

Chapter 1

"Damned violation of my rights is what this is." Leonard McCoy spat that- and a few other things that turned heads- at the blank expressions of the two Starfleet security officers as they stood next to his table. All eyes in the restaurant had been on the pair of uniforms since they'd disrupted the atmosphere by beaming directly to the hostess's station, but now the patrons were looking more at McCoy.

The older of the two security agents was on the short side, wiry, but had an air of confidence and authority. His younger, more athletic, female counterpart was inexperienced enough to look amused at McCoy's situation, a small smirk playing at her lips. "We have our orders, sir," she said.

"Where've I heard that before?" McCoy muttered. "Is there a charge, or a plan, or do I just sit here until Kingdom Come?"

This time the male officer spoke. "Our instructions are to hold you here until we receive further orders from the admiral, sir."

"I'm not a 'sir,' Lieutenant. I've resigned. I'm a civilian. Do you understand that?" McCoy tried to keep his voice in check, but people continued to stare. And why shouldn't they? How often did anyone beam into a small family restaurant in Fox Chase, Kentucky?

"Yes, sir," the man said.

"Then stop calling me 'sir.'" McCoy grumbled.

"We'll try, sir," the woman said. Her youth was showing. She was amusing herself at McCoy's expense, which was unprofessional, and it garnered a harsh look from her comrade.

McCoy noticed for the first time that while the male didn't have his phaser out, his hand did hover over the weapon in its holster.

"Do I threaten you, son?" McCoy asked.

The man smiled, and his brow crinkled a bit, probably at the unique thought of McCoy's thin, almost frail frame being menacing. "No, sir."

"Then take your hand away from that weapon. This is a public venue," McCoy barked, then motioned toward his half-empty dinner plate and the silverware on it. "Unless you think I'm going to fling my butter knife at your neck as I make my dramatic escape."

The hostess who'd seated McCoy less than an hour before and had wished him a good meal came sheepishly toward the table. Her gaze cast mostly downward with only passing sympathetic glances toward him, her voice was barely above a whisper. "Excuse me, Doctor?"

Poor girl couldn't look McCoy in the eye at all. When he'd signed for the credit transfer she was the one who said she'd have to check on why it wasn't going through, and she was the one who must have made the call about his flagged account. All that brought Starfleet Security barging in, and she obviously felt responsible. She was a sweet young girl- probably not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old- and McCoy wondered at exactly what age he'd decided people in their twenties were "children" to him, but he felt as if he must allay her guilt. "Well, it's not your fault," he said to her quietly.

She smiled meekly and whispered, "I really am sorry but we really do need y'all to move to one of the banquet rooms." Her voice trailed off and as McCoy sighed and began to move she quietly added:

"And... we still need someone to pay the bill."

"I'll take it." A familiar voice sliced into murmurs of recognition that bubbled around the man who now made his way from the entrance. The two security agents remained unmoving and yet seemed to tighten their stance as their superior neared. McCoy slumped back into his seat and waited as the murmurs hushed and the man who'd offered to pay the check lowered himself into the seat across from his doctor.

"I knew it had to be either you," McCoy said, "or Nogura."

Jim Kirk smiled pleasantly. "It's good to see you, Bones."

"Don't you 'Bones' me, 'Admiral' Kirk. What right have you got to- "

Ignoring McCoy's outburst, Kirk nodded to the two security agents. "Thank you. That'll be all."

Both nodded, stepped back to the hostess's station, and a transporter beam whisked them away in a flash of sparkle and buzz of sound as the hostess showed Kirk and McCoy to a more private room used for parties and banquets.

"Hey, listen- " McCoy tried to begin again once they were seated, but now Kirk was looking toward the

doorway and into the main dining room.

"Could I get some coffee?" He called for one of the waitstaff.

The doctor did all he could to keep his eyes from rolling back into his head with disbelief. "Excuse me- I'm ranting at you. The least you could do is have the courtesy to listen."

A young man set down a coffee cup in front of Kirk and filled it, then nodded and quickly retreated to the main dining room. No one wanted to intrude but everyone was probably watching the doorway and listening as best they could.

"Go on with your rant," Kirk said, sipping his coffee. "Get it out of your system."

"Why the devil have I been arrested?" McCoy demanded.

"You're not under arrest. The guards are gone. I just wanted to be sure I didn't lose track of you."

If anything infuriated McCoy more than the situation, it was Kirk's expression. As if he'd done nothing out of the ordinary, as if he hadn't disrupted the lives of God knows how many people in the little small-town restaurant, as if it were reasonable and rational to take a friend into custody when you want to meet him for a chat.

"How about calling me and asking me to meet you for lunch?" McCoy asked.

Kirk shrugged. "Would you have said yes?"

Good question. "I'm not sure," McCoy admitted, and felt his ire calming. Kirk sometimes had that effect, when he wanted to. McCoy would be hot and bothered about this or that and just yelling at Kirk for a while could vent the steam and quiet his anger.

"See? My way was better," Kirk offered, taking another sip of his drink. "This is really excellent coffee."

"Your way," McCoy said, jabbing his finger at Kirk, "was to put a hold on my financial accounts and have guards stop me from leaving- "

"Did you try to leave?" Kirk asked.

"Of course not."

The admiral smiled, and the grin was becoming insufferable. "If you had, they'd have followed you, not phasered you."

"That's not the damned point."

Kirk said nothing for a long moment, just looked McCoy over- as much of him as he could see- and then finally said, "You lose a little weight, Bones?"

"Yeah," McCoy said, annoyed. "You gain some?"

Kirk pursed his lips a bit. "Maybe you need a drink- "

The doctor sighed, shook his head, and raised his arms in defeat. "Jim, what's this all about?"

"Would you believe I just wanted to catch up?"

"Not for a minute," McCoy said, and Kirk gave his best impersonation of a kicked puppy. "Please, spare me the wounded expression. Just tell me what you want."

Kirk took another sip of his coffee, placed the cup slowly back on the table, and looked McCoy dead in the eyes. "I need your help, Bones."

"That's a load of bull. Unless they suddenly have no other doctors in Starfleet."

"Okay, I want your help," Kirk admitted. "Will you at least listen?"

"Do I have a choice?" McCoy motioned toward the main dining area where the security detail had been standing as if they were still there, implying that they'd suddenly beam in again and wrestle him to the ground if he put his hands over his ears as Kirk talked.

Kirk gestured toward the entrance. "If you really want to go, without even listening, I won't stop you."

There was a tense moment when McCoy thought he might do just that- walk out and leave Kirk sitting there. Let him pay the bill to boot. Would serve him right, too, McCoy thought. He was ready to do it- even placed his heels squarely on the floor, prepared to stand up and walk away. But he didn't know what Kirk really wanted, and the chances were that if it weren't serious then Kirk wouldn't have gone to the trouble. Say what you liked about Jim Kirk, he wasn't prone to flights of fancy. "I'm listening," McCoy grumbled finally.

Kirk nodded and absentmindedly toyed with the spoon in his coffee. "You remember Mestiko?"

"Sure. The pulsar disaster. Some of the harshest living conditions I've seen."

The admiral nodded, and something played in his eyes that McCoy couldn't quite put a name to. Some memory that perhaps Kirk had not shared or McCoy had forgotten. It had been some time since that particular mission, and McCoy wasn't on the Enterprise for the original visit to Mestiko when the pulsar hit. "They've come a long way in a short time, considering the massive contamination, both literal and metaphorical, but reports I read say they're at a fragile stage."

"What's this have to do with me?" McCoy asked. "Or you, for that matter? Aren't you pinned to a desk now?"

"That desk," Kirk began, a defensive tone marbling his voice, "has given me some perspective on the big picture. I have a look at shipping-line patterns, for instance, and I've noticed something that someone without some experience 'out there' might have missed." When Kirk said "out there" he crooked a thumb toward the back of the restaurant as if the endless bounds of the final frontier were just beyond the grill of the small diner. "There's a pattern that's changed," Kirk continued. "Not in supply lines that provide Mestiko her goods, but in the carriers, lines, and merchant ships that furnish the ships that supply Mestiko."

McCoy felt his brow furrow in confusion. Somewhere in the mess of lines and ships and carriers Kirk had lost him. "Once more, for the doctor in the first row?"

With a chuckle, Kirk seemed to realize what he was describing made sense only to someone who knew what he meant to begin with. He took in a long breath and began again. "Something has changed in the way Mestiko obtains goods from other planets. It's not very obvious, and in fact it's well hidden, but I see changes that have all the earmarks of a Klingon covert operation. We've seen similar patterns before: Sherman's Planet, Pentis II, SE-832."

As if back in the Enterprise briefing room again, McCoy automatically began thinking of the possible medical requirements of a conflict with the Klingons at the starship level: plasma burns, radiation exposure, broken bones- He stopped himself. That wasn't his job anymore, and it damned well better not be what Kirk wanted from him this time. Besides, what Kirk was talking about sounded like nothing more than idle suspicion. "The Klingons had their paws on Mestiko once before and it didn't work out." Kirk leveled a cynical eye at McCoy. "How easily do the Klingons give up?"

Point made, but so what? What did it have to do with McCoy? "It's all very interesting, Jim, but I'm sure I can't help you weed out a Klingon conspiracy."

Kirk pointed right at McCoy with his left hand as he finished a sip of coffee and set down the cup with his right. "That's exactly what I want you to do. Help me find out what's going on. We send a starship in there, we're not likely to find out anything. Some things take a softer touch."

Before Kirk had even finished his sentence, McCoy was already shaking his head. "Then send in Starfleet Security- "

"No jurisdiction, technically," Kirk said with a dismissive wave of his hand as the waiter returned and refilled his coffee cup and McCoy's water glass. "And it would be hard to sell a covert mission on our side based on just my hunch."

McCoy scoffed. "But you're going to go- one of the more recognizable admirals in the Starfleet."

"I'm only recognizable to news watchers on Earth and Federation diplomats," Kirk said. "But officially we're calling it a fact-finding mission, should anyone ask. I've got Nogura's approval to go, and take you with me. Technically you'll be gathering info on Mestiko's current medical situation."

Shaking his head again, McCoy couldn't believe the cockeyed scheme laid before him. "You've lost your blasted minds. Both of you."

Kirk huffed out an amused sound. "That's just about what he said you'd say. If it's any consolation, he'd rather I not take you. He wants me to bring Lori Ciana."

"So why don't you?"

"Because... that comes with its own problems."

Feeling the weight of fatigue from