

## CHAPTER 1

Captain's Log, Stardate 3290.9:

After two years, the Enterprise is returning to the planet Mestiko to aid in the task of restoring the planet's ecology following the devastating effects of a rogue pulsar that has been dubbed the Pulse by the locals.

The first thing Dr. Leonard McCoy saw when he emerged from the turbolift was Spock rising from the command chair in deference to the person McCoy had ridden up with. The first officer said, "Captain, we have crossed the orbit of Mestiko's second moon."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," said Captain James T. Kirk, replacing Spock in the center seat. "Uhura, send best wishes to Space Central and request permission to establish orbit. And summon Dr. Lon to the bridge."

"Aye, sir," came Uhura's voice from behind him.

McCoy, meanwhile, turned his gaze to the viewscreen, showing a faraway view of a planet. "So that's it, eh?"

"That's it, Bones," said Kirk. "Mr. Sulu, viewer on full magnification."

"Aye, sir," replied Sulu. A moment later, the world came into sharper focus.

"What do you think of our patient?" asked Kirk.

McCoy was silent for a long time as he took in the more detailed image on the viewscreen. Immense patches of sere, barren earth, many encompassing entire continents, were evident, unobscured by an almost complete lack of cloud cover. The oceans looked dark, their waters listless.

"My God," said McCoy, finally. "I've read Piper's notes, but had no idea.... It looks almost dead."

Looking up from his station, Spock said, "A more accurate diagnosis, Doctor, couched in medical terms, would be that the planet is in critical condition. The planet's atmosphere was almost entirely denuded of its ozone layer by the radiation from the pulsar. The death of most of the oceans' plankton followed, reducing oxygen levels all over the planet. Mestiko was once a Class-M planet, but the Federation Science Council has temporarily redesignated it as Class-L."

"To hear Dr. Lon tell it, the emphasis is on 'temporary,'" said Kirk.

"So the people are living in enclosed shelters?" asked McCoy. "Unless they're compensating for the lack of sunlight, vitamin D deficiency will be a chronic problem for them. And I don't want to think about the nutritional situation."

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Bones," said Kirk, "until these people can get back on their feet. Uhura, do you have Space Central yet?"

"I'm having trouble establishing contact, Captain. The Pulse ionized the interplanetary medium around the planet."

"The Pulse," said Spock, with a shake of his head. "A very inaccurate term for the event."

"It's their planet that got devastated, Spock," said McCoy with a shrug. "I guess they get to decide what to call the thing that did it."

"Perhaps, Doctor, but 'disaster,' in its original meaning, would be much more precise."

Before McCoy could reply to Spock's latest bit of pedantry, Uhura said, "Captain, I have Councillor Raya elMora."

"Put her on-screen, Lieutenant." Kirk said, rising from his chair.

McCoy had seen so many pictures of wounded and dying Payav, people scarred by radiation or killed by exposure, that he had forgotten how beautiful a people they could be, until he saw the woman whose face replaced Mestiko on the viewscreen. Her features, though delicate, gave the impression of an inner strength, and the lines her face bore spoke of having faced many struggles, and losing more than she had won. But the mouth was full and mobile, curving upward with an appreciation of pleasure by a person who had lately not seen much.

Her skin was quite pale, with an almost porcelain glow, with the delicacy of a living thing that might be beaten back, but could never be entirely eradicated. She was bald and might have been taken for a Deltan, save that her face was entirely hairless and her neck, swanlike and twice as long as the human norm, was covered with tattoos that complemented the graceful lines of her naked skull.

But the most intriguing aspect of her appearance, to McCoy, were her hands. They were as graceful as the rest of her, and a casual observer might overlook the fact that, in addition to the four fingers common to Federation standard humanoid species, each of her hands bore two thumbs. McCoy noted that Raya elMora had a habit of tapping the tips of her left thumbs together for emphasis when speaking, almost like a pair of pincers with a life of their own.

In a tone Kirk used with few planetary leaders, the captain said, "Madam Councillor, greetings from the United Federation of Planets and the U.S.S. Enterprise."

"Captain," she said. Her voice was low and musical, but gave the impression that, given the need, it could immediately sharpen and snap to enforce discipline. "How good to see you again. On behalf of the Zamestaad, I welcome you and your crew to Mestiko."

"Thank you, Madam Councillor," replied Kirk, making a little bow. "We are looking forward to seeing the progress Mestiko has made in healing itself over the past two years." The turbolift door hissed; McCoy and Kirk turned to see Dr. Lon enter.

"Excellent timing, Doctor," said Kirk. He motioned for Lon to join him and extended a hand at the viewscreen as if the woman whose image graced it were standing on the bridge. "Dr. Marat Lon, Madam Councillor Raya elMora."

"A pleasure, Doctor," said Raya. "I look forward to a full explanation of your satellite technology."

"I look forward to this chance to prove it," said Lon, "though I might have wished for less drastic circumstances." Tall and lean with ascetic features, Lon was typical of the Martian people descended from the colonists who had taken the red planet as their own centuries ago.

"I understand, Doctor, but it is the universe that dictates circumstances to us, not the other way around."

"With due respect, Madam Councillor," said Lon, "the science of terraforming may enable us to do just that."

Raya chuckled a little, and McCoy saw Kirk glance at Lon with a little smile, as though a child or a trained animal had done well. "Perhaps so, Doctor. I certainly look forward to discussing this with you. Captain, can you and your people join us for an evening meal with the rest of the Zamestaad? The menu may not be quite so elaborate as you're used to, but- "

"I'm certain it will be quite sufficient, Madam Councillor," Kirk said quickly. "We'll see you tonight, then, if..." He paused.

"Yes?"

"If we may receive permission to enter planetary space."

Raya elMora laughed again, and seemed to McCoy to be grateful for the opportunity to do so. "Of course, Captain. Permission granted."

"You heard the lady, Mr. Sulu. Standard orbit."

"Aye, sir," said Sulu, exchanging a slight grin with Chekov, "standard orbit."

"Thanks for introducing me," McCoy said archly after the viewscreen went blank.

"You'll have your chance to make an impression tonight, Bones," said Kirk. "I wanted to make a point of introducing Dr. Lon, as he's going to be living on the planet for a while. What did you think, Doctor?"

"They like their tattoos, don't they?" said Lon, judiciously.

Spock, naturally, had an explanation on tap. "The Payav have a long history of skin decorations, Doctor. It is their custom to think of their skin as a blank canvas they may adorn. Many generations of the same family can be found to wear identical tattoos."

"Filthy habit, injecting chemicals under the skin," said McCoy.

"Nonetheless, it is their way, Doctor," said Spock, "though it is less common than it was generations ago. I have made a study of the Payav body art that- "

"I'll bet you have," said McCoy. "But no thanks, Spock. I've still got some medical records to go over."

He glanced at Kirk. "I'm going to want a look at their medical facilities. Will that be a problem?"

"I'm certain we can arrange something, Bones," said Kirk.

"I'm certain you can," replied McCoy, remembering the look Kirk and Raya had exchanged.

"Such an arrangement is already in place, Doctor," said Spock. "Under the terms of the Organian Peace Treaty, inspection of humanitarian services is allowed."

"Everyone keeps citing that treaty," said Lon, a trifle aggrievedly. "I'm afraid I don't follow politics all that much, so I'm a bit unclear as to its meaning here."

"I suppose the entire landing party could do with a little review before we go planetside," said Kirk. "The briefing room in ten minutes."

## CHAPTER 2

"Is everyone here, Spock?" asked Kirk as he walked into the briefing room ten minutes later.

"We seem to be missing one member of the landing party, Captain," said Spock.

Kirk looked at the large table in the center of the room. The three-sided viewscreen sat in the center of the table, and around it sat Spock, McCoy, and Lon. Spock was, as usual, next to the large computer station. Two seats remained empty. One was for Kirk himself, the other...

Stabbing a button on the wall intercom with irritation, he said "Kirk to- "

Before he could finish, the doors parted, revealing a young female officer with shoulder-length blond hair. Her chest rose and fell rather more rapidly than was normal, and she seemed a little wobbly on her feet, as though she had just come to a full stop from a brisk run.

"Lieutenant Sinclair," said Kirk dryly. "Glad you could join us."

"I'm sorry, sir, I was brushing up on the local customs and lost track of time." She had a straight nose, gray eyes, and a squarish jaw, which was currently thrust forward.

Sternly, Kirk said, "This is a valuable opportunity for you, Sinclair. If you're not up to the responsibility- "

"I am, sir." She brushed back an errant lock of hair that had strayed during her run.

"Well, take your place."

Sinclair nodded docilely and sat down, tucking her long legs underneath the table.

Kirk also took a seat at the head of the table next to Spock. "In fact, Lieutenant, since you've been brushing up, tell us about the Orga nian Peace Treaty."

"Yes, sir," said Sinclair, her high forehead furrowed a little. "The treaty forbids hostilities between the Federation and the Klingons, and provides that any planet disputed between the two sides will be awarded to the side that proves it can develop that planet most efficiently."

"And since Mestiko is already closer to the Klingon Empire's borders than Federation's, the Klingons have already claimed it's theirs," said Kirk.

"Captain," said Lon with a frown, "I don't relish the idea of my technology being taken by the Klingons."

"Your technology is secure, Doctor," said Spock. "In fact, it was your technology that convinced the Zamestaad to give the Federation the first opportunity to repair the ecosphere. The Klingons' plan simply proposed to mine and sell Mestiko's many stores of mineral wealth to support the population until the ecosphere restored itself by due course of nature."

"Which, left to its own devices, would take over a century," said Lon. "My technology can do it in half the time."

"And you'll have the chance to prove that, Doctor," said Kirk. "No matter which side wins, the results will be known throughout this quadrant for decades. Losing this planet to the Klingons may be more devastating to the Federation's reputation than losing a war. And I have no intention of losing this planet- let alone its population- to the Klingons."

"They've already suffered enough," said McCoy emphatically.

"Exactly, Bones. Which is where you come in, Lieutenant," said Kirk, swiveling to face Sinclair. "Your job as recording officer is to make sure a full record of our dealings on the planet is preserved."

"I understand, sir."

"If there are no further questions," said Kirk, rising, "then we have a dinner engagement."

## CHAPTER 3

"Are you sure this is the wisest course, Captain?" asked Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott.

"You sound worried, Scotty," said Kirk, as he entered the transporter room.

"I just don't think both you and Mr. Spock should be goin' planetside when we're this close to Klingon space. Sector 418-D is practically next door to the sneakin' devils."

"There has been no evidence of any current Klingon presence on Mestiko, Mr. Scott," said Spock from his place on the platform with McCoy, Lon, and Sinclair.

"Besides, with Sulu at the conn and you in engineering, I don't think we'll be in any danger, Scotty." Kirk took his place on the platform with the others. "But just in case, make sure either you or Kyle is on duty here. I want an experienced hand in charge if this ionization shows any signs of interfering with the transporter. Energize."

"I was worried about the ship, mostly," grumbled Scotty as he manipulated the transporter panel.

"What was that?" Kirk asked even as the beams activated.

The next thing he saw was the interior surface of a great half-sphere. It showed evidence of having once had windows, but these had been sealed.

Kirk looked around. Hallways led off the half-sphere at sixty-degree intervals that sank below ground level as they progressed.

"Captain," came a cool voice, "welcome from the Zamestaad."

Kirk smiled as he turned. Madam Councillor Raya elMora approached with a walk that managed to be somehow businesslike, efficient, and yet feminine.

"On behalf of the United Federation of Planets," replied Kirk, gallantly, "I accept." This led to a formal greeting in which Raya held out her hands with the left palm facing upward, the right palm downward. Kirk placed his own palms on hers, and the gesture was held for a moment.

Then the two of them broke into a mutual smile. "It is good to see you again, James," said Raya.

"And you, Raya, alive and well," replied Kirk. "From the reports received of your planet over the past two years, I wasn't always sure that would be the case."

"Perhaps you worry too much," said Raya, turning away from him to face the others.

"My landing party," said Kirk, "You already know Mr. Spock. This is our new chief medical officer, Dr. Leonard McCoy, Dr. Marat Lon, and Lieutenant Sinclair, our records officer."

"How good to see you again, Mr. Spock," said Raya. She approached the landing party and exchanged the same handshake with each of them. "Dr. Lon, I look forward to discussing your plans to restore our beleaguered planet. I'm afraid you have your work cut out for you."

"A scientist always enjoys a challenge, Madam Councillor," replied Lon, as Raya moved to Sinclair.

"Is something wrong, Lieutenant?" asked Raya, after a moment.

"No, ma'am- no, Madam Councillor. Forgive me if I was staring. Your hands are very beautiful."

"How kind," said Raya. She favored Sinclair with a smile that Sinclair returned with a brilliant smile of her own. Raya's eyes widened and she took an involuntary step backward.

"Madam Councillor, did I- ?" began Sinclair.

"It is nothing, Lieutenant," said Raya, regaining her composure as quickly as she had lost it. "Nothing at all." She stepped away from Sinclair and gestured to a small group that had remained some distance away. "Let me present my advisers."

Kirk followed, tossing Sinclair a frigid glance as he did so.

"What did I do?" asked Sinclair, of the landing party in general.

