a classic deflector-shield method, doesn't it?"

My

method . . . which still never got credit for?"

Moss phaser-pointed them across the bleak, rocky landscape

pocked with a few archaeological tents and pathetic excuses for

hiking paths, under an eerie, unnatural glow from the miles-long

dome, but he kept his phaser at

McCoy's back and eyed the others the whole time, and they eyed him back.

"Hmm?" he badgered. "The method which was stolen from me?"

Any of you going to admit it?"

"There were others working on it who would've broken through soon," Kirk said. "You never got credit because you didn't stick

with the project. You didn't do the development."

"Because I was sitting in a rehab colony, thanks to you and your

papa. I sat there till I was twenty-five.

Thinking the whole time.

Then, I came here."

Moss didn't sound angry, yet his tone was laced with a disturbing

irony and a devious grin that bothered the

Starfleeters. He obvious

ly liked the bothering part.

Spock's voice buttered the crunchy purple landscape.

"We diagnosed your special deflector shield

decades ago. You found a way to focus the deflection against isolated threats, and no more. It made your shields seem a hundred times more powerful than they actually were. Federation engineers dissected your theory, applied it, combined shields with sensors-was "Stole my ideas." "Expanded," Spock repeated firmly, "your theories and further developed them, because they know that every scientist stands upon the shoulders of those who come before. It is a building process." "And you're a needle-eared regurgitator. Big deal. It's all talk." Jim Kirk suddenly stopped walking and scraped around in front of Moss. "You think everyone else should start from scratch at the Stone Age, even though you didn't, right?" Stock-still, Moss gripped the phaser tightly between them. "People who came before me were idiots." "You don't give any of them credit for the foundation you're standing on. Take from all, give to none, share nothing, fear being robbed-your obscurity was your own choice. You could've continued work on those shields, but you fumbled the ball, Roy. You made your own purgatories. Don't blame anybody else." "Purgatory?" Moss waved his free phaser in a big arch. "I don't need any security out here! Tourists come and go, delegations come and go, diggers come and go, boatloads of students . . . I've been working here undisturbed for thirty years. I wasn't going to take any chances that a little oinker like you would ruin my plans again. Now I'm ready. All this ancient equipment is lined up and cleaned-it's fairly simple. I figure it all happened about a hundred thousand years ago, and the problem was that the stars have shifted. So I had to recalibrate it." Kirk felt his features crunch when the subject

suddenly changed
in such a bizarre way. He used what he
knew about Roy Moss to try to deduce what was
happening. His feet got cold, as though he'd just
stepped into a pool of ice water.
was "It"?" he prodded.
Moss glared at him analytically, then all of a
sudden looked at
Spock. "Ohhhh . . . you brought the Vulcan
here to figure out my
science, didn't you? That means this other one
...
is a psychiatrist.
He's supposed to figure out my motivations or
my mental stability,
right?"
McCoy gave him a dirty glare. "I'm
Leonard McCoy, ship's chief
surgeon. I'm here in case of injuries."
"And in case of insanity," Moss was sure. "The
other side of the
balancing act. I know how these command things work. And
everybody sends the chief surgeon down in case of
skinned knees
and splinters. That's all right-you're still a hell of a
good target,
Doctor, and your captain over here knows
I'll drill a juicy hole in
you if they don't behave, so go ahead and analyze
me up and down
the cliffs for all I care."
He waggled his phaser directly at McCoy's
head to make his
point, and something about the way he did it erased any
doubt that
he would shoot.
"Get down there. Down that ladder."
He pointed to some kind of geological bowl,
crater, or dried pond
bed that opened before them and went down two choppy
levels,
where he had put a simple wooden ladder.
Moss grinned as they started down before him, and he
stayed up on a small, glittering promontory,
then pulled the ladder up behind
them, and they were trapped.
"You should see the looks on your faces. You'd think
you were
midshipmen."
"Why don't you get to the point?" Kirk demanded.
"What is it

you want?"

"Respect."

"You won't get it from me. You've got to earn it."

The words were barely out and-

zing-

back forty-five years to

the sound of his father's voice. The same words, the

same feelings,

new dangers.

"You'll give it to me," Moss said, "when you see

what I got here.

About four thousand miles from here, there's a machine.

Its power

core is a hundred and sixty miles straight

down underground, so

your ships can't find it. Here-watch this. You'll like

this."

He fingered his control box without even taking it off his

belt, and

things started to change in the very rock.

Behind Moss, a picture of the

Bill of Rights

formed as though projected on the rock. There was no

projector, but there was the

picture, as tall as Moss.

"Jim, look out!"

McCoy shoved him from one side and Spock pulled

him from the

other just in time to keep him from dropping into an opening that

appeared at the pond bed's center. Before they could

react any more

than that, a set of dull-colored pill-shaped

orbs the size of melons rose in no particular

order out of the ground. There was no noise,

no metallic substance about the oblong things, and they

were

disturbingly unarranged.

"Control center, Captain," Spock said.

"Probably a computer

access. Obviously built to the social taste of the

ancient culture."

"They must have thought Faramond was pretty, then,"

McCoy

commented when the orbs stopped rising.

Only to the educated eye did this smooth collection

of bowling

balls appear to be a computer of any kind. To a child

it might look

like a gathering of balloons, each independent with a

glowing

interior and a pliant, almost gummy

surface, all different colors, but
all versions of the ivory-to-ash spectrum.
In the side of the pond bed, right out of the dry rock
there, part of the rock separated and revealed what
looked like a child's idea of a
library-books or tapes, stacked side by side,
in long, curved racks.
Apparently, these and the balloons were meant to be used
together.
At least, that was the symmetry of their movements.
Spock's eyes lit up when he saw the
volumes, but he didn't say
anything.
Kirk and McCoy pushed up behind Spock for a
look at the
brilliant past culture. Certainly the
collection seemed alien. Though
neither captain nor physician dared touch the
balls, Spock was on them like a bee on pollen.
His long fingers left marks on doughy surfaces,
but the marks
filled in almost immediately, as though he had pressed
wet mud.
"Poke all you want," Moss said. "Unless you
know the order of
information feed, you're just poking at rubber. At first
I thought
they might be kids' toys."
"Where is your power center?" Spock asked him.
Roy looked at him in a disgusted manner. "It's
built in."
"But
where
is it," Spock emphasized. "Physically?"
"Underground, I told you."
"How do you know?"
"Because I put it there. It's the only thing that was
missing. It
took me my whole adult life, but I added a
matterstantimatter
converter to the central core complex. It's almost as
powerful as
what you have on your pretty ship, Mr. Brock."
"Spock," McCoy corrected fiercely.
"Fine. Where did you idiots think I was getting the
power for my dampening field? Magic? Anyway,
the machine is ready to go and
all I have to do is turn it on. All you have to do,"
he added, "is
watch."
"What does this machine do?" Kirk asked.

"Wait a minute!

Don't start it up yet! Tell us what it does!"

Moss squared off before them, squared his shoulders, squared his brows, squared everything about his posture, as though to build himself into a castle before their very eyes.

"I'm going to move the fastest thing in the galaxy a hell of a lot faster than it can go. I'm going to show how you move things around if you're Roy Moss. I'm going to take your big fancy

Bill of Rights, all its six hundred eighty crewmen, and all the Faramond archaeologists, and transport them all the way back to Starbase One in a single beam. And you're going to serve as my living witnesses.

How's that for a destiny, hm?"

Roy Moss stood above them, looking from each to the next as though to taunt them. His eyes were wide, brows up, arms fanned outward.

"You haven't figured it out yet, have you?" he quizzed. "I've given you enough information-was "You have discovered a long-distance transporter," Spock said.

His interruption sliced Roy's insult in half.

"Some form of frequency-focus method of travel."

Moss confirmed Spock's words by looking a bit disappointed.

"Wait a minute," Kirk said. "Is this thing operative? Do you understand how it works?"

"I don't have to," Moss said. "I've figured out how to operate the controls. You drive that ship up there, but could you build a warp engine? Of course not. You don't need to. That's for mechanics to do."

Jim Kirk moved dubiously from one side of the dry bed to the

other, just as he had paced the sunken command deck of his bridge,

never taking his eyes from Roy Moss.

"This thing has been shut down for a hundred thousand years,"

he said, "and you're going to plug power into it and go from there?"

