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Book 5:The Blood-Dimmed Tide by Howard Weinstein

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MERE ANARCHY  
Book 1: Things Fall Apart

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dillmore

Based upon *Star Trek*™  
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IN TRIBUTE

Paul Carr

February 1, 1934–February 17, 2006

SIX MONTHS AGO

CHAPTER

1

“First Consul, believe me when I tell you that every living thing on this planet is going to die.”

Mino or Dresha felt frustration mounting even as she delivered the blunt, harsh statement. Despite that, she still was satisfied at finally getting the reaction she sought from Flen et Hamwora, watching as his pale, withered features tightened for the first time into a mask of genuine concern.

“You are absolutely certain, my friend?” the first consul asked, his faint and raspy voice one of the more overt symptoms of neplatrenu, the degenerative disease with which he had been diagnosed during the previous season. Acting on the directions of his advisors, Flen had chosen to keep his affliction concealed from the public he had been elected to serve, a course of action that only would have become harder as time passed and his condition worsened.

Not that any of that matters now, Mino mused with only a slight degree of bitterness as she regarded Flen, the first consul’s aged, diminutive body seeming even paler than normal and all but swallowed by his high-back chair as he sat behind the simple, uncluttered desk that was his spacious office’s prominent piece of furniture. While neplatrenu was not fatal in all cases, it was a virtual certainty that Flen would not survive long enough to see the disease run its course.

“I have checked my findings three times, First Consul,” Mino replied. “There is no error. I remained silent while I verified the data, as you directed, but now that it is confirmed we must take action.”

“I do not understand,” Flen said after a moment, turning in his seat in order to take in the breathtaking view of Yabapmat, the sprawling city that had served as the capital of the Gelta nation-state for thirty-eight generations. “How can something so far away present such an enormous threat?”

Mino sighed. Though she had attempted to describe the scope of what the planet faced, she knew that Flen’s impatience and inability to grasp the finer aspects of the sciences would only serve to prolong this discussion. “Yes, it is true that the object we detected is a great distance away, and in fact will never actually collide with or pass very close to Mestiko. That is not the issue here, First Consul.”

Deep-space telescopes had detected the object three lunar cycles ago, and it had taken nearly every waking moment since then to corroborate what Mino had feared upon her initial analysis of the telescopes’ collected data telemetry: The rogue phenomenon—essentially a compact star moving through space—was emitting lethal levels of radiation. While the object’s path would not bring it into proximity with Mestiko, that did not matter, as the radiation it emitted would wash over the surface of the planet, destroying its atmosphere and inflicting a death sentence upon all life harbored by it.

Those most fortunate would perish quickly as the event occurred, rather than survive a brief aftermath characterized by immense, unremitting suffering from which there would be no escape.

Flen swiveled his seat so that he could see Mino again, his expression still retaining a large measure of doubt. “You will have to forgive me, my friend, but this prediction of yours is a bit much to take in all at once. It does at first sound quite outlandish, would you not agree?”

Once more Mino felt frustration as well as the first hint of anger as she listened to Flen’s continued denial. “First Consul, I have been your chief science advisor since you took office. You know that I am not disposed to alarmist theories or reckless, uncorroborated declarations. I stand before you today and tell you without any doubt or reservation that our world is doomed, and that we must act if we are to have any hope of preserving anything of our people or our culture.” Indeed, Mino’s entire career had been devoted to the sciences and the pursuit of knowledge, to say nothing of the careful weighing and investigation of each new piece of information. Working alongside some of the greatest minds in history, she labored to understand not only the origins of the Payav but also their place among the other worlds and peoples that must inhabit the universe.

And it was that part of my work that was just beginning to show such promise.

Flen placed his frail, withered hands atop the polished surface of his desk. “You misunderstand me, my dear friend. It is not that I doubt you, for you have served not only the people of Gelta but me personally with unflagging loyalty and integrity.” He paused to release a small cough, as though the act of speaking at such length was becoming a strain. “The problem I face is my own, for I find myself unable to decide how best to proceed in the face of what you tell me is an inalterable fate for our civilization.”

Not for the first time, Mino felt the impulse to simply shout that which she had been keeping contained within herself. It was a struggle that had grown ever more difficult with the dawn of each new day that itself was but one of a dwindling number left to her people. The answer to Flen’s question and perhaps even the dire fate that apparently had been levied on Mestiko might well be within her grasp. She had only to speak the words.

I cannot, she reminded herself yet again.

Instead, Mino said to the first consul, “Based on the technology available and the time remaining to us, we have nothing that might be employed to destroy the object, alter its path, or protect against its effects. However, there is something else we can consider.”

She paused, stepping around Flen’s desk so that she might study the expansive Yabapmat cityscape, which she had called home for nearly her entire adult life. For a brief moment, she imagined it scorched by fire, enveloped in dust and smoke, drenched in acidic rain, with millions of its inhabitants lying dead in the streets or huddled inside their homes, fearfully waiting for a merciful end.

Enough!

Forcing away the gruesome imagery, she returned her attention to Flen. “We have developed the ability to propel a spacecraft faster than light. We can increase its scope to accommodate one or more larger craft, capable of supporting a representative sample of our people. They would be a group who might carry forth our heritage, perhaps to begin anew on another world somewhere far from here.”

Flen’s eyes grew wide as he listened to Mino’s proposition. “That is quite poetic, my friend, but is it practical? How are we to select such a sample of survivors to carry on our name and culture? How do we ensure that an equal representation of all the peoples of our planet is created? Most important, how do we go about such a venture without inciting a global panic?”

“I do not know,” Mino said. “That is not my area of expertise. I can only provide you with facts and my opinions on how best to proceed. The rest is up to you.”

Remaining silent for a moment, the first consul rose from his chair, using an ornately carved wooden cane to support his aged body as he moved closer to the window. He placed his hand on the thick, ovoid glass of the portal, and Mino saw him close his eyes as though attempting to commune with the city and landscape beyond. After several moments, he turned back to Mino.

“The answer, my friend, is that we cannot.”

Mino did not respond at first, unsure that she had heard Flen correctly. Shaking her head, she said, “I do not understand.”

“We cannot proceed as you have recommended,” the first consul replied, “not without causing worldwide calamity.”

Frowning, Mino asked, “You are suggesting we remain silent, even now?” She held up a hand. “No, it is more than that. You actually believe we should take active steps to ensure the public remains uninformed about this.”

Flen nodded. “I do not see that we have a choice.” Waving toward the window, he indicated the city. “Once the people learn of what is to come, our entire civilization will likely crumble and descend into chaos and terror. People will turn on one another, perhaps even sacrificing their fellow Payav in the hopes of securing their own safety, which of course will be a futile effort. We essentially will see to our own fate before it can be visited upon us.”

“How do you propose to keep such an enormous secret?” Mino asked.

Making his way back to his desk, Flen lowered himself into his chair before replying, “There are only two other nations that currently possess the technology to detect the object’s approach as we have. It would be best to alert those leaders, so that we might coordinate how best to proceed. I imagine they will feel similarly with regards to informing their respective peoples. After that, I imagine we shall also need to alert the other members of the Zamestaad .”

Mino nodded in agreement. Given the information and options currently at his disposal, there was of course no faulting Flen for what he was contemplating. Notifying the global security council—created nearly three generations ago in the aftermath of the last great worldwide conflict and which to this day served as a body whose sole mission was to prevent future wars—was a prudent course of action. Once more, Mino felt herself longing to provide her friend and leader with another option, one he likely would not consider even in the most desperate of times.

No! The command echoed in her mind, seeming as though she had shouted it aloud to herself. I gave my word that I would not divulge what I know .

Drawing a deep, calming breath, she instead asked, “First Consul, what will you do when the people learn not only what is happening, but also that their leaders chose to keep that information secret?”

Flen offered a small, wizened sigh. “We will address that issue when it presents itself, my friend.” Releasing a small, tired smile, he added, “For now, and as odd as it might seem, I must tend to the normal business of the Gelta people. I trust I can depend on you to do as you have already done, to keep this information to yourself, in the interests of preserving the peace so long as we are able?”

“You have my word, First Consul,” Mino replied. “I and those I have already entrusted with this information will obey your directive.”

Knowing that she likely would be spending an increasing amount of time in these chambers in the days to come, Mino took her leave of the first consul. Her body seemed to carry her back toward her offices of its own volition, leaving her mind free to reflect on her world and the inability of anyone currently living upon it to do anything about the crisis it confronted. She wanted to believe that it was how the people of Mestiko faced what was to come that would define them as a people for all time and in the eyes of those who one day would learn of what was to happen here.

It was also something she feared, never more than as she entered her office and beheld the lone figure standing there, waiting for her.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, turning to close her heavy, soundproofed door and ensuring its lock was engaged, thereby concealing from anyone who might happen by the presence in her office of the being from another world.

## CHAPTER

### 2

“I thought you might want to talk,” said Dr. Nathan Apohatsu as he watched Mino secure the door. Though he had met with the Payav scientist several times in recent months, this was the first time she had summoned him. In keeping with the protocols he had established at their first meeting, all contact was to be initiated by him or a member of his team, which at Starfleet direction had been in place on Mestiko and observing the people of this planet for nearly a year. The controls were enacted as much for the protection of Apohatsu and his team as the local population, who of course had no inkling that visitors from space walked among them.

“I know I should not contact you,” Mino said as she moved toward her desk, which appeared on the verge of overflowing with uneven stacks of papers, folders, and various other assorted office-related detritus, “but given the circumstances I thought this warranted the deviation from procedure.”

Watching her settle herself into her old yet still comfortable-looking chair, Apohatsu could not help but notice that she appeared to have aged considerably since the last time he had seen her less than a month previously. He saw the new lines around her eyes and mouth, and that her skin seemed even more ashen than the already pale pigmentation that was normal for her race.

Fate truly is a cruel bastard, Apohatsu considered, and not for the first time. The Payav had been of interest to the Federation from the moment they had learned of Mestiko’s progression to faster-than-light technology, thanks to a passing Andorian passenger transport’s sheer chance detection of the unrecognized—and decidedly primitive—warp signature while traveling in proximity to the planet’s star system. As it was the nation-state of Gelta that had developed the successful prototype warp ship, Federation officials decided it was their culture that merited closer observation, bringing about Apohatsu’s assignment—along with two other cultural observation specialists—to study the society as well as the dozens of other independent states that formed the planet’s sociopolitical landscape. In Apohatsu’s opinion, the Payav showed great potential to one day be a valuable member of the Federation. As such, he had been transmitting promising status reports for months, and had been prepared to recommend that formal first contact with Mestiko be initiated.

Then, the pulsar had been detected.

As part of their ongoing cultural observation of the Payav—itsself an exercise in preparation for formal first contact proceedings to be initiated by the Federation—Apohatsu and his team had learned of the approaching pulsar as part of their continuous monitoring of all planetary communications. Studying the data collected by the Gelta space agency’s telescopes, the Starfleet team had come to the same staggering initial conclusions about the rogue space body and its lethal effects as those reached by Payav scientists. Even as Mino and the Gelta government’s science ministry worked to corroborate their findings, Apohatsu himself had been transmitting information back to Starfleet Command in the hopes of getting a more refined analysis of the telemetry. Once that verification had come, it had been with a heavy heart that he met with Mino to confirm her worst fears.

He watched as Mino reached up to caress her smooth, bare scalp, the six digits of her right hand brushing over the small, intricate pattern rendered in dark maroon ink along the top of her skull. Not for the first time, he found his eyes drawn to her neck, thin and longer than that of most other humanoid species with which Apohatsu was familiar but which was normal for the Payav. It always had struck him as one of Mino’s more alluring physical characteristics.

“I find myself in the unfamiliar position of not knowing what to do next, my friend,” she said, gesturing Apohatsu to the only other chair in her office, which featured a sloped backrest but was still not altogether different from an overstuffed recliner with which he might furnish his study in his Okinawan home on Earth.

“So,” she said after recounting her meeting with First Consul Flen, finishing with Flen’s decision to withhold knowledge of the pulsar from the public, “those who do or will know about the Pulse will say nothing. Every discussion will be uttered in hushed whispers; every report from this time forward will be couched in code and cipher. No one will know anything until it is too late, and after that, nothing will matter.”

“Flen’s reaction isn’t unexpected,” Apohatsu replied. “In fact, there are plenty of arguments that keeping the Pulse secret is for the best.”

He paused, blinking at his own use of the colloquial—if largely inaccurate—term by which Mino had taken to calling the approaching pulsar and its anticipated effects. In the months since he had begun secretly meeting with Mino, he had picked up a good bit of the language used by the majority of Gelta citizens, but he still relied upon the universal translator he wore on his belt to help him. Because of that, he occasionally caught himself employing various idioms and other shorthand used by Mino in their periodic conversations.

“Better to die ignorant and happy rather than informed and terrified?” Mino said, the words sharp as she spoke them. She shook her head. “Given a choice, I do not know if that is the option I would want.” Looking across her desk at Apohatsu, she then smiled. “Of course, if I had chosen the career my parents wished for me and become a musician, I would be much happier this evening, yes?”

Apohatsu felt a new pang of sorrow. To see the reality of the current situation weighing so heavily on Mino was all but unbearable. Not only did she carry the burden of knowing what would soon befall all of her people, there were precious few others with whom she could share that knowledge and perhaps seek comfort, and now that isolation had been cemented by consular decree.

“Nathan,” Mino said after a moment, her smile fading even as the universal translator produced the slight mispronunciation of his name that was the closest the Payav woman could manage, “we have spoken before of your people and the laws you have against interfering with civilizations that are not as advanced as yours.”

Apohatsu nodded. “Just one law, actually. Our Prime Directive. Generally speaking, it applies to civilizations that have not yet discovered faster-than-light travel.” In Mestiko’s case, while the government of the Gelta nation had successfully broken the warp barrier, the technology remained untried in regular use and, more important, unshared with other governments and leaderships across the planet. It was a leading factor that had prevented him from advocating first contact earlier than he had. Only after prolonged observation, during which it had become apparent that Gelta’s ultimate goal was to use the capabilities of warp travel for the betterment of the entire world, had Apohatsu been led to his final recommendation.

“I admire the spirit inherent in the law,” Mino said, “that you are unwilling to risk cultural contamination by introducing societies to technology and concepts for which they might not be prepared.” She leaned forward in her chair, placing her hands atop one of the shorter piles of papers on her desk. “Given your overtures to me and my select circle of peers, it would seem the directive no longer applies.”

“I don’t know if it’s that simple, Mino,” Apohatsu replied. Using standard pre-first contact protocols, he and his team approached targeted members of Mestiko’s scientific community, employing a series of burst transmissions on low-band radio frequencies that when interpreted would translate to mathematical theorems. Once those broadcasts were received and returned, the team began a dialogue with that small cadre of scientists, eventually leading to face-to-face introductions.

In particular, Apohatsu’s first meeting with Mino or Dresha, held months ago, resonated in his memory as if it had happened earlier in the day. Since that initial encounter—which she had taken with great aplomb and poise considering she was among the first of her people to meet with an extraterrestrial—they had forged a fast friendship. In their coded transmissions and during their rare personal meetings, they had spoken of family, of history, of art, and of ambition. The bond he had developed with Mino was unlike any he had experienced among his friends or colleagues.



Realizing he was staring at Mino's small hands—something he had done on several occasions—Apo hatsu cast his gaze downward to discover that he was absently fidgeting with the sixth finger of his left hand. Essentially an opposable thumb opposite the one he already possessed, the extra digit had been reproduced via a biomechanical prosthetic he wore on each hand, concealed beneath artificial skin colored to mimic indigenous pigmentation. While the mock-ups did not possess the full functionality of actual Payav hands, and would not pass muster if subjected to close examination, the prosthetics, working in concert with other skin coloring and a hair-hiding skullcap, allowed him to move casually through the city disguised as a local inhabitant.

“While you and the others we have approached know about the Federation,” he continued after a moment, “and my superiors are aware of our contact with you, there are still issues to consider. We can't simply announce our presence here. That would likely do as much damage as informing the public about the pulsar.”

“But there is so much you could do!” Mino exclaimed, pointing at him with a gesture made all the more odd due to the extra digit on her right hand. “You have the ability to evacuate an untold number of our people, ensure they are taken to a world that can support our species. Even if our planet is doomed, you can make certain that our civilization and our culture is not lost.”

With renewed anguish, Apo hatsu shook his head. “You know that we couldn't evacuate the entire planet in time, and as your first consul said, there would be no way to enable a program of selection for potential evacuees without causing global alarm.”

Whatever he was going to say next was forgotten at the sound of the lock on Mino's office door disengaging before the door itself swung open to admit a trio of armed guards, each wearing dark body armor and helmets with visors that concealed their faces. Apo hatsu saw that all three carried ominous-looking rifles, the barrels of which were aimed at him and Mino.

Oh no. The words echoed in Apo hatsu's mind. They know! How?

“What is the meaning of this?” Mino shouted, rising from her chair. “How dare you barge into my private office!”

Another shadow fell across the threshold of the door, and Apo hatsu watched as the small, hunched form of an elderly Payav male walking with a cane entered the room.

“I hope you will forgive me, my dear friend,” First Consul Flen etHamwora said as he stepped toward Mino's desk. “The guards are of course acting on my order.” Apo hatsu saw that the aged leader of Gelta was not looking at Mino as he spoke, but instead was scrutinizing him with a piercing gaze.

“With all due respect, First Consul,” Mino said as she stepped around her desk, “would you kindly tell me what this is about?”