"Your acquaintanceship with the local customs is not yet complete, Lieutenant," said Spock, before moving to join Kirk. "The Payav consider showing teeth when smiling a major cause for offense."

"Don't worry about it, Lieutenant," said McCoy, "Spock's hardly the one to give advice about smiling. I'm sure Raya didn't take it personally."

"I hope not," said Sinclair, her cheeks coloring.

"Captain," Raya was saying, "may I present my elor- my grandmother."

"I can easily see where Raya's beauty comes from," replied Kirk. He took the grandmother's extended hand and kissed it.

That the old woman and Raya were related was obvious from more than just the fact that several of their facial decorations were identical, though the grandmother's tattoos were somewhat faded with age, and the skin they decorated was weathered like old parchment. The grandmother's features very much resembled Raya's, but it was in a shared manner of looking at the world, of quizzically evaluating any new aspect of life presented to them more than any mere physical resemblance that most made them seem alike.

"It is good to have visitors, Captain," said the old woman. She regarded Kirk with a smile that showed an

appreciation of his flattery, yet also saw through it.

"Please, this way," said Raya, motioning to one of the walkways leading off the main structure.

"Is this building aboveground?" asked McCoy, looking around. "I thought I read that your living quarters were all underground."

"Almost all of them are, Doctor," replied Raya. "But we kept this building, which used to be the main hall of our council chamber, in use, after sealing it off from the atmosphere, as a receiving point for visitors. It also- " And here she approached one of the walls, opened a small panel set into the wall, and pressed a button. "- serves to remind us of the struggle we will be fighting for years to come."

A curved section of the outer dome retracted, revealing a window of thick glass. It looked upon the landscape of Mestiko as its sun set, red rays refracted through an atmospheric slush of reddish-brown air that hung over the land, barely moving, like a lurking predator. Beyond that, remains of collapsed buildings could be seen, tumbled over vehicles and city streets that had once been filled with an industrious people.

"My God," said McCoy. The starkness of his tone drew no reproach from any present.

"Nitrogen dioxide," said Spock. "Red-brown in color. Along with nitric oxide, which is colorless. They block both light and heat from the sun, two essential elements if the planet's ecology is to recover."

"That's where Dr. Lon's satellites come in," said Kirk, heartily, trying to encourage a positive attitude.

"Isn't that right, Doctor?"

"Yes, Captain," said Lon, though not as eagerly as Kirk had hoped. "Once the satellites are placed in orbit, they'll begin reconverting the nitrogen oxides- both nitric oxide and nitrogen dioxide- into regular nitrogen and oxygen."

"Because it is the nitrogen oxides that are destroying the ozone, yes?" asked Raya.

"Exactly, Madam Councillor," said Lon. Unlike Kirk's attempt at raising spirits, Raya's response seemed to engender a more encouraging tone from the doctor. "It will take some time- years, in fact- but my satellites will do the job far more quickly than waiting for Mestiko's condition to correct itself."

"I will know the world is on the path to recovery when I see it covered again in forests of noggik trees." For just a moment, her shoulders slumped. "I do so miss them."

"Such technology is remarkable," said Raya's grandmother. "I do not think I shall live to see the day when we can live on the surface again, but it will help to know it is coming."

"Elee, don't be such a fatalist," said Raya, taking her hand. "I'm sure you'll outlive us all."

"Perhaps," said the grandmother, smiling faintly.

"This is what I would have you see," said Raya, urging the party forward. Kirk became aware that they were heading gradually downward, deeper into the earth. From the ceilings of the tunnels they walked were hung lights that, despite being strung at regular intervals, gave the impression of having been positioned quickly; bare wires and electric conduits could be seen sprouting from them.

"Were all these tunnels built after the Pulse struck?" asked McCoy. "Seems a lot of work to have to do in a short time."

"We have become experts at that over the past two years, Doctor," said Raya. "But, to be honest, most of these tunnels originally formed the access networks to the physical plants of many of the major buildings of our city. With the cities no longer in service, the access to the surface has been sealed off. Now the tunnels, some of them expanded by emergency construction, have been used to provide housing, schools, temples, and whatever other facilities may be needed. It is a rare chamber that does not serve at least three purposes."

Kirk got a look into a vast underground room as they passed, and caught the whir of turbines, powering electrical plants, and air scrubbers.

"And you live down here, too, Madam Councillor?" asked Sinclair. "In subterranean quarters?"

"Yes, our living areas are down here, too. In fact..." Raya paused before two wide doors decorated with bright paper stickers and scrawled drawings and tapped a button in a wall console next to it. The doors rose, revealing a large room full of families, standing, in various degrees of impatience, in line before tables full of food. Most heads turned at the sound of the doors parting. Then, when a cheer arose at the sight of Raya, all heads turned.

"Madam Councillor," said a portly uniformed attendant, running forward and bowing at the same time.

"Forgive us, we did not know- "

"Actually, it is I who beg your forgiveness," said Raya, with a smile. "I did not know we would be coming."

"Raya!" exclaimed a voice at the edge of the crowd. A moment later a young girl, all arms and legs and neck, but apparently well cared for, broke through the crowd and hugged Raya, to the utter disapproval, Kirk noted with amusement, of the uniformed attendant who obviously had a great deal of a martinet in her.

"Hello, Theena," said Raya, running her left hand with affection over the child's skull. "These are the visitors I mentioned. This little hareeja is Theena elMadej, a friend of mine."

"I am not a demon," replied the girl, with a grin. "I am a big help here."

"I'm sure the attendants would have a different story," said Raya, with a smile.

Most of the children had gathered around Raya and her grandmother, waving and jumping up and down, but some of them regarded their visitors closely, especially Spock. Their parents stood back a little, also plainly happy to see Raya.

"Are those ears real?" asked a little girl, of Spock. Kirk couldn't help but smile.

"Indeed they are," said the Vulcan, equably.

"And you only have one thumb? How do you make do?"

"One per hand, yes," replied Spock, "but they have always seemed sufficient for their tasks."

"Loda- !" gasped an aghast parent, pulling the little girl back. "I'm sorry, sir, she meant no- "

"There is no need for apology," said Spock. "Her curiosity is natural. And quite commendable."

"These are visitors," said Raya, "from another planet."

"Oh!" gasped a little boy, enthusiastically. "Are you Klingons?"

There followed an awkward moment of silence, which Kirk broke by saying, "No. We're from the United Federation of Planets. Dr. McCoy and I are from Earth, Dr. Lon is from Mars, Lieutenant Sinclair is from Alpha Centauri, and Mr. Spock is from Vulcan." Spock gravely exchanged greetings with children who offered their hands; Dr. Lon stood back, nodding politely, but a little aloof. Many of the children seemed in awe of these faraway names, but at the mention of the Federation, a cloud seemed to pass over the faces of some of the parents, and their smiles turned to concern, and, in some instances, to outright frowns.

"That is one of our better living facilities," said Raya, as they proceeded back up the tunnel, waving good-bye to Theena. "I wish it were possible for each family to have a separate home, but..."

"They looked generally well fed and cared for," said McCoy. "Were those sunlamps I noticed in the ceiling?"

"Yes, they're used in the mornings to simulate the effects of sunlight. There's only so much that can be done with vitamin supplements."

"I've been saying that for years," said McCoy, with a martyr's sigh, and Kirk chuckled.

At the central intersection of the tunnels Raya led them to the left, down a long hall past a blank wall, then into a large room lined with tables set with silverware and linen tablecloths. While Kirk appreciated the effort to show grace under pressure, the fact remained that they were in an underground chamber, discussing the revival of a planet that was very nearly dead. Several persons in native dress or military uniforms were already present, milling about, some with drinks; at Raya's entrance they turned and applauded.

"Thank you, members of the Zamestaad and representatives of the peoples of Mestiko," said Raya, acknowledging their applause with a graceful bow. "Join me in greeting Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise." This was followed by another round of applause, though not as long, nor as enthusiastic. Kirk and his party made little bows, and tried not to look self-conscious.

They were ushered to a large table at the head of the room. As they neared it, Kirk noticed a large man wearing a military tunic, festooned with medals and ribbons. His features were strong and had a cast that could, in certain conditions, be considered cruel, though others might consider it merely resolute. His eyes were the most remarkable thing about him, Kirk realized. Large and clear and carrying a sensitivity they

rarely showed; they were the eyes of a poet.

"Captain Kirk, I present Councillor Traal," said Raya. Kirk nodded and presented his hands for the standard greeting, then introduced the rest of his party.

Sinclair had prepared a thorough briefing on Traal; he was a native of a tribe called the Norrb, a tyrant and conqueror who, in the wake of the Pulse and on the backs of its victims, saw the road to political respectability and a vindication by history, and so was trading in the title of warlord for councillor.

Different world, same story, Kirk thought with bemusement.

"So, Captain," said Traal, in a confidential man-of-the-world tone that could nonetheless be heard twelve feet away, "you have come to attempt to make amends for the damage the Federation has done to our planet, to buy our allegiance?"

Kirk had rather expected this sometime during his visit, and better now than later. "Suffice it to say, Councillor, that the Federation is extending to all the tribes of Mestiko the hand of friendship...as, I assume, are you to the many nations you once tried to conquer." Rather than being taken aback, Traal smiled wryly and shrugged, as if acknowledging that his first assault had been merely a test, and that Kirk had passed.

There was a round of toasts, which were followed by drinks of a native liquor, something beneath whose pungent fruitiness lurked a kick that, Kirk decided after the second toast, could easily sneak up on an unsuspecting imbibor. He had no idea what it was called, but nicknamed it "liquid dilithium" and resolved moderation in its intake.

Councillor Traal was lavish in his praise of "our new allies, the United Federation of Planets," but concealed a sting in its tail, praising also "our friends of the Klingon Empire."

Suddenly, Kirk felt all eyes on him for reasons other than that he was the next in line. He rose, hefted a glass of the liquor and delivered a stirring toast to the planet Mestiko, its brave citizens, the Zamestaad, and finally, "the Jo'Zamestaad, the first on the Planetary Council, Raya elMora." This brought the entire assemblage to its feet, and as he lifted his glass, Kirk caught a glimpse of Raya, beaming at him.

The meal was a native dish, simply prepared and quite flavorful. Kirk gathered it to be some kind of fish, and he noted an attendant telling Spock that a vegetarian dish had been prepared for the Vulcan, which Spock received gratefully.

It was just when an after-dinner cordial was being offered that Kirk's communicator sounded. Rather than trying to hide it, he produced the device and flipped it open with a nonchalance that said such tasks were all in a day's work, knowing that any observers would be fascinated by the details of his command. "Kirk here."

"Captain," came Sulu's voice, "we've just picked up- "

"Captain," said Spock, cutting off Sulu, "we are no longer the only visitors at this banquet."

Kirk lifted his gaze to the entrance of the banquet hall, where a display of silent, flickering red energy had drawn every eye in the room.

The energy coalesced, revealing itself to be four Klingons.

And at their lead, Commander Kor.

#### CHAPTER 4

Kirk again felt every eye in the room on him, now including those of the new arrivals. He lifted his communicator and spoke into it almost nonchalantly. "Yes, Mr. Sulu. I believe you were about to say you've picked up the I.K.S. Klothis in the vicinity?"

"That's right, Captain," came Sulu's reply, a little confusion in his voice. "Are you all right?"

"We're fine. Commander Kor just made a grand entrance. Await further orders. Kirk out." As Kirk stashed his communicator, he looked down the table at his landing party. "Have a seat, Lieutenant," he told Sinclair. "The evening's not over yet."

Sinclair looked down at herself, as if surprised to find she had risen to her feet, one hand halfway to her phaser. "Yes, sir," she said, sinking slowly back to her chair.

"Commander Kor, welcome back to Mestiko," said Raya, in a hospitable tone. "How may we be of service?"

"Jo'Zamestaad," said Kor with a half-bow, "we thank you for your hospitality. We trust our arrival,

though unannounced, is not an intrusion." His voice carried the identical tone he had used during his short tenure as military governor of the planet Organia, and to his grudging credit, the tone he had used with the Organians even after they were revealed to be noncorporeal life forms of nearly incalculable power: cordial, condescending, and capable of turning on the object of his attentions in a split second.

"Not at all," replied Raya, "all friends of Mestiko are welcome in the chambers of the Zamestaad." She gestured down the table. "Have you met Captain Kirk and his crew?"

"Commander Kor and I have...exchanged greetings in the past, yes," said Kirk. He rose and approached Kor, wearing a smile behind which lurked an ill-concealed reserve of defiance. Kor's landing party began to move around Kirk as he neared their commander, but Kor raised his right hand with a dismissive wave that scattered his men.

"Captain," said Kor, "how glorious to see you again."

"Thank you, Kor, it's a genuine pleasure to see you, as well."

"Is it, now?" asked Kor cautiously, smelling a rat.

"It is, yes. I always feel more comfortable when you and I are face-to-face, rather than back-to-back."

Kirk gave Kor a toothy grin, hoping the Klingon was up on the local customs.

One of Kor's minions, who either was up on the customs or simply slow on the uptake, began to emit a low growl. "Silence, Kiregh," said Kor. "This is a social occasion." Nonetheless, it felt to Kirk like the air had become electrically charged, like the calm before a tremendous storm. During his walk to confront Kor, Kirk had seen the heads of every person present oscillating slowly on their long necks. A people who had suffered much these past two years, it was as if they were cautiously waiting to see which way they should jump.

"Commander, will you join us?" boomed the voice of Councillor Traal, breaking the tension like a clap of thunder.

"Thank you, Councillor Traal," said Kor, not taking his eyes from Kirk. "We will not be staying- this time. I simply wanted to wish the captain a pleasant stay on Mestiko, though I doubt it will be a long one."

"That's up to the people of Mestiko, isn't it, Commander?" asked Kirk. "Just as it was up to the Capellans, not so long ago."

"Were it up to us," trilled a familiar voice, "I know what my decision would be." Kirk turned and was surprised to see Raya's grandmother, risen to her feet and thrusting an imperious finger at Kirk. "And I think many other of the Payav would feel the same. It was the Federation that knew disaster was headed for our planet and conspired with our former leaders to hide this from us. And now we are asked to trust them?"

This statement elicited cheers and applause from many of those present; some level of Kirk's mind noted idly that applause from hands with multiple thumbs sounded no different than applause from hands with one thumb.

Kirk locked eyes with Raya, who returned his gaze, but gave him no support. And what he saw there gave him no comfort.

"Nothing more to say, Captain?" said Kor, his voice an oily smear.

"Just this," said Kirk, returning to stand behind his chair. He waited for the clamor of the crowd to die down, then waited a few more seconds, making sure he had their full attention. "If the Zamestaad feels the Federation has not fulfilled its promise to aid the people of Mestiko, I invite them aboard the Enterprise tomorrow night to witness the implementation of the first step in the Federation's plan to restore the ecosphere of Mestiko, the dispersion of Dr. Lon's satellite technology. That should convince any who doubt not only the Federation's good intentions, but the ability to act on those intentions."

There was more applause, most of it from people other than those who had applauded the Klingon. Kirk nodded his thanks.

And when he looked toward the entrance of the banquet hall, he caught just the fading flash of the Klingons' transporter.

## CHAPTER 5

While Jim Kirk didn't have his chief medical officer's facility with sarcasm, he hoped that he matched McCoy's tone on the bridge earlier when he sardonically said to Raya, "Thank you for your support."



"What did you expect, James?" replied Raya.

They stood in Raya's office, a rather small cubicle, Kirk thought, for such an important post. The walls were mostly bare, which lent authority to those few pieces mounted there: a picture of a woman Kirk first thought was Raya, but was probably her mother, with a younger version of the grandmother and Raya as a gangly young girl; a picture of Raya with the girl Theena; and a photograph of the Jo'Payav, the warp-speed vehicle built by the Payav that had drawn them to the attention of the Federation in the first place. It was a craft so austere in its design that it almost resembled a child's toy. Then Kirk remembered Zefram Cochrane's Phoenix, the first Earth craft to break the light barrier, and decided the Payav craft wasn't bad-looking at all.

Occupying nearly the entire facing wall was a picture so large it could almost be taken for a window- an immense painting of the city under which they currently dwelled, in its days of greatest glory.

Hopefully, days of even greater glory lay ahead.

"Did you expect me to take the Federation's side against that of the Klingons?" Raya asked. "Though my elor's statement was impolitic, it was not untrue. The Federation does bear at least partial responsibility for keeping the truth about the Pulse from us."

"And the Klingons will be glad to take full responsibility for every living soul on Mestiko- for the rest of your lives."

She nodded; at least that truth had not eluded her. "But it is my responsibility to lead my people- Payav and Dinpayav alike- through this black mark in our history, and I will do so by any means available."

Nearing her, Kirk said, "You know that I have only the best intentions toward you and your people- and so does the Federation."

She replied after a moment, "My duty is to see my planet healed and its people saved, just as it is your duty to guard the safety of your ship and your crew." She paused for a moment, the thumbs of her left hand tapping together rapidly. "Would you betray your ship and crew, act against their best interests, simply on my word?"

"No," conceded Kirk, softly.

"Thank you for your honesty," she said. "Perhaps as long as we have that between us..."

"Perhaps so," said Kirk. Then he looked up. "The Zamestaad will come aboard the Enterprise tomorrow night, then?"

"Of course," Raya replied quickly. "This is a matter of Mestiko's future, James, and our relationship with the Federation. There is no question of trust between the two of us. At least, I hope there is not."

"Of course not," replied Kirk, perhaps too quickly. "Lieutenant Uhura will be in touch with your office about the arrangements for tomorrow night, then."

"I look forward to seeing the woman in your life," said Raya, with a teasing smile.

"I'm not so sure you haven't already seen her," said Kirk.

## CHAPTER 6

"I want continuous sensor sweeps, Mr. Chekov," said Kirk. "Maximum range. Report anything you find that even seems irregular to me immediately."

"Aye, Captain," said Chekov from the science station, filling in while Spock was off the bridge, answering the same order for the third time in two minutes.

"And there have been no signs of a Klingon presence?"

"No, sir. Wherever the Klothis went when it left orbit last night, it's out of our sensor range. Perhaps they're hiding on the other side of the planet?"

"Possibly," said Kirk, after a moment's consideration, "but I doubt it. Too much chance of being picked up by one of the other nations and reported. But I don't want to take a chance on being ambushed by the Klingons at any time- and certainly not when we have the Mestiko Planetary Council aboard."

"Acknowledged, sir," said Chekov, for variety's sake.

The turbolift opened, and Lieutenant Sinclair emerged. Kirk turned, and Chekov, thankful for the diversion, continued the sensor sweep.

"I have that information you wanted, Captain," said Sinclair, producing a computer microtape.

Kirk nodded, but did not take the tape. "Report. Is there any record of Councillor Traal's dealings with

the Klingons?"

"No hard evidence of it, sir, though it is common knowledge that he does deal with them. Traal is the most visible leader of what might be called a 'Mestiko First' movement. He denigrates the Federation, and, as we saw last night, has even implied that the Federation might be responsible for instigating the Pulse so we can secure a foothold on Mestiko, and discourage Mestiko's own attempts at space travel. He is on record as having petitioned the Payav, in an attempt to force them to share their warp technology with all the peoples of the planet, but was turned down. Traal feels he and his people can do better by helping themselves than they can by, to quote one of his speeches, 'tying themselves to the Federation's apron strings.'"

"As though those are the only options," said Kirk.

"I'm just quoting, sir."

"Of course, Lieutenant. Continue."

"Councillor Traal has a great deal of credibility among both the Norrb and even among the Payav, because he believed the alarms raised about the pulsar. His people are living in relative comfort in cities preserved under domes or in underground colonies, and he has been responsible for distributing aid and comfort to millions of Payav whose lives have been disrupted."

"Well, we can't fault his humanitarian acts, though their motivation might be somewhat suspect. Thank you, Lieutenant. Report to Mr. Spock. He and Dr. Lon are doing a final diagnostic on the satellites before tonight's ceremony."

"Aye, sir," said Sinclair. She turned smartly, headed for the turbolift, and was gone. Chekov wished he could have followed her, as he did not enjoy being under Kirk's eye when the captain was in a mood.

\* \* \*

"Members of the Zamestaad," said Captain Kirk, resplendent in his dress uniform, hours later, "welcome aboard the Starship Enterprise." The first bunch of councillors had barely materialized on the transporter pad before Kirk was bearing down on them. "You all remember my first officer, Mr. Spock." Some of the councillors who had probably never transported before were patting themselves surreptitiously, as if confirming that they had each arrived with all the limbs they left Mestiko with. Kirk thought of his own ship's doctor and grinned, though he did not show teeth.

"Madam Councillor," said Kirk, offering a hand to Raya as she stepped off the pad. She was wearing a gown of shimmering, multicolored fabric printed with many of the same tattoos she herself wore. This gave an observer a first impression that the gown was at least partially diaphanous, though she was clothed from head to toe. Kirk greeted Councillor Traal as though he were Kirk's best friend, then offered an arm to Raya's grandmother, which she took with a smile.

As they passed transporter control, Kirk glanced briefly at Lieutenant Kyle, observing a brief, furtive shake of the lieutenant's head. It meant that neither Traal- nor any of the other guests- was wearing any kind of recording or eavesdropping device. Kirk had debated the diplomatic repercussions of this kind of scan being performed on the guests without their knowledge, but reasoned that where the Klingons might be involved, it was better to err on the side of caution. If it were an error at all.

Leaving Spock to greet the rest of the council, Kirk ushered the first arrivals through the halls of the Enterprise to the officers' lounge, where there would be drinks before dinner. Kirk had deliberately chosen the transporter room farthest from the lounge for the council members' materialization, so the impromptu tour of the Enterprise could be extended as long as possible. The Zamestaad was properly appreciative of his ship, making it all the more easy for Kirk to treat them, not as representatives of a planet of which one race had achieved faster-than-light space travel, but as trusted colleagues.

"Look at the size of it!" gasped one councillor, on seeing the recreation deck. "You could land our entire ship in it!"

"You should see the size of our early space-faring craft," said Kirk, in the tones of one colleague to another, "I don't know how the crew stood it."

Traal was largely noncommittal through the tour, nodding once in a while in acknowledgment of an observation Kirk put directly to him, but volunteering little. It may have been only the calm before the storm, but it was at least better than last night's rabble-rouser.

After dinner and drinks in the lounge, they made their way to the observation deck. With this many occupants and the overlooking window closed, the deck seemed a trifle cramped. When their guests were comfortable, Kirk spoke.

"Honored members of the Zamestaad, and Jo'Zamestaad," began Kirk, "I thank you for giving the Federation the opportunity to show you the technology we offer you to help restore your planet- the satellite technology of Dr. Marat Lon."

Tapping a button on the deck's console, the shield over the window slid back, providing a view of the shuttlebay and its current cargo.

There were a number of actual gasps, which Kirk appreciated, watching their faces reflected in the revealed window, though Traal's face was not among these.

The floor of the shuttlebay had been pressed into service as the launching pad for Dr. Lon's satellites, a fleet of which hovered at various heights in the bay.

"There they are," said Kirk, through the intercom to the bay. "Dr. Lon, the author of this technology and Mr. Spock, performing the final pre-launch check." As instructed, both men turned and waved to the observation deck. Dr. Lon seemed uncomfortable in the role of cheerleader, and Spock was...well, Spock. Amusingly, he was still in his dress uniform, though he of course didn't let that curtail his work in the least.

The satellites themselves were large gray globes with a pair of vents on either side and a short communications antenna. "Are there any questions?" asked Kirk.

"Why do they look like mines?" said Traal, undiplomatically. "Are explosive devices to be released into our atmosphere?" Kirk quickly started to reply, but was cut off.

"No, no," said Lon, his voice magnified and slightly harshened by the intercom. "The function of the units is to replenish Mestiko's atmosphere by reconverting the nitrogen oxides into regular nitrogen and oxygen. The design is simply to make the units as aerodynamic as possible, the vents are simply for the intake of nitrogen oxides, and the emission of standard nitrogen and oxygen. We discussed this. Do you people remember noth- ?"

"Yes, Doctor, thank you," said Kirk, quickly cutting off an incendiary remark. "Please join us up here when you're through down there."

There followed a few moments of uncomfortable silence that somehow seemed longer than the entire evening had so far. When Spock and Lon entered the observation deck, Kirk was tempted to hug them.

"Any remarks on this occasion, Doctor?" asked Kirk.

Lon's slender features twisted in thought for a moment. "No, Captain. Instead I feel, as I'm sure do our hosts, that I would rather begin the restoration of Mestiko's atmosphere." This was met by applause from the Zamestaad; Kirk couldn't blame them.

"If you'll begin, then," said Kirk, gesturing to the control panel. Lon nodded and took his place. Inside the sealed and pressurized observation deck could be heard the pumps that sucked the air from the shuttlebay- until, of course, there was no air and nothing to be heard.

A slight tremor swept through the observation deck; the more sensitive of the council looked around nervously. "Is the ship coming apart?" asked Councillor Jolon, representative of a tribe called the Domtos.

"Not at all, sir," said Spock. "That is simply the vibration made when the doors of the shuttlebay open, conducted through the floor, rather than through the medium of atmosphere. It is quite ordinary."

"Very well," said Jolon, returning to his seat. From the corner of his eye Kirk noticed Lon shaking his head as if in exasperation. Then he caught himself, and returned gazing at his brainchildren.

"That's Mestiko out there, in the background," said Kirk, pointing. Most of the councillors, who were not spacefarers and had never seen their planet suspended against the cosmic firmament, nodded with interest; Kirk even heard a few gasps, though they were quickly subdued. He imagined the councillors had been warned against appearing too provincial to the Federation offworlders, and that was something of a shame. Kirk appreciated the honest reactions of people experiencing space travel for the first time, not as a superior observer, but as one who had once been there himself, and remembered it well.

Lon tapped a few keys on the control panel and touched a small lever that had popped up from it. In the

shuttlebay, lights at the bases of the satellites' antennae began flashing, and they stirred slightly, like children waking up after a nap.

"The navigation beacons will aid in the prevention of close-range collisions with other craft," said Spock, "and each satellite broadcasts its own unique long-range identification signal."

Looking up from the controls, as though just becoming aware Spock was doing part of his job, Lon said, "These signals will be provided to all the governments of Mestiko."

The councillors nodded. Raya tapped her grandmother on her arm and pointed at the first satellite, which was hovering at the mouth of the bay. It hesitated there for a moment, like a swimmer testing the waters, before plunging out into space.

"The restoration of Mestiko's atmosphere has begun!" said Lon, and there was a round of applause that, Kirk noticed, even Traal joined in.

"We're going to take you on a quick trip around your planet," said Kirk with a grin, "though I hope you'll forgive me if we don't have time for sightseeing." The Zamestaad laughed, this time with no tension at all.

"Where will the satellites be placed, Dr. Lon?" asked an elderly councillor.

"In stationary positions in Mestiko's stratosphere," replied Lon, "largely at equal distances, save over the planet's polar ice caps, where the atmosphere suffered less damage than that of the remainder of the planet. The satellites need maintenance only twice a year, which your vessels are certainly capable of performing." Clever, thought Kirk, treating them not only as partners in this endeavor, but as partners performing a vital task.

"Of course," said Spock, "no planet is perfectly spherical. It may be of interest to the Zamestaad to become acquainted with the calculations used to determine the satellites' positions- "

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk interjected rapidly. "I think this moment speaks for itself."

"Yes, sir," said Spock, with a raise of his brows that said such an omission was Kirk's loss.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Kirk and the Zamestaad stood in the transporter room, bidding each other good night. There was not a frown in the bunch; even Traal looked somewhat less dour as he offered Kirk an Earth-style handshake.

"A great day for Mestiko, Captain, thank you," said another councillor, moving to the transporter pad.

"Would you and your elor care for a nightcap, Madam Councillor?" asked Kirk, approaching Raya.

"Thank you, but this has been a full day for us both," said Raya, holding hands with her grandmother.

They reminded Kirk of the family picture in Raya's office. "A wonderful day," she continued, leaning forward and kissing Kirk on the cheek.

"What do you think of the woman in my life?" asked Kirk, blandly.

"I think it may take a powerful woman like the Enterprise to tame you," said Raya.

"Or one like her," said Kirk, with a smile, as the Jo'Zamestaad and her grandmother dissolved into energy.

"I think, Mr. Spock," said Kirk, as they walked the ship's corridors, "that we've done our part for interplanetary diplomacy today."

"Indeed, Captain, but I'm sure the Klingons will have something to contribute to the discussion."

"I'd like to see them top this," said Kirk, as he left the turbolift.

Hours later, Kirk was awakened from a dream in which he had four thumbs, each one ending in a miniature satellite, by the beeping of his intercom. "Spock to captain." "Kirk here," he replied. "What is it, Spock?"

"Captain, Satellite 22 has struck the planet's surface."

"Struck the- ?" Kirk shook his head; it was as though he were still dreaming. "Was anything hit?"

"An orphanage," said Spock. "Thirty-six reported dead so far."

## CHAPTER 7

Two minutes later, the landing party materialized near the orphanage- or what was left of it.

Kirk surveyed the scene; if he had still been dreaming when he heard the report, that dream had become a nightmare. The air of the orphanage, buried deep beneath the capital city, was nearly opaque, like that of the planet's surface, but it was polluted with floating dust. Aid workers, pressed into emergency

service, tried to lift jagged mounds of masonry. A huge hole sundered the ceiling; a makeshift emergency covering had slid into place, but it tensed and buckled ominously.

Some yards away one of Lon's satellites lay, buried to its equator. From beneath it protruded a pair of legs, still twitching.

And everywhere there was blood and the screams of children.

Kirk shook his head. It was too much like a scene from his past, the massacre at the Tarsus IV colony at the hands of Kodos the Executioner. Though the two events had little in common, the screams of children gave them a deadly similarity.

"Bones," said Kirk, "do what you can for these people."

But McCoy had already whipped open his communicator. "McCoy to sickbay! Chapel, tell M'Benga to divide the staff into emergency medical teams; tell them to be prepared for mass trauma. And beam down a box of miner's masks; they should be in the ship's stores."

"Spock, Dr. Lon," said Kirk, "find out what went wrong here. Sinclair, you're with Spock."

Spock and Sinclair each nodded and moved off, Lon trailing behind them. "But be careful, Doctor," said Kirk. "Any goodwill your invention bought us has just been exhausted." Lon's mouth opened, moved a couple of times, then closed as he walked off. He had made no sound, and his expression was like that of a father who had just learned his dearest son was responsible for a grisly murder.

Through the dust Kirk saw a willowy form approaching. Raya's beautiful features were slashed with pain, her skin paler than Kirk had ever seen it. She saw Kirk and moved toward him. "James, how-?"

Kirk motioned for patience and flipped open his own communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Scott here, Captain. How is it down there?"

"Worse than I'd feared. Trace these coordinates and put a tractor beam on the ceiling of this chamber. It looks as though it's going to blow, Scotty, and we can't have that."

"Aye, sir."

"And get every available hand down here, have them bring that thermoconcrete to build emergency shelters. And send down the spare food synthesizers, calibrated for Mestikans, with all the emergency gear you can find."

"Right away, sir. Anything else?"

Kirk looked around, as though suspecting to see someone lurking. "Maintain maximum sensor surveillance. This would be the perfect time to blindside the Enterprise."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"You have your orders, Scotty, Kirk out." Looking up, Kirk started to apologize, but Raya was no longer nearby. She stood, supervising men who were trying to maneuver a board into position to lever some wreckage away. Kirk ran to them, motioned them to stay back, and used his phaser to dissolve some of the layers. The men ran in, using tools to pry the remaining wreckage out of the way and emerged seconds later, bearing seven children. They were unmoving, save for the action of their chests, which rose and fell fitfully.

"Raya!" called a thin voice. Raya's head snapped up as a small form became visible through the floating dirt, running toward her. Raya's broad mouth spread into a joyous smile and she took Theena elMadej in her arms, kissing her.

"Thank you," said Raya, fervently, to Kirk. "For everything." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Clean yourself up," whispered Kirk. "You have to be strong for the others."

She nodded, comprehension dawning.

"Leaders don't get the luxury of being weak," said Kirk.

Raya made some reply, but it was drowned out in the trill of transporters. Columns of energy coalesced in the courtyard, and a second later, Enterprise crew charged forward to aid in the rescue effort.

Kirk wandered across McCoy and Nurse Chapel, the latter performing triage in an alleyway that had been turned into a hospital. Every one of the victims being treated was wearing one of the miner's filter masks McCoy had requisitioned.

Despite the emergency, Kirk was intrigued, and approached the physician, whose face was smudged with dirt. He put a hand on McCoy's shoulder, without looking at him. McCoy pointed behind him. "Put

them in the alley."

"It's me, Bones. Is it bad?"

McCoy looked up, his eyes filled with pain. "Bad enough. Anyone who wasn't stricken with shock by the impact is in danger of suffocation."

"From what?"

"These people are totally hairless, Jim, remember? No nose hair, no cilia in the ears to filter out air pollutants or dust. Without the miner's masks, half of them might have been dead from inhaled dirt clogging their lungs before we could help them."

Clapping McCoy on the shoulder, Kirk moved on.

Rounding the corner of a building, Kirk found himself confronted by a band of adult Payav, their hands cut and bleeding, their clothes in tatters. They were glaring at him in a manner he deemed distinctly hostile.

Kirk stood with his hand halfway to his phaser, facing them down. An errant breeze wafted away a cloud of dust, and behind the crowd Kirk saw the bulky figure of Councillor Traal, watching, making no move to interfere.

"You are from the Federation ship, no?" asked the leader.

"Yes. But you'll have to make the first move," said Kirk.

They did just that, though hardly in the way he expected. Like puppets controlled by a single string, the men fell to their knees. "Please!" said the one in the lead. "Take us with you!"

"We beg you!" said the second. "This planet is death! We Payav are dying! Take us with you!"

"We will do anything," intoned a third. "We will be your servants, your slaves. Just take us from this planet!"

Kirk stared at them for a moment, struck dumb with shock. To be attacked was one thing, he could fight that. But to be the object of near-worship by helpless men...

Bending before the leader, Kirk angrily seized his shoulders. "No. This is your planet! Get off your knees! If you have to kneel, do it to dig out those children!" He virtually shoved the man toward one of the numerous work parties. The others followed, slowly, looking over their shoulders at Kirk as though he might be following them.

"A stirring speech, Captain," came Traal's voice, approaching. "Would that we could practice it."

"What's stopping you?" asked Kirk, still breathing a little hard.

"The efforts of your Federation to keep us down," said Traal, with a shrug. "You pick us up with one hand and slap us down with the other." One of his hands moved to indicate the crashed satellite, his thumbs twitching.

"You think we did this deliberately, Traal? Destroyed an orphanage so we could come in and be saviors?" His head shook contemptuously. "You and the Klingons belong together."

"We shall see," said Traal, moving off into the dusty air.

Later, Kirk remembered very little of the rest of that night. It was all a montage of crushed concrete, cries begging to stop the pain, and, underscoring it all, the wails of children.

He was stepping off an antigrav sled from a work detail securing the protective covering when he saw Spock. He had not thought of his first officer in several hours. "What do you have?" he asked, sitting roughly down on a stack of concrete slabs.

"The data will have to be processed, but I believe it will be revealing. I have transmitted it to the ship's computer banks for analysis."

Kirk felt something warm thrust into his hands, a cup of broth, no doubt laden with nutrients. He looked up to see Sinclair. "I thought you might need a break, sir."

Kirk nodded his thanks and sipped gratefully. "Where's McCoy?"

"Dr. McCoy was supervising the installation of certain medical equipment into the makeshift hospital."

"Any idea what the death count is?"

Spock said, "I have heard estimates of over two hundred dead, but that total may be in error."

Kirk nodded and took out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Scotty, how's the ship?"

"We're fine up here, sir," replied Scott, "how are things down there?"

"I'll let you know when we get back. Kirk out."

They found McCoy leaning against a support pillar in a hastily constructed thermoconcrete building. His eyes seemed dead, like marbles. As they approached, Chapel hovered briefly by his side, gave him a shot of some sort of stimulant and moved on. McCoy looked up, began to protest, then shook his head. "Bones," said Kirk. The doctor looked first to his left, then to his right, and shook his head.

"Two hundred and fifty-seven dead, Jim," he said. "For the rest- well, take a look." He lifted a hand expansively.

Rows of field bunks stretched out, seemingly to the horizon. In the distance, Kirk saw Raya, carrying a tray of cups. She stopped by one bunk, gave a child a cup, stroked his brow, and moved on, approaching Kirk. "You look terrible," she said.

"I feel better than any of them," said Kirk, indicating the bunks. "I thought you'd be conducting an emergency council meeting or something like it."

"Of what use is another meeting? Time enough for that when we have facts to discuss."

"I understand. Bones, Spock, is there anything more we can do here?"

"The emergency ceiling is secure and the initial crisis seems to have subsided, Captain," said Spock. McCoy simply shook his head.

"Then let's get back to the ship. I want to start trying to find what went wrong." He looked around. "Has anyone seen Dr. Lon?"

"Not for some time," said Spock.

"There he is, Captain," said Sinclair, pointing across the building at a small table. Lon sat there, slender shoulders hunched as he worked on a small computer he had procured, seemingly oblivious to the chaos surrounding him.

"Dr. Lon," said Kirk, as they neared him.

"Captain," said Lon. "I was trying to analyze what little data I have on the incident."

"The ship's computers are analyzing our findings as we speak, Doctor," said Spock.

"Then let's go," he said. "I'm anxious to see what they've found. We have to prove to these people that my technology wasn't responsible for this."

"This' is going to be a hell of a lot more difficult to explain than that, Doctor," said Kirk.

"Captain," Sinclair said, nodding toward the entrance, "there may be trouble."

Raya was standing at the portal to the emergency shelter, facing down a small but determined bunch of angry citizens who were pointing toward the Enterprise party.

Off to one side stood Councillor Traal, taking in the scene noncommittally, while Raya glanced back over her shoulder at Kirk. Kirk caught a snatch of their conversation, which consisted of accusations against the Federation citizens of murder and even attempted genocide, and Raya's reply: "There is no evidence at this time to recommend legal proceedings..."

He took out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Five to beam up."

A moment later they were gone, but the screams still rang in Kirk's ears.

## CHAPTER 8

"Bones, this may be a long night," said Kirk, as they trudged to the conference room.

"I'd like to tag along, Jim," replied McCoy, after a moment.

Kirk shrugged. "You're the doctor. Spock, better see what the computers have come up with."

They entered the conference room. Spock nodded and accessed the interface with the bridge computer as Dr. Lon gazed at the second screen of the tri-faced viewer on the conference table. McCoy sat down with an audible sigh, and Sinclair brought a tray of beverages.

For several minutes Spock and Lon spoke in low tones as various pieces of computer circuitry were highlighted on the viewscreen. "Well, gentlemen?" said Kirk, finally.

Spock tapped the keyboard of the computer interface and lifted his gaze to Kirk. Kirk took a look at the viewer, which showed what looked like a complicated set of computer commands. "If you will examine the viewer, Captain," said Spock. "I retrieved this data from Satellite 22's computer banks just before its circuitry burned out completely."

"It looks like some sort of computer language," said Kirk, taking a cup of coffee from Sinclair.

"It is in fact a computer override code, sent to the satellite via its computer interface," said Spock. "This will prove that the satellite left its orbit, not due to a programming failure, but by interference in its programming."

"It will prove that only to those who don't have their mind set against the Federation," said Kirk. "Is Payav technology sophisticated enough to accomplish this?"

"I wouldn't have thought them capable of this," said Lon, shaking his head, "though it's certainly possible for the Klingons."

"One of the more salient features of this analysis," said Spock, "is that the override code shows no sign of having been acknowledged by the satellite's long-range onboard receiver."

Kirk leaned forward, as if this information were more stimulating than another cup of coffee. "Could the override code have been somehow...induced into the satellite's interface directly by some sort of short-range transmission, possibly generated by another spacefaring craft?"

"It is a distinct possibility," said Spock. "The long-range receiver would have held the override code for some time, but it was only by good fortune that the override code was detected before the satellite's more delicate circuitry expired."

"We're about due for a break," said Kirk. "Could the override code have come from the Jo'Payav?"

"We didn't think the Payav quite capable of that degree of sophistication," said Lon, "but it is possible."

"What about the Klingons?" asked Kirk. "Could this override code have come from them?"

"The programming is consonant with known Klingon technology," said Spock, "but it is not unique to them. It is insufficient to tell us whether the Klingons are taking a direct hand in Mestiko's affairs, or merely loaning out their technology to, for example, Councillor Traal."

"I think it's time we found out," said Kirk, getting to his feet. "Get cleaned up, and meet me on the bridge in ten minutes."

## CHAPTER 9

"Mr. Scott," said Kirk, in mild surprise as he exited the turbolift. "I didn't expect to see you still on duty." It was the night shift, after all, and Scott should have been in bed. So, for that matter, should Kirk have been.

"No Scott has ever bunked down while his captain was in the field, sir, and I'm not going to be the first," replied Scott, rising from the command chair.

"Appreciated, Scotty," said Kirk, chuckling at the boast, taking the center seat. "Any visitors while we were gone?"

"Not a one, sir. Nice and quiet. Too quiet, if you get my drift."

"I think I do. Stick around if you feel like it, we may have something for you to do."

"Aye, sir," said Scotty, moving to the bridge engineering station next to the turbolift entrance.

Spock took his post at the science station and Lon at the auxiliary science station.

"Orders, Captain?" asked Spock.

"Patch into all the satellites we put in orbit around Mestiko," said Kirk. "Check for any attempts to override programming."

"Do you think they'll try the same trick again, Captain?" asked Scott.

Kirk shrugged. "If no one catches them at it, why not? Spock, anything?"

"Evaluating data, sir," said Spock, staring into his scanner. "Interesting. Satellite 158 shows attempts to override its basic programming."

"Location?"

"Satellite 158 is orbiting directly over the Norrb Refugee Center."

"Kirk," said Lon, as this bit of knowledge struck home, "you can't let them- "

"They won't catch us with the same trick twice, Doctor," Kirk said with a glance behind him, then turned back to Farrell and Riley at helm and navigation in front of him. "Mr. Riley, lay in a course to take us within ten thousand kilometers of Satellite 158."

"That's as close as you want, Captain?" asked Riley. "I can get us- "

"Have you ever seen a cat track a mouse, Lieutenant?"

"I get it, sir," said Riley, with a grin. "Course laid in."



"Mr. Farrell, ahead, maximum impulse power."

"Ten thousand kilometers from Satellite 158, sir," said Farrell, seconds later.

"Maintain this position," said Kirk. "Spock, any uninvited guests?"

"Difficult to say, Captain. The same ionization from the disaster is making sensor readings somewhat unreliable. This location is a source of maximum interference."

"And I don't need you to tell me the odds against that being a coincidence," said Kirk. "Do what you can to compensate. Lieutenant Palmer, main viewer on, maximum magnification. Can you get a visual at this range?"

"It's not the range, sir," said the relief communications officer. "It's the interference. Let me try..." Seconds later, a hazy, static-ridden image flickered on the viewscreen; a globular object seemed to float on a sea of ebony waves. For all they knew, it might have been a snowball dropped into a vat of dirty oil, viewed through the wrong end of a cracked telescope.

"That's the best I can do, sir," said Palmer.

"We'll have to do this the hard way," said Kirk. "Scotty, can you pick up any kind of engine readings out there?"

"It's like trying to see through that muck they call air down there, Captain. I'm picking up energy readings that indicate a matter/antimatter drive- 'tis definitely a warp-capable ship. But I cannot localize the readings. It's nothing I'd care to chance a phaser lock on."

"Understood. Spock, lock on to Satellite 158. Are you too far to check if there's been any interference with the satellite's programming?"

Spock's fingers ran over the console of his station like a pianist playing a keyboard as the blue glow from his scanner washed over his face.

"I am reading some foreign programming attempting to override the original, Captain. The system is attempting to resist it."

"Part of its computer security program," said Lon, proudly.

"Attempt to track the foreign programming back to its source," said Kirk. "That may give us a- "

"Unsuccessful," said Spock.

Kirk pondered for a moment. "Mr. Riley, attempt phaser lock on that satellite, ready to fire on my command."

"Kirk, you can't!" Lon cried.

"If it shows any signs of deviating from its orbit, I can and will, Doctor."

"Captain," said Riley, "unable to attain phaser lock. Too much interference."

Kirk didn't need to see Lon's face to know it bore a smile. Kirk was silent for a few seconds, then:

"Spock, do the satellites carry a self-destruct code?"

"They do, Captain."

"Enter and activate self-destruct code for Satellite 158."

Inevitably, Lon again said, "Kirk- !"

"We may not be able to pinpoint that ship, but we can make its general vicinity very inhospitable."

Dr. Lon's angular form ran across the bridge and stood before Kirk, shoulders hunched. "Kirk, I won't let you- "

"Would you rather be considered a mass murderer by an entire planet, Doctor? Whoever's tampering with your satellite is no friend of yours, or of Mestiko's."

"Self-destruct code entered, Captain."

"Damn it, Kirk!" Lon's build was slender, but wiry; muscles worked beneath his torso like cables. "You can't- !"

"Stand down or you'll wake up in the brig, Doctor!" Kirk rose from his chair. "Spock, implement self-destruct code."

Spock continued to work his console with his left hand. The satellite's explosion was almost anticlimactic. The snowball abruptly threw itself at the screen, then vanished, leaving only a field of gently undulating static.

"Scan for radiation, Spock."

"I have something, Captain. Some kind of craft. Not precisely a lock, more an indication, gauged by the radiation from the satellite, of where the craft is not, rather than where it is."

"I'll take it. Who is it?"

"Insufficient data for identification. We know only that it is there, and it is damaged. It is likely the same energy reading Mr. Scott detected- sensor readings indicate an imbalance in a matter/antimatter reactor."

"Good enough. Mr. Farrell, take us in. Mr. Riley, ready phasers."

"Aye, sir. Phasers ready."

Spock said, "The ship is wounded, but still navigable, Captain. It is attempting evasive maneuvers."

"The masquerade's over," Kirk said, sitting back down. "It's time to unmask. Tractor beam."

"They're running, Captain."

"Or trying to. Mr. Farrell, prepare for warp drive."

"Captain," said Spock, "the craft is not entering space. Rather, it is nearing the planet."

Kirk cursed. "I was afraid they'd think of that. Get after them, Farrell."

The viewscreen was swathed in clouds, then, when those broke, the brown atmosphere of Mestiko. The ship's progress could barely be discerned by broken clouds and paths through the russet air that were already disappearing as the Enterprise followed.

"Hull temperature increasing, Captain," said Spock.

"Where are they?" asked Kirk, sweeping his gaze from one side of the viewscreen to the other.

Spock stared into his scanner for a moment, then shook his head. "Electromagnetic interference is blocking our instrumentation. We have lost them."

"Where could they have gone?" asked Lon.

"They may have returned to a concealed base. I read no signs of a cloaking device."

"Where are we, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Over an area of Mestiko's easternmost continent, a region whose possession is under dispute by the Norrb and the Domtos tribes, locally referred to as 'the badlands'. A sensor sweep indicates that name is well-deserved. A more accurate verdict cannot be obtained without an investigation of the area."

"Then we know nothing about them," said Scott.

"Not necessarily, Mr. Scott," said Spock. "I would conjecture that the craft was not the Klothos. Such a craft would move sluggishly through a planet's atmosphere, and could not elude us that rapidly. Our quarry was, in all probability, a smaller, more mobile ship."

Kirk nodded and rose. "All right. Return to standard orbit. Continue monitoring the satellites for any signs of interference- though I think we've scared them off for tonight. And tomorrow, we're going to take the fight to them."

## CHAPTER 10

"I have a mission for you," said Kirk, the next morning.

"Yes, sir," said Lieutenant Sulu, with an anticipatory nod. Sulu did not look around the conference room at Lieutenant Kyle, Ensign Chekov, and Lieutenant Sinclair, but Kirk knew they were all wondering what he had in mind for them.

Kirk played for them the bridge recording of their encounter last night with the unidentified vessel. "What do you think?"

"Not much to go on, Captain," said Chekov.

"No, Mr. Chekov, not much at all. But enough to give us an idea of where to start looking for it. You four will take a shuttlecraft and attempt to find the hidden base that berths that ship."

"Captain," asked Kyle, "isn't that something the Enterprise can accomplish more efficiently?"

"Not with the state their atmosphere is in," said Kirk. "Too much interference. No, a smaller, more mobile craft is the way to go. It will allow you to fly closer to the surface and scan more precisely than we can from up here."

"Yes, sir," said Sulu. "When do we leave, sir?"

"Tonight, after sunset on the eastern continent. The atmospheric interference will be playing havoc with any warning system they might have set up, too, so darkness may be your best ally. Sulu, you'll be in command."

"Yes, sir."

"You're not to play hero," said Kirk, wagging a finger at them. "If you find any signs of a hidden base, you're to document it as thoroughly as you can, then return to the ship immediately. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," said four voices, as one.

"Report to the shuttlebay after sunset. In the meantime, familiarize yourself with the information Spock has put together." He rose. "If I don't see you before you embark, good luck."

"Yes, sir," said Chekov.

"And thank you, sir," said Sinclair.

Kirk was halfway to the door, but turned. "Save the thanks until you return."

As the doors closed behind Kirk he smiled, remembering the anticipation seen in their faces, then he shook his head. It never got any easier to send his crew into potential danger.

\* \* \*

"Captain," said Raya elMora, minutes later. "Please, come in."

Kirk entered her cubicle with a smile. "I hope I'm more presentable this time."

"I'm certain we both are," she said. Then her smile faded. "Thank you for all your help last night. I'm certain a number of lives were saved."

"I hope so," said Kirk, seating himself in the chair Raya offered. "Despicable act, targeting an orphanage like that."

"Of course," said Raya, with a slight tremble. She rang a small bell on her desk, and her assistant entered, bearing a tray, two glasses, and a carafe. "Will you join me?" she asked, as she poured.

"Is this the same stuff we drank last night?" asked Kirk, smiling warily.

"The unfermented version," she replied with a laugh. She handed him a glass that Kirk offered in a toast.

"To the friendship of all tribes of Mestiko and the Federation."

"I can certainly agree to that," she said. They clinked glasses, and drank.

"Delicious," said Kirk, after a cautious taste.

"I told you it was unfermented."

"Yes, but many things on this planet harbor more danger than they might seem to."

Raya drained her own glass- Kirk noted that its stem carried two small niches for dual thumbs- and put it down. "I don't know what that means," she said, finally.

Kirk smiled. "You'll have to learn to speak the language of diplomacy if you're going to head a people."

"James, what are you talking about?"

He frowned. "We discovered a spacecraft last night, trying to bring another satellite down on the Norrb Refugee Center."

Raya actually gasped. She gave an involuntary shudder that almost toppled the small tray; Kirk caught it just in time. "Thank you," she said. "But what do you want?"

"I want to examine the Jo'Payav and its records," said Kirk. "I have to ask you to prove that your ship wasn't the one we chased last night."

"Why...of course it wasn't," she said. "To even think so is absurd- "

"Not so absurd, Raya. The ship we detected had a warp drive, and there's only one warp-capable spacecraft on the planet."

"James," she said, stiffly, "I resent your implication."

"Not as much as I would resent having to pull more refugees out of more wreckage."

"How can you even think our people are involved in- ?"

"I'm not saying all your people are. I'm not saying any of them are. Perhaps only some who have access to that spacecraft."

"Don't you trust us?"

Kirk shrugged fatalistically. "As much as you trust us. Your expression of support to Councillor Traal last night could have been a more ringing endorsement. There is no evidence at this time to recommend legal proceedings."

Raya waved a hand, as though to dispel Kirk's statements. "I have to use that kind of language with Traal. He has already scattered the seeds of doubt concerning me among the Zamestaad."

"Then you have no reason not to give us the logs," said Kirk.

Their eyes locked for what seemed a long time. On the edge of his vision, Kirk saw a steady beat in her graceful neck.

"Very well," she said. "I'll have the logs transmitted to the Enterprise- "

"I'd prefer a look at the actual ship- now," Kirk said. Before Raya knew what had happened, Kirk had risen, drawn her chair back, and was ushering her forward.

Her cheeks, under her tattoos, colored. "So this is a matter of trust."

"It's a matter of maintaining trust between allies," said Kirk, before he opened his communicator. "And I trust you can provide the coordinates to our transporter chief?"

"May I not at least inform the crew that we'll be coming?"

"I'd rather surprise them."

Kirk had them beamed back to the Enterprise and Spock summoned. When the science officer arrived, tricorder in hand, the three of them materialized in the hangar.

Raya gestured before her. "There it is, Captain, the Jo'Payav." Despite her barely restrained anger at Kirk, her voice carried a measurable amount of pride.

The hangar was a Spartan affair, unadorned gray reinforced walls arcing upward to a barely perceptible hatch in the ceiling. The ship was a match for its surroundings, a sweeping silver shape that nearly blended into the walls, and looked in motion even when standing still.

A maintenance crew around the craft looked up in alarm when Kirk and Raya first appeared, confused by their presence, and became even more distraught when a squad of security forces charged the room.

"Thank you, Colonel," said Raya, nodding to the officer who led the troops. The colonel, a hard-bitten middle-aged man, looked at them with a mixture of curiosity and hostility, but he relaxed when he recognized his Jo'Zamestaad.

"Madam Councillor," he said, saluting. "We were not expecting you."

"That was the intent of our guests," replied Raya. "Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, this is Colonel maTara."

MaTara, impressed despite himself, gave Kirk the traditional Payav handshake. "The captain wishes to inspect the Jo'Payav logs."

"Will you require internal access?" asked maTara.

"I first wish to scan the craft's exterior," said Spock. He proceeded to walk slowly around the silver ship, working the instrumentation of the tricorder, his expression unchanging. "Thank you. Now I request access to the ship's interior."

"As Madam Councillor wishes," said Colonel maTara, his tone implying that giving offworlders access to the craft would not be his responsibility. He approached the ship, lowered a small concealed panel in its side, and tapped a security code into the revealed keyboard, dexterously using both thumbs of his right hand. Seconds later, the hatch, well disguised in the lines of the ship, arced open.

"After you," said Raya, bowing to Kirk. Kirk, in turn, nodded to Spock, who briskly climbed the stairs that had automatically lowered. Then Kirk motioned Raya aboard.

The ship was quite small; it reminded Kirk of some of the training craft he had piloted at the Academy in his first, uneasy flights. Raya followed Spock to the bridge, with Kirk bringing up the rear.

The bridge held four seats, their backs to one another at the four compass points. Spock, who had never set foot in the ship before, strode to the seat occupied by the equivalent of the science officer and scanned its console with the tricorder.

"The recording computer is at this station, Captain." The tricorder began its customary warble as Spock's long fingers worked the instrument. Seconds later, Spock, after having viewed the tricorder screen, looked at Kirk and shook his head. "The last time the Jo'Payav was utilized for transport was three days ago," he said.

"You're sure?" asked Kirk, then bit his tongue.

"I am, Captain," said Spock, "its log is quite specific. And while it is possible that such records can be altered, it is extremely difficult to do so without leaving some residual evidence, none of which is present here.

"Additionally, even considering an altered log as a possibility, the hull of the Jo'Payav contains no traces

of the radiation it would have been subjected to had it been in proximity with Satellite 158, nor of the damage we detected to its matter/antimatter core. I can state conclusively that the Jo'Payav was not the ship that tried to send Satellite 158 out of orbit last night."

"I see," said Kirk. "Thank you, Spock." Spock nodded respectfully to Raya, and left the bridge. Kirk faced MaTara, bowing gratefully. "Thank you, Colonel MaTara. I hope you understand the necessity for inquiries such as this during times like these."

MaTara seemed uncertain whether he was being insulted or not, then finally chose the side of grace. "Of course, Captain. Please contact me if I can be of any future assistance." Kirk shook hands with him again, and the Payav colonel moved off.

Kirk took a deep breath and turned to Raya, who stood stiffly, as though waiting for something. "My apologies," said Kirk, with a little nod. "I trust the Jo'Zamestaad will understand that, with the current climate, we had to be certain."

"I understand," said Raya, after a long pause. "And I trust you will remember this incident the next time you deem such an investigation necessary."

"Raya," said Kirk intently, "is it possible there is another warp-capable ship on Mestiko? That your technology has somehow been stolen by another nation?"

Raya, momentarily frustrated by this seeming change of tack, thought for a moment, then threw her hands up. "I don't know. It is possible, I suppose, but we have maintained thorough security throughout the ship's construction and maintenance."

"All right," said Kirk, bringing out his communicator. "We'll be in touch. Scotty, stand by for transport."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain," said Spock, "there is no logical reason for positing the existence of a second spacecraft. Such a conjecture is pure supposition."

Kirk nodded glumly. "Perhaps the recon party can help us out on that."

## CHAPTER 11

"Scanning sector 17-B," said Chekov, peering into the scanner of the shuttlecraft Armstrong. "No sign of unidentified base."

"Acknowledged," said Sinclair, making a notation on her electronic clipboard.

"Scanning sector 17-C," said Chekov. "No sign of unidentified base."

"Acknowledged."

Sinclair sighed.

"Scanning sector 17-D- " said Chekov.

"Let me guess," said Kyle, from his position at the navigational control grid, "'no sign of unidentified base.'"

"Very good," said Chekov, "you must have mastered the Vulcan mind-meld."

"I'd rather have mastered the art of navigating while I'm asleep," said Kyle, stifling a yawn.

"I've seen your navigation," said Sulu, slyly. "I thought you already had."

They all laughed, the tension breaking, if only for a moment, which was Sulu's intention.

"Well," said Sinclair, "that killed a few seconds. Now what?"

"Keep scanning," said Sulu. "This is still better than stellar cartography."

"Scanning sector 17-E," began Chekov. Then he peered more intently into the scanner. "Sulu, I think I've got something."

"Send the data," said Sulu. "Let's see." After a few seconds, Sulu nodded slowly. "I think we have got something here, but it's difficult to tell."

"Those are definitely plasma traces," said Chekov, "perhaps exhaust from a spacefaring vessel."

"Or maybe a false positive," said Kyle. "These instruments are very delicate, but that makes them easier to knock off calibration."

"We're going to need more than that to take to the captain," said Sinclair.

"All right," said Sulu, "if anyone is down there, you can bet they're watching us, as well. I'm taking us to the next sector, nice and easy, just like we didn't find a thing."

"But- " began Sinclair.

"Then we'll double back on foot and see if we can't get some definite positive readings. Sinclair, find us a cozy spot to set down."

"Right," said Sinclair, bringing up the planetary maps. "Looks like there's good cover right over that next ridge."

\* \* \*

"I'd like to get my hands on whoever designed these environmental suits," said Kyle, putting on the helmet.

"Just make sure your seals are nice and tight," said Sulu. "You don't want to get a whiff of that sewage they call an atmosphere, let alone come into contact with that acid rain."

"Yes, Mother," said Chekov.

"Everybody ready?"

"Yes, thanks," Sinclair replied. Though she had been fully trained on the use of environmental suits, she had never worn one on an actual mission. Through the visor of her suit she caught Sulu giving her a wink, and grinned in reply.

"Intercom check." The other three gave the standard reply as they heard Sulu's voice crackle over the interiors of their helmets. "All right, let's go." Sulu worked the controls next to the main hatch of the Armstrong, blowing out the atmosphere as the hatch rose.

Setting foot on Mestiko was like walking underwater, something Sinclair had actually done back home on Alpha Centauri. But the Opal Ocean back home was clear and beautiful, with visibility for several dozen meters. On Mestiko, the brown air only permitted viewing a few feet ahead. There was moonlight, but like the sun in the ocean, it was refracted through the atmosphere, its faint presence more taunting than providing any real illumination.

"Keep someone in sight at all times," said Sulu. "We don't want anyone lost. Adjust your faceplate controls to make maximum use of what little illumination there is. And move at a steady pace. If they're using motion sensors, they won't be of much use here."

They stalked through the plain toward Sector 17-E. It was difficult to tell what the terrain might have been like under normal conditions, Sinclair thought. Even in the suit it was incredibly cold, and the land itself was bleak and quiet. Not just still, but absolutely silent- another similarity to moving underwater. Sinclair associated the great outdoors with the sounds of birds and insects and living things making all kinds of racket. This kind of silence wasn't natural on land.

But then, what aspect of the mission to this planet was?

They tromped across the terrain for an hour, pausing twice for short breaks.

"We're coming up on it now," Sulu's voice sounded over the intercom. Ahead of them loomed a small rise of ground, seeming to waver a little as seen through the befouled air. "We'll split into two teams, taking as many tricorder readings as we can. If you pick up any signs of interference, don't be shy about letting the others know. Chekov, you and Kyle take the southern face. Sinclair, you're with me."

"That's right," Chekov said with mock annoyance, "I get stuck with Kyle, and you get Sinclair."

"Who's stuck with whom?" Kyle replied in like tones.

"Do you hear me complaining?" asked Sinclair.

"Hasn't serving under Captain Kirk taught you anything, Chekov?" Sulu chuckled. "Let's go, Sinclair."

"Age before beauty."

Sulu and Sinclair made their way to the mound, tricorders warbling as they made readings. "I'm definitely getting power-generation readings," said Sulu. "How about you?"

"Me, too. Some kind of technology and- whoa!"

"What is it?"

"I think I- " Sinclair rapidly made an adjustment to her tricorder. "Yeah, I got a warp signature for just a second there."

"Did you get it down?"

"Right here in my tricorder."

"Terrific. Sulu to Kyle. We've got what we need, let's go."

The trip back to the Armstrong seemed quicker than the trip away. Once back inside, Sulu didn't even

get rid of his enviro suit before activating the motor. His still-filtered voice asked, "How are we, Kyle?" Kyle had at least removed his helmet. "Fine, Sulu, just take us out low and tight."

"Exactly as planned," said Sulu, as the shuttlecraft rose. He removed his helmet with a pneumatic hiss, and then added, "Give me a course a couple hundred kilometers away before we take any altitude."

"Sulu," said Chekov, "I think we've got company."

"Have they picked us up?"

"I think so," said Chekov, staring into the scanner. "They may have been waiting for us to lift off to give them a better target."

"Anything to be an obliging guest," muttered Sulu. "Get ready for some turbulence."

"Sulu," said Sinclair, "I'm reading weapon s powering up- "

It was as though the shuttlecraft were slapped by a giant hand. The craft swerved to port, reeled, and tried to right itself. There was a moment of nausea before the inertial dampers caught up, then they were flung to the right.

"Playing with us," said Sulu, angrily. "All right, then..."

"Tractor beam!" said Kyle. "They've got us!" Even without Kyle's warning, Sulu could feel their progress slow.

"Not yet, they haven't," Sulu said with amazing calm. "Sinclair, prepare to discharge the secondary fuel line."

Confused both by his calm and his orders, Sinclair said, "What? Why will that- ?"

"To give them a slap on the wrist they won't forget. Prepare the discharge, and wait until I give the order."

Still confused, Sinclair said, "Yes, sir."

"We're close now," said Chekov. "I'm still having trouble making out their ship, but- "

"Now, Sulu?" Sinclair asked anxiously.

"When I give the order. Where are they, Chekov?"

"Right behind us. I'm reading machinery...their hatch is opening."

"Now, Sinclair, release and ignite."

Even through the forward viewports, Sinclair could see the explosion of the ignited fuel reflected off the ship behind them. There was a moment's turbulence; then they were free. Sulu feinted to port, then pitched the Armstrong to starboard and threw all engines into maximum.

"They're arming weapons," said Kyle.

An instant later the shuttlecraft bucked forward, sending the recon team sprawling. Pulling himself back to the main controls, Sulu took one look at them and turned to the others, shouting over the alarm klaxons that now blared throughout the small craft. "Back into the suits! We're jumping ship!"

The second volley tore the back off the craft and sent them into the planet like a greased brick.

\* \* \*

Straining to remain conscious after the impact, Sulu extended one hand toward the control panel, pulling on his helmet with the other. He shook his head, why was he moving so slowly? He had to reach only one switch to send an emergency signal...

But he fell into unconsciousness with that task unaccomplished.

When he awoke, Sulu had to admit he was surprised. He had expected to find himself either dead or in the brig of a Klingon ship. But the quarters he found himself in were cramped and showed every evidence of being makeshift. The cabin's walls were unfinished and dull.

Sulu's hands were tied behind him- no surprise there. He glanced to his right, and saw Chekov, Kyle, and Sinclair, unmoving, save for their chests, which slowly rose and fell. That was something. Their environmental suits had been removed, as were their uniforms and equipment. At least they left us in our underwear, Sulu thought glumly.

Vibrations came through the floor; a second later footsteps rang outside the cabin. A section of the wall opened, revealing two natives- members of the Norrb if he wasn't mistaken- and, between them, a massive form that seemed to loom over Sulu like the side of a cliff.

"Sulu, Hikaru. Starfleet serial number- "

"I have no interest in such trivia," said Councillor Traal. "There is nothing I want from you."

"Then you won't mind letting us go." This was Sinclair, her voice raspy, but her tone defiant.

"Sinclair, don't- "

Traal nodded to one of his entourage who bent and slapped Sinclair smartly across her mouth.

"I said there was nothing I wanted from you," said Traal. "I did not say your capture served no purpose."

"My mistake," said Sulu mildly. "And I'll bet I can tell you what purpose we serve."

"Really?" Traal's heavy features smiled cynically, but his poet's eyes seemed interested. "And what is that?"

"Traal," growled a voice from behind the councillor.

Traal did not turn, but snapped, "What is it, Kiregh?"

From the shadows behind Traal emerged a Klingon. "My commander demands you speak to him." He held a communicator, which he thrust toward Traal. Traal eyed it for a moment, lifted his gaze to Kiregh, then took the instrument, grudgingly.

"Kor, what do you want?" He listened for a moment. Sulu tried to hear the other end of the conversation, but couldn't quite make it out. "No, the prisoners are mine. We agreed- " More chatter. "Very well, we will transfer them to your vessel. Yes, at the rendezvous. Traal out." Speech was still coming from the communicator as Traal shut it off and flung it away to clatter on the floor.

Kiregh and Traal locked eyes for a moment. "My apologies," said Traal, "I'm all fingers today." Kiregh looked at the communicator for a moment, bent slowly to recover it, then left the chamber.

Traal looked at Sulu and smiled. Sulu noted that he was showing teeth. "I wish we had the pleasure of your company for a longer time, Starfleet. I think that soon you will wish the same."

"I don't like the sound of that," said Chekov, after Traal and his men had left.

"At least we know for certain that Traal is in bed with the Klingons," said Kyle, his voice a little groggy.

"Not that there's much we can do with that intelligence."

Despite the circumstances, Sulu smiled. "Everyone okay? All right, try to stay limber. You never know when we'll get a chance."

"We're in it pretty bad, aren't we?" asked the timid voice of Sinclair.

"We've been in worse," Sulu said, trying to sound reassuring. "Just stay ready for any opportunity. Get back-to-back and try to untie each other."

"You never did get to tell Traal what purpose you think we serve in this," said Sinclair.

Grimly, Sulu said, "Bait."

## CHAPTER 12

"Where's Sulu?" asked Kirk, rhetorically. "He should have checked in forty-five minutes ago."

"Forty-three minutes and eighteen seconds," said Spock.

Kirk rose from the command chair restlessly. "Uhura, any luck in raising them?"

Uhura's chair swiveled as she faced Kirk. "No, sir. They're not receiving at all."

"Keep trying. Spock, any clue as to their whereabouts?"

"None, Captain. I have scanned for their engine signature as well as the transtators in their environmental suits. Neither has yielded any data."

"Captain," came a tentative voice from across the bridge.

"Yes, Dr. Lon?" asked Kirk.

Lon looked up from a console, speaking rapidly. "I've just accessed all the remaining satellites. Their sensors show no signs of having registered any spacecraft."

Kirk nodded, grateful that Lon seemed to have gotten over his snit. "Thank you, Doctor. Send your reports to Mr. Spock for calibration."

Nodding, Lon turned to do so.

Kirk turned to the helm. "Mr. Farrell, take us over the eastern continent. As low an orbit as you can get away with without alarming the authorities."

"Aye, sir."

What seemed like an hour later- though Kirk knew it was far less- he approached Spock again. "Any sign of them?"



"No, sir," said Spock, "no signs at all. That in itself is suspicious; if they had crashed or were forced to abandon the shuttlecraft, there would be wreckage left behind, but this points to the shuttlecraft having been taken into custody."

Kirk thought for a moment, then turned to Uhura. "Get me Colonel maTara."

Moments later, the Payav colonel appeared on the viewscreen. "Yes, Captain Kirk?" He sounded wary, as if expecting some kind of test.

"Colonel," said Kirk, with the hearty manner of one colleague to another, "have you picked up any signs of an unauthorized ship on your planet? Specifically, of any other warp-capable craft developed by any other people of Mestiko."

MaTara frowned. "The designs of the Jo'Payav have been under maximum security, Captain- "

"And as we discussed earlier today, we all know how porous such security can be. Some of my people may have been captured, and- "

"I understand. Can you please hold?" The screen went blank for a few seconds. "Captain," said maTara, when the screen was activated again, "we do have some records of an unauthorized craft in our airspace. Obviously, we have kept such reports on a need-to-know basis- "

"Of course, Colonel. But time is of the essence here. As a ship captain yourself, I'm sure you realize how- "

"Of course," said maTara, understanding, as Kirk was hoping he would, the captain's urgency. He glanced offscreen, and Kirk heard the click of a keyboard. "I've just transmitted the coordinates at which we've detected unauthorized activity. If such a ship is anywhere- if it even exists- that may be your best chance."

Kirk glanced at Uhura, who nodded. "Thank you, Colonel. Would you care to join us in a little hunt?"

MaTara smiled. "It would be an honor, Captain."

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"These are the coordinates Colonel maTara sent, Captain," said Uhura, ten minutes later.

Mestiko, looking as though caught in an eternal dust storm, hung in space a few hundred thousand kilometers away. "Spock, anything?"

"The presence of the Jo'Payav approaching, Captain."

"Uhura, on-screen."

"Captain," said maTara, a moment later, "how may we aid you in your search?"

"Captain," said Spock urgently, "I am reading the presence of another- "

His next words were drowned in the sound of an explosion. When Kirk picked himself up, he said, "What the hell was that?"

"An unidentified ship has just fired at us, Captain," said Spock. "And...I read a Klingon battle cruiser, type D-7, approaching at full impulse."

"Raise shields! Red alert," said Kirk. "Sound battle stations!"

## CHAPTER 13

The image on the viewscreen shattered, then coalesced again, this time showing the visage of Councillor Traal, standing on a small but efficiently designed bridge. "Kirk," he thundered triumphantly, "I demand your surrender!"

"Another signal, sir," said Uhura. "This one from Commander Kor."

"It never rains, but it pours," said Kirk grimly. He turned to his science officer. "Damage report."

"Minor hull damage along decks six and seven, Captain. No major structural damage yet. However, we are boxed in by three ships. No chance of escape sitting still as we are." Kirk nodded and turned to his left.

Kirk slammed his fist on the intercom. "Scotty, make us look more damaged than we are. Vent some plasma from the exhaust ports. Give us a fake limp. Buy me some time."

"Aye, sir," said Scotty from engineering, "let me see what I can do."

Uhura said, "Commander Kor is waiting impatiently, Captain."

"I'm sure he is. On-screen. See if you can make this a conference call."

"Aye, sir...I have them all, Captain."

The viewscreen was now segmented in thirds. The faces of maTara, Traal, and Commander Kor now glared at Kirk. Kor spoke first: "The Organians shall not prevent our battle this time, Captain. And it will be glorious."

"I can understand Traal being on the Klingons' leash," said Kirk, "but what about you, maTara? What do they have on you?"

"Do not answer!" Traal snapped.

MaTara shrugged. "What does it matter, Traal?" To Kirk, he said, "They are going to take me and my family off this planet. To a place fit for children to grow up in."

"More likely a Klingon relocation camp," said Kirk, tersely. "I have to hand it to you, though, Colonel- I thought I was a better judge of character. You took me in completely."

"That will make an excellent epitaph, Kirk," said Kor.

"Aren't you being a little premature, Commander?"

"I think not." The Klingon sneered, and Kirk was afraid he knew the ace Kor had under his sash. "Traal, show Kirk your guests."

The image flickered again, to show Sulu, Chekov, Kyle, and Sinclair, lying on a floor, stripped of their uniforms, their hands apparently tied behind them.

Knowing it to be futile, Kirk nonetheless said, "I demand you release my officers."

"I will," said Traal, "when you and all Federation influence have left Mestiko."

"I can't let their lives make any difference," said Kirk. "And they knew that when they signed on."

"Excellent, Captain," Kor said with a grin. "We shall have some sport after all."

"You have an odd idea of 'sport,' Kor- three ships against one."

"The battle shall be between the Enterprise and the Klothis, Kirk."

"Whenever you're ready, Kor," said Kirk, smiling coldly. "Screen off."

As the viewscreen returned to the image of the three vessels that hemmed in the Enterprise, Uhura said, "Sir, the ships are still communicating with one another- and their signals aren't encrypted!"

Kirk whirled around. "What?"

Uhura rarely smiled so broadly on duty, but she did so now. "My guess is that the Klingons aren't trusting Traal and maTara with their codes."

"On audio, Lieutenant."

Kor was in midsentence when Uhura put it on the speakers. "- your orders, maTara. Proceed on your mission."

It was Traal who replied to that. "'Mission'? What do you mean, Kor?"

"Space Central is about to receive a visitor, Traal- another satellite."

At the same moment, both Lon and Traal said "What?"

"Your people are stiff-necked," said Kor. "Their spirits need softening. Another tragedy will at once further that process, eliminate the Zamestaad, and install you as supreme ruler of the planet- as per our agreement."

"Kor," said Traal, "there is no need for more death. I sent the first satellite out of orbit as you demanded. Why make maTara the deliverer of a second?"

"So he will know obedience," said Kor. MaTara hissed, as if he felt the crack of a whip on his back, but made no reply.

"Kor," said Traal, "my people have suffered- "

"Your people have only begun to suffer," said Kor. "Another Federation satellite coming to call should make them beg to become citizens of the Klingon Empire- as well as make them quite tractable subjects for you. Colonel maTara, you have the coordinates, and your orders."

For the first time, maTara spoke. "I understand. The satellite positioned over Space Central has been targeted, with the satellite over the Norrb Refugee Center laid in."

"Damn you, Kor!" thundered Traal. "You would attack my own people?"

"Captain," said Spock, "Traal's ship has left position to pursue the Jo'Payav."

"Traal!" Kor screamed, "return immediately- " The channel was cut with a blare of static.

Kirk smiled grimly. "Looks like I'm not the only bad judge of character around here. Spock, did he

transfer the prisoners?"

"Both ships still have shields raised, Captain. The hostages are still aboard Traal's ship."

To Farrell, Kirk said, "Get after him, Mister."

"Aye, sir."

Spock said, "The Klothos is pursuing us, Captain."

The ship shuddered again.

"A disruptor blast to our aft section," said Spock. "Deflected by our shields- just barely."

"Mr. Riley, direct a pinpoint phaser beam to Traal's ship. Burrow through his shields, and find Sulu's team." He tapped the intercom. "Scotty, prepare to send a transporter beam through to get them out of there."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain," Spock said, "we will need to lower shields to beam them aboard."

"I know," said Kirk. "So we'd better do it while we still have shields to lower."

\* \* \*

Aboard the Jo'Payav, Colonel maTara sat uneasily in the center seat. To betray his own people and his oath by divulging the specifications of his ship to the Norrb was bad enough. But to send a satellite plunging into an occupied area, to cause destruction and death to his own people...this was a line he had hoped never to cross.

"Colonel," said his first officer, "we are approaching the satellite."

"Prepare computer interface," said maTara, closing his eyes. He did this for his children, so they would not be trapped on this dead planet simply because their father's orders did not permit him to be assigned offworld. We cannot afford to lose your leadership on the Jo'Payav, they had said. We need you here. The colonel prayed his children would never learn of this. And that if they did, they would forgive him for what he did in their names.

\* \* \*

"You don't understand," whimpered Sinclair. "You've just got to let us go. The Klingons will torture us, they'll- "

"Without orders to do so, Traal would have my head," replied the Norrb guard. He seemed an unimaginative sort, and did not look prone to hyper-bole.

"Then let me go," said Sinclair. "I'll go with you, I'll be your prisoner, I'll- "

"Sinclair!" snapped Sulu, "remember you're a Starfleet officer."

"That's what got me into this," she said, maintaining eye contact with the guard. "Please! I'll do anything." Two small tears leaked from her eyes.

"Will you, now?" The guard smiled and approached Sinclair, his right thumb scratching the corners of his mouth as he knelt to speak to her. "And how do you define any- "

This statement was never completed. Sinclair's long legs shot up like catapults. The balls of her feet, bound together, slammed against the Norrb's chin, sending his head back with an audible snap.

"I knew it was a mistake for the Mestikans not to allow women in their space fleet," said Kyle, as Sinclair made her way, none too gracefully, to the guard. She took the knife he wore on his belt and held it behind her, its blade tracing an uncertain path through the air.

"Who wants to be cut loose first?" she asked.

"How about if I free you?" asked Sulu, watching the wavering knife blade cautiously. "I am in charge."

\* \* \*

"Damage to the port nacelle," said Spock, as the Enterprise shook.

"Mr. Riley, Mr. Farrell, evasive action," said Kirk. "And make it good. Scotty, how's that beam-out coming along?"

"Little by little, sir," said Scotty. "Their shields're strippin' away, bit by bit."

The ship rocked again. Kirk smelled burning circuitry. "I think you can say the same for us."

\* \* \*

"The Earther flees, Commander," said Kor's weapons officer. "He fears us!"

"Cowards are not given commands of starships," replied Kor, sitting forward in his command chair. "Kirk

has some plan, and I do not care to find out what it is." He hammered a control console and spoke into the intercom. "More speed! More power to weapons!"

\* \* \*

"Prepare to interface with the satellite's navigational computer," said Colonel maTara. Then the ship shook.

"Captain, we are being fired upon!"

"By whom? Kirk?"

"No, sir, by- by Councillor Traal!"

"Traal?" MaTara shook his head. "No matter. Abandon the satellite interface. Target satellite and fire!"

"Firing, sir!"

Crimson energy lanced from the Jo'Payav and struck the nearest satellite, thousands of kilometers away. It wobbled in its orbit, then plunged toward Mestiko.

"Now," shouted maTara, "turn and- "

A moment later, the Jo'Payav erupted like a firecracker.

\* \* \*

"The Jo'Payav is down, sir!" said Traal's helm officer.

"But the satellite?"

"On a collision course with the planet, sir," said his science officer.

"Fire upon it! Destroy it!"

The weapons officer turned. "All banks were exhausted in destroying the Jo'Payav, sir."

Traal shook his head. He would not have wished it to end this way, but if it must..."Prepare to intercept!"

\* \* \*

"Which way's the transporter room?" asked Sulu, as they crept down a corridor.

"I don't think they have one," said Kyle. "And it's too small for escape pods."

"If the ship is that small, perhaps we can take the bridge," said Chekov. "There can't be that many of them."

"Does anyone else smell something burning?" asked Sinclair.

\* \* \*

"Captain," Spock said, "Councillor Traal's ship has fired upon and destroyed the Jo'Payav, and has entered a course to intercept the satellite disrupted by Colonel maTara. Its hull temperature is two thousand degrees. I do not believe this is a maneuver they intend to return from."

"You hear that, Scotty?" said Kirk. "Send the transporter beam through, now!"

"I've got only a partial lock on them, Captain! I can't be sure we'll get them!"

"It's a better chance than they'll have if they stay on that ship," said Kirk. "Energize!"

"Captain," said Scotty, seconds later, "we've got 'em! All four of 'em!"

"Get them to sickbay," said Kirk. The ship again lurched sickeningly. "Now let's save the ship, Mr. Spock."

"We may be beyond that point, Captain," said Spock, as if commenting on the weather. "Photon torpedoes are exhausted, phaser power is down to forty percent, shields down to thirty percent."

\* \* \*

"Commander, Traal's ship has collided with the satellite set out of orbit by the Jo'Payav. It has been destroyed, with all hands, as has the Jo'Payav."

"Better for Traal that he died," said Kor, shaking his head. "Well, we will still wring a victory from this day. Fire full disruptors on the Enterprise."

\* \* \*

"We've still got warp power, Captain," said Riley. "We can give them a run for their money."

Kirk shook his head. "Stick close to the planet. Within the envelope of interference created by the Pulse."

"Such a maneuver will interfere with the Klingons' sensors, Captain, but probably not enough to let us escape," said Spock.

"I'm not looking to escape," replied Kirk, "I'm looking to give them some vision problems. Uhura, access the satellites we distributed over the planet."

"Let me, Captain," said Lon, approaching Kirk. He looked a little green around the gills, and sounded compliant, even desperate. Kirk guessed that this was his first taste of space combat. "I'm already familiar with their interface mode."

Kirk gestured across the bridge to an empty seat. "Uhura, patch Dr. Lon into the auxiliary communications station."

"Shields down to twenty-five percent, Captain," said Spock, as the ship shuddered again.

"What is it you want, Captain?" asked Lon.

"Contact the six nearest satellites, plot an intercept course. Bring them alongside us- and hurry."

"Commander Kor is contacting us, Captain," said Uhura. "He's asking for our surrender."

"No answer, Uhura. I can already imagine the look on his face."

"Satellites accessed, Captain."

"Reprogram the satellites, have them send the Enterprise's identification signal. Spock, Uhura, give him a hand."

Spock nodded and turned to his console. "Do you think such a ruse will be sufficient, Captain?"

Kirk's reply was almost drowned out by another groan from the ship. "In a few minutes, we'll both know."

\* \* \*

"Commander," said Kor's science officer, not taking his eyes from his console, "the Federation ship still flees."

Kor was silent for a moment. "I thought this a ruse of Kirk's. I thought I knew him better than that. How petty of him to lessen the sweetness of my victory. Still, I shall be made a captain for removing this thorn from the empire's side. Target full disruptors and- "

"Commander," said the science officer, slowly, "we now read seven Federation ships, all carrying the Enterprise identification signal."

"What? One of them must be our target! Locate the true ship and- "

"Commander, electromagnetic interference from the planetary medium makes closer targeting impossible. Request- "

"Target them one at a time, then! Destroy them all! Before- !"

Suddenly the Klothos shook, like a branch caught in a high wind. "Commander, the Enterprise- all of them- have reversed course and are attacking."

\* \* \*

"All available power to the phaser banks, Scotty," said Kirk urgently over the intercom. "It won't be long before they see through my little ruse."

"One satellite has been destroyed, Captain," said Spock.

"Send another on a collision course with their bridge."

\* \* \*

"What was that?" demanded Kor, as a tremor passed through his ship. "That did not feel like a phaser blast."

"A collision with some foreign body, Commander. Forward shields are down to seventy percent."

"All power to forward shields. Fire again!"

\* \* \*

"Their forward shields are weakened, Captain, they're diverting power to strengthen them."

"Target their engineering section, and fire."

\* \* \*

"Commander, engineering reports taking- " This report was interrupted as his console exploded. Smoke filled the bridge. Kor rose from his command seat, as if this would give his orders increased emphasis and his fist smashed his communications console. "Engineering! Engineering, answer or- !"  
"Engineering does not respond, Command- " The Klothos shook again. "We are running on impulse engines only."

"Reverse course," said Kor, finally.

\* \* \*

"The Klothos has broken off pursuit, Captain," said Spock. "It seems to be heading for open space. Shall we pursue?"

"No need to press our advantage," said Kirk. "I think we've taught them enough of a lesson for one day. Secure from red alert."

"Secured from red alert, sir."

"Redeploy the remaining satellites, Dr. Lon- and thanks for your help."

"You're welcome, sir," replied Lon.

Kirk hammered a button on his chair arm urgently. "Sickbay. Bones, how's the recon team?"

"No permanent damage, Jim," replied McCoy, "unless you count the coddling Nurse Chapel is giving them."

"Battle damage?"

The physician's voice lowered. "Three dead, fifteen wounded."

"Thank you, Doctor," sighed Kirk, after a moment. "Kirk out. Mr. Farrell, reverse course."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk shook his head as conversations erupted around him. Three dead. It could have been worse. But it could have been better. It could always be better.

#### CHAPTER 14

Captain's Log, Stardate 3297.8:

Dr. Lon's satellite fleet has been restored to full strength. With almost two hundred satellites doing the work, the loss of four is negligible to the overall effort. The satellites are continuing the work they were designed for. Dr. Lon will be remaining on Mestiko for the duration to supervise satellite maintenance and to act as liaison for the Federation.

The Federation will replace the Jo'Payav, agreeing with my argument that its existence serves as a vital symbol of the future of all Mestiko.

Commendations to the recon team for their meritorious service, and a special civilian commendation to Dr. Lon as well.

"And never let it be forgotten," said Kirk, pausing for emphasis as he looked out over the assembled mourners, "that Colonel maTara and Councillor Traal gave their lives to the cause of preserving their people and their planet in the face of subjugation by the Klingon Empire." Kirk stepped back and pulled a cord, unveiling the rather severe memorial to maTara and Traal that had been erected in the center of Space Central. As he stepped back to his chair behind the dais, Spock caught his eye, and Kirk shrugged.

"Fellow members of the Zamestaad," said Raya, "a toast to our friends from the Federation." She raised a glass of the native liquor, and Kirk was privately delighted to see even the members of the Zamestaad who most hated the Federation complying, so much so that he decided not to rub it in.

"Thank you so much," said Raya, at the reception afterward.

"I was glad to speak," said Kirk.

"I mean for what you said about Traal and maTara. Their families may be comforted," she said, lifting a glass of the native liquor, "though I doubt it was the literal truth."

"Sometimes a lie can serve the bigger picture more faithfully," whispered Kirk. "Your planet needs heroes now more than ever. I decided to give them some."

Raya was silent for a moment as she surveyed the room. "I'm disappointed the Klingons did not attend," she said, "though I'm not surprised."

"The Klingons will be wiping egg off their faces for some time," said Kirk. "I don't think you'll have to worry about them."

Her brow furrowed quizzically. "I don't think you understand, James. If it is in the best interests of Mestiko to do business with the Klingons, Mestiko will do just that."

"Even after what they did?"

"After what Traal allowed them to do," she said. "And is what they did really any worse than what the Federation did? Or, rather, did not do?"

She turned to meet Kirk's gaze, and they stared at each other for several seconds. Then she turned and

walked off.

Kirk stood there for a moment, then opened his communicator. "Now, Scotty. Beam the package down."

\* \* \*

"Sometimes I almost think Spock has the right idea," said McCoy, lowering his glass. "Almost," he emphasized.

"Regarding what, Doctor?" asked Spock, his curiosity piqued.

"About not having any feelings," said McCoy.

"When I think of what the damned Federation Council said..."

"What was that, Doc?" asked Sulu.

Kirk was glad to see that he, Chekov, Kyle, and Sinclair had been working the room, enjoying themselves, seemingly none the worse for their experience, and, he hoped, better officers because of it.

"In the council's response to my report," said Kirk, "they declined to take any action against the Klingons, because Kor had been approached by a member of the Zamestaad to provide aid. Kor was, according to them, operating completely within the constraints of the peace treaty, and the council agreed that there was no treaty violation."

"Indeed," said Spock, significantly.

"Well, this isn't the last time we'll cross paths," said Sinclair.

"I just hope I'm there when they finally get caught," said Chekov.

"Excuse me," said Kirk. His gaze was fixed across the room as he watched an orderly deliver a message to Raya. She nodded, seeming somewhat puzzled, and exited the hall. Kirk placed his empty glass on a table and moved toward the door.

He caught up to Raya in her office, where she stared at a tall, slender package, loosely wrapped in bright paper. She turned as he cleared his throat.

"What is this? It is so beautiful."

"It's not the paper, it's what's inside it. It's a present," said Kirk, approaching her. He took her hand and lifted it to the package. "Unwrap it and see."

Kirk smiled as she gasped. "It's wonderful," she said. "Even more beautiful than the paper." She let the wrapping fall to the floor and took in the noggik tree seedling, running her hands over its gnarled wood, breathing its pungent fragrance.

"Mr. Sulu knows his way around our bota ny lab," said Kirk. "It will be a while before Mestiko's surface can support such growth, but I didn't want you to have to wait that long."

"I'm not sure if this will make the wait easier or more difficult," replied Raya, her blue eyes brimming with tears, "but thank you, James. I only wish- "

"I think I have the same wish," said Kirk.

TO BE CONTINUED...

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sometime in the 1980s, the members of KISS released solo albums, each one dedicated to the other three members of the group. By the second album, you pretty much figured out what was going on.

The acknowledgments for each book of Mere Anarchy are going to read a lot like that. But why not?

Though each individual eBook bears the unique stamp of its writer, the overall structure and many of the bits and the characters were worked out in mass e-mail exchanges that were as funny as they were occasionally infuriating. The end results are the products of a team, not a committee, and I thank the rest of "the usual gang of idiots" who helped make Book 2 what it is: Dayton Ward and Kevin Dilmore, Dave Galanter, Christopher L. Bennett, Margaret Wander Bonanno (the other MWB), and Howard Weinstein. (Collaborating with Howard was a rush for me as he wrote one of the Star Trek animateds, "The Pirates of Orion," and thus actually worked with Shatner, Nimoy, and Kelley; how cool is that?)

Either we all deserve special commendations for putting up with editor Keith DeCandido, or he deserves a special commendation for putting up with us. Probably both- commendations all around!

In writing this story I sometimes wondered how I would have felt if, at 9:30 PM on September 8, 1966, having just seen the premiere of Star Trek, I had been told that four decades later I would be contributing

to a story designed to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of that series. That will never be known, but I think my younger self would have been amazed and pleased. Over the years Star Trek has been a source of entertainment, inspiration, and sometimes even income, and I have always tried to do my best by the Enterprise crew and the examples of Gene Roddenberry and Gene L. Coon. At its worst- which it sinks to no more often than any other American television production- Star Trek is still an agreeable visit with old friends. At its best- which it achieves no less often than any other American television production- Star Trek entertains, lifts the spirit, lightens the heart, and provides that sense of redemption without which no creative endeavor can ever aspire to the title of Art.

It can never be known how I would have felt back in 1966. But I do know how I feel today.

To quote James T. Kirk from Star Trek II: "I feel young."

MWB

May 1, 2006

About the Author

MIKE W. BARR is the author of the 2003 Star Trek novel, Gemini, and has written Star Trek comics for Marvel, DC, Malibu, and TokyoPop, the latter a manga-style story to also celebrate the 40th anniversary of TOS. Primarily a comic book writer for many years, creating and writing such series as Camelot 3000, The Maze Agency, Mantra, and Batman and the Outsiders, Mike is concentrating more on prose nowadays, having contributed short stories to anthologies and magazines, including Noir, the Illustrated Crime Fiction Quarterly; Hot Blood: Crimes of Passion; Path of the Bold, which won The 2005 Origin Award, awarded by the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts and Design, for Best Fiction Publication; Star Wars Insider; and Kolchak: the Night Stalker Chronicles, an anthology based on the 1970s cult TV show. He is still the writer of Secret Agent X-9 for King Features Syndicate, the popular Internet fantasy comic strip Sorcerer of Fortune, and is writing a fantasy novel.