"I've got it aimed. What can go wrong?"

"Have you tested it? Put any power to it before today?"

"No. Why would I?"

McCoy rolled his eyes. "Uh, boy

..."

Moss looked at the doctor. "If I did that,

Starfleet would have

heard it and come in and taken it all away from me.

After all, one little buzz and here you are, right?"

Above them on his ledge, he huffed a sigh, pushed his phaser into

a pocket, and looked at the ground.

"I'm the only one who figured out how to make it work," he said.

"Faramond's an old, cold system and I'm the one who made it

warm again. When I was fourteen, we salvaged a ship on its way

back from here-was

"You mean you pirated a ship," Kirk drilled.

"Shut up. The ship had all kinds of relics from here that made the

Federation decide to dome and dig. But

archaeologists are always

looking backward. Even though I was fourteen, I was the only one

who looked forward. I'm the one who figured out the normalized

symbols, that the language over here under this rock was the same

as the language over there under that outcropping

...

I found the

commonality and discovered that it was a device for frequency-

focus travel . . . instantly stop existing here, start existing there.

What would

that

be worth to the settled galaxy? The Fabrini and a

half-dozen others have found this stuff, and

none of them knew

what to do with it."

All three Starfleet men surged forward.

"The Fabrini were here?" McCoy gasped. "Have you had this checked?"

Even Spock let a trace of shock run through his question. "A race as advanced as the Fabrini passed this by?"

Kirk stepped as far forward as possible and pressed, "Doesn't that tell you something?"

Moss couldn't ignore their reaction. In fact, he seemed proud that an extinct but far superior race had come here and gone away without the prize.

"They just couldn't figure out how to work it," he said. "I've turned up a dozen artifacts from past digs of other visiting civilizations. None of them were as patient as I was. They came and went, and after a few years they got used to me and I just went about my work."

Kirk felt Spock step forward to ask a question, and caught his old friend by the wrist just in time to keep him silent. "How do you know you're doing all this correctly?"

"Because it was simple!

You don't think for a hobby, do you? If I took your shuttlecraft back a couple hundred years, it would still be obvious which way it points and where the pilot sat, wouldn't it?

Drop a World War Two biplane into King Arthur's age, and a clever person could figure out how it steered." Moss nodded at them with raw pomposity. "I told you-I had it figured out when I was a kid. Before I even met you, Jack."

"Jim," McCoy spat.

"Yeah, Jim, Jim, right. All I had to do was ask why any advanced race would put an instrument here. It's a cold system, right?

Nothing growing, no heat, no life-a giant gravitational field and not much else. A big magnet. So that's what I went looking for. I let the Federation archaeologists set up the domes and the

artificial
atmosphere, then I started picking."
Moss pecked at the dirt and stone with his toe, as a
child pecks at
beach sand.
"Those Federation dopes ran around here, scooping up
trinkets and brushing off fossils, while this
incredible technology sat idle
just a few miles away. They never figured out what
happened to the
Old Culture, and I had it figured out when I
was fourteen." He
looked at them as though to be sure they were paying
attention to
his win. "Somehow the gravity or mass of this
planet, or maybe its
effect on surrounding space, were necessary to their
project. But
why a cold planet? I asked myself that question-and I
answered.
They needed an inactive core, because that's
exactly where the heart
of their transporter is-at the gravitational dead
center! That's
where I found it when no one else was smart enough
to look. Great, right?"
Pacing again, he started grumbling as though talking
only to
himself.
"I tolerated those piratical pigs in order
to get my stake for the big
score, then you came along and set me back
years. I never depended
on anybody else again. Just me. I knew what a
long-distance transporter would be worth to the Federation.
Or anybody. Klingons, Romulans, I
don't much care. It'll make me one of the most
powerful beings around to control the LDT. The
LDT . . . good sound to it, doesn't it?"
"Yes, Roy"-Kirk glared up at him and
pushed-"you cling to
that "it." You don't have anything else. You've
always expected "x" to come in the future.
Forty-five years and you still have nothing but a
someday. Even after all these years, you still have no
today."
Silence fell suddenly and left only the buzz of the
dome.
Roy Moss had counted on having to immobilize a
starship to use
as his example. He hadn't counted on having

to immobilize Jim
Kirk.
Deprived of respect, he went hunting for it. His
eyes were boiling.
"What do
you
have?" he asked. "You're a captain. So what?
You've risked your life a hundred times, I'll
bet. What've
you
got to
show for that? A couple of stars and bars? You're at the
end of your
career, you've run all over the galaxy, you've
gotten a lot of people
killed, and for what? You don't even own that ship out
there!
Everybody says "Kirk's ship," but it's not
your ship. You've been in
charge of a machine that could lay waste
to anything! You could've
flown into orbit around some planet and declared yourself
god to
any culture fifty years younger than yours, and
there's nothing they
could've done about it. They'd have to say, "Yes,
you're god, you
sure are." You never knew what you could've had!
Which of us has wasted his life?"
Abruptly, cruelly, Jim Kirk's attention
was dragged back to the
most potent weapon anyone could strike him with, and
he went
bitterly silent, a prisoner to the words from up there.
"If you hadn't stopped me forty-five years
ago," Moss badgered,
"I would've developed this back then! All the
deaths in four decades
of exploration and accidents at high speeds-they're
all your fault! Who are you now, Jim Kirk?"
To Spock and McCoy's unexpected dismay-a
dismay he could
feel on either side of him-the captain didn't say
anything.
The control box on Roy's belt started
yelping at him, and he
grabbed it and read something on it.
"All right, what're your friends doing in that stupid
ship?" he
demanded.
"Okay, I'll just hit 'em with another damper.

I'll just go pull the stopper out of the bathtub again. Something must be broken. Equipment failure or something. Stay down there, because you can't get out. I've got the area electrically sealed. Sure, Mr. Vulcan, I see your face-play with the machine all you want. You couldn't figure it out in twenty years, and you couldn't hurt it with a phaser. Even I don't know what it's made of. I'll be back as soon as I beat your friends off. I can't wait to see your faces when you see history happen."

"Spock," the captain said. Immediately Spock turned to the ancient, alien controls and the snakelike shelving of ancient books, or cards, or whatever they were. He scanned the books first with his eyes, then with his tricorder, then picked up one and began leafing through its stiff, leatherlike pages.

"I am uneasy with this," Spock puzzled. "Others have been here, including races as advanced as the Fabrini, yet even they could not make the long-distance transporter operate. It is unlikely that Roy Moss is the most brilliant creature to come along in the galaxy . . . ever."

"Don't tell him that," McCoy drawled. Spock turned to him and added, "There must be a reason these intelligent races have left this mechanism alone.

His assumption that we could not locate this machine's core simply because it is underground-was

"Makes perfect sense, Spock," McCoy shoved in, "given his psych profile. He only sees weaknesses in others. He was never formally trained, learned everything on his own, and didn't even realize his flushback could be detected from far away. One of us said

it before-gaps in his knowledge-was
"Spock said it," the captain supplied.
"Well, one of us said it," McCoy went on.
"Moss is smart, but
he's learned only enough in life as he's needed to know
to achieve his goals or protect himself. He sees
no value in knowledge itself, did you notice that? Only in
knowledge as it leads to power."
"Or recognition," Spock added.
"Jim-Jim, what's bothering you?" The doctor
stepped toward Kirk, ignoring their commander's
attempt at solitude. "Jim, don't
let him get to you. This man's psychological
profile isn't any
different from the one you handed me on board the ship.
He hasn't
changed in almost five decades. He's a
textbook example of
Huerta's Emperor Syndrome, and even that
wasn't enough for him.
He'd become an emperor, then spend all his
riches trying to become
a deity. I should write a dissertation on him!
McCoy's Pharaoh
Syndrome."
"If we survive, you can write a book."
Kirk turned to Spock and
said, "What do you think?"
"A long-distance transporter is a fabulous
advancement, if he can
indeed do it," the Vulcan said fluidly as he
picked through the
ancient library. "No more death, no danger, no
risk of travel at
warp speeds . . . there could be instant exploration,
far less cost and
loss of life in the name of a single look at a new
place or a contact with a new race-was
"I don't trust him." McCoy pushed between them.
"Jim, how
thorough could he have been? As critical as you were to the
turns in
his life, he didn't even remember you!"
"The incident meant a lot more to me, Bones,"
Kirk said. "All he
remembers is that he lost. He's completely
wrapped up in himself.
That's the scary part. Roy Moss doesn't think
about people. If this
thing works, even a little bit, even if it costs the
lives of everyone on

board

Bill of Rights

to find out how to operate it, he thinks the Federation will forget about those lives eventually and honor him

for the discovery. And he's much more dangerous at sixty-five than

he was at nineteen."

"This man," Spock said, "does not seem to consider the reality of

probability, Captain. He accepts a

ninety-percent chance of success,

but not the ten-percent chance of failure. There are no allowances

for failures of machines, failures of others, failure of himself.

Yet-was

"Yes, he bets everything on every spin of the wheel,"

McCoy

finished. "The hole in his plan is that he never sees the hole in his plan."

Kirk pushed his way out from between them so he could pretend

to be alone again. "The

Bill of Rights"

crew and all the Faramond

archaeologists might fall through that hole. The

entire ship may

die."

Kirk's thoughts were now with the

Enterprise.

The original.

But now that first ship was gone, burned up, sacrificed, and there

was a replica in her place. A model of her, a tribute, yes, but not the

original ship that had taken them through voyage after voyage,

danger upon danger, and somehow survived. An incredible feat,

considering that even poor docking could rip a hull apart.

The same style of ship, the same kind of hull structure, the same interior structure, the same

mass to thrust, and all those other same

things that Roy Moss had so casually tossed off.

But it wasn't the

same ship. This one hadn't earned her stripes.

She hadn't been

given a chance.

That was the miracle of the old ship . . . that she had

survived all
those dangers, all those storms, all those attacks,
all those hands at her helm, all the brand-new things
that no other ship had encountered because no other ship had gone out so far, and all the little
mistakes that might have been made by whoever was at the controls
from moment to moment—a compilation of survival and skill
and luck that only old ships could show off.
She'd been lucky, the old
Enterprise.

This new ship was a tribute,
yes, but she hadn't paid her way yet.
And now she wouldn't get the chance.
Starfleet had apparently already made that
decision.

Spock and McCoy could see the gravestone sitting
on Jim Kirk's
shoulders, tooled with an inscription dictated
by Roy John Moss.

An era about to pass. Even the tribute was being
decommissioned.

McCoy maneuvered closer, just to Kirk's
periphery. "Moss has
managed to incapacitate the
Bill of Rights
and the
Enterprise,
but he
didn't count on the wild card

...

he didn't count on Jim Kirk being here again."
"Just as well," the captain said. "I'm tired of people
counting on
me."

The captain's voice lacked its old burn. A
lot was missing that
could be painted in colors of fire. Was this why men
chose to retire?

When the fire washed away?

If the pond bed had had bars, Jim Kirk's
hands would have been wrapped around them. He would have been
staring between them,
the cold metal pressed against his face and blood
running to his
cheeks. His eyes would have been fixed upon the
landscape, if there
were one.

There was nothing in his eyes that had been there four or
five

decades ago. Today he wasn't the bulldoggish
James Kirk he'd been
on the bridge of his command ship, who flourished during
danger,
gone on the hunt for it, who tasted adventure on the
tip of his
tongue and had to bite.
He wasn't even the Jimmy Kirk he'd been
on the bridge of the
Shark,
secretly enjoying the sensation that rashness had
provided to
a goalless teenager. That was the time he'd first learned
that spunk
could be put to a valiant purpose.
His dad had taught him that. . . .
All the red-blooded overzeal was gone from him now.
He kept
waiting for the valor to arise as it had in every other
situation, but nothing came this time.
He had lost more than years when the first
Enterprise
went down,
for he'd failed to go down with her. He was tied to his
ship by the
captain's string-and when a ship dies unhelmed by its
master, the
string draws tight and kinks the captain's spine for the
rest of his
life. He may never again walk as tall, move as
swiftly, glare as
fiercely.
Such was the portrait here. The captain without his
ship. The
mind without its heart. James Kirk without his
Enterprise.
"My ship is gone," he murmured. "My career
is ending. Maybe
this is my best destiny, Bones. My full
circle . . . from Roy Moss to Roy
Moss. This is where it began . . . maybe this is
where it's meant
to end."
Usually an ardent man whose short words were delivered
sharply,
McCoy barely moved behind his shoulder this time, and had
the
good sense not to touch him.
Seconds whispered past.
The captain's phrases roamed and settled without
really having

anywhere to go. No one in here wanted them. McCoy didn't even have to glance over his own shoulder to Spock to know their thoughts were consonant.

"Spit in the eye of meant to," Jim," the doctor said gently. "You always have before . . . why not this time?"

Like boys telling ghost stories in a tent deep in the alien night, they kept their voices low.

"Is he right, Bones?" Kirk didn't look at him. "Did I prevent something from happening that could've kept thousands of people alive over the years? Of all the decisions I've had to make in my career . . . how many have been wrong-and I'll never know? Have I done more harm than good in my life?"

He turned and watched Spock move from the control bubbles to pick through the ancient volumes, as he had for what seemed much longer than twenty or thirty minutes since Roy left them here alone.

Spock was working, yes, but he was watching Kirk too. And he was hearing.

"Oh, Jim, for cryin' out loud," McCoy muttered, carrying it on a sigh. "How much do you have to see?"

"I see,

"the captain snapped. "If Moss hadn't been smart enough to pursue power, he would've been frustratingly torturing little animals to get an illusion of power. If he'd gained power, he'd have found out it wasn't enough and would've had to blame somebody and started killing millions of people. That's how it starts-how do I know I'm any different? What would I have become if his father's ship hadn't attacked my father's ship that day? I was a frustrated boy, enticing others to follow me on crazy chances, making decisions they should've been making for their own lives, and that's what I kept doing for the rest of my life."

McCoy shook his head as though somebody had hit him. "Now, you know that's not what I was getting at-was

"Yes, you did." Kirk nailed him down.
"Jim," the somber Captain Spock interrupted
as he looked up
from his instant education about the alien machine. He
stood still,
one hand holding a volume, the other on a bubble.
"The past
cannot be redrawn," he said quietly, "nor can the
future be drawn
in advance. You learned from your experience with Roy
Moss. He
failed to learn. He continues to underestimate those who
are his
equals or his betters."
Supplanted by the hum of the dome above them, his
voice was
the bass chord of a cello-soothing and simple.
"It is a classic error of military history.
Disaster after disaster,"
he said, "because generals underestimate. Overestimate
and be
timid, underestimate and be destroyed. All leaders
march that
line
...
all captains sail it."
Though he paused, from experience the other two knew
he wasn't
finished.
"I have been content these many years," he said, "to march
that
line at James Kirk's shoulder."
Spock wasn't prudent about sentimentality as he
had been when
they'd first struck out together in the dawn of Federation
longdistance exploring. In fact, now he was proud
of it. How many
Vulcans could be sentimental and still be
Vulcan?
Kirk gazed at him, and for a flash saw the younger
Spock. Then
the flash ended, and Spock gazed back at him without
the veil of
embarrassment they had over the years torn down.
Moderately Kirk grinned at him with one side of
his mouth.
"How do you always know the right thing to say?"
"I do not," Spock said. "I merely estimate very
well."
"What should we do, Jim?" McCoy asked.
"Jump him?"

Kirk shook his head. "If this machine is on some kind of buildup, jumping him won't stop it," he said. "Spock

...

is he demented?

Or is there something to all this-stuff?"

Spock frowned, still pressing and feeling his way across the

floatless gray balloons. They knew from his expression that in a few

short minutes he had analyzed Moss's data as

Moss had failed to do

in fifty years.

"It definitely is a computer," he confirmed.

"I can deduce from this information here that Roy Moss is right."

"Ouch," McCoy said.

Spock looked up, then stepped to the racks of

books or pamphlets or whatever they were,

pulled one out, and showed them

what looked like hieroglyphics with ink and fish soup

splattered on it. "Fabrini, intermingled with a

language I do not recognize.

However, I can tell that he is right. This is a

long-distance

transporter

...

on the order of light-millennia."

McCoy turned serious and stepped closer. "Good Lord."

"I estimate that beaming the

Bill of Rights

back to Starbase One,"

Spock went on, "would barely warm up the machine."

Though he was impressed, though his iron eyes

flashed with a

scientific fascination that didn't come along very often

these days,

Spock's voice carried something that Kirk pounced

on.

"But it's not going to work, is it, Spock?" he

asked intuitively-

not really a question.

Seeming relieved, Spock put the book in its

place, then paused with his back to them and his hand on the

rack.

"These books are scientific logs, and I do not

believe they were

left by the Old Culture originally at all.

They were left by following visitors, and are

purposely made in a low-tech way, so others would not be saddled with incompatible communication technology."

"Brother," McCoy drawled, "would I like to get a gander at your idea of low-tech.""

"Not now, Bones," Kirk admonished. "Spock, go on."

"Thank you. The logs seem to have been begun by the Fabrini, but were added to by other races. None is complete, and each subsequent race apparently abandoned the attempt to use this machine."

"Why would they abandon it?" the captain persisted.

"If it was so valuable?"

"Because," Spock said, "it seems to be missing a central connection. This is the terminal . . . but there is no core."

Kirk stepped away, then circled the leathery collection of bubbles. "Are you telling me this is a hulk? A shell?"

Spock turned around. "Yes, Captain. It will accept commands,"

he said, "but it has no place to send them."

He drew a long breath, knowing he was speaking to intelligent men, but attempting to put across a concept meant only for scientists who had no other life or concern than science.

"Moss is correct that if an old airplane were dropped into the Middle Ages, a clever individual could deduce how it may have steered and flown, but he may not realize it has no engine. What lies before us, a hundred sixty miles under the ground, and all that extends to the planet's core, is essentially a computer without software. The shell of the machine remains here, but the Old Culture took the important parts with them in case they should want to move again, or to prevent others from following, I would surmise. In our lifetimes, it will never work as a long-distance transporter."

"They didn't want us to come walking in their back

door!"

McCoy said excitedly.

Taking the Vulcan's nod as encouragement, Kirk empathized

with those he would never meet. "So Roy decided what it was, then

never considered that the people who built it were smarter than he

was. I find it damned impolite to look back on the past and be

arrogant toward those who invented our advancement."

"Well said," Spock commented as though they were sitting in

front of a fire.

Then-maybe they were.

The captain spun toward him. "Is it useless, Spock?"

"Not at all." Spock raised his voice, his scientist's passion

shooting through the sobriety. He yanked control back, but he was

still excited. "Not at all-the remnants themselves can give our

science tremendous direction, sir-was

"Jim, think about it!" McCoy interrupted. "We can analyze the

metallurgy, the control techniques, the directional power transfers,

the molecular structure-was

Kirk blinked at him for a moment, and realized how easy it was

to forget that McCoy was very much a scientist, if a scientist of

nature more than mechanics.

"Moss's shields from forty-five years ago are an excellent exam

ple," Spock said. "The technology Starfleet developed from their

principles has given us nearly a half-century of relatively safe space

exploration and battle survival rates." His large, elegant hands

swept the gray control center, then the racks of volumes, then all of

Faramond. "This can be a leap in technology

to rival the Theory of Relativity or the discovery of the space warp. Captain, think of it."

He stepped forward, as close to excited as the Vulcan ever became.

"The Old Culture used this single compact mechanism to beam

their entire civilization countless billions of
miles from here-what
can we learn from what they left behind?"

"Yes . . ." the captain said. "Yes, but,
Spock

...

if the Fabrini
and others got to a certain point, then stopped . . .
what will
happen when he puts power to a mechanism that was
meant never to be used again?"

There was a pause, then McCoy was the one to answer.

"Probably the same thing that happens to the medieval
guy when
he tries to fly that biplane off a mountainside."

"My God, that's the scariest thing I've heard
in-hell, must be a half-hour

..."

McCoy echoed his own grumbles and paced, but there was
real

fear in his voice and no one attempted to scold him
for making a
joke.

In fact, Kirk wheeled toward him and spoke with
zeal under his own dread. "The entire civilization just
picked up and beamed out of here together?"

"Millions of people," Spock agreed, "billions
of miles a way,
thousands of years ago. They are, as you say . . .
long gone."

McCoy scowled at him. "Why? Why would a whole
culture want
to beam across the galaxy?"

At his side, the captain yanked attention
back to himself, and to
the glitter in his eyes. "Why would a man get in a
reed boat and try

to cross an ocean? Why sit on top of a Roman
candle and try to

break out of a planet's gravitational pull? Why
are you and I here

today? Why, Bones! Because the whole culture wanted
to go
look

...

go see what it's like in another place . . . think
of it-an

entire culture that said, 'Let's go!'"

He found himself staring upward and wishing the dome would go
away so he could look at the stars and think about what
was beyond

them. His entire body pushed upward, his arms, his
shoulders, his
chin and thighs, and one foot even went up on a
toe.

McCoy winced, then ambulated his brows and said,
"I'd've liked
to see

ballot."

But the captain had already moved away a few steps,
though the
ground shuddered and made a rumbling growl beneath his
feet, still

looking up. In his eyes a hunger began
to reignite even as they
watched. In a moment he began to speak, and there was
something

in his voice that neither of his closest companions had
heard in a
decade.

Maybe two.

"Bones . . . it's us. It's humanity. We
said, "Let's go!" And so did
they!"

Paces away, McCoy was poking Spock in the
shoulder with a long
forefinger and holding very still, hoping Spock was looking
too and would be a witness.

James Kirk gazed up at the atmospheric
dome as it turned
nauseating colors above him, yet saw not a bit of
it.

"Think about that," he murmured. "Think how
far there must
still be to go

...

what must still be out there.

...

I haven't thought
about it in years! He asked me what we get out of
what we do, but he
doesn't understand it's not like looking for gold.

Exploration is an end in itself!

That

is what we get!"

As he was gazing upward, the poison came back
into his
periphery.

Roy Moss, back on the promontory in front
of the projection of

Bill of Rights

on the rock wall, was annoyed and bitching.
He pointed at the projection.
"They're finding little ways around my damper! Why do
people
even try? What's this guy's name? What's he
doing?"
"As if we'd tell you," McCoy
high-browed.
Moss stalked around on his promontory, picking and
twisting at
his control box, shaking his head so that the ponytail
swayed, and spitting insults.
"Moss," Kirk began, "are you paying attention
to me?"
"I heard you," Moss said. "What else? You're
only twenty feet
down."
"Good. Now, pay attention. There's nothing here but the
con
trols. The other civilization left a hulk. They
took it all with them.
They didn't want to be followed! Putting power
to it could create a disaster."
Stopping whatever he was doing, Moss looked down.
"Oh, how
nice. You figured this out in the thirty minutes I
was gone, did
you?"
"I'm serious."
"Oh, you're "serious." I'm glad you know so
much more than
I do. When the
Bill of Rights
suddenly appears in orbit at Earth,
then everybody'll know a lot. And I'll have six
hundred living
witnesses."
McCoy pushed forward to the bottom of the
promontory. "What
if they're not living! Maybe this thing wasn't meant
to transport
humans! Have you considered that?"
"I don't care about that. It's so simple, what can
go wrong?
Besides, if they die, they die. Even if the
transporter works enough
to move the ship, it'll be justified in the long run.
Nobody'll care
who lived or died. How many of Columbus's
sailors died of
dysentery on the trip from Spain? Who cares,

right?" He pointed at
the projection of the trapped starship and said, "When that
monster appears at Starbase One, what can anyone
say but "thank
you"? The victors write the history books,
Doctor. Now, back off before I make
you history! Look at my hands," he said.
"Look at
them! Left! Right! I've got the only phaser!
I've got the only
communicator! I've immobilized your
magnificent prizes! Your
starship! I've frozen Starfleet's best ships!
There they are, hanging
there!"
He whisked his hand across the little viewscreen's
image
of Bill of
Rights.
"This is my planet now! On it is the only thing
the Federation
doesn't have! You were here at the beginning, Kirk, and
now you're
here to see my reward! You . . . watch!"
He went after his control box like a squirrel going
after a walnut.
Nothing happened.
Roy looked at them, and they looked at him.
Then Roy looked at the picture of
Bill of Rights
and held his
breath.
Still nothing.
Roy looked at the ship, looked at his hand-held
activator, gave it a
little shake, put it to his ear, looked at it again.
From below, Kirk asked in a low voice, "Did you
put any safeties
on it?"
"What?"
But the captain's words weren't really a question at
all. "You
didn't put any safety backups on your
equipment, did you?"
Moss just gaped down at him as though he were the
crazy one.
Behind Spock, one of the balloons hissed, and
broke open. Steam
fizzed from it. Then the steam turned into a spray.
Then the spray turned into a geyser. . . .
USS

Enterprise

1701-A

"Mr. Scott, to the bridge!"

The bridge of the sparkling new "old-style" starship thumped

with frantic movement.

Pavel Chekov bounded out of the command chair and took his

more comfortable position at the science area. He'd always felt

better here than in any facet of command.

"Chekov, take the conn," he muttered as he glared into the

science monitors. "Chekov has better things to do-was

"Pardon, sir?" a fresh-faced lieutenant called from the science

station down the starboard control board from him.

"Nothing," he clipped, his Russian accent adding a certain scissor to his word. "What takes

Mr. Scott so long to get up here?"

"No idea, sir," the science lieutenant said noncommittally, but

he and Devereaux exchanged a glance.

They knew what it was. Mr. Scott didn't want command either. He wanted to be down there with those engines.

Want or not, responsibility had them all by the throat, and

Montgomery Scott thundered out of the turbolift, barking orders.

"Red alert. Battlestations. Stabilize all external systems. Police all local frequencies. All weapons on line. And see what you can do about that bloody communications problem."

Warning alarms erupted-somehow comforting those who had been on edge waiting for them-the ship darkened to alert-status maroon lights, the graphics came into crisp, bright focus, and the bridge rippled into a series of "ayes."

And Uhura's voice throbbing through the entire vessel-

"Battlestations

...

a

hands to battlestations

..."

"Reading matterstantimatter power feeding through the core of

the planet Faramond, Mr. Scott!"
"Ah, that's just a duck flapping in your ear,"
Scott growled as he pressed himself into the command
chair. "It's a dead
planet."
The lieutenant pushed a flop of thin blond hair
out of his eyes and
insisted, "Sir, there's a massive runaway
matter-antimatter reaction
generating power through the interior of the planet!"
"Slow down, lad. Just man your post."
The lieutenant sucked a breath, held it, then
said, "The core is
starting to become molten again, sir."
Scott looked at him a moment, divided the
panic from the young
man's ability to read the science equipment, then
decided to believe
him.
"Can the planet take it?" he asked.
"After being cold for millions of years? Doubt it,
sir. All the
energy is being taken up by the body of the planet itself
and it's all going to become molten."
"It's reverting," Scott said. "It's all going
to go up. The whole
planet's going to explode!"
"Yes, sir-and, sir?
Bill of Rights
is in orbit. She's going to be
swallowed by the blast!"
Scott hit the young officer with a look of the obvious,
then
arranged himself in the command chair, leaning hard on one
side.
"Not to mention our personnel sitting down there on that
bomb.
Pull up that twelve-percent power, lad.
Divide it half to thrust, half
to shields."
"Aye, sir. Power coming up
..."
"Shield engineering acknowledges, Mr. Scott,"
Devereaux called
from the port side.
"Impulse engineering signals ready, sir,"
Chekov told him.
"Ahead one quarter impulse. Let's show 'em
what this ship can
do." "One quarter impulse, aye!"
"What's happening, Spock!"

Kirk stumbled toward the control balloons as Spock and McCoy joined him there. The balloons were beginning to dissolve, one at a time.

"He activated it," Spock said simply. "The power-was

A fissure opened in the pond bed not ten yards from them. For a terrible instant they had to work to keep each other on their feet.

Was there any feeling worse than the planet itself coming apart under those who must live upon it?

"Mr. Moss!" Spock called over the volcanic noise. "You were right. The entire planet is a giant transporter conductor! That explains why the Old Culture chose a cold rock for their project! But the control mechanism was beamed away too! The power you have put into it now has nowhere to go!"

"A huge short circuit," Kirk muttered.

"I beg your pardon?" Spock shouted over the sound of a planet tearing itself apart from within. "I failed to hear you, Captain!"

"Moss!" Kirk staggered toward the rock wall.

"Moss, if you don't want to listen to me, at least listen to him!"

He waved at the smoke pouring from the cracking shells of the ancient computer controls and found his way toward Roy, but

McCoy grabbed for him and hollered, "Jim, we've got to get away from here!"

Kirk ignored the flaming obvious, shoved past him, and choked out, "Moss! We've got to get off this planet!"

"No, no," Moss said. Insanely calm, he shook his head and smiled. "You just want me to leave. I'm not leaving my prize."

"You idiot, the entire planet's melting under us!" Spock twisted toward them without taking his hands off the cracking balloons. "Captain, planetary surface is collapsing."

"The surface is collapsing!" Kirk repeated to Moss. "The planet's melting! Give me the communicator!"

"It's not melting," Moss insisted. "You must have done some

thing. What did you touch down there?"
Looking up from the grotto at the hunched
shoulders and brittle
outline of his oldest enemy, Kirk felt his fists
ball up and his arms go
hard.
"It wasn't
us,
you spoiled maniac," he snapped. "Wake up and
get over it!"
Moss actually cocked a hip despite of what was
happening
around them. "Get over what?"
Kirk pushed forward, his hands on the rocks now.
"So you had a bad father! So what! Parents don't
last forever,
good or bad! Get over it! Comes a time when there's
no excuse.
'Poor me, I had a bad life, so I get to go
out and be bad to others."
Like hell you do. You've been dragging that fat
corpse around for
forty-five years waiting for it to sit up and say,
"Son, you did a good
job." It's not going to happen! You're never going
to get his
recognition! You're going to have to grow the
hell up!"
From the vantage of his promontory, Roy huddled
his shoulders
and they could see, in spite of the banging, clanging,
heat, sweat,
and burning, a big shiver go through him. "Don't .
. don't speak to
me like that. . . ."
"That's your problem right there," Kirk growled up at
him.
"Captain!" Spock called.
McCoy cranked partly around at Spock's
shoulder and shouted,
"Jim, you better look at this!"
"Captain, continents are collapsing!" Spock
continued. "Dry
oceans are beginning to break open!"
"I'm about to break open myself." Kirk climbed
toward Moss.
"You're going to give me that communicator, you whining
baby.
Don't you understand? There's nothing here! The Old
Culture
didn't go out in a radius from a central hub!

They
moved the hub!"
Moss was thrown to one knee, and had trouble rising, but
the
shake-up made him really feel what was happening
to the planet.
"No

...

no, that's not right. You see, I've-was
Kirk waved a hand dismissively. "You can't do this
because they
didn't want to be followed! They took the
secret with them! No
excuses anymore! You've had gold fever for a
half-century, fixated
on gold that's not here! Your own dream blinded you!
You're a
spoiled, angry kid, still looking for the same things you
were
looking for when we met! And you still haven't found
them!"

The captain felt the swirling tempest of conflicting
atmosphere
tearing at his hair as the dome above them shuddered and
began to
lose integrity-the only thing still keeping them
alive. Once the
dome went, there would be nothing but a scalded ball in
space.

He didn't care. He saw only his anger. He
started climbing the
crystal rocks, using the anger as his staircase.

The crystals cut into
his fingers as he climbed, an inch at a time.
"And I'm not going to let you have it. You can kill me,
but I'm
going to take it all with me. You're still getting
nothing!"

"You stop talking like that to me!" Moss bellowed, his
diaphragm
crushing inward. He shot a hand toward the
artificial sky, finger pointed. "I'll drag that
ship of yours down! I can do it! I'll drag it
down!"

Suddenly, Kirk stopped climbing. He
straightened and pressed his lips tight, his glare the
kind that cuts.

Then he said, "Go ahead."

Behind him McCoy kept poking at Spock,
until Spock had to shrug him off, but they were both
staring, neither moving at all,

certainly not daring to interrupt.
Above, Moss tilted his head. "What?"
"You heard me," Kirk said. "Go ahead and try
it. Those people
up there are better than you are."
Roy's mouth twisted and flinched. "Are not. Now .
. . . you think
comy think about it. They are not. I have the only
communicator. I
can tap into my power stations and haul that ship down.
Then
what'll you have,
Captain?"
The man he tried to taunt merely straightened a
little more on the
rocks under him and had no problem staring upward in
spite of
crashing and howling planetary collapse.
"I said go ahead."
"Oh, you're bluffing, come on," Moss said. "I
mean, I know the
tactics, right? We're both too smart for that."
"Try me."
The words, the eyes, the man himself, suddenly
statuesque-
there was no dare about him. No game. Nothing.
He meant what he said.
Moss glowered down at him, huffed reflexively
a few times,
grinned without thinking about it, then brought his
communicator
around tightly to his chest and started pecking at it.
Past his hands and the small black mechanism, though,
were the
eyes of James Kirk.
Antique-gold eyes and low brows. Wind ripping
at the soft taupe
hair and the undone chest flap of the burgundy
Starfleet uniform
he'd earned the hard way. Shoulders that had never
been square but
had remained unbending under a weight few could carry
for so
long, and not a flinch now. Less than ever, in
fact.
Below, Spock lost the last of his interest in the
gurgling computer
controls. At McCoy's side he turned
to watch what would happen.
Life was ultimately more captivating
than any machine, even

though that life stood on a precipice and threatened to jump or be pushed.

Moss was clearly irritated. "I'm going to do it," he said.

Kirk didn't move. "I know you are."

Moss pointed upward again, but in a smaller way.

"Your ship.

Your big identity."

"I know what it is. Our only way off the planet. Yours too."

Shifting from one foot to the other as the promontory started

quivering, Moss added, "Your whole crew, y'know."

"They swore the same oath I did. They're ready."

"Wait a minute

...

am I missing something?"

"As usual. And we don't have a minute. Go ahead."

Curious as much as afraid he was missing something, Roy asked,

"Why doesn't this bother you?"

"Why?" Kirk's mouth took on a bitterly satisfied grin. "Because

I've gotten more out of this in five minutes than you've gotten out of it in fifty years."

"How d'you figure?"

"Because, you brat, I know those people went somewhere. They left the machine, but they took their dreams with them.

And

somewhere far away from here they built on those dreams.

There

are ways to meet them, but my ways, not yours. There are more

places to explore-more people to meet-I've got your dream,

Moss. And you can't have it."

"What," Moss asked, his voice getting high,

"what are

you . . . talking about?"

"I'm talking about your dream!" Kirk said. His words shot out

like staples. "I'm gonna take it. If I

leave here, I'm gonna take it.

And if you kill me, I'm still gonna take it."

Moss stood over him, fundamentally baffled. Never

mind the
frantic environment and the planet falling down around
them, Jim
Kirk stood below him with his arms casually at his
sides and a
damning chalk drawing of satisfaction instead of
anger on his face, one foot up a little higher than
the other on the uneven terrain and a
hand resting dynamically upon it. He looked like a
painting, he
really did-he was
enjoying
this!
"I was ready to give up," Kirk told him, "but
if I live through this,
I've got you to thank for the rest of my life. And
if I don't live, I've
accomplished things I never dreamed would have my name on
them
when you and I first met. All because you helped turn
me around
forty-five years ago."
Rocks cracked
off
points and fell around them. Pieces of the
interior shell of the dome chipped away and spun like
giant needles
into the ground inches from them, shattering and spraying them.
Each jolt of the planetary core reinvigorated the
knowledge that
James Kirk was not his ship, or even his rank.
Kirk barely moved. He never took his eyes from
Moss, and he
never even raised an arm to protect himself from the
fallout.
"You think those ships up there are Starfleet?" he
said, rolling a
hand upward as though this conversation were happening in a
lounge instead of in the midst of a planet pulling itself
apart. "I've
been through that," he went on. "I've scuttled my
ship. I took her
out and watched her die in space, stmade that
decision. And I'm still
here! Those are ships, but that's all they are-vessels
for ideals. The
ideals . . . you can't kill." He nodded at
Moss, and at the communi
cator. "You have the ship. Go ahead-crush it. You
can't kill the
dream."

Strange how softly he was speaking. Strange that Moss heard him, or read his lips, or got it telepathically-no one could tell. Strange that Spock and McCoy watched from below and saw what was happening, and somehow also heard in spite of the great collapse.

Strange that Jim Kirk, a boy on a bridge, saw so well that there was no one thing that could be an answer to a dream. "It doesn't matter if you're captain or admiral or emperor or god," he finished. "Reach the position at which you can be of most value. But you didn't do that, Roy. You wanted shortcuts. All this time you've been wrong. Forty-five years, dead wrong. All you have is a big short circuit. And my ship?" He tucked his lip and shook his head. "Still wrong. The man isn't his ship. The ship is the man. So go ahead. The only one here with anything to lose

...
is you."

No matter how McCoy had analyzed Roy John Moss, no matter how over decades Spock had learned to be more interested in life than in machines-no matter anything that had happened to them in the past ten hours or ten years, James Kirk still knew Roy Moss and men like him better than anyone else including Roy Moss. The captain who knew everything he needed to know now began to climb again. Crystals chipped under his fingers and his boots, but he kept going until he was all the way up, standing beside Roy Moss and in front of the weapon leveled on him that Kirk had dared and dared and dared to go ahead and put a hole through him. Because no hole was going through what he sculpted out of the raw rock of Jimmy Kirk over the years. No holes. Shuddering, Roy Moss grew smaller and smaller, staring at Kirk. Kirk jabbed out a confident hand, caught Moss by the wrist, and pressured the bigger man down toward the cracking rock.

As Moss crumpled, he let the communicator
fall out of his hand
and into Jim Kirk's expectant grip.
The dirt was still in him, and he was taking Robert
April's advice.
He brought out the gangster to understand the gangster, and he
knew Roy Moss didn't have a Starfleet oath
in his soul-the oath to
sacrifice himself for anything, or anyone, or any
dream.
With Moss hunched at his ankles, Jim Kirk
flipped the communi
cator upward.
"Kirk to
Bill of Rights.
Four to beam up, priority one!"
The three from the
Enterprise
burst onto the bridge of the class of
starship that was going to make everything they had known
obsolete-the Excelsior-class starship
Bill of Rights.
Behind them, two beefy, armed, and mean Security
men in
helmets hauled the shackled man who had insisted
he was going to
make even this ship obsolete.
Going hand over hand along the starboard side of the
rocking
vessel, Spock invited himself to the science station
to peer over the
shoulder of
Bill of Rights'
science officer, but kept his hands to
himself. McCoy stayed to one side also on the upper
deck, but was
chewing on some crack about who was going to make what
obsolete.
Captain Alma Roth swung around in her command
chair, her dry
brown hair flying in three directions, and she
looked like she'd just
gotten up after a bad night's sleep. Instantly
she found the face of the man she wanted to talk to.
"The ship is completely drained, sir!
Transporting you took the
last of our batteries," she said as Jim Kirk
stepped down to her side.
"We're being pummeled by power surges and massive
waves of
radiation! There are indications of imminent

antimatter detonation
inside that planet in roughly eight minutes!
It'll tear us apart
and-was
She stepped very close to him and grasped his sleeve.
"I really don't know what to do," she whispered.
"I really don't."
He gazed into her pale face, noted that she
suddenly looked a lot older than thirty-seven,
and evenly told her, "It takes guts to admit
that. Give yourself credit."
"They promoted me too fast, sir," she said.
"Do you want me to
admit that too, in front of my crew? I should have,
and long before
something like this."
Kirk scowled and grinned at the same time.
"Alma, I'm surprised
at you. What do you take us old fogies for? Think
we'd give a ship to
someone just because we're tired of making decisions
ourselves?
Look me in the eye and say, "No, Jim.""
She sucked in a shuddering breath and through her teeth she
actually laughed and said, "I can't call you Jim!"
"Have you got a fix on the
Enterprise?
They're not drained yet."
From behind, Roy Moss said, "Like hell it isn't
drained."
"Shut up," one Security guard snapped, and
tightened the
shackles on Moss's arms just to prove who was in
charge.
Kirk glanced back, but resolutely stayed with his
conversation
with Roth. He'd already been informed they only had
eight
minutes, and he needed one of those to explain.
"Is the dampening field gone?" he asked, raising
his voice but
trying to keep from shouting in spite of the alarms whooping
and
the ship shaking. He crossed in front of Roth
to squint at the
diagnostics on the starboard side.
"Yes!" Roth said, following him. "But the ship's
power is down
and we can't regenerate under this bombardment of
radiation!
According to my engineers, it's compromising our own

intermix
stability ratios!"
"All right." He turned to her, one hand on the
bridge rail. "Use
your impulse reserves just enough to turn the ship toward
Enterprise
prise
as she moves in." He looked up at the science
officer and
asked, "Is
Enterprise
any closer than she was an hour ago?"
"Aye, sir!" the officer said. "She's within two
hundred fifty
thousand solar miles!"
"Puffed in on that twelve percent," Kirk thought
aloud. "Close
enough for shield extension in less than thirty thousand
miles-was
"Sir," Roth began. She dug her fingernails
into his sleeve, and this
wasn't the grip of a person who wanted to give
up. "I don't
understand."
The statement was perfectly clear. No argument, no
panic, no
demands.
Kirk whirled around. "Spock! Explain to the
captain."
Spock was already dropping to the central deck behind
Roth's
command chair.
"Enterprise
can make her shields specific to the
electromagnetic resonance of the planetary
radiation waves and
extend the shield to protect
Bill of Rights- his
"And keep us stable enough to regenerate?" Roth
interrupted.
"Yes," Spock said simply.
Kirk confronted Roth again.
"Enterprise
needs thirty minutes to
regenerate. What've you got?"
Roth panted a few times, desperate and excited,
and her eyes got
wide in what could almost have been conspiracy.
"Bill of Rights
only needs five minutes!
Enterprise

can shield us from the radiation,
then we can pull
Enterprise
away before the planet explodes!
Captain Kirk! You have the conn!"
She gestured him with both hands to her command chair, and
actually stepped out of his way.
But he shook his head and spoke quietly in spite
of the Klaxons
and the flashing and the running.
"I don't need the conn, Captain. Mr.
Scott on
Enterprise
knows
what we need. Just wheel
Bill of Rights
around into that shield
envelope and take it one step at a time.
After all, you've got almost
five minutes."
Reinvigorated as a plebe, Roth drew her
shoulders tight and spun
to her left. "Lieutenant DesRosiers!
Digest and calculate!"
"Aye, Captain! Minimal impulse on line!
Turning toward
Enterprise!"
A hum of effort rose through the ship, and with it a lance
of hope
went through everyone there, piercing what Kirk
recognized as that
crew sensation that the ship might be sinking and their next
moves
might be their last and most desperate, nervously
expecting the
abandon-ship to be the next order.
Suddenly all that changed. Alma Roth grabbed
tight hold on the
idea that the time-hardened
Enterprise
and her technical eccentrici-
ties and the new-age
Bill of Rights
could combine their skills and gamesmanship and yank
both out of a maelstrom even as it bit at
them from beneath.
Within fifty seconds the ship jolted.
"Mr. Scott on
Enterprise
advises we are in their shielding
envelope!" DesRosiers shouted over the red alert

whooping in their
ears.
"Shields are around us, Captain Roth!" the
science officer
shouted. "We're stabilizing!"
"Intermix!" Roth ordered, smashing back a handful
of flying
brown hair. She even found an instant in her
gasping and ordering
to throw Kirk a wild-eyed grin. Then she flung
herself to the port side, grabbed the bridge rail, and
shouted at DesRosiers, "Prepare tractor
beams for immediate lock-on as soon as we're hot!"
"Aye, aye, intermix formula calculating.
Traction on line!"
Kirk backed off a few feet to let the process
happen. Somehow he
managed not to blow everybody's flush by crossing his
fingers.
As Roth barked orders to her crew and relayed
cooperations back
and forth from engineering and from communications with the
Enterprise,
Kirk stepped to the upper deck, jabbed a thumb at
the two Security men to stand aside, and moved in on
Roy Moss. He
grabbed Moss with both fists and forced him to look at
the forward
screen, at the planet that was burning up from inside
out.
He felt his own eyes like scorched nuggets in his
head.
"Look at it!" he said through his teeth. He took
Roy's collar and choked him until he looked.
"A hundred thousand years of culture
and technology, and we're losing it! All because of
you. For
generations after we're all dead, Roy Moss will be
equated with
stupidity. The one who lost Faramond for us and
everything it
could have taught us. You got what you wanted,
Roy. You're going
to be famous. Humiliated before the known galaxy.
Your name will
go down in history as the biggest buffoon of all
time."
At first he thought his words weren't getting anywhere, just
as no one's words had gotten anywhere with Roy
Moss-
Until he felt the quiver at the ends of his hands.

The shudder.

He looked from the screen to Moss, and found himself holding a red-faced, weeping old man.

Dampened and brought to bay this time not by a fist but by facts, Moss slipped back against the consoles, and Kirk let him go. Moss could swallow anything but humiliation, and Kirk had given him a mouthful.

The Security guards closed in again as Kirk moved away, but there was no protest from the quivering, gurgling, whimpering mess that once had threatened them all.

Kirk found himself near the turbolift, beside McCoy.

He blinked at the doctor. "You were right. It was revenge," he said.

McCoy nodded, not quite as flippantly as usual.

"I liked it," Kirk added.

Any smug responses were cast aside as a force grabbed the ship and threw everybody grasping for handholds.

When the warp engines came back on line, they all felt it. The

ship whined and hummed beneath them, and the bridge flashed like firecrackers, and howled with warning whistles and alarms as if she

were some great locomotive ready to haul a record line of cars, and

Roth's crew scrambled at their emergency stations.

"Compensators!" Roth was calling, on line to her chief engineer.

"Implement traction on the

Enterprise,

and let's get both ships away

from that planet!"

Kirk grabbed for McCoy as the doctor stumbled when the

countertractors activated, then the three of them retreated even

farther into the turbolift vestibule to stay out of the way.

All this time the captain's string had been pulling on him like a

long, quiet noose. Now it would be the other way.

The string would reach from the past, from

Enterprise

to

Enterprise,
to keep all ships
and all who sailed them alive.
"Look at them, Spock . . . Bones," Kirk
said. "I've been talking
about retirement as though it's all over. As though
I've done it all.
And I haven't done anything close to all.
We're all young-uns of the
human race," he added. "I don't know about you,
but I'm going to
keep on going."
At his side, Spock was gazing at him but remaining
appropriately
silent, and Kirk knew what that meant.
At his other side, Leonard McCoy clung
insectishly to a hand-
hold and grumbled, "I knew you were gonna say that,
I just
knew it. Now Scotty's got to sell his boat and
I've gotta send back
the firewood I just had delivered to my cabin, and
Spock'll have to
starch his backup uniform-you know what a problem you
are?
Lewis and Clark and Kirk-was
Forty-five years earlier. . .
Officers' Lounge, Starbase One
Fingers were funny things. Open 'em, close 'em,
imitate 'em with prosthetics . . . lose 'em
altogether . . .
Boot heels caught in the struts, Jimmy
lazily sat on a turning stool in front of the
big viewport at Starbase One. Beside him, the
beauty
of Earth was settled like quartz in the soil of
space. From their orbit
he could look up from appreciating his fingers and
appreciate the
Northern Hemisphere, the wide United
States, and even thought he could see the Skunk
River, and the rope bridge if he squinted.
Yep, there she was, hanging like wet laundry.
He rubbed his sore knuckles with which he had
cashiered Roy,
and almost let in a flicker of self-pity, but then
thought about
Veronica and flushed the self-anything.
The door panel brushed open behind him, and he
cranked the
stool around enough to see the carrot-red hair, the ruddy

cheeks,
and the other reds and blacks of his father and the Security
uniform
that so ideally blended with George Kirk's
personality.
Neither of them said anything.
George was petrified. He inhaled nervously
several times before
he could even remember to exhale. The officers'
lounge wasn't very
big, and it was completely empty except for them,
because this was the weekend and everybody was planetside.
George took the long, long way around to getting
anywhere near
his son.
His boy was looking at him, at least. Well, that was
something.
He steeled himself for the inaccessibility that had been
lurking
under the freckles just days before, and the wall behind which his
son had withdrawn, the sun of sociability, and the
mean falcon's
glare from that apricot face.
There was still a touch of unripe, inharmonic youth, a
stroke of
skepticism groping for something to disbelieve-
Or was it the shadows in here?
Jimmy just sat there on the stool, his muscular
shoulders
hunched and his hands folded, legs kinked up on the
supports of the
stool, and waited.
"Don't know what to say," his father mumbled. "I was
hoping I
could give you a perfect. . . y'know . . .
perfect voyage."
Jimmy nodded. His dad was very nervous. Funny, but
he'd never
noticed that his dad could be nervous before. Just
hadn't ever seen
it. Maybe he just hadn't ever looked. He'd seen
a lot of things in the
past few hours that he'd never looked at before.
For an instant he was back in the airlock, about
to be launched on
a desperate journey, the last breath of the living.
In his head rang
the things he was going to say, the awkward apologies,
the painful
confessions, all the things that had pushed at his lips
while he sat on

the needles of loss only hours ago.
Would his dad be embarrassed if those words were spoken
now?
There must be a better way to say those things than
blurting them
out like a bad commercial. Some better way than
words. There
would be time, Jimmy thought, and a better way.
Maybe he'd look around for that too. A way
to talk without
talking too much.
After a few seconds of fidgeting from his father,
Jimmy offered a
shrug, then pursed his lips. He gazed at his father,
and made his
own eyes shine with the ancient Rosetta trinary, the
human confidence of Starbase One, and the snow-white
sorcery of a
starship.
And as he gazed, his eyes told about the bloody
cry for help
scrawled on a piece of metal, and about a boy's
last good-bye, this
time to himself as a boy.
Jimmy wanted all those to be in his eyes for his father
to see. He
refused to look away, or down, or at anything
other than his dad's
eyes, because this time the message knew where it was meant
to go.
"Don't worry about it," he said soothingly.
"Perfection stinks."
George gaped, blinked, shook his head, then tried
to talk again
and failed.
After a few bad seconds he managed to say,
"I know I've let the
years slip away . . . guess there's
no way now to convince you space
is worth seeing. Sure don't blame you . . .
and I, uh, I want you to
know I'm done."
Jimmy looked sidelong at him. "Done?"
"Y'know-done . . . sticking my nose in and trying
to change
your mind. I'm done with that."
George anticipated a typhoon by squinting
into what he thought
might be the first wind, but nothing came. Jimmy just
sat there,
swinging idly back and forth a few inches, hands

clasped.

His son nodded. "Thanks."

A message was just getting through George's hard
hide that he'd

underreckoned his boy again. Maybe Robert was right.

.. Robert had been impressed all along by the
fire and underlying survival
instinct of Jimmy Kirk.

Time for me to be impressed too, George thought.

Late with
everything.

He cleared his throat and paced sheepishly
around the clean

deep-plum carpet, thankful that he had something
freshly vacu

umed to stare down at instead of his own feet.

"Your mom and I always accused you of running away from
everything," he said sullenly. "We didn't
understand."

He cranked on his throat muscles until he
managed to look up at

Jimmy. A man should have the guts to look up at a
moment like

this.

"You were running
to

something," he finished.

Moved by his father's confession, Jimmy thought back
on the

quiet gallantry of sacrifice from his father,

Captain April, Veronica

Hall, and Carlos Florida, who were willing

to save him while giving

up their own lives to a purpose. He'd found out

how critical it was

to do a job and just

a job. On board a ship, no matter how menial

a job was, if it didn't get done by the person

assigned to it, then

somebody else would have to do it. Nothing could just go

undone. Nothing could go judged by the doer.

His dad was still looking up. "I'm sorry for not
understanding,"

he said.

Jimmy raised his shoulders, then let them drop.

"No problem.

But there's something I'm going to tell you."

"Anything. Go ahead."

"I'm not going into the pre-Academy program at
high school."

His dad licked his lips, shrugged sadly, looked
down again, and
groped, "Can't . . . say I blame you."
"I'm going directly into the Academy itself."
The astonishment in those ruddy cheeks and dark eyes was
like
getting a medal all by itself.
Jimmy liked the feeling of causing surprise
to pepper that face.
Wanted it again.
"Wha-what?" his dad gasped.
"I want to go right into the Academy. Captain
April said he could arrange it, so I'm going
to let him. I promised I could get my grades
up and stay out of trouble. That's the deal. I'm going
to do it."
"But-but-but I thought-I thought-was
"Well," Jimmy popped off, "we can't let
criminals like the
Mosses think they can just have their way out there, can we?"
"No, no, no
...
we
...
uh
...
no, sure can't. . . but, uh, Jim,
not everybody gets in, you know
...
I never did . . ."
"Dad," Jimmy said, and slipped off the stool
to stand before his
father with the big viewport as his backdrop and all of
Earth as his
mantle. "I'm
going
to the Academy."
George tried to take a step, but his legs
locked. He might prick
something. Break the bubble. What was he seeing in
front of him?
Who was he seeing?
Terrified he might blunder what was happening, he
stammered,
"You, uh . . . you'll have to give up your . . .
your . . ."
"My gang?" Jimmy slid off the stool and moved
forward, coming
toward his father with a confidence that didn't include the
flippant
disgust that had always been there before. He was almost

George's
height and much steadier.
He took his father's arm and turned him toward the
door. "I
don't think I need them anymore, do you? If they
need me," he
added, "they can join Starfleet."
Through blurring eyes, George Kirk was taking that
real first look
at this son of his.
At this man.
They walked together toward the doors of the Starbase
One
officers' lounge.
"I'll be darned," he murmured. "I guess they
can . . ."
As the wide doors opened before them, they caught at
the same
moment a glimpse of the brass placard on the
beautiful polished
walnut panels. Neither mentioned the placard, but father
and son
felt it go by, and felt it breathe on their shoulders
its blessing for the
valiant of Starfleet.
Sail forth-steer for the deep waters only.
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with
me, For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared
to go, And we will risk the ship, ourselves, and all.

- Walt Whitman

USS

Enterprise

1701-A

"This is the president. My greetings,
Captain."

"Mr. President, hello."

"still

must add once again our profound thanks. How many
times can

we thank you for your superhuman feats?"

"Only human, Mr. President. I do have a
special notice, how
ever."

"Go right ahead."

"We're not decommissioning this vessel, or
retiring the

Constitution-class of starships."

"We're not? But the Admiralty- his

"Will have to consider new facts. I have evidence that the
older

style of starship construction and power ratios may

prove indispen
sable. The galaxy is only partly explored, and
we can't prudently
shelve valuable capital. We will make a new
decision."
"still
see. . . very revealing, Captain. Certainly we
cannot ignore
your conclusions. And obviously when we
needed the
Enterprise
this
time, she was therefor us-again. I risk being
presumptuous, but I
agree a growing Federation should not cast away our
early strengths.
I have authorized your command crew's reprieves from
retirement
while I call a special congress of the
Admiralty for you to address. I
look forward to the result. . . there are those of us who
cling to the
Constitution-class for more than tangible reasons.
We may be glad you can provide tangible
reasons, sir. Visit me upon your arrival."
"I will, sir. I'd like you to be my guest in the
officers' lounge.
There's a plaque there I'd like to polish with my
elbow."
"My pleasure to witness it, Captain."
"Thank you. Kirk out."
"This is Starbase One, out."
James Kirk drew in a deep cleansing breath,
then took a moment
to flick a hangnail off his thumb. All of a
sudden a little piece of him
was embedded in the plush carpet of the new ship's
bridge. All of a
sudden it was a little more part of him than it had been a
day ago.
Ships were like that. Something had changed in the ship's
heart.
Suddenly she wanted to be part of him instead of the other
way
around. They had saved each other's lives, and the
lives of others.
Strange, how things could change.
He glanced around him, at the upper deck, where
McCoy stood
beside Uhura, where Chekov stood beside Spock, and
over to port,

where Scotty was leaning on the glossy new engineering section, and all at once the ship wanted them, and wanted desperately to prove she was worthy of them.

That light was in all their eyes, and it was in his. The let's-fly light.

Jim Kirk patted the arm of his command chair, and told her in his mind that the captain's string was still in his pocket.

"Mr. Chekov," he said, "reverse the ship."

"Reverse the ship, aye. All decks responding."

"Mr. Spock?"

"Captain?"

"Bring her about. . . steady as she goes."