Finally turning to face his science advisor, Flen replied, “Considering the gravity of what we face, I suspected you might seek counsel from other parties.” He shifted his weight, using his cane to maintain his balance as he regarded Apo hatsu once more. “Though I admit I never expected what the true nature of that counsel might be. What manner of being are you, sir?”

Doing his best to feign an expression of surprise and confusion, “Forgive me, First Consul, but I do not—”

Flen held up his free hand, prompting Apohatsu to silence. “Let us not waste time with false pretenses.” To Mino, he said, “I have had your offices—as well as those of your associates—monitored for quite some time now. There was some concern that you might attempt to inform the public about the Pulse.”

“You would accuse me of insurrection?” Mino said, her voice rising an octave. “I gave you my word that I would remain silent, and so far as our people are concerned, I have done just that.”

Nodding, Flen replied, “An interesting choice of words, given your present company.” To Apohatsu, he said, “There will be time to discuss the historic aspects of our first meeting at another time, sir. For now, I have but a single question: Is there anything you can do for the people of my world?”

Swallowing the lump he felt forming in his throat, Apohatsu shook his head. “First Consul, I honestly do not know.”

NOW

CHAPTER

3

Jim Kirk hated meetings.

It was not that he failed to see their occasional usefulness, at least when information of importance was conveyed. Still, he always had been impatient when it came to such proceedings, discussing the merits and potential pitfalls surrounding a particular course of action rather than actually getting on with whatever tasks needed accomplishing. Despite what he recognized as a personal foible, Kirk was no fool. There obviously were times when meeting to hash out the details prior to undertaking a complicated, hazardous mission was a prudent strategy.

Acting to prevent the extinction of every living thing on a planet definitely qualified in that regard.

Kirk forced away the casual, even flippant thought, annoyed with himself even for harboring it as he looked around the oval-shaped conference table to the other people assembled in the *Enterprise*’s main briefing lounge. While Lieutenant Commander Spock, his science officer as well as his second-in-command, displayed his usual implacable Vulcan demeanor, the other members of his senior staff—Dr. Mark Piper, ship’s physician; Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott, the *Enterprise*’s chief engineer; and Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu, leader of the ship’s astro-sciences department—each wore expressions of concern and doubt that Kirk was certain matched his own.

“A rogue pulsar,” he said. Seated at one end of the conference table, the captain leaned forward until he could rest his forearms atop its polished surface as he regarded the image in the viewer at the far end of the table. He took an extra moment to study the computer-enhanced image of the pulsar as collected by the *Enterprise*’s sensor array. “I’ve heard of them, but I never thought I’d actually get to see one.”

“They are a rather rare form of stellar phenomena, Captain,” said Professor Lindsey Cameron from where she sat just to the left of the viewer. A human woman perhaps forty years of age, Cameron wore her blond hair cut in a style short enough to expose the tanned skin of her neck. Dressed in a contemporary one-piece jumpsuit that flattered her trim, athletic figure, the professor presented the appearance of someone far more accustomed to outdoor activity than spending long hours huddled in a windowless research laboratory. “I was most surprised when I received the report about it from Starfleet Command.” Offering a demure smile, she added, “I never expected to actually see one myself, let alone

get very close to one.”

Though he had been captain of the Enterprise only for a short time, Kirk could appreciate Cameron’s excitement at facing the “unknown.” Indeed, it was that aspect of his ship’s forthcoming mission—a long-duration assignment that would take him and his crew into an uncharted region of the galaxy with the primary task of discovering and establishing peaceful contact with other intelligent space-faring civilizations—that filled him with a sense of anticipation unlike anything he ever had experienced.

Before he and the Enterprise could set out on that mission, however, they first would have to complete the task currently facing them.

“The object was discovered almost six months ago,” Cameron said as she rose from her chair and moved closer to the viewer. Using the stylus from her data slate as a pointer, she indicated the pulsar centered on the screen. “Astronomers on Mestiko became aware of it thanks to telemetry received from orbital telescopes, and its presence was later confirmed by additional data transmitted by a long-range probe currently traversing the outer boundary of their solar system. Long-range sensor scans from a Starfleet science vessel removed any lingering doubt.”

“It’s headed for Mestiko?” Kirk asked.

Cameron nodded. “In a manner of speaking.” Stepping away from the viewer, she clasped her hands behind her back as she began to pace the perimeter of the briefing lounge. “Though its projected course will bring it no closer than five hundred and twenty million kilometers from the planet, the pulsar still poses a tremendous threat.”

Seated next to Scott, Sulu said, “Captain, a pulsar emits X-ray radiation from its magnetic poles while spinning at high rates of speed. Think of it as a lighthouse, its search beams rotating dozens of times per second. In this case, those beams will intersect with Mestiko as the pulsar moves through the system.”

“What kind of damage are we talking about?” asked Dr. Piper, leaning forward in his chair, his frown acting to deepen the already prominent lines etched into his aged face.

Turning to face Piper, Spock replied, “The event will be sufficient to wipe out all life on the planet, Doctor. While that portion of Mestiko facing away from the pulsar will be spared from direct exposure, the damage to the entire planet will be catastrophic.

“The X-ray emissions will also have detrimental effects on the atmosphere, completely destroying the planet’s ozone layer and allowing lethal levels of ultraviolet radiation to reach the surface. Within forty-eight hours, the heat buildup resulting from radiation saturation will trigger innumerable severe weather events. Over time, that radiation also will inflict widespread ecological damage.”

“The Payav have also deployed a network of satellites and three staffed orbital facilities,” Sulu added, “some of which were utilized as part of their research into faster-than-light travel. Those exposed to the pulsar will have their guidance systems fused. Eventually, the heating of the atmosphere will increase drag on the satellites, slowing their velocities to the point that their orbits decay and they plunge back to the planet.” The astrophysicist shook his head. “There’s also a permanent research base located on one of Mestiko’s two moons. No evacuations have been ordered as of yet. Anyone at that colony or aboard one of those space stations doesn’t stand a chance.”

His own expression one of dread, Scott said, “Sounds to me like the lucky ones are those killed right away.”

“You’d be correct, Commander,” Cameron replied. “Those who survive the pulsar’s immediate effects will be doomed to eventual extinction, either by prolonged radiation exposure or by an atmosphere saturated with toxic pollutants.”

Shaking his head, Piper whispered, “Dear God.”

Kirk saw the anguish in the doctor’s eyes even as the older man released a sigh of resignation. His brown hair, thinning on top, was graying at the temples. There were bags under his eyes and the skin along his jawline was sagging and wrinkled. Kirk knew the man had seen his fair share of suffering and death during his career, and he wore the strain of more than four decades in service to Starfleet for all to see. Though he recently had put in his paperwork for retirement, Piper had agreed to remain aboard the Enterprise until the ship’s return to Earth, currently scheduled for three months from now. Perhaps he believed those final weeks would be uneventful, but instead he faced the possibility of watching an entire planet die while he stood by, powerless to prevent it.

Well, Kirk mused, not if we have anything to say about that.

As though reading his mind, Cameron halted her pacing and turned to face the group of assembled officers. “Of course, the reason we’re here is to make an attempt at preventing this catastrophe. At first, we discussed the possibility of building a larger version of the old Verteron Array on one of the system’s uninhabited planets, but eventually we decided that was not a practical approach.”

Frowning, Kirk leaned forward in his seat. “Verteron Array? Why does that sound familiar?”

“It was a mechanism constructed on Mars in the mid-twenty-second century, Captain,” Sulu replied. “Essentially, it was a massive emitter, using verteron pulses to direct comets to the planet as part of the then-ongoing terraforming efforts.”

“Aye,” Scott said, “but creating an emitter capable of moving a pulsar would be something else entirely.”

Spock nodded. “Indeed. The mass of such an object would be far beyond the capabilities of anything we could construct in such a short period of time.”

“Which brings us to our current plan,” Cameron said. Returning to her place at the conference table, the professor tapped a series of controls on the portable computer terminal Spock had placed there for her use. In response to her actions, the image on the viewer shifted to that of a technical schematic, albeit one for a device Kirk was not sure he recognized.

“This is a Series Alpha sensor probe,” Cameron said, “although it’s been substantially modified from its original configuration. As you know, this design is intended for investigation of spatial areas where it’s considered too dangerous to send a starship.”

From the opposite end of the table, Scott said, “Those beasts carry some heavy-duty shielding.” He indicated the viewer with a wave of his hand. “That looks to have had some enhancements, though.”

Cameron nodded. “Quite right, Mr. Scott. We’ve taken six of these probes and modified them with increased shielding, and replaced their sensor arrays with enhanced deflector emitters and power transfer relays. We’ve upgraded their auto-navigation and remote-controlled course correction components, and they each now feature a networking interface so that they can operate in concert with one another.” She pressed another control on the computer terminal, calling up another image to the viewscreen depicting

six of the probes arranged in a hexagonal formation, with a pale yellow field filling in the space between them.

“Once deployed,” the professor continued, “the probes will assume a course parallel to that of the pulsar, traveling so that they are positioned between it and Mestiko. The emitters we installed will deploy a single field designed to act as a moving shield, deflecting the pulsar’s X-ray emissions away from the planet. Based on the pulsar’s current speed, the shield will only have to perform this function for the duration of time its emission cones are intersecting with Mestiko’s trajectory.” She shrugged. “Perhaps five minutes, ten at the outside, and it’ll all be over.”

Scott offered an appreciative nod. “A fine bit of engineering, Professor.”

“Extraordinary circumstances, Mr. Scott,” Cameron replied, once more offering a small smile. “As an engineer, I’m sure you know and appreciate that any attempt to help these people would be of similar scope and mindset.”

Scott nodded. “Aye, Professor. Indeed I do.”

“Assuming it works, of course,” Spock countered. “It is worth noting that not only is this technology experimental, but this would also be the first known attempt to deflect or divert the radioactive emissions of a stellar body.”

Taking her seat at the table once again, Cameron replied, “If you’re saying that we don’t know whether this will work, Mr. Spock, well of course you’re right. However, it’s not as though we’re graced with a number of options here.”

Clasping his hands on the table in front of him, Kirk frowned. Untested technology usually meant all manner of unexpected complications. While he was not in the habit of shirking from a course of action simply because it had never been attempted, he also preferred to examine a problem from all possible angles in the hopes of reducing head-on collisions with the unforeseen. “It’s a valid observation, Professor. Suppose this deflector screen doesn’t work; what are the alternatives? What about evacuation?”

“All but impossible,” Spock replied matter-of-factly. “Mestiko’s space travel capability is equivalent to that of mid-twenty-first-century Earth. The Payav have completed automated exploratory missions to four of their system’s other six planets as well as several of those worlds’ respective moons. They’re incapable of evacuating themselves, and there is insufficient time for any Federation effort to succeed in rescuing more than a fraction of the planet’s population. Indeed, it would not have been possible to complete an evacuation even if we had begun the process six months ago.”

Cameron said, “A large portion of our task is covert in nature. If knowledge of the pulsar reaches the populace—which we have to assume it will at some point if it hasn’t already—we have to make sure our diversion of its X-ray emissions cannot conclusively be connected to extraterrestrial action.”

Looking to Spock, Kirk asked, “What about our team on the surface? Where are they now?” He had seen the reports about Dr. Nathan Apohatsu and his people being discovered by Payav government leaders.

“According to Apohatsu’s reports, which Starfleet continues to receive,” the first officer replied, “they remain with the leaders of the Gelta nation-state, who have taken measures to ensure their secrecy as well as that of the pulsar and the existence of beings from other worlds. Such knowledge would likely

result in widespread panic among the populace.”

When Spock paused, Kirk noticed the slight, almost imperceptible tightening of the half-Vulcan’s jaw. Though the captain was still learning how to read his normally unflappable first officer—a task made all the more difficult by Spock’s strict observance of his father’s people’s cultural mandate to keep their emotions suppressed beneath a veneer of logic—he recognized uncertainty when he saw it.

“Something else on your mind, Mr. Spock?” Kirk asked.

Folding his arms across his chest, the science officer turned to regard Kirk. “I was merely considering the implications of our mission here with respect to the Prime Directive, sir.”

“Seems to me,” Piper said, “that went out the window the minute our people on Mestiko contacted the Payav scientists.”

Kirk had read the transcripts of the messages received from the team of Federation pre-first contact specialists, embedded on Mestiko for nearly a year at that point, in the days and weeks following the discovery of the pulsar. He was struck by how the world’s leaders had elected to conceal that information. Realizing that nothing could prevent the catastrophe, they evidently had decided that a swift end to their civilization was preferable to the months of chaos and anarchy that certainly would result when the reality of looming disaster became public knowledge.

That might well have been the way of it, save for the actions of the cultural observation team.

Starfleet Command had received an urgent message from them, requesting assistance for the Payav in dealing with the pending crisis. The team, already in close contact with a cadre of trusted scientists and other high-ranking officials from the planet’s largest provincial state as well as a handful of that nation’s allies, had revealed much knowledge regarding the Federation and its dozens of member worlds, each of them possessing technology far beyond that of the Payav, and had held out the possibility that aid in dealing with the coming calamity might be available.

“The Payav achieved warp drive, Mr. Spock,” Kirk added. “According to the observation team’s reports, they were recommending an accelerated timetable for formal first contact protocols even before the discovery of the pulsar.”

Spock nodded. “That is true, of course, but the fact remains that according to regulations, the observation team undertook considerable risk by divulging to Payav leaders that we might be able to render assistance.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” Scott said, his brow furrowing in irritation as he leaned across the table. “Are you actually suggesting we leave these people to their fate and go about our merry way?”

Though the engineer’s tone and expression conveyed his rising ire, Spock’s features in contrast remained composed. “I was simply attempting to convey the complete context of the situation we face, Mr. Scott.”

Because formal first contact protocols had not been enacted with the planet, lawyers had argued that revealing the Federation’s presence to the population at large and attempting to render aid would also be in violation of the Prime Directive. While the policy was intended to protect societies that had not yet ascended to a level of technology allowing them to travel to other worlds and interact with other space-faring races, more cynical minds tended to view the decree as a means of allowing the Federation to soothe its conscience while remaining blissfully unengaged in the affairs of those who might genuinely

benefit from so-called “interference.”

For weeks after the receipt of the observation team’s message, the semantics of the situation with the Payav—the letter of the law versus the spirit it was meant to foster—had consumed legal experts. A number of other factors had also been considered, not the least of which was the Mestiko system’s proximity to territory claimed by the Klingon Empire. Given that reality, having an ally in this part of space would be of no small value.

Assuming the Payav survived the coming days, of course.

Ultimately, it was determined that the Federation could not in good conscience stand by and do nothing while Mestiko faced certain annihilation, a decision for which Kirk was thankful. While he understood and respected the purpose of the Prime Directive as a means of preventing the contamination of a fledgling civilization, debating the policy’s merits in a classroom setting and applying its principles in situations when real lives hung in the balance were two entirely different matters.

“The Prime Directive still applies to the balance of the planet’s population,” Kirk said, “and Dr. Apohatsu and his team are upholding it by ensuring their presence remains a secret except to the parties they approached as part of the normal pre-first contact protocols. It’s too late for second-guessing those decisions, and now we’ve got a job to do.” To Cameron, he added, “I’ve no illusions that this is a simple task, Professor. What do we do next?”

Apparently satisfied at the direction the discussion had taken, Cameron said, “The effectiveness of the deflector field will be dependent on getting accurate sensor readings of the pulsar. The only information we’ve gotten to this point was taken from long-range scans. I’ll require more detailed readings—the intensity of its X-ray emissions, rate of rotation, and so on. The probes will need that information as a baseline in order to more effectively make automated course-corrections while in flight. I’ll also be able to better estimate how long the shield will need to be active.”

Kirk frowned. “That means we need to get close enough for Enterprise sensors to make an intensive sweep.” He turned to Spock. “Can we do that safely?”

“We will have to take precautions, sir,” the Vulcan replied. “Our own deflector shields will provide some measure of protection, and we should remain free of danger so long as the ship avoids the pulsar’s X-ray emissions.”

“That’s why I have a top-flight helmsman,” Kirk said, offering a smile. Then he asked Cameron, “How much time do we have?”

Pausing to look at her data slate and review her notes, the professor replied, “The pulsar entered the Mestiko system about five days ago. Its trajectory will take it past the planet in twelve days, sixteen hours.”

“If we proceed at our maximum safe cruising speed,” Spock added, “we can be in a position to conduct the requisite scans in approximately sixty-five hours.”

Kirk nodded in approval. There would be plenty of time to study the pulsar and allow Cameron to complete her work in preparation for deploying the deflector drones. “Flash the bridge, Spock. Order Mr. Mitchell to lay in an intercept course and engage at warp six.” He already could anticipate the reaction his navigator and close friend would have when he learned of the potential danger they faced in bringing the ship so close to the pulsar and its hazardous effects. Gary Mitchell thrived on the thrill of the

unexpected, and this mission promised to deliver that in no small portion.

After dismissing his officers and making his way from the briefing room into the corridor, Kirk could not help feeling the same way. With no more questions or items to consider—for the moment, at least—and with orders issued, it was time for action. If good fortune chose to smile upon him and his crew, that action would result in the salvation of an entire world.

A damn sight better than sitting in a meeting.

## CHAPTER

### 4

Her mind still clouded from a half-day session on changes to regulations governing the construction of public housing, Raya elMora groaned aloud as she pushed past the doorway of her small office. Her first act upon entering her private workspace was to relinquish the weight of assorted binders and folders she carried onto her already overburdened desktop. Letting her lithe arms drop to her sides, she sighed and turned back to her door to swing it closed, only to hear a loud, ruffling clatter behind her, a sound that could be only that of once neatly stacked and sorted papers cascading from the desk to a significantly less orderly state on the floor.

Raya brought one hand to her bare forehead and let her thumbs lightly massage her temples as she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the pressure might scrub away her memories of the last few moments or, better yet, the entire morning.

Despite all of the advances made in communications and electronic data storage, why does the Convocation still insist on committing the bulk of its information to print?

She entertained the thought of proposing the elimination of hard-copy records for the entire national government of Larenda, until it occurred to her that she would likely be put in charge of an entire subcommittee to research the idea.

“And print the whole cursed proposal onto more stacks of paper,” Raya finished her thought aloud.

“Servant?”

Raya’s eyes snapped open at the sound of the voice, and she looked up to see her aide, Blee elTorno, standing in the now-open doorway, the sounds and sights of a bustling hive of interconnected office spaces spilling around her small form. Blee’s soft features carried a look of puzzlement and some concern as she peered inside.

“Is something wrong?” the young woman asked. “I thought I heard a crash.”

Raya allowed her aide a small smile, knowing she should have expected the typically overfunctioning Blee to follow her into her office despite anything the aide might have overheard. “Just making more work for myself,” she said as she turned to her desk to survey the damage. “Apparently, someone thinks I do not have enough to do already.”

Blee stepped into the office and bent to the task of collecting the spilled folders and scattered papers. “Perhaps they simply observed the lone area of your office not otherwise occupied with documents, and wished to alleviate that oversight.”



Laughing as she moved to assist with the cleanup, Raya smiled not only at her aide's zealous enthusiasm to help, but also her sense of humor. The younger woman displayed the typical energy of a recent graduate from schooling for governmental service, particularly those students fortunate enough to receive appointments as Convocation aides.

As for herself, Raya admitted that her seven seasons as a Servant—one selected by the people of her province to join the three-hundred-member Larendan Convocation—had been long enough to allow the reality of the governmental process to dull some of the shine from the allure of national politics.

“So, what happened in the meeting?” Blee asked. “Did they really think we might fail to notice such a severe relaxation of the codes for construction materials?”

The comment elicited a small laugh from Raya as she returned some of the spilled papers to her desk. “We? Blee, you were the one who read through that huge proposal and wrote the brief to oppose it. To be honest, except for my showing up at the meeting, the only ‘we’ this time around was you.”

She noticed a grayish cast begin to spread across Bree's pale features. It seemed obvious that the remarks had begun to embarrass her aide.

“I was only doing my duty, Servant,” Bree said, and Raya noted the humility in her voice. “So,” she added as she straightened a handful of folders, “what did happen at the meeting?”

Raya shrugged as she made her way back to her chair. “That depends on whom you ask. Either I once again raised my voice against the threats of profiteering and greed to speak for the unsuspecting masses, or I provided yet another example of my reactionary whining to demonstrate once more just how uninformed I really am.”

“It could not be both?” Blee asked, keeping her expression neutral as she collected the last of the scattered papers.

Chuckling at the remark, Raya replied, “In any event, I said just enough to get the proposal pushed back into review. We won't have to worry about code changes again anytime soon. So, you did good this time but we will do even better next time.”

Blee smiled as she placed the final collection of papers atop Raya's desk. “Yes, we will, Servant.”

Glancing toward the ornate timepiece positioned above her office door, Raya realized for the first time that she had missed her morning meal. Given her appointment calendar for the remainder of the day, she knew it was unlikely that she would have a chance to eat anytime soon, and her stomach already was beginning to announce its annoyance at this fact.

Ignoring the protests, Raya instead looked to the schedule on her handheld computer interface. “As far as doing better goes, did we ever hear back from Umeen on those air-quality reports?”

“I connected with the Atmospheric and Astronomic Council office three times this morning,” Blee said. “I left two voice messages for Councillor Umeen personally, and a third with the council clerk. I am sorry, Servant.”

Raya knit her brow. “He is late with that data we need, and he is never late. Something else must be going on. Try him again this afternoon, and if he has not connected by the end of the day, you will have to go to the AAC to meet with him personally. I cannot let the pollution proposal slip past me like I did with

the construction codes.” Tapping a control on her portable keypad, she asked, “What is next on the agenda?”

Looking to her own personal computer interface, Blee replied, “Con orStapa with the Convocation news feed wants your comments on the poll—”

“The pollution proposal, yes,” Raya finished. “That can wait until after I review Umeen’s reports. Anything else?”

“Yes,” Blee said, her mouth fighting a smirk. “Two connects from yourelor .”

Raya felt a pang of guilt as she realized that she could not easily recall when she had last spoken with her father’s mother, the woman whom she had affectionately addressed as Elee for as long as she could remember.

“I hope she was not too short with you,” Raya said, “and kept any editorial comments about my lack of communication to herself.”

Typically, not even a full schedule of Convocation duties could keep Raya from taking a few minutes to contact her, even if only by mobile link as she made the commute to and from the Convocation complex. Despite that, for uncounted reasons—none of which sounded valid to her at this moment—Raya had forsaken that routine, and now she would have to answer to herelor, who of course would take no small amount of amusement from that act.

“She was polite as usual,” Blee replied, “and I told her you happened to mention to me just today that you intended to sit down to a nice long talk with her this evening.”

“Oh, nicely done,” Raya said, nodding in appreciation at her aide’s deft handling of the situation. “And with that settled, I suppose I need to—”

“Servant Matthi stopped by to invite you to midday meal,” Blee said, tapping her keypad.

Raya sighed, her stomach again rumbling with the thought of food as she consulted her schedule for the remainder of the day. “As much as I enjoy his company, I just don’t have the time to meet with him.”

“You’ll be of no help to me at the review meeting if your mind is on your grumbling belly,” a deep voice echoed through the small office.

Looking up, Raya smiled as Matthi orJurbes strolled into the room, his richly colored robes of blue and red—a display of wardrobe other Servants cited as much too casual for the atmosphere of the Convocation—adding a warm hue to his pallid skin. After sixty seasons of public work, Raya figured, the man had earned the right to wear anything he pleased, and he had said as much to anyone risking an audible comment about his apparel in his presence. His adherence to his convictions despite any resulting clash with long-standing convention, and his vocal defense of anyone else willing to shake up the status quo in similar fashion, warmed the two to each other almost instantly upon their initial meeting, when Matthi was assigned as a mentor during Raya’s first season as a Servant. She found herself particularly pleased that he had chosen today to call on her.

Noting the small bundle he carried in his left hand, Raya asked, “Dare I ask what gifts you have brought me this day?”

The elder statesman craned his thin and quite wrinkled neck in an evident expression of pride, offering the paper-wrapped parcel with a dramatic wave. “Spiced curd spread and greens, just the way you like it.”

“And that is my cue to go. . . somewhere. Anywhere,” Blee said, her expression one of mock disgust as she turned for the door. “Servant, if you need me, I will be eating a meal fit for actual consumption.”

“Good taste is wasted on the young,” Matthi said to the departing aide, with the two exchanging knowing smiles before she disappeared through the closing door. Now alone with Raya, he moved without invitation to the chair situated before her desk and handed her what apparently was to be her midday meal.

“Thank you,” she said as she took the proffered package. “You are a gift from the gods.”

“Remember that when you add the gratuity,” Matthi countered as he settled himself into the chair. “So, my young progeny, what could possibly be so important that you do not even have the time to eat?”

“Everything at once,” Raya replied before biting into her leafy roll and savoring the blend of seasonings that lightly burned at her taste buds.

“Let me guess,” Matthi said. “The Atmospheric and Astronomic Council again? I am surprised that they have not given you your own office, considering how often you are there harassing them. A holdover from your university days, I suspect.”

Raya offered a sheepish smile and felt her face warm with some embarrassment, the same way it did every time Matthi chidingly remarked about what he referred to as her “radical youth,” rather than crediting her with her schooling achievements. It was during her training as an environmental sciences teacher that Raya had joined a group of fellow students committed to the purity of the planet’s air and water. Her own research into the subject turned into what she knew even then would be a lifelong passion for raising public awareness of the contaminants people ate, drank, and breathed each day.

Indeed, it was her first testimony before the Convocation—a call for the protection of wetlands threatened by a proposed reduction in emissions standards for manufacturers—and the overwhelming positive response she received from her fellow students and journalists as well as a few Servants that eventually had led her to pursue a calling to public service rather than education, with the goal of forging her passions into policy. While her role as a Servant required her consideration of matters ranging from agriculture to foreign policy and from security to transportation, issues directly affecting the environment of Larenda and all of Mestiko had always been the primary driving force behind her efforts.

“I do not harass anyone,” Raya said around another bite of her meal. “I am merely persistent at making my wants known.”

“Indeed you are,” Matthi replied, nodding, “and the people see that. They pay attention to the proposals you make as well as those you support. They like what they see, Raya.”

“I am not here to be watched on the news feeds or recognized when I am at the marketplace, Matthi,” Raya said. “When I was selected to serve, I admit that I was single-minded on what I wanted to accomplish here, but I have since found that my focus has broadened in a great many ways.” Eyeing her mentor as she took another bite, she added, “You have yourself to either thank or blame for that, by the way.”

Ignoring the good-natured jab, Matthi smiled. “That is just the kind of thinking that will see you to a leadership position, my young Servant.”

Raya actually stopped chewing at that remark. Noting the look in her friend’s eyes, she frowned. “You cannot be serious.”

“The Presiding Servant has started asking questions about you,” Matthi replied, “wondering about your potential in an expanded role, and I am not the only one whose opinion he has solicited. That is something you should keep in mind before you go charging into any proposal reviews with your customary ire raging.”

“It sometimes takes a little ire to get people to think about the things in life we take for granted,” Raya said, leaning forward in her seat. “I am not about to stop pushing to protect our planet just to receive leadership of some administrative committee.”

Holding up his hands in mock defense, Matthi said, “I am merely offering you some insight into how others are viewing you. You are respected, both by the Convocation and the people, and you have the chance to start building consensus. That can work very much in your favor when you need support for proposals of much greater scope than tightening emissions standards. Clear-minded thinking and the willingness to work for the middle ground is what they are hoping to see you demonstrate, and I know you have it in you.” Rising from his chair, he offered a knowing smile as he nodded at the remains of the meal still in her hand. “But only if you keep up your energy, so... finish eating that.”

He let himself out, leaving Raya alone in the confines of her cluttered office. She studied the closed door as she chewed another bite of her meal, though the greens now seemed a little less crispy and the spread just a little flatter in spice as she considered what her friend had said to her.

It was not the first time that Matthi had suggested she make some effort to expand her sphere of influence within the Convocation. Unlike many of his peers, he looked past her rebellious youth and instead saw her passion for pursuing the greater good. Still, it was not as though he was ignorant of her feelings on pursuing such a career path, one which would in all likelihood require her to rein in her outspoken manner and develop proficiency in something for which she seldom had seen use: Compromise.

Sorry to disappoint you, Matthi, she thought, but I fear that a bit of the radical still remains within me.

## CHAPTER

### 5

“Approaching the pulsar now, Captain.”

Looking up from the latest in what seemed to be a never-ending series of status reports handed to him by his yeoman, Kirk nodded to Lieutenant Commander Gary Mitchell, who turned to regard him from his navigator’s console as he relayed his report.

“Lay in a parallel course, Mr. Mitchell,” he said. Turning his attention to the officer seated to Mitchell’s left at the helm station, Lieutenant Lee Kelso, Kirk added, “Mr. Kelso, match the pulsar’s velocity while maintaining safe distance. Let’s have a nice, smooth ride, gentlemen.”

Mitchell nodded, a wan smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “We’ll do our best to lull the captain to sleep,” he said as he returned to his station, exchanging grins with Kelso that communicated not only their

trust in each other, but also the faith they knew their captain gave them. Individually, each man was an effective officer well suited to his duties. Working together, they were a formidable team upon which Kirk quickly had learned to depend.

Of course, Gary Mitchell was a longtime friend of Kirk's, dating back to their days at Starfleet Academy, and the two already had served together on two other ships, the *Republic* and the *Constitution*. Upon assuming command of the *Enterprise*, Kirk had asked for Mitchell to serve as his first officer. That request had been overruled by Starfleet Command, however, in favor of promoting Spock to that position in addition to his current duties as *Enterprise* science officer.

The admiral responsible for making such decisions believed that Kirk and Mitchell were too much alike in their personalities to make an effective tandem as commanding and executive officer, a relationship which more often than not thrived on contrasting perspectives and approaches to problem solving. Mitchell, to Kirk's shock, actually agreed with the admiral, though Kirk himself protested the ruling. Despite that initial discord, the captain was coming to realize, based on his dealings with Spock, that the admiral's decision had indeed been a wise one.

"Strong sensor contact," Spock said from his workstation. The captain looked over to see the science officer hunched over the hooded viewer that was the dominant feature of his console and that provided him with a direct interface to the constant streams of telemetry being received by the *Enterprise*'s array of sophisticated sensors. His face bathed in cool blue light as he continued to study the scanner readings, Spock continued, "Bearing 346 mark nine, velocity 40.77 kilometers per second."

Though Spock could not see him, Kirk nodded at the report before handing the data slate and its miniature mountain of status reports to the young brunette woman standing to his right. "Thank you, Smith."

She regarded him with a startled expression. "Sorry, sir. I'm Yeoman Jones."

Kirk sighed. The ship's personnel administration department recently had assigned two enlisted women to fill the billet of his yeoman, Jones for alpha shift and a striking young blonde, Smith, for gamma. At least, he thought those were their assignments, as he had yet to address either woman by her correct name.

With a weak smile of apology, the captain shook his head in resignation. "I'll get it right one of these days, I promise." Rising from his chair at the center of the bridge's command well, Kirk noted an abnormal tremor in the deck plates beneath his feet. "What is that?"

Spock replied without looking away from his console. "We are beginning to encounter gravimetric turbulence from the pulsar. It will have an effect on our sensors as we draw closer."

"Go to yellow alert," Kirk ordered as he stepped toward the red curved railing separating the upper deck from the command well. He could tell when the *Enterprise*'s deflector shields activated in response to the raised alert level, not only from the fleeting blink in the overhead lighting as the ship responded to the new power requirements but also by the abrupt fading of the slight yet still noticeable trembling in the deck plates.

"We're starting to receive detailed sensor telemetry from the pulsar," said Professor Cameron from where she sat to Spock's left, the station she occupied having been reconfigured for her use. She pointed to one of the eight small display screens arrayed just above her console. "Density is equivalent to 1.48 solar masses. Smaller than I expected." Looking to Kirk, she smiled. "That's a good thing."

His elbows perched atop the railing, the captain stroked his chin as he considered the professor's report. "How so?"

Turning in his seat, Spock replied, "Given its current trajectory, if the pulsar were any larger there would be a significant risk of it pulling Mestiko from its normal orbit around this system's sun."

"As it is, there's likely to be a minor disruption of its orbit, anyway," Cameron said. "I'll need to examine the sensor data more closely and conduct some computer simulations, but just from what I'm seeing here I'm willing to guess the planet's orbit will become slightly more elliptical. Long-term effects would include more extremes in seasonal weather patterns: hotter summers, colder winters, though the summers might end up being shorter and the winters longer. It's possible the orbits of the planet's moons may also be affected."

From behind Kirk, Mitchell said, "Given the circumstances, I imagine the Payav could learn to deal with that."

"On the contrary, Commander," Spock countered, "according to the reports submitted by the cultural observation team assigned to Mestiko, there are several segments of Payav society with deep-seated religious tenets. They include the belief that a calamity befalling their world be considered punishment for not living up to the standards set forth by the entity they choose to worship."

His eyes widening even as he kept his attention on his console, Mitchell said, "You're saying that if we manage to deflect the pulsar's effects, we'd be seen as interfering with divine will and the fulfillment of prophecy?"

"Assuming we're discovered by any of the indigenous population," Cameron replied. "Beyond the handful of people who already know about us, of course."

As if in response to the conversation, the deck plating once again shuddered beneath Kirk's feet, and he felt the vibrations channeled through the bridge railing and into his hands. The overhead lighting flickered and he noted several of the display monitors at the perimeter stations waver as though suffering momentary disruption.

"Gravimetric interference?" Kirk asked, making his way back to his command chair as Spock and Cameron both returned to their respective stations.

Consulting his instruments once more, Spock replied, "Affirmative. The effects are increasing." He turned toward the young officer at the engineering station at the rear of the bridge. "Deflectors, full intensity."

Kirk looked to the main viewscreen, upon which was displayed an image of the blue-red pulsar. "Can we compensate?"

"Our course isn't being affected, Captain," Kelso replied from the helm. "At least, not yet. We can move away if we need to, but it'll get worse as we get closer, sir."

Satisfied with the report, Kirk turned to Cameron. "How much longer do you need?"

"Just a few more minutes, Captain," the professor replied before turning back to her workstation.

“Shields holding at full power,” Mitchell reported, “but they’re taking quite a beating.”

Kirk could believe it, even without the added emphasis of the renewed tremor in the arms of his chair. There was no denying that the ship was being subjected to a terrific assault on its defensive systems as it maneuvered ever closer to the rogue astral body. Despite that, he understood just how important it was that Cameron be given every opportunity to collect as much information as possible. There simply was too much at stake to err on the side of caution now.

“Have engineering route emergency power to the shields. Maintain course and speed as long as possible,” Kirk said. “And Professor, sooner would be better.”

Cameron nodded, both hands moving across her station’s rows of multicolored controls. “Almost there, Captain. These are the most detailed scans of the pulsar we’ve gotten to date. Its magnetic field is stronger than we anticipated, which means we’ll have to modify the way the probes are deployed.”

In front of Kirk at the center of the navigation console, the red triangular alert indicator began to flash at the same time as a new, stronger jolt rocked the entire bridge. He felt himself pushed back in his seat and he saw both Kelso and Mitchell grip the edges of their consoles.

“Deflector generators are overloading!” Spock called out, shouting to be heard over the alarm klaxon that was now echoing across the confines of the bridge. Once again the overhead lighting wavered, this time dying out altogether before being as quickly replaced by emergency illumination. Despite the Enterprise’s inertial dampening systems Kirk still felt his stomach lurch as the starship struggled against the pulsar’s gravitational effects.

“Kelso, cut speed!” he ordered over the shrill whine of the red alert siren, remembering the instructions Cameron had given him in the event the ship needed to move away from the pulsar. “Veer off!” He gripped the arms of his chair as the image on the main viewer showed the pulsar pulling away before vanishing past the screen’s left edge. Almost immediately he sensed the vibrations running through the deck and even his chair beginning to abate.

“Damage reports, all stations,” he heard Spock call into the ship’s intercom system, and looked to see his communications officer, Lieutenant Alden, turning to oversee that task. The young African man’s features clouded into a concerned scowl as he listened to the litany of status reports coming in from across the ship, channeled to his station and the Feinberg receiver he wore in his right ear.

The tremors were gone now, and Mitchell already had seen to the securing from red alert before leaving his station to assist Cameron, who had been dumped unceremoniously to the deck. “Are you all right, Professor?” the navigator asked as he assisted her to her feet.

Cameron replied, “I’m fine, Commander, thank you.” As Kirk moved once more to the railing, she added, “My apologies, Captain. I should have anticipated that might happen as we drew closer.” Glancing toward the floor, she grimaced as she reached up with her right hand to rub her temple. “There was so much sensor data coming so fast, I guess I just got caught up in it.”

“No other significant damage or injuries, Captain,” Alden said from the communications station.

Stepping toward Kirk, Spock clasped his hands behind his back. “Engineering reports that the deflector shield generators experienced severe strain, but Mr. Scott believes he can have them back to full operational status within nine hours.”

Nodding at the report, Kirk said, “Have Scotty see what he can do about enhancing shield strength. We’re not done here yet, and I don’t want to risk further damage to the ship in the event we have to get close to that thing again.”

“What about those probes?” Mitchell asked, leaning against Cameron’s console, his arms folded across his chest. “They’re going to have to be a lot closer to that pulsar than we got. Will their shields protect them?”

Cameron frowned. “The pulsar’s gravimetric effects are more intense than we anticipated, but we tried to allow for such a variance when calculating the power requirements for each probe.” Exhaling audibly, she looked to Kirk. “But I have to be honest, Captain, I’m not sure it will be enough.”

Kirk could see that the admission was a difficult one for the professor to make. She—and those who had helped her, of course—had no doubt labored with a palpable level of uncertainty throughout the development of their plan and the technology to support it, insecurity only made worse when measuring the stakes. Still, that feeling could at least be mitigated with the knowledge—harsh though truthful—that the people of Mestiko were doomed if no action were taken.

Now, however, Cameron faced head-on the possibility that she might take that action and still fail. It was a prospect Kirk also had considered—a realistic assessment of the situation given the untested nature of what they would soon attempt.

That said, he simply refused to accept it.

He turned to look at the main viewer, which now showed an unfettered starfield. In his mind’s eye, however, he envisioned a tranquil image of Mestiko centered on the screen, with its azure oceans and lush green and brown landmasses upon which teemed a civilization on the brink of extinction.

“It’ll have to be enough, Professor,” he said after a moment, feeling his jaw tighten in determination. “We don’t have a choice anymore.”

There could be no excuses, no rationalizations for inability to achieve what they had come here to accomplish. Too much rode on the outcome of their mission; too many lives depended on what he, his ship, and the people under his command did or did not do in the coming days.

Failure was unthinkable.

## CHAPTER

6

Raya slammed the heel of her hand against the door, pushing it open as she dashed into the outer offices of Umeen or Wenda, her longtime friend and occasional rival at the Convocation’s Atmospheric and Astronomic Council. The first thing she noticed was the active oval-shaped display monitor, tuned to one of the dozens of news broadcasts currently being aired. While the audio had been muted, the stark visuals—a computer-generated star map depicting a representation of Mestiko and the sun it orbited, along with another, highlighted object emitting bright yellow lines that intersected the image of the planet—and the expression of the journalist currently reporting were more than enough to convey what was rapidly becoming the only topic of discourse, not only here but perhaps across the entire world.

We are going to die.



The thought echoing in her ears as she tore her eyes away from the monitor, Raya noted the conspicuous absence of Umeen's assistant. That alone was an uncommon occurrence, particularly at this time of the workday when the councillor was at his busiest. With no one to stop her, she made her way across the anteroom and pushed open the door leading to the inner office.

"Umeen?" she called out.

Seated in his favored high-back chair behind an ornate wooden desk perhaps twice the size of the more utilitarian model she used and watching another monitor—a smaller, tabletop display showing the same news broadcast as was currently airing in his outer office—Umeen or Wenda looked up at her approach. "Raya?" he asked, squinting to see her across the expanse of his spacious chamber. "Is that you?"

Stoop-shouldered and thin, Umeen was an elder member of the AAC, having occupied his position on the council since well before the first time Raya had encountered him. She had been a student at university and he was old, then, of course, though she had watched in recent seasons as his body seemed to succumb ever more rapidly to the onset of advanced age.

Despite his deteriorating physical condition, Umeen's mind remained as sharp as ever, something he demonstrated every time Raya saw him, either in private or as he addressed the Convocation about various matters pertaining to the mission of the AAC. She had watched him stand before her and her colleagues and argue for budget increases in order to fund new satellite technology, and it had been Umeen who first had suggested that Larenda could do worse than to assist the Gelta nation in its controversial space programs, funding Raya herself had always argued could be better spent on curing the planet's mounting environmental woes.

In the end, it seemed, Umeen always won.

Pointing to the images on the monitor situated at the corner of the councillor's desk, Raya asked, "Can this be true?"

Umeen paused, and the expression clouding his aged countenance—a combination of fatigue and perhaps regret—told Raya everything she needed to know even before he spoke the words.

"Yes, I am afraid so."

Raya felt her stomach tighten as though struck by a physical blow. "I do not understand," she said as she all but sank into the heavily padded chair positioned before Umeen's desk. "How can this be possible?"

Despite her growing apprehension, she managed to keep enough presence of mind to pay attention to the councillor's brief explanation of the compact, renegade star currently traveling across the outer boundary of Mestiko's solar system, emitting lethal radiation that eventually would wash across the surface of the planet in less than a solar cycle's time.

"Everything will die?" she asked once her friend finished his cold, almost dispassionate explanation.

Umeen nodded. "The atmosphere will be all but burned away, creating a seemingly never-ending series of shock waves that will cause tumultuous weather events unlike anything ever recorded. According to our calculations, our side of the planet will be shielded from the direct effects, but the radiation's impact will still be felt worldwide. There simply will be no escaping it."

Feeling the first hints of true fear beginning to grip her, Raya said, "How can you be so sure?"

“The data has been corroborated by no less than seven different scientific bodies around the world,” Umeen replied, indicating the monitor atop his desk with one withered hand. “Of course, that information was not to be disclosed in this manner, and I am sorry you had to learn of it this way.”

Her brow furrowing, Raya scowled at the councillor. “How long have you known about this?”

Releasing a resigned sigh, Umeen reached up to scratch his long, thin neck. “Almost two full seasons now. For reasons that should be obvious, it was hoped the information about the Pulse could be kept secret from the public. Perhaps that was wishful thinking on our part.”

“Our part?” Raya repeated. “Who else knows?”

Umeen shrugged. “The councillors of the Zamestaad, of course, as well as a handful of my peers in the science community and the leaders of the three nations who have access to space telescopes capable of detecting the object. That is the way it was to remain until the end.” Nodding toward the monitor again, he added, “Obviously, someone decided differently.”

Holding up a hand in protest, Raya said, “Are you saying that the Zamestaad has decided that nothing can be done for us? We are to simply lie down and die without any attempt to save ourselves? There must be something we can do, some preparations we can make.”

For the first time since her arrival, she saw frustration cross Umeen’s features. “Child, if you do not believe that our planet’s greatest scientific minds have been laboring over this dilemma in the hopes of gleaning a solution, then you are as naïve about this as you were when you took me to task during those university lectures.” Then his expression softened, and he sighed once more. “There is something of a plan in place, of course. People are even now being urged to move to shelters, either storm shelters, or the more robust versions constructed long ago during the global wars. I also have heard of some groups making their way to the inland mountain ranges, to the caves and tunnels there. It will be a futile effort, though. Even if such shelters are sufficient to protect against the radiation, it is unlikely anyone will escape the Pulse’s long-term effects.”

Raya felt a tear sliding down her cheek as she finally began to absorb the enormity of what Umeen was telling her. “So, what are we to do?”

Shaking his head, Umeen replied, “There is precious little we can do, my dear. In the time remaining to us, I fear we shall have our hands full just keeping the public from devolving into mass hysteria and anarchy.” With a tired, resigned smile, he added, “Not that I believe such efforts will be successful, mind you.”

Rising from her chair, Raya made her way to the large, elliptic window dominating the rear wall of Umeen’s office. Looking down into the expansive courtyard that occupied the center of the Convocation grounds, her eyes were drawn first to the courtyard’s stand of revered noggik trees, their gnarled, fruit-bearing branches and fragrant wood a living symbol for many people of the diversity and plenty of all life. The courtyard was a regular place of respite for Raya, where she could find momentary peace away from the daily responsibilities and stresses of her duties.

As she watched now, however, the courtyard was anything but serene and calming. Dozens of armed security personnel moved about, either securing the various exits from the complex or working to bring under control what appeared to be a growing crowd of civilians. Even from where she stood, three levels above the ground, Raya still could see expressions of concern, anguish, and fear on the faces of the

citizens. No doubt they had come here, to the seat of their elected government, in search of answers to what was being disseminated over the news broadcasts. The longer they went without information—some sign that their leaders were working on their behalf—the more panic-stricken they would become. Chaos would soon reign supreme.

For a short time, at least.

As she watched the growing unrest among the people she had been selected to serve and as she realized she was no longer in a position to do anything for them, Raya's thoughts turned instead to a single person.

Your words would be such a comfort now, my beloved Elee. What am I to do?

"...sent to us by a member of the first consul's administration who has asked to remain anonymous, appear to leave no doubt that our entire planet faces an imminent threat from space. So far, all requests for clarification from the first consul have gone unanswered."

"How could you do this?"

Along with Mino or Dresha, Dr. Nathan Apohatsu stood with the other two members of his cultural observation team—the three of them each sporting their Payav clothing, makeup and prosthetics that allowed them to move undetected about the local populace—at the rear of Flen et Hamwora's office, watching as the elderly Payav leader rose from his chair and leveled an accusatory finger at the individual who—so far as the public was concerned, at least—remained "anonymous."

"Do you not realize what you have done?" Flen asked Celadi ilSom, who until a few moments ago had been one of the first consul's most trusted assistants. As he jabbed his long, bony finger at the younger Payav, Flen's anger seemed on the verge of racking his entire aged, emaciated frame. "Surely you comprehend the widespread panic this will cause? Why would you do such a thing?"

His hands clasped behind his back as he stood flanked by two members of the security force assigned to the capital, Celadi nodded slowly. "I felt the people deserved to know what was coming, so that they might be with their loved ones, rather than simply going about their normal lives as though nothing were amiss." Looking up, he added, "Is it wrong to want to seek peace when one's end is near?"

"Of course not," Flen snapped, "but you are not empowered to make that decision for an entire world!" He started to say something else, but the words were interrupted by a deep, gurgling cough that caused him to collapse back into his seat. Watching the first consul struggle to regain his composure, Apohatsu knew that this was yet another effect of the disease ravaging Flen's weakened body.

He had watched the progression of the first consul's ailment in the months since his initial meeting with the aged leader. In that time, he had come to respect Flen not only as an individual, but also for the courage he displayed every day as he forced aside his personal struggles in order to continue his service to the people of Gelta.

As Flen reached for a carafe of water, Mino stepped forward. "Celadi," she said, reaching out to place a hand on the assistant's shoulder, "what else did you tell the journalist?"

Clearing his throat, Celadi replied, "I provided information about the Pulse's projected effects, the

damage it would cause, and how soon it would begin. I supplied computer simulation data and visual records obtained from our telescopes. Additionally, I offered the names of certain scientists who could corroborate the data on the promise of anonymity.”

“So, there are others who have betrayed us, as well?” Flen asked, having once again reclaimed his bearing. Not waiting for an answer to the question, he rose once more from his chair, using his cane to shuffle his way to the expansive window that formed his office’s rear wall. Looking down on the vista of Yabapmat, he shook his head. “The repercussions of your actions will be staggering, if somewhat short-lived.” As he said that last part, his eyes shifted so that he was looking at Apohatsu, and the doctor was sure he saw uncertainty in the elder Payav’s features.

For the first time since his arrival on this planet, the doctor was acutely aware of how much he and his companions did not belong here. Apohatsu looked to the other members of his team, and saw true sorrow in the eyes of his fellow Earth-born researcher Camila Schiapp. The cultural anthropologist’s somber expression seemed even more acute given her Payav disguise, which hid from view the brown hair that usually framed her face and that always refused to be tamed by the ponytail she typically wore.

Next to Schiapp, the Deltan sociologist Vlenn regarded him with hard eyes and lips pressed tightly together. While Apohatsu outranked him, Vlenn was by far the most experienced member of the team. In the doctor’s experience, no one held any greater appreciation for the duty to protect indigenous peoples and cultures from outside influences that might irreparably change the course of their natural development. Given all that had happened—over the past several months, to say nothing of the past few minutes—there was no denying the expression of helplessness and frustration now visible in the Deltan’s features.

“What you did was misguided, but I know that it was without malice,” Flen said as he turned away from the window, and Apohatsu now saw the strain of the past months—his disease, coupled with the need to come to this place each day in order to carry out the duties of his office, knowing all the while that he was helpless to protect the civilization he had been elected to lead—etched firmly in his pallid features.

The first consul did have a point, Apohatsu knew. That Celadi had not known of the existence of Apohatsu and the rest of the team was fortunate, in that it obviously would have led to all manner of other questions regarding their presence here, to say nothing about inquiries into their knowledge of the pulsar and whether they might be able to do anything about it.

Waving toward the guards standing on either side of Celadi, Flen ordered, “Take him down to the emergency command center.” As the pair of security personnel moved to collect their charge, the first consul held up his free hand. “Wait.” Moving slowly but with a renewed purpose around the corner of his desk, he moved to stand before his assistant. “Celadi,” he said, his raspy voice sounding even more tired now, “your family will be brought to the shelter. You should be together when...” His voice faltering, he suppressed another cough. “You should be together.”

As the guards left with Celadi and Flen made his way back to his chair, Mino stepped closer to the first consul’s desk. “What happens now?”

“Now?” Flen repeated, lowering his withered frame into his seat. “As we speak, our police, military, and emergency first-response assets are being deployed toward quelling the mass unrest that is gripping the populace. I have already begun the steps to declare nationwide martial law in the hopes that such drastic, distasteful measures might afford us some degree of control, as fleeting a concept as that is rapidly becoming.”

“First Consul,” Apohatsu said, stepping toward the desk, “there is something you might wish to consider.”

His eyes widening in surprise, Flen asked, “And what might that be?”

“Talk to the people,” the doctor replied, his initial uncertainty at the idea fading with each word he spoke. “Tell them that the situation is not as certain as was first believed. The calculations support several conclusions. Tell them you really don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“You can’t be serious,” Schiapp said as she moved toward him. “What possible good can that do now?”

“Perhaps nothing at all,” Vlenn replied even before Apohatsu could open his mouth to speak. “However, there is a chance it will quell the panic, at least for a time.”

“You’re not suggesting I tell the people about you?” Flen asked.

Apohatsu shook his head. “Certainly not, First Consul. I merely advocate giving them some small piece of hope on which to cling. It could help for a short time, after which, either their prayers will have been answered, or . . . it simply won’t matter anymore.”

Reaching up to wipe his face, Flen indicated the door through which Celadi had been escorted with a nod of his head. “I can only imagine what might now be ensuing among the people if he had been privy to that information. Still, is it wise to alert the populace now? Considering that this plan that your people are putting into motion is fraught with uncertainty, we risk falsely elevating our people’s hopes, particularly at this late juncture.”

The allegation was veiled, but Apohatsu caught it nonetheless. “As I have told you before, First Consul, the technology being employed in this endeavor took a considerable amount of time to develop, and remains untried. Further, the people currently involved in its use are doing so at great risk to their own safety.”

Nodding at words he had heard before, Flen said, “We have discussed your directives against interfering in cultures that are not as advanced as yours, Doctor. For some time, I have wondered if that directive had any part in the length of time it took to arrive at a means of helping us.”

“I beg your pardon,” Vlenn said, the Deltan making no attempt to hide the disbelief in his voice. “Are you actually accusing our people of dragging their feet so as to somehow avoid rendering aid?”

It took a moment, but Flen eventually shook his head. “No, but trust me when I tell you that—should anyone survive the calamity about to befall our world—it will not be the last time such an accusation is raised.”

“With all due respect, First Consul,” Mino said, “I do not believe our friends are capable of merely standing by and watching our people die. Their actions to this point are obvious evidence of that.”

Flen cleared his throat. “Their laws would indicate that they have done precisely that, at least once.”

“We’re here now, aren’t we?” Schiapp said, her voice quivering as she fought to control her composure. “We’ve spent a year and a half here, immersed in your culture, watching your children grow, your world thrive.” Apohatsu looked to his friend and saw the tears welling in her eyes. Reaching up to wipe her

face, she drew herself straight, her jaw setting in that expression of determination the doctor had come to know so well. “And now we stand here, with you, waiting to see if your world can be saved.”

Something in the woman’s voice seemed to strike a chord in Flen. He studied her for several seconds before looking to Apohatsu. “Is that true, my friend? Do you stand with us and await our fate?”

Realizing what was being asked of him—and the inherent trust that hinged on his response—Nathan Apohatsu nodded.

“We stand with you, First Consul, until the end.”

## CHAPTER

### 7

Even if he had ready access to a laser scalpel, Kirk was certain he still could not cut through the tension blanketing the bridge as everyone on duty regarded the image now displayed on the main viewscreen.

“The situation is deteriorating down here, Captain,” said Nathan Apohatsu, looking out at Kirk and his bridge crew with tired, red-rimmed eyes. “You’ve already seen the reports of mass panic in many of the larger cities. Martial law has been declared, and a number of mass-scale evacuations are still under way.” Apohatsu sighed as he reached up to wipe away a sheen of perspiration on his forehead. “I don’t know where the hell they think they can go.”

Sitting in his customary place at the center of the bridge, Kirk replied, “Perhaps it has more to do with them wanting to just do something.” He offered a resigned shrug. “Anything to avoid sitting around and . . . waiting.” According to the reports he had reviewed, the captain also knew that those Payav who had been working in the three space stations orbiting Mestiko had been evacuated and returned home. The thirty-four people residing on the planet’s only lunar colony were a different story, however. Even if a vessel were available to carry them, given the insufficient warning, the colonists had no time to make the transit back to their home planet.

Kirk bristled at the current circumstances. Why had Payav leaders not taken steps to ensure those people were retrieved? While he understood the original decision to keep the approaching pulsar a secret from the general public, steps could still have been taken to ensure that the lunar colonists at least were with their families if and when the rogue object’s worst effects came to pass.

Well, it’s our job to make sure that doesn’t happen, right?

Leaning forward in his chair, Kirk said, “Doctor, there’s still time for us to return to the planet and have you beamed aboard.” He left the rest of his concern unvoiced.

Apohatsu knew full well the implications of what had not been said. With a small, accepting smile, the doctor shook his head. “If it’s all the same to you, we’d rather see this thing through with the friends we’ve made here.” Straightening his posture, he leaned closer to the visual pickup. “Good luck, Captain.”

“To all of us, Doctor. Kirk out.” The transmission ended and the image of Apohatsu was replaced with that of a starfield, with the pulsar depicted as an indistinct red blur at the center of the screen.

Kirk noted the new silence around him, the only sounds that of indicator tones from the surrounding workstations as well as voices piped through the intercom system as other departments aboard the ship

related normal status reports to the bridge. It was there that any similarities to just another mundane duty shift ended. He sensed anxiety in every person around him, with the notable exception of Spock, of course. The uncertainty was evidenced in the way his people went about their respective tasks—shoulders hunched as they sat at their stations, the movements of hands across consoles taut and efficient. There was no conversation, not even the normal exchange of duty-related chatter as the bridge crew saw to their various assignments.

Though Kirk's own duty at a time like this was to oversee the actions of those around him, such responsibility on occasion left him with nothing to do but sit and dwell too much on things that did not contribute to the accomplishment of the mission. When that occurred, he often felt envious of his subordinates, who at least could channel their apprehension and focus on their work.

Each of them, along with every other member of his crew, knew full well the importance of the coming moments, and that they were about to bear witness to either a tremendous act of salvation or one of immense devastation. What would the next hours bring? Would there be cause for celebration, or mourning?

With grim determination, Kirk forced away the troubling questions. Swiveling the command chair to his right, he looked to where Cameron now worked with Lieutenant Sulu at her station, coordinating the various aspects of the operation that was just now getting under way.

"Professor?" the captain prompted.

Looking up from the console, Cameron turned in her seat. "The probes are almost in range now, Captain. I'll be ready to deploy the deflector grid as soon as they've been maneuvered into their final positions." The professor's report was more a courtesy for the rest of the bridge crew than anything else, Kirk knew. Cameron had assumed authority over the mission, and the deployment of the probes as well as the positioning of the Enterprise all had been at her direction, and she would enable the massive deflector shield at the designated moment.

Despite his first impulse, Kirk forced himself not to ask again about the status of the shield network the probes would generate. He knew that Cameron and Chief Engineer Scott had spent a significant portion of the past several days examining the devices' shield generators, looking for ways to enhance their output and further protect them from the tenacious assault they would face as they moved closer to the pulsar.

Scott's last status report had been straightforward, if not unduly optimistic: He and his engineering staff had made all the modifications possible under the circumstances, enhancing the probes' shield output by several percentage points. Any further upgrades were simply beyond the physical limitations of the units themselves, and would require the replacement of key components not included among the Enterprise's stores of supplies. As it was, Scott already had performed several unorthodox adjustments to the components he did have on hand in order to reach the level of enhancement he had achieved. In the engineer's opinion, he had done all that was possible and even a few things that flew in the face of that.

The rest, Kirk figured, would have to be left for Fate to decide.

"Position report," he called out as he rose from his chair, stepping out of the command well and making his way to the science station.

Looking over his shoulder, Gary Mitchell replied, "We're holding steady with the pulsar two million kilometers off the port bow."

“Maintaining parallel speed,” Kelso added. The helmsman shook his head. “Never thought I’d fly a starship this slow except out of space dock.”

Kirk nodded. While the Enterprise’s current velocity was but a fraction of what the starship’s massive engines were capable of generating, he knew that speed was not the priority now. Professor Cameron had determined that due to the level of X-ray radiation being emitted by the pulsar, this was the maximum distance the ship could keep and still receive uncorrupted telemetry from the probes once the deflector grid was deployed and began its task of shunting the lethal radiation away from Mestiko.

Studying the sensor data being fed to him at the science station, Spock looked up from his hooded viewer. “Pulsar will reach intersection point with the planet in two minutes.”

“Probes are in position now,” Cameron called out a moment later. “Standing by to activate the deflector grid.”

“You are doing the right thing, child. I am glad you are staying where you are needed. ”

The voice in her ear soothed Raya elMora as she listened to her over the wireless headset, just as it had for as long as she could remember. “How is it, Elee, that you always know just what I need to hear?” Raya hoped that the concern she felt was not making itself apparent in her own voice as she talked.

It was a difficult conversation to hold, given the current circumstances. Sitting as she was in one of several dozen small, drab offices on the lowest of the two-level subterranean shelter, Raya could barely make out Elee’s words through the irregular static caused by the compromised audio signal. There also was the constant din of people moving and talking in the corridors and rooms beyond her makeshift office, the sounds generated by the hundreds of Payav who had been herded into this complex, one of four located beneath the Convocation grounds. The room was functional and afforded her some measure of privacy, but it hardly compared to her regular office, to say nothing of her home.

“I have had many years of practice, now, have I not?”

“You certainly have,” Raya replied. She had sought Elee’s words of comfort in the past for such personal hardships as adolescent heartbreaks, the difficulties of living alone while at university, and even after a few of her more strained political dealings had left her worn and frustrated. Today, though, made every personal drama she had experienced in her life seem trite by comparison, for today, Raya truly was unsure whether she might see a tomorrow.

Even though Larenda was located in the hemisphere of the planet that would be spared the initial and much more catastrophic effects of the Pulse, Raya knew from the reports Umeen had shown her that no one on Mestiko was safe. Eventually, the atmospheric and environmental damage inflicted on the planet would overcome everyone, and everything.

Or, would it?

According to the speech Raya had just watched as it was delivered by Flen etHamwora, leader not only of the Gelta nation but also the global Zamestaad Council, the dire predictions first given by the media regarding the Pulse’s potential effects were no longer being reported with such certainty. Instead, Gelta’s



first consul had offered the supposed conceit that there was no way to be certain as to just what would happen during or after the passing of the rogue object. Experts were forecasting severe weather events and possible high ultraviolet radiation surges as the worst consequences.

With that in mind, the citizenry had been warned to seek every opportunity for shelter, and scores of people had gathered at the Convocation complex. Many of them had come in search of safe haven from the riots and looting that still consumed many areas throughout the province. Others had come with a mind to continue their lawless behavior, only to find themselves confronting law enforcement officers and military units deployed to protect the Convocation complex as well as other important locations. While Raya could have taken the opportunity to return to her home province and wait out the event with her family, she and other Servants instead had realized that their presence among the people would serve a grander purpose, perhaps providing a calming influence.

Then why, Raya thought, am I letting myself be consumed with such dread?

“I am taking up too much of your time, young one,” Elee said. “You should be using this time to call home and not worry about the likes of me.” Despite the low-quality connection that was a consequence of the inadequate audio transmissions inside the shelters, Raya still heard the ever-present strength from her father’s mother, and it buoyed her despite the concerns for her family half a province away. She hoped that as the situation progressed—or worsened—she would find within herself the same composure that her beloved elor apparently was able to muster in the face of such uncertainty.

“Do not worry. I have already connected with everyone else. They have all moved to shelters. Will you be joining them?”

There was a pause before Elee replied, “I am too old to be sleeping on the floor of someone’s storm cellar, or on a makeshift bed alongside two hundred strangers. I will be fine here, child, in my own home.”

A beep echoed in her ear before an automated voice filled the connection. “This connection is required for official Convocation communications. Please terminate your connection immediately so that the frequency can be reallocated.”

Feeling a sudden surge of tears well in her eyes and realizing her voice would soon betray her fear, Raya cleared her throat. “I have to go now, Elee, but I will talk to you soon. Promise me you will take care of yourself.”

A burst of static that made her pull the headset from her ear was followed by the telltale tones signaling the connection’s termination. It was unusual for private connects to be so interrupted, but Raya knew these were extraordinary times. Feeling a tear begin to slide down her cheek, she stared at the now inoperative handset.

“I love you, Elee.”

Staring at the walls of the small office, which seemed to be closing in around her, Raya knew there was nothing to do now but wait.

Or, so she thought.

“Servant?”

Turning toward the voice, Raya looked into another pair of concerned eyes. This time, the worried gaze belonged to her trusted aide, Blee, who seemed obviously unable to mask any inner turmoil in her expression.

“What is it, Blee?” Raya asked.

“You have a connect on the Civil Security line,” the assistant replied. “It is Servant or Jurbes, and he pressed me to find you rather than having you connect back.”

Raya followed Blee out of her office and down the shelter’s narrow, dimly lit main corridor. The passageway seemed even more confined due to the press of people who mingled listlessly in small groups, and from whom Raya was sensing an escalating sense of dread and gloom, the same feelings of discomfort and worry she had detected in Blee. As they walked, Raya reached out to place a hand on the younger woman’s shoulder, hoping that it might offer even the slightest consolation. Her aide did not even turn her head to acknowledge the gesture.

At the far end of the corridor was a small, drab office, not unlike the one she had just left. Inside the room was an officious-looking young man, the sash he wore indicating his affiliation with Civil Security as he sat at a portable desk that seemed too tiny to support the large, bulky transceiver situated there. As soon as Raya stepped inside, the young man rose from his chair.

“This is a hard-wired connection among the Convocation complex buildings for emergency use,” the man said crisply.

“I am aware of the equipment’s function and purpose,” Raya said, hoping her smile might take some of the edge from the man’s perfunctory yet understandably nervous tone, “but we are in an emergency shelter. Does that not imply that any connects received over this equipment are related to why we are here?”

Now looking somewhat sheepish, the man nodded. “Of course, Servant. However, I have orders to keep traffic on this channel limited to an official nature.”

“I imagine that I would not be summoned by a senior Servant for anything less,” she said, still smiling as she took over the man’s seat at the station and leaning forward to talk into the slim microphone mounted on a pivoting arm. “Matthi? This is Raya.”

“There you are,” replied the tired-sounding but still recognizable voice from the transceiver’s speaker. “You no doubt are very busy over there, and I just wanted to make sure you were getting something to eat.” There was a pause before Matthi added, “Let me guess: That poor security officer is glaring at you right now.”

Raya turned to look over her shoulder and saw the young man displaying the very disdainful expression Matthi had predicted. She also caught the grin on Blee’s face, something Raya was pleased to see given the fog of uncertainty in which each of them found themselves. “Matthi, should I interpret this connect as you using your influence to access an emergency channel for personal use?”

“Absolutely,” the elder Servant answered. When he continued after a pause, the humor was gone from his voice. “Raya, the initial predictions about the atmospheric effects from the radiation may well be correct. Level 5 on the side of the planet that will see direct exposure.”

Raya felt a wave of dread wash over her. Coded classifications for the Pulse had been determined and

secretly distributed among select government officials during their preparations in order to facilitate a quick but ciphered system of passing information without spreading panic. With regard to intensity, Level 5 was the extreme end of the list, and represented a level of destruction from which few to no survivors were to be expected.

“What about everywhere else?” she asked, finally finding her voice.

“At least Level 4, but it is important to stress that there’s still some uncertainty. I just thought you should know. Keep your head about you as I know you can do, and I will talk to you when this is over.”

“Thank you, Matthi,” Raya said, feeling the same tightness in her throat as when she had spoken to Elee. “And I want to tell you that I—”

“You can tell me later,” Matthi replied, her longtime friend’s voice sounding so secure and confident to her. “We will talk soon.” Raya then heard a series of clicks from the speaker that signaled the end of the connection.

“Level 4, Servant?” asked the Civil Security officer. “What does that mean?”

“It means you should keep to your post,” Raya replied, certain that her expression must be undermining the effort she was making to stifle her grave sense of the situation. “You will be needed here.”

For what specifically, however, Raya could only imagine.

## CHAPTER

### 8

“Tactical plot on main viewer,” Kirk ordered, turning toward the forward screen in time to see the image displayed upon it change from that of the pulsar to a computer-generated schematic. It featured a pale yellow grid superimposed over a black background, with a bright yellow sphere—Mestiko’s sun—displayed in the screen’s lower left corner. Smaller circles depicted Mestiko itself as well as its six sister planets. Closer to the center of the screen, a stark blue line illustrated the course of the pulsar while a moving white arrow represented the *Enterprise* following its parallel course. Six smaller white dots corresponded to the positions of the unmanned probes, arrayed in a hexagonal formation between the pulsar and the general direction of Mestiko.

“Intersection point in ninety seconds,” Spock said. “Deflectors are holding steady. Mr. Scott’s modifications to our own shield generators are proving to be most effective.”

Nodding at the report, Kirk looked to see Cameron focused on one of the sensor display monitors at her station, the index finger of her right hand poised over a control button. The finger was moving up and down rhythmically, and Kirk realized she was tapping in time to the countdown.

Spock was just announcing the forty-five-second mark when the professor’s hand pressed the button. It was accompanied by a short, high-pitched tone.

“Deflector grid activating,” Cameron reported, and Kirk watched on the main viewer as a web of orange materialized amid the array of probes depicted on the screen. “Starting the clock: three hundred and fifty seconds...mark!”

Not even six minutes. That was the window of time that stood between Mestiko and survival or all but

total annihilation. It was how long the probes needed to provide their blanket of protective energy, erected between the pulsar and the endangered planet as both astral bodies made their way through the void.

“Intersection,” Spock called out a moment later. “Now.”

Though the interval that the pulsar’s deadly X-ray emissions would sweep across Mestiko was somewhat shorter, Cameron had calculated a margin for error both before and after the event. Kirk actually felt himself flinch as his first officer provided the report, an almost instinctive reaction for which the captain had no explanation. He was unsure as to what he might have expected once the critical moment arrived, but it was heralded by nothing more than those around him offering tentative glances to one another. Otherwise, the atmosphere of the bridge remained unchanged:

Tense.

“Shield status?” he asked.

His attention focused on the instruments he was monitoring with Professor Cameron, Sulu replied without looking away from his viewer, “Field generators are at maximum output, sir.”

“Shield’s already taking a hell of a beating,” Cameron added. “The enhancements we made are helping, but I don’t know if they’ll be enough.” She looked over to the chronometer that dominated one of the smaller display monitors at her station. “Five minutes, twelve seconds remaining.”

On the main viewer, the computer illustrated the collision of X-rays with the deflector grid as a series of rapid-fire blinking lines, too fast for normal eyes to follow. To Kirk, the display reminded him of training simulations he had studied at the Academy and periodically throughout his career. He had studied vicious, merciless conflicts between spacecraft of the Federation and Klingon Empire, and before that Earth and the Romulans, all reduced to basic, sanitized, computer-generated representations created for the purpose of facilitating the learning of starship combat tactics and strategy.

While Kirk appreciated such training aids for their value in honing those skills—the possession of which was an unfortunate necessity as humans and their allies ventured ever deeper into uncharted space and encountered those who did not take kindly to such visitations—part of him always had taken issue with the cold, antiseptic portrayal of such battles and the apparent disregard for the deaths of hundreds or even thousands of people on both sides of the engagements. He knew the programs held no such imprudent intentions, but it nevertheless was a reaction he always experienced, even if only for a moment.

As he regarded the image on the main viewer, Kirk realized he was feeling the same thing now. He could not help but wonder if, in years to come, Starfleet scientists would scrutinize and dissect the sensor records of this event. Would they analyze it in the interests of furthering science and knowledge with the same tenacity that soldiers studied past battles with an eye toward improving the way they waged war? How would Mestiko’s people, the fate of whom was still in question, factor into what those future students learned?

A sharp, piercing alarm signal echoed across the bridge, startling Kirk from his reverie. It took him an additional instant to realize that it was not any of the alert tones normally used aboard the Enterprise, but instead was something new, emanating from the station Cameron and Sulu currently occupied.

“What is that?” the captain asked as he moved toward them.

Without looking up from the console, Cameron replied, "We're picking up fluctuations in the deflector grid. One of the probes is showing strain in its field generator."

"Can we compensate?" Sulu asked, his brow furrowing in concern. "Redeploy the other probes into a new formation?"

Cameron shook her head. "The grid scheme is balanced for six probes working in tandem," she said as her fingers worked across the rows of controls, entering rapid-fire commands to the console. "Using five to cover the same area will weaken the overall strength of the shield."

"What about the Enterprise?" Kirk asked, feeling as he did so the eyes of the entire bridge crew turning in his direction as he voiced the question. "Can we channel more power to the malfunctioning probe? Stabilize it somehow?"

The professor turned to face him, pondering the questions for several seconds before replying, "It'd be dangerous. You'd have to position us with pinpoint precision to avoid direct exposure to the pulsar's emissions."

"And if we don't try?" the captain asked.

Sulu answered, "If the problems with the probe worsen, we could lose that portion of the shield, leaving a sizable area through which Mestiko would be exposed to the pulsar's X-rays."

That was all the information Kirk needed. So far as he was concerned, there was only one course of action open to him. "Feed the coordinates to the helm, Professor," he said as he stepped back down into the command well. "Mr. Kelso, stand by to alter course. Put all decks on the alert."

Casting a glance over his shoulder before setting to work assisting the helmsman, Mitchell said, "It's going to be a bumpy ride, Captain."

Kirk understood his friend's meaning, taking a moment to convey that concern to the rest of the crew via the ship's intercom system. Then he could only sit and observe as his officers worked to put into place a contingency plan that was being developed as they went. He listened to Sulu conversing with Scott down in engineering, crafting new protocols that would allow the transfer of power from the Enterprise to the troublesome probe's shield generator while at the same time preventing any compromise in the starship's own defenses.

"How much time until the pulsar passes the planet?" Kirk asked, trying to ignore the increasing tremble in the deck plates and the arms of his chair.

Cameron replied, "Three minutes, twenty-eight seconds."

Almost there, Kirk thought. It was simultaneously a hopeful and yet frustrating thought, given how the seconds seemed to be stretching into decades from where he sat. The ship was shaking now, the toll accumulating on the Enterprise's shields as they continued to combat the pulsar's gravitational effects.

"We're in position, Captain," Kelso called out from the helm.

Nodding at the report, the captain activated the intercom pickup affixed to the flexible arm on the right side of his chair. "Kirk to engineering. Scotty, start the power transfer."

There was a momentary pause before the chief engineer replied, "Transfer under way now."

From the science station, Spock reported, "The connection is not stable. It's being affected by the pulsar's emissions."

"Aye, I was afraid of that," came Scott's aggravated voice from the intercom. "Too much interference, Captain. I cannot recommend taking us any closer, though."

Kirk looked up to see Spock stepping down into the command well, moving to stand next to him. "Doing so is the only way to stabilize the connection, sir."

The captain nodded, not seeing any choice in the matter. Things only had to hold together for a minute, two at most. Surely the Enterprise, which already had performed admirably to this point, could take that limited amount of additional abuse? The people of Mestiko certainly deserved everything that could be done on their behalf, did they not?

Standing before the large, ovoid window that afforded a panoramic view of the night sky above Yabapmat, one hand absently fumbling with the universal translator he carried on his belt and concealed beneath the loose jacket he wore, Nathan Apohatsu realized that at this very moment, he had never felt quite as isolated in his entire life.

He was not actually alone, of course, given the three dozen beings occupying the room with him. Along with the rest of the first consul's staff, he, Vlenn, and Camila Schiapp had listened as the Gelta leader delivered what he believed was a hopeful speech, broadcast via satellite to almost the entire planet, after which a brief prayer service was conducted by the first consul's spiritual advisor. Now, the assemblage had begun to splinter into smaller groups, some huddled in corners while others moved to other rooms, but all of them awaiting the announcement that would call for them to descend into the storm shelter situated nearly a hundred meters below the ground floor of the capitol building. The chamber, recently stocked with foodstuffs and equipment intended to keep them alive following the pulsar's anticipated sweep of radiation, held little appeal for Apohatsu.

If the worst comes to pass, that place just prolongs the inevitable.

His sense of isolation, the Starfleet cultural specialist decided, almost certainly came from what he observed outside the window. The streets of the capital city, once bustling with activity only to be all but consumed by riotous looters and panic-stricken citizens as the global menace loomed, now were desolate. Broken glass, tattered papers, and other detritus littered the pavement. Buildings that once had housed merchants and services stood mostly as empty shells, smoke-streaked and savaged. Vehicles remained where they had been abandoned in the streets, gutted, wrecked, and overturned.

And amid the chaos, not one person could be seen. Everyone had either been corralled away by security forces or else had left of their own volition, fueled by terror or madness, to places unknown.

Apohatsu turned his gaze toward the sky, clear and starry, hoping against hope it would remain unchanged in the minutes to come. For several hours, by his own reckoning, he had pondered the sight, hoping and praying that deliverance from the pulsar's effects might come in the form of intervention by the daring plan being put into motion by the Enterprise. News of their success would not be coming by communications signal, not under the circumstances under which the starship currently was operating.

No, Apohatsu knew, the answer would come from the sky.

“Lloben na slu winneded, mos Naythun?”

While not understanding the meaning of the native tongue spoken to him, Apohatsu slipped from his reverie enough to recognize the feminine tone of the voice right away. Realizing that his absentminded toying with the translator on his belt must have turned off the device, he moved to reactivate it.

“I’m sorry, Mino,” he said, turning to the Payav woman who had walked up behind him. The dark circles beneath her icy blue eyes contrasted sharply with her pale skin, and her long neck seemed to bow a bit under the weight of her smooth head. “What did you say?”

“Do you see what you seek, Nathan?” Mino or Dresha repeated, herself now looking past the window up toward the night sky.

“Not at all,” he said, “and with any luck, I won’t.”

Mino nodded. “I did not know whether you would prefer the company of your own friends.”

Glancing over his shoulder, Apohatsu saw the other members of his cultural observation team, who like himself had shed their usual prosthetics and other disguising garb in order to be more relaxed in front of those very few Payav aware of their existence.

He located Vlenn in the far corner of the room, the Deltan sitting motionless with eyes closed in contemplative reflection. At one of the room’s two tables was Camila Schiapp, sitting with a pair of older Payav males whom he recognized as peers of Mino’s. The human woman appeared solemn-faced but still attempting to engage her companions in discussion of some sort.

“Not at all,” Apohatsu said, offering a small smile. “We’re all friends now, I should think.”

Pausing as if to consider his words for a moment, Mino asked, “May I confide in you, friend Nathan, as an observer of people?”

Apohatsu heard the hesitation in her voice. “Of course,” he said. “Now more than ever.”

The smile gracing Mino’s petite features was the first one he could remember seeing in weeks, if not longer, and he realized in that moment how much he had missed it. He found it somehow soothing, particularly given the current circumstances.

“One of the first consul’s administrators,” she began after hesitating again, “before he went down to the shelter area, asked if I might accompany him to another part of the building.” She regarded him for a few silent seconds before adding, “Alone.”

Despite his best efforts, the look on Mino’s face coupled with the sincere concern in her voice got the best of Apohatsu, and he found himself releasing an explosive laugh that echoed through the room. Mino’s frantic motions for him to be quiet only made things worse, and within seconds his continued laughter had drawn the attention of everyone around him. Most understandably were startled from their conversations or quiet thoughts, with Schiapp alone offering a puzzled smile in return.

The abrupt release of tension actually felt good, he decided; it was something he’d sorely needed, given the mounting stresses of the past months. Reaching out, he placed a comforting hand on the shoulder of

the woman who had become so dear a friend to him so far away from his native home.

“Stop that,” Mino demanded in a hushed voice, her white cheeks darkened as she blushed. “It was discomfoting, and a completely inappropriate request!”

“But so male,” Apohatsu said, grinning, “and actually pretty human, too.”

Finally seeing the humor in the situation, Mino returned the smile, though it was a small, tentative one born as much from embarrassment as amusement. After a moment, she said, “I have enjoyed your company these past seasons, but I do not believe I have ever thanked you for your friendship, Nathan. You have given me so much that I never thought I would experience in my life. This has been... a hopeful time.”

“For both of us,” Apohatsu replied.

Neither of them said anything for several minutes, both content to gaze at the stars above them. It was a calm, serene moment, one he would have been happy to share until the sun once more climbed above the horizon.

Then, he saw it.

A barely perceptible flash winking in the night, and Apohatsu felt a shiver down his spine. Was it a trick of light, perhaps an aftereffect of his blinking? He widened his eyes and stilled his breath, staring silently into the starry blackness.

“Nathan?” Mino asked.

The night sky flashed again, more brilliantly this time, like a ripple of sheet lightning across the skies of Earth. It happened again, quicker than before, and now he was sure he noted a steady glow coalescing out of the darkness, casting each star in its own aura among a wavering pattern of rich purples, eerie reds, and warm yellows.

Apohatsu sensed more people gathering at the window alongside him. He heard the gasps as some caught sight of what he was seeing, while others asked what the apparition might mean. As the colors and lights danced, not unlike a most intense show of Earthly aurora activity brought about by the harmless collisions of electrons in its upper atmosphere, Apohatsu’s sinking heart filled him with dread.

“It is happening, yes?” Mino asked.

“Not with a bang, but a whimper,” Apohatsu recited under his breath rather than answering the question, his eyes filling with not only tears but also the cascades of electric color he so much wanted to appreciate for their beauty rather than the portent they heralded.

Reaching for Mino, Nathan Apohatsu slid his hand into hers, squeezing it slightly and pulling her close to him, saying nothing as the colors grew more brilliant and chased the darkness from the sky.

## CHAPTER

### 9

“It’s failing!” Cameron called out. “The probe’s shield generator just gave out!” She uttered the report at the same time a new alert klaxon began wailing across the bridge and Kirk felt a renewed shaking in the



very structure of the ship around him. His stomach lurched as the deck shifted beneath his feet. To his right, Spock fell against the railing, and Kirk saw the science officer's legs dangle in midair as he gripped the red bannister. Kelso and Mitchell somehow managed to keep from being tossed out of their chairs. Then Kirk caught sight of another body being thrown about to his right and turned to see Cameron tossed from her seat and over the railing, landing heavily on her side as she slammed into the deck of the command well.

"Professor!" Kirk yelled as he threw himself from his chair to where Cameron lay in a crumpled heap, her right arm moving listlessly as she tried to pull herself to a sitting position. "Lie still," the captain said, kneeling beside her and noting her agonized grimace. His gaze was drawn to her right leg, bent unnaturally beneath her body. "Try not to move. We'll get medics up here as soon as we can."

Nodding, Cameron lay back on the deck, her eyes squeezed shut as she fought against the pain of her injuries. "The shield," she hissed between gritted teeth. "You have to move away from it, now!" Even as she spoke the words, Kirk felt the deck tremble beneath him once more.

"The pulsar's radiation," Spock reported, now back at his station. "Our shields will overload if we stay here."

"Helm!" Kirk shouted above the alarm, turning and pointing toward the main viewer. "Get us out of here!" As he gave the order, the captain's gaze locked on the image still displayed on the screen, the tactical diagram that had been updated by the Enterprise's sensors to depict the planet Mestiko, now awash in the partially deflected yet still potent X-ray emissions of the pulsar.

Oh God.

Then there was no time to ponder the misfortune of the ill-fated world as the astrogator console situated between Kelso and Mitchell exploded.

The sound was all but deafening as it enveloped the bridge and Kirk winced as he ducked, draping himself atop the injured Professor Cameron in a desperate attempt to protect her. Glass and sparks peppered his uniform and exposed skin, and he heard the sound of several heavy objects falling to the deck. He looked up as he sensed movement nearby and saw that Kelso and Mitchell had fallen from their upended chairs. Mitchell had rolled away from the still smoldering console, blood streaming from several small wounds on the left side of his face and neck.

"Lee!" the navigator yelled, ignoring his own injuries as he tried to cross the command well to where Kelso lay unconscious near the steps leading to the upper bridge deck. Mitchell only made it a few steps before stumbling over his overturned chair, saved from falling by Kirk as he pulled himself to his feet in time to catch him.

"Gary?" Kirk asked, his ears still ringing from the explosion as he pushed his wounded friend into the command chair. "Are you all right?" Though worried about Mitchell, and indeed the growing number of wounded people literally at his feet, the captain knew he could not focus on one person right now. The ship was still in immediate danger.

Intending to take the helm himself, Kirk turned around in time to find Lieutenant Sulu hunched over the console. Next to him, Alden had abandoned the communications console and taken up position at the navigator's station, a duty he often performed in relief of Mitchell while on the bridge.

"Engineering!" Sulu snapped as he pressed the intercom control on his console. "We need lateral

power!”

“We’re workin’ on it, bridge!” shouted Scott’s voice over the comm speaker.

Leaning over the helm console, Kirk asked, “Lieutenant, are you sure you can handle this?” He knew that the astrophysicist had been training in other departments—including starship operations—for the past several months as a way of fueling his seemingly unending desire to learn new things, but had no idea how far he had progressed in his studies.

Sulu nodded. “I’ve got it, sir.” He spoke without looking up, his fingers moving as though of their own volition over the helm console. Kirk looked from the station’s array of status indicators and lights to the image on the main viewscreen, which showed a computer-generated representation of the Enterprise beginning to arc away from the pulsar. Already he could feel the shaking in the deck plates ebbing as the ship put distance between itself and the rogue body.

“Nice work, Lieutenant,” he said, patting the younger man on the shoulder. “Notify sickbay that we need emergency medical teams up here on the double,” he ordered before turning to where Spock was now working at Cameron’s station. “Spock?” he asked, a single anguished word pushing past his lips.

The Vulcan turned from the console, his eyes hard and focused as he provided the cold, merciless facts. “The pulsar has moved past the point of intersection with Mestiko, Captain. While the compromised deflector grid was able to redirect 74.893 percent of the emitted X-rays, what was able to get through was still sufficient to cause significant damage to the planet.”

“Oh dear God,” Cameron said from where she still lay on the deck near Kirk’s chair. The captain could not help but notice that the professor’s voice seemed even weaker now than just a few moments earlier.

“What the hell does that mean?” Kirk asked. “Isn’t there something we can do?”

Drawing himself into a ramrod posture, his hands clasped behind his back, Spock locked eyes with Kirk. “The effects are quite unavoidable now, Captain.”

“You son of a bitch,” Kirk heard Mitchell say, and turned to see his friend still slumped in the command chair, holding a part of his tunic’s torn left sleeve to the wounds on the side of his head. “Do you hear what you’re saying? Every person on that planet could die, and we can’t do a damned thing to stop it!” There was no mistaking the dulled expression on the navigator’s face and the slurred speech. Mitchell was slipping into shock.

His mind still on the more immediate problems, Kirk turned to his first officer, certain he caught a hint of remorse in the Vulcan’s features, but it vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared. For a moment, the captain thought Spock might even offer an apology.

“Spock,” he said, forgetting all of that, “how long until the pulsar’s emissions hit the lunar colony?”

“Eight minutes, thirty-seven seconds, Captain,” the Vulcan replied.

There was still time! Looking over his shoulder toward the helm, Kirk ordered, “Sulu! Lay in a course for the colony. I don’t care what you have to do, but get us there with enough time to transport those people to the ship. Go!”

As he spoke the words, he saw the already stressed lieutenant turn to the task of carrying out his latest

orders. That accomplished, Kirk turned and knelt beside Professor Cameron. Tears welled up in her eyes and streamed down her face, though the captain knew she was not crying due to the pain she suffered.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” she whispered, her voice faint and barely audible.

Shaking his head, Kirk patted her on her shoulder. “You did everything you could, Professor. No one can blame you for anything.”

Even as he spoke the words, his imagination began to fill with visions of a world in flames, enveloped in chaos, death, and destruction; city streets running red with the blood of millions falling victim to the wrath of nature and its unrestrained fury. As he raced to save a small segment of Mestiko’s population, he wondered about the wounds being inflicted upon the planet itself. What would they find when the Enterprise returned there?

The flickering of the lights was the first indication to Raya that something was wrong, a suspicion only strengthened when the overhead illumination failed altogether and plunged her small office into total darkness.

Cries of surprise and fear echoed in the corridor beyond her door even as the lighting almost immediately returned, though Raya noted its lesser intensity now, telling her that the underground shelter’s primary power generation systems had been disrupted or compromised in some fashion.

Rising from her chair, Raya made her way into the corridor to find Blee weaving around other evacuees as she maneuvered up the passageway toward her. “What has happened?”

“The Pulse,” replied the young aide as she came closer. “It is beginning to affect power and communications systems. We just lost the news broadcasts.”

Raya knew that whatever her most nightmarish imaginings of how the planet might be ravaged by the effects of the rogue object, they would not compare to the images conjured by those now cut off from the rest of their world and forced to wonder just what was happening far above them.

As they approached one of the shelter’s larger common rooms, Raya caught sight of the larger, elliptical monitor suspended from the ceiling near one corner, which now displayed nothing more than colorless static. She knew that the shelter and its counterparts situated within the Convocation grounds were supported by power generators as well as communications and other equipment, which were shielded against electromagnetic interference such as that being inflicted by the Pulse—a consequence of preparations made long ago in paranoid anticipation of a global nuclear conflict which, thankfully, had never occurred. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the vast majority of those systems utilized by the populace at large.

All around the common room, Raya observed the reactions of those gathered there. Some impulsively shouted out questions and remarks to no one in particular, while others dissolved into tears and held tightly to a friend or family member.

And then she heard the rumbling, sounding much like the rising and ebbing of an approaching thunderstorm; a slow, throaty roll echoing through the building and bringing a moment of silence to the room. Then a second clap of thunder—as loud as the first—seemed to rock the flooring beneath Raya’s

feet.

“Everyone, go to your emergency stations now!” she called in a firm voice as people started to shriek in alarm. As the dulled yet still raucous sounds of furious thunder echoed through the thick walls of the underground shelter, other evacuees began heeding Raya’s call to action, echoing her command and passing it on to others beyond the common room.

As she moved into the corridor and made her way toward the communal dining area on this level of the shelter, Raya noticed Blee keeping pace with her rather than heading for her own emergency station. The young woman already had made her own decision to stay here rather than seek out her family, and Raya’s assent to that request made her feel implicitly responsible for her aide’s safety. It was a charge she intended to honor as best she could.

Another shock rocked the building and Raya felt herself stumble into Blee. Shrieks of fear filled the air and the lighting flickered as dust filtered from the overhead fixtures. Blee grabbed on to Raya and held her for a moment, until everyone realized that the shock to their surroundings had subsided.

“It is not safe here!” yelled a voice from the congregating throng of people, followed by a series of shouts and cries echoing throughout the corridor. Raya wrested herself from Blee’s clutches, dashing down the passageway and past several citizens toward the source of the commotion. Turning a corner, she found herself at a stairwell and watched in horror as a line of panic-filled Payav was trying to ascend it.

“What are you doing?” Raya called over the shouts ringing within the bare-walled, confining space, but to no avail. Instead, the crowd flowed upward—toward the exit leading to the surface. Certain that whatever circumstance lay outside was more dangerous than any injuries to be sustained within the shelter, Raya struggled to be heard among the fleeing refugees.

“Stay here!” she called back to Blee before dashing into the stairwell—practically buoyed along with the surging crowd—only to be greeted by acrid-smelling air and the deafening roar of thunderclap upon thunderclap. By the time she reached the door, several dozen Payav had already made their way outside, but as she stepped to the threshold she turned to face those people still behind her in the stairwell.

“You will die out there,” she pleaded, seeing the fear in the refugees’ wide-eyed, ashen faces. “Go back downstairs, please!”

The crowd lurched forward—forcing her outside.

Pushed aside as her fellow citizens emerged from the shelter’s entrance, Raya looked up to see that the light of the sun was almost scrubbed out by an orange-brown haze suspended in the sky, almost but not quite obscuring the line of storm clouds gathering on the horizon. Wind whipped at her clothing, and the stark white brightness of bolt after bolt of lightning illuminated the clouds, their surreal energy making her exposed skin tingle with their power. All around her, the Payav who had escaped the shelter’s confines were all but mesmerized by the scene, shouting and crying in fright as they beheld the hellish scene surrounding them.

Above that din, however, Raya heard a piercing, desperate cry, and looked about her to see a young girl, one who had been swept up in the exodus, not unlike herself, standing alone and abandoned as people rushed past her. Apparently not knowing what else to do, the girl could only stand frozen and scream in abject terror.

“Over here! Come over here!” Raya shouted as loudly as she could muster over the crowd and wind, prompting the girl to regain her senses and dash toward her. Raya greeted her with outstretched arms, though the girl seemed to cry even harder as she fell into the woman’s grasp. “You are safe now,” Raya said, hoping her words were more convincing to the child than they were to herself. “What is your name?”

The girl sputtered several unintelligible words between sobs before finally offering something Raya could understand. “Theena. Theena elMadej. I cannot find my parents!”

Raya held the girl more tightly as she cried. “We will find them, but first we have to go back inside. Come with—”

The words caught in her throat as another cacophonous blast of lightning pulled her attention toward the center of the Convocation courtyard, where she now saw fire engulfing the reverednoggik trees, flames licking at their trunks and reaching up to consume the entire canopy. Her eyes welled up with tears yet again as the living symbols of her people burned.

Forcing her gaze from the distressing sight as she gripped young Theena’s hand and guided her back to the shelter, Raya could only think of the dying trees as nothing more than a dreadful omen of what was to come.

## CHAPTER

### 10

Poured into a squat, octagonal-shaped glass with a thick base, the Saurian brandy sat untouched atop Kirk’s desk. Though he had come to his quarters for a short reprieve from the burdens of command and the current situation with the full intention of drinking from his bottle of preferred spirits, he now found he had no taste for the liquor.

Instead he merely stared at it, as though by some miracle it might actually provide him with the answers he sought.

To his left, perched on the edge of his desk, his computer terminal continued to display the latest status reports on the catastrophe currently enveloping Mestiko. While new information was still hard to come by from the planet itself, theEnterprise’s sensors were performing an admirable job of conveying the simple, harsh reality.

Mestiko was dying.

It would take time, Kirk knew, as he stared at the viewer and beheld the image of the wounded planet before him. He watched with tired eyes and a heavy heart at the process that already was well under way as the once serene planet descended into what was fast becoming a stark vision of hell. A veil of sickly brown haze roiled across the sky, all but covering the entire hemisphere currently visible to him. Thick storm clouds crossed the central region of the largest continent, the dark sky broken only by frequent discharges of lightning.

“Sensors are registering spikes in ultraviolet radiation across the planet,” reported the voice of Spock as the image on the viewer shifted to depict the first officer at his station on the bridge. “Average surface temperatures have increased twenty-six degrees over the past two-point-four hours. Thunderstorms and tornadoes are still active across the three largest continents as well as flash flooding in many low-lying regions. Two hurricanes have formed, each in different oceans. Average sustained wind velocities are at

one hundred kilometers per hour and rising.”

“Any word from Dr. Apohatsu or his team?” Kirk asked, running a towel through his hair to dry it after the short but much-needed shower he had taken—part of Dr. Piper’s prescription of rest, recovery, and a meal after the captain had spent nearly three complete duty shifts on the bridge observing the unfolding situation on the planet.

The image on the viewer shifted again, this time to display Lieutenant Alden. “No, sir, nothing. I’m not picking up their transponder signal or any of their individual communicators.”

It was as Kirk had expected, of course. The nation of Gelta, where Nathan Apohatsu and his team had made their home for more than a year, had been in the hemisphere facing directly toward the pulsar. When the drones’ shield grid was compromised, that portion of the planet was subjected to the full brunt of those X-ray emissions not deflected by what remained of the shield. The entire continent was among those places hardest hit, where the bulk of the casualties would be recorded.

That included Dr. Apohatsu and his team, who had upheld their pledge to remain with their Payav friends until the end.

As for the rest of the planet? The pulsar’s X-ray emissions had only washed across its surface for less than two minutes, but the duration and intensity of the radiation still had been enough to cause damage on a global scale. In addition to the immediate effects on the atmosphere, the lingering, cumulative consequences would continue to plague Mestiko for generations.

And it’s our fault.

The thought echoed in Kirk’s mind, ate at his gut, had tortured him from the moment he had first heard the reports of the shield grid failing. Wallowing in the nearly overpowering feelings of guilt was tempting, but he could ill afford such selfish indulgences now.

“I am picking up a few scattered broadcasts, sir,” Alden continued. “Probably from military-grade equipment hardened against electromagnetic pulses. The signals are fairly weak and have hardly any range, though. They’re probably operating from batteries and using small antennae, but somebody is talking down there.”

Kirk nodded at the report as he finished dressing. News from the surface would be sketchy at best for quite some time, in large part due to the damage inflicted upon any unshielded electronics by electromagnetic disruption. Adding to that issue was the loss of dozens of communications satellites that had fallen victim to the pulsar’s radiation and already were beginning to drop from their orbits. While it was disheartening to observe the calamity currently gripping the planet, it also was encouraging to hear that survivors already were reaching out and looking for others.

“Stay on that, Lieutenant,” Kirk said after a moment as he smoothed wrinkles from his newly donned uniform tunic. “Any information you can glean will be helpful to the rescue ships when they get here.” He was about to ask for Spock again when he heard his door chime. “Come.”

The door to his quarters slid aside to reveal Gary Mitchell, leaning against one side of the threshold with his arms folded across his chest. A white rectangular dressing was affixed to the left side of his neck, along with a somewhat smaller bandage placed above his eyebrow. Otherwise, he appeared as fit as ever.

“Probably a bad time to ask if you’re up for a game of racquetball,” the navigator said, his expression somber.

Kirk took the comment in what he knew was the intended spirit, releasing a tired chuckle. His friend’s presence already was having a calming effect, and he could feel the tension in his muscles easing, if only a small bit.

Entering the room without invitation, Mitchell made his way to the chair on the other side of Kirk’s desk and took a seat. “I know that look,” he said, reaching for the unmolested glass of brandy and taking a swallow. “You’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, Jim. One world in particular, at any rate.”

Kirk reached for the bottle of brandy on the shelf behind him. “If you read more poetry,” he said as he poured himself a new glass of the liquor, “you’d know how truly bad that sounded just now.”

“You know I never was one for that sort of thing,” the navigator replied before taking another sip from his own drink, “but we’re not talking about me, are we?” Setting the glass back down on the desk, Mitchell turned to regard his friend. “Tell me you’re not hell-bent on blaming yourself for what’s happening down there.”

Though he released an exasperated sigh, Kirk said nothing in reply and instead sipped from his brandy. While he was frustrated about a great many things at this particular moment, adding to that level of his strain was his knowledge that Mitchell was right. Of course he blamed himself. Who else was there? The actions of everyone and everything under his supervision were his responsibility, regardless of the outcome. While he never would have considered taking credit for the work of Professor Cameron and those members of his crew who had assisted her had everything gone as planned, the failure of the operation could only be laid at his feet. That was the price of command, the cost of obtaining and keeping the trust of those who swore oaths to follow and obey individuals placed into positions of leadership. It also was a philosophy in which Kirk had believed his entire adult life, for which he had spent his career training and preparing to undertake.

“So,” Mitchell said after a moment, making a show of tapping his now-empty glass on the desktop, “what happens now?”

Pausing long enough to refill his friend’s glass from the bottle, Kirk replied, “Alden and his staff are continuing to monitor whatever broadcasts they can pick up from the surface. There are survivors, lots of them. That’s good news, at least.”

At this moment, Dr. Piper and his medical team were seeing to the needs of the Payav, rescued almost without time to spare from the doomed lunar colony. Guiding the Enterprise as though he had been doing it all his life, Sulu had maneuvered the starship into position above the moon and given transporter crews just enough time to lock on to and beam up all thirty-four colonists before moving the vessel out of danger as the pulsar’s X-ray emissions once again found their deadly mark. Since then, the colonists had been sequestered in the Enterprise’s main shuttlebay, where makeshift sleeping, dining, and hygiene arrangements had been made based on the information about the Payav provided by the late Dr. Apohatsu and his team.

In addition to identifying and treating any medical needs, which thankfully were few, Kirk also had assigned sociology and xenobiology personnel to handle what had become a touchy first contact scenario. The early reports were what he had expected, with the Payav colonists reacting at first with fear and uncertainty to their new surroundings, followed by shock at what was happening to their home world

as well as at being introduced to beings from an intelligent species that was not their own. Kirk at first thought that he should go down there, introduce himself and perhaps try to explain the situation, but common sense had quickly prevailed. He had qualified, experienced members of his crew seeing to those needs, and they would tell him when the time was right for a formal visit by the ship's captain.

Until then, all Kirk could do was sit, watch, and wait.

Not that I've ever been any good at that sort of thing.

Sighing, the captain took a pull from his glass before continuing, "Starfleet's mobilizing ships, supplies, and personnel to deliver aid. Specialists are being brought in to assess the long-term damage to the planet." On top of everything the Payav had faced, they also would have to cope with the realization that they were not alone in the universe, and that some of those other inhabitants were coming to their aid. Sociology and xenobiology experts would be required on site as well. As first contacts went, Kirk figured this one probably would end up ranking among the most heartrending such events ever recorded.

Shaking his head, he added, "These people are in a bad way, Gary. It'll take weeks just to assess the extent of the damage, and decades to complete the sort of terraforming efforts the scientists are talking about back at Starfleet Command." Reviewing the unremitting flow of reports on the scope of the tragedy, only served to hammer home the magnitude of what had been inflicted upon the people of Mestiko, to say nothing of the very real possibility that those who had survived to this point might well be facing a long, slow death in the grips of the savagely and perhaps even mortally wounded planet.

Scotty was right. The bitter musing taunted him. Those who died probably were the lucky ones .

The door chime sounded again, and Kirk looked up, surprised. "Is the intercom broken or something?" he asked. "Come."

When the door opened this time, it was to admit Dr. Piper. "Am I disturbing you, Captain?" he asked, his expression one of concern.

"Not at all, Doctor," Mitchell said, rising from his seat. "I promised Kelso I'd look in on him before I turned in for the night. How's he doing?"

Piper nodded. "He'll have a headache for another day or so, but otherwise I think he's going to be fine." Looking to Kirk, he added, "I was planning to discharge him from sickbay tomorrow, sir."

"Probably not a bad idea," Mitchell said. "He's going to want to get back on the job pretty quick, before Sulu sneaks it out from under him." Offering his good-byes to Piper and Kirk by way of a mock salute, the navigator then disappeared through the door and out into the corridor.

"Have a seat, Mark," Kirk said, waving the physician toward the chair Mitchell had vacated. Holding up the bottle of brandy, which he noted was now missing a third of its contents, he asked, "Care for a drink?"

"Best offer I've had all day," the doctor said as he all but dropped into the seat. "Professor Cameron suffered a broken leg and hip. I've taken care of that, but she'll be off her feet for the next few days while the bones knit. Otherwise, she's fine, physically. I can't say as much for her emotional state, of course."

Kirk figured as much, just as he suspected the professor was suffering at least the same level of remorse and frustration that he currently was facing. Rising from his chair, he began hunting for a clean glass,



noting for the first time as he did so that Piper was carrying a data slate, which he laid atop the desk. "What's that?" he asked as he poured the doctor a drink.

"My preliminary reports for Starfleet Command," Piper replied as he took the proffered glass from Kirk. "From a medical standpoint, all of the colonists are fine, physically speaking. Their mental state is something that may be a bit more tricky to gauge, at least right away. According to Lieutenant Lindstrom from the sociology department, the Payav aren't quite sure what to make of us just yet. They don't know whether to consider us saviors or murderers."

"Something tells me the answer to that question will be a long time coming," Kirk replied. "What about your report on what's happening down on the planet?"

Piper sighed. "It's mind-boggling, trying to put it into words." He paused, taking a long pull from his drink. "It's going to take a lot of resources to treat the various maladies these people are going to suffer, Captain, in the short and long term. Melanomas and other cancers, respiratory ailments, you name it, these people are going to be dealing with it, and future generations are going to have a hard time of it, too."

"Still want to retire?" Kirk asked.

Piper did not miss a beat. "Now more than ever," he said before sipping again from his brandy. "I thought I'd seen a lot in my time, but this is a whole new level." Shaking his head, he added, "As much as I'm ashamed to admit it, Captain, I just don't have the stomach for this kind of thing anymore."

Kirk said nothing for a moment, instead regarding the doctor in silence. Piper, in his late sixties, appeared to have aged another decade in just the past few days. Deep frown and worry lines creased his forehead and his jowls, the wrinkles and puffiness around his eyes seemed more pronounced than even was normal for him. When the doctor said nothing else for nearly a minute, choosing instead to sit and sip his drink, Kirk could tell that other issues were weighing on the man.

"Something else on your mind, Mark?" he prompted. Though he respected the physician not only as a member of his crew but also for the long, distinguished service he had given to Starfleet, he could not honestly think of Piper as a close friend or confidant, or rely on his counsel to the same degree he did Gary Mitchell's. He figured the difference in their ages kept the doctor from considering him in similar fashion, as well.

He should have known better.

"Actually," Piper finally said, "I'm worried about you, Jim."

Kirk could not help his surprise. Since arriving aboard the Enterprise, Piper had never once referred to him in anything less than a formal manner. "How so?"

"You're beating yourself up about what's happening down on Mestiko. You figure it's your fault, and that it should be you who falls on your sword."

Shrugging, Kirk absently spun his empty glass atop the desk's smooth surface. "That's what captains do, Mark. It's part of the job."

"A lot of the time, sure," Piper replied. "Ordinarily, I'd agree with you, but not this time." Leaning forward until his left arm rested on the desk, the doctor locked eyes with Kirk. "You haven't been a

captain that long, but you're no untried rookie, either. Thing is, you won't last long as a captain if you don't learn to accept that, every so often, you're going to get the short end of the stick."

"Millions of people are dead, Doctor," Kirk snapped, feeling his jaw tighten. "There's no telling how many more will die. That's not the short end of the stick. It's an obscene failure."

"And that's what I call bullshit," Piper countered, his own voice rising a notch now. "You didn't make any kind of mistake here, Captain. There was no failure to act or foresee or respond in the correct manner. The technical solution Professor Cameron developed was the best that could be expected, considering that no one in the history of...hell, I don't know...anything...has ever tried to do what we attempted here. It was more than anyone could predict."

Kirk heard nothing he had not already considered, either on his own or via the reports he had reviewed as submitted by Spock and Sulu. "Your point, Doctor?"

Reaching for the brandy bottle, Piper poured himself a new glass. "My point, Captain, is that your only other option was to stand by, do nothing, and watch a planet's entire population die." He paused to take a drink, before pointing the glass in Kirk's direction. "Now, you and I haven't known each other very long, but I'm pretty sure you're not the type of captain who's going to stand around and do nothing, not while any other kind of choice is available. Am I wrong?"

"No," Kirk replied, feeling his teeth grind together. "You're not wrong."

Piper nodded. "And since we're on the subject, seems to me I recall you not having a lot of say in the matter, anyway, so I don't think you're entitled to blame yourself for decisions you didn't make in the first place."

"Starfleet sent the Enterprise," Kirk said, slapping the desk. "That made it my responsibility."

"And you can carry that around with you if you want," Piper snapped, "but the simple fact is that you did everything that was asked of you, everything that could be asked of you. There are people down there we can help because of that, rather than arranging funerals for an entire world."

Forcing his rising temper down a notch, Kirk cleared his throat. Once he was convinced he could speak without verbally cutting off the doctor's head, he even offered the hint of a smile as he asked, "Is this your way of telling me to look on the bright side?"

"Something like that," Piper replied. "Fate dealt these people a hell of a blow, Jim. It's up to us...no, it's up to you...to help them forge something better from what they've been given."

Kirk released a sigh mixed from equal parts fatigue and acceptance. While it might be easier to dwell on what had happened—or what might have been—he knew Piper was right. If there was to be any helping the people of Mestiko, that effort only could begin by looking to the future.

The desk intercom blared to life with its melodic whistle. Reaching for the desktop terminal, the captain opened the frequency. "Kirk here."

"Alden here, sir," replied the voice of the communications officer. "We're picking up some new broadcasts from the surface, apparently from the surviving elements of their global security council. You need to hear this, Captain."

Frowning at the report, Kirk searched his tired memory for the name used by the indigenous population for the international body to which Alden referred, but his brain would not cooperate. Nevertheless, instinct told him he was not going to like what he was about to hear. Exchanging a worried look with Piper, the captain said, "Send it down here, Lieutenant."

There was a delay as the communications officer made the proper connections, after which Kirk and Piper found themselves listening to the still in-progress broadcast being delivered by an unidentified Payav woman, and translated by the Enterprise's computer.

"—ful for our deliverance from this great tragedy, which has taken so many of our loved ones from us. It will be a struggle, but from this day forward we must strive to ensure that the gift of survival bestowed upon us is not wasted. To do so, we must recognize that the visitors from the stars who have been watching our planet for these many seasons acted in our best interests, who in fact took steps to save our world from total annihilation, and hope that they are as willing to assist us with our recovery."

"Uh-oh," Piper said.

Listening to the speech, Kirk heard the fatigue as well as the resolve behind the words. This was a strong woman, he decided, someone people could look to for guidance and compassion, particularly in the days ahead. Was she an established leader, or simply a person of such strength and character who had seen the need for someone, anyone, to step into the void created by the disaster and lay a firm hand on the tiller?

"Something better," Kirk said after a moment, echoing the doctor's earlier comments. Closing his eyes, he reached up to rub the bridge of his nose, listening to the mesmerizing woman as she continued to speak, offering hope and possibilities to a world all but enveloped by darkness and despair.

Maybe there's hope for us, as well.

## CHAPTER

11

"I never thought I would get to see my world from space," Raya elMora said from where she stood at the front of the Enterprise's bridge, staring at the main viewer.

Standing next to her, Kirk recognized the expression on the Payav woman's face as one of almost childlike wonder. He imagined he understood at least some of what she was feeling now, as to this day he still recalled his first time looking upon Earth from the observation port of a shuttle on its way to the orbital docking facility holding his father's ship.

"As a youth I used to daydream about it," Raya continued after a moment. "Myelor used to tell me to get my head out of the clouds and mind my studies." Kirk watched the woman's expression falter to one of resignation, even defeat. "It was always so beautiful in my dreams."

On the screen, Mestiko seemed to turn as the Enterprise continued its orbit, providing a sobering, bleak image of the wounded planet. Instead of the brilliant blues of its oceans and the rich, vibrant colors saturating its landmasses, everything was shrouded and dulled by the thick brown haze permeating the atmosphere.

"It can be beautiful again." Though he delivered the words with what he considered to be a confident, authoritative demeanor, one he had spent his entire career developing in anticipation of one day

ascending to the position of starship command, Kirk could not help but think that the belief he was expressing seemed to ring hollow.

Turning away from the viewscreen, Raya regarded him with narrowed eyes. “Forgive me if I find that hard to believe, Captain. From what I’m being told, the environmental damage inflicted upon my world is beyond measure.”

She was not far from the truth, Kirk knew, at least according to the resources currently available to her. Even with the Enterprise’s sensors at his disposal, it had taken nearly two days to assess the extent of the immediate impact of the pulsar’s passing. Though casualty figures were still being accumulated, projections were rising well into the order of hundreds of millions already dead. As many more were predicted to die from the direct effects of ultraviolet radiation poisoning and cardiovascular ailments brought on by the unforgiving pollution now permeating the atmosphere. There also were the ravages of persistent, unforgiving severe weather to consider—thunder and electrical storms, flooding, mudslides, tornadoes, hurricanes—which already had taken a tremendous toll in the days following the pulsar’s passing.

With more than half of Mestiko having suffered the worst effects of the pulsar, the surviving elements of planetary governments devastated by the disaster had been struggling to deploy emergency response assets and procedures. Primary energy production facilities across the planet were offline, and already stressed backup services were being further taxed by the demands of ongoing rescue and aid efforts. Kirk knew that such measures were temporary at best and would require bolstering in order to continue operating even in the short term.

In the long term, the measures currently being employed were woefully inadequate, and would do nothing to stave off the doom still faced by the planet. Kirk knew from the reports he had been receiving from Spock and Professor Cameron that the worst was still to come. Continuously rising nitrogen oxide levels in the atmosphere meant less sunlight making its way through to warm the planet. Further, if left unchecked, the ultraviolet radiation eventually would be responsible for killing off all plant and animal life. Along with the atmosphere’s depleted oxygen content, and Mestiko would devolve into a frozen, uninhabitable rock.

Unless we do something.

After a moment, Raya’s pale features softened, and Kirk even thought he caught a twinkle in her radiant blue eyes as she offered a small smile. “I apologize if I sound harsh, Captain. As you might imagine, this is more than a bit overwhelming for me.” She paused, casting a glance toward the deck. “For all of us, and I do not just mean the calamity that has befallen my people.” Looking around the bridge, exchanging glances with the members of Kirk’s crew, she added, “Learning that you are not alone in the universe is something of a trying experience, as well.”

“No apologies needed, Raya,” Kirk replied, almost faltering as he remembered at the last moment that the Payav woman had stated a preference not to be addressed by any specific honorific in keeping with her position of leadership. It might have been modesty, though the captain suspected that practicality was a more likely explanation given the hasty circumstances under which Raya had assumed her current role. “I know it’s a lot to take in all at once, and while I can’t claim to understand what you must be feeling right now, I hope you believe me when I say I want to help you in any way I can.”

Among the casualties suffered by the people of Mestiko were many members of national and provincial governments across the planet. Chief among the losses were several heads of state who, in addition to leading their own countries, had also served on the Zamestaad, the planetary association founded out of

circumstances similar to those that facilitated the creation of both the League of Nations and the United Nations on Earth in the twentieth century. Whereas the Zamestaad originally had been formed with the stated goal of fostering communal peace and security, its hastily created replacement now carried the simple yet daunting task of trying to lead their people from the ashes of despair and perhaps toward whatever fleeting remnants of hope might still remain to those who had survived worldwide catastrophe.

Turning to Kirk once more, Raya did not say anything, but instead seemed to study his face as though attempting to gauge the sincerity of his words. After a moment, she said, "I do want to believe you." Nodding in the direction of the viewscreen, she added, "While many, myself included, recognize and appreciate your attempts to help us, the general consensus is to blame you for our plight."

Despite the guilt he had been harboring since the moment the deflector grid failed and sentenced Mestiko to its tortured fate, Kirk still found himself unprepared for the stark allegation. "It's an understandable sentiment."

"Perhaps for those who do not know better," Raya countered, "but not for those with access to more comprehensive information." Looking to the viewscreen and its image of her world once more, she said, "Embracing your people while we come to terms with what has happened will take much time, and it will present a formidable challenge. But as I have already told the Zamestaad, were it not for your efforts, we would not be here to undertake that challenge in the first place."

For the first time since the pulsar had inflicted destruction upon Mestiko, Kirk felt the initial faint glimmer of hope. "I only hope that more people come to feel as you do."

"Several members of the Zamestaad would not even agree to meet with you," the Payav woman replied. "Much of that is fueled by fear at the prospect of facing beings from another world, of course, but my people are very hurt, and very angry. I am here because I see the necessity of meeting with you given your pledge to render assistance." She smiled once more. "I must also admit to a bit of selfishness. The opportunity to visit a spacecraft from another world was too precious an opportunity to ignore."

"I'm only happy you agreed to transport up here to meet with me," Kirk replied. "I wanted you to see firsthand everything we're trying to do." Motioning her to accompany him around the bridge's upper deck, the captain led Raya to the communications station. "Mr. Alden, can you show our guest what you've been picking up in the way of audio broadcasts?"

The young lieutenant looked up from his console and nodded. "Of course, sir." To Raya, he said, "We've been monitoring various low-level frequencies since after the incident. There are numerous transmission points scattered across the planet—pockets of survivors trying to make contact with one another. We're thinking most of these broadcasts are coming from large underground structures, probably shelters similar to yours, with equipment designed to be protected against effects such as those inflicted by the pulsar." Looking to Kirk, he added, "One group in particular seems to be having a great deal of success, making contact with people at twenty-three separate locations." Alden pointed to one of the status display monitors at his station. "Their equipment is definitely more powerful than most others I'm picking up."

He reached out and tapped a sequence of colored buttons, which resulted in a burst of static from his console's intercom speaker followed by a faint but unmistakable male voice saying, "Praise be to our god for your joining us in the aftermath of the cleansing. Blessed be the mar-Atyya!"

"Interesting," Raya said, and Kirk noted the cloud that seemed to darken her ashen features, if only for a moment.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

Shaking her head, the Payav woman replied, “No, not really. What we are hearing is the broadcast from a religious sect known as the mar-Atyya. I do not pretend to understand the various tenets of their chosen faith, but I seem to recall that according to their beliefs, this event was foretold—in a manner of speaking, of course.” Pausing for a moment, she added, “It seems they were right, and were prepared, if I understand what you were saying about their shelters and equipment. I wonder how they will fare in the times to come.”

“As well as anyone else on your planet,” Kirk replied. “At least, that’s our hope.”

Raya said, “I and others have urged our peers to accept your offers of assistance in order to best serve the immediate needs of the people in our time of crisis. There has been much resistance to that idea. Several Zamestaad councillors are worried about how far they may have to subjugate themselves to you.”

While he had expected such concerns to be voiced, Kirk nevertheless found himself swallowing a sudden lump in his throat when confronted with the issue. “Under no circumstances will that happen, Raya. Your world is yours, and always will be.”

“I want to trust you, Captain,” she replied after a moment. “I can sense your commitment to helping us...and perhaps even a bit of remorse as well. I do not wish to sound ungrateful, but such trust must be earned. Only time will allow us to see whether that can happen.”

Kirk knew from the reports he had received that Raya elMora had found herself thrust into the position of leading her province simply as a consequence of being the highest-ranking individual of her people’s government to live through the disaster. Only then had she been told, by surviving members of the original Zamestaad, about the Enterprise and the team from the Federation that had been working in secret with trusted Payav science and government leaders. While those original council members held seniority, of course, the captain’s instincts told him that this woman was no fool, and that she soon would become a significant voice in the renewed body that would oversee the rebuilding of Mestiko.

“Captain.”

Turning toward the voice, Kirk saw Spock standing behind him. The captain could not be certain, but he thought he detected the first hints of fatigue finally beginning to show through the Vulcan’s stoic countenance. Kirk knew that his first officer had been working without respite since the disaster, overseeing the monitoring of its aftermath and coordinating not only the Enterprise’s limited ability to render aid but also status reports to Starfleet Command in order to facilitate its deployment of relief assets and personnel from throughout the Federation.

“Yes, Mr. Spock?” Kirk asked.

“We have received an update from Starfleet Command,” the Vulcan replied. “They inform us that a flotilla of medical and colony support ships is en route at high warp and should be here within the week. Other ships and supplies are being dispatched as well. We can expect a steady stream of support vessels, supplies, and personnel for the foreseeable future, sir.”

“Those supplies will alleviate much suffering,” Raya said, “and will help build this trust we both want. Let us hope that such gestures do not become too little, too late.”

The statement was not delivered in an accusatory fashion, but Kirk felt the sting of the words just the same, and he could not help but feel that such a charge was not misplaced. Could the Federation have been better prepared to deliver the much-needed assistance in a more timely fashion? Should it not have anticipated that the pulsar's effects would only be mitigated, rather than either being simply diverted altogether or allowed to wash unimpeded over the surface of the planet?

Enough.

Kirk pushed away the irritating, defeatist thoughts. Even now, the greatest minds in the Federation were mobilizing, all of them driven by the single goal of devising a solution to the planet's staggering environmental issues. Leading terraforming experts already were hard at work studying the issue and contemplating the best course of action in the shortest possible time, knowing full well the number of lives hinging on what they did or failed to do. From her bed in sickbay and much to Dr. Piper's vexation, Professor Cameron had demanded to be included in such efforts, using a computer interface to remain in constant contact with the special team that had been formed at Starfleet Command on Earth. Should whatever efforts devised for aiding Mestiko fail, Kirk was confident that it would not be for lack of trying.

Even if there was precious little he himself could do here today, about anything.

Well, there is one thing.

"Raya," he said after a moment, "I know this won't sound like much right now, but you have my word that my people will do everything they can for Mestiko. The Federation's greatest minds will work tirelessly to heal your world. They'll do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, to see that Mestiko is made whole again."

Looking to him once more, Raya locked eyes with his, and Kirk could sense that she was measuring his words against whatever it was she saw in his face.

"You seem determined, Captain," she said after a moment, "and I admire your passion, but are you in a position to make such pledges, no matter how sincere they may be?" Nodding, she let her question go unanswered. "Nevertheless, I appreciate your convictions."

"My convictions are all you need," Kirk countered, feeling his confidence beginning to return, if only to the slightest degree. "Your people deserve every chance at returning to the life that was taken from them. It's the least we...the least that I...can do."

Despite his vow and even as he gazed once more at the viewscreen and the tarnished, aggrieved world displayed upon it, Kirk could not deny that accomplishing what he had promised would be a struggle, to say the least. The assistance Mestiko required could conceivably take decades to render, if not longer. While he was certain the Federation would provide that help without reservation, was it truly possible to repair the harm done to these people—both by nature and by the actions of those who many on the planet believed should have been friends as well as benefactors and even saviors?

Surely some revelation is at hand?

James Kirk knew that only time and effort would provide that answer.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DAYTON WARD has been a fan of *Star Trek* since conception (his, not the show's). His professional writing career began with stories selected for each of Pocket Books' first three *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* anthologies. In addition to his various writing projects with Kevin Dilmore, Dayton is the author of the *Star Trek* novel *In the Name of Honor* and the science fiction novels *The Last World War* and *The Genesis Protocol*, as well as short stories that have appeared in *Kansas City Voices* magazine and the *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits*. Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife, Michi, Dayton is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Visit him on the web at <http://www.daytonward.com>.

For more than eight years, KEVIN DILMORE was a contributing writer to *Star Trek Communicator*, penning news stories and personality profiles for the bimonthly publication of the Official *Star Trek* Fan Club. On the fiction side of things, his story “The Road to Edos” appeared in the *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits*. With Dayton Ward, his work includes stories for the *Star Trek: Tales of the Dominion War* and *Star Trek: Constellations* anthologies, the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novels *A Time to Sow* and *A Time to Harvest*, and ten installments of the original *Star Trek* eBook series *S.C.E.* and *Corps of Engineers*. Their latest full-length novel, *Summon the Thunder*, the second in the *Star Trek: Vanguard* series, was published in July 2006. A graduate of the University of Kansas, Kevin lives in Prairie Village, Kansas, with his wife, Michelle, and their three daughters, and is a writer for Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, Missouri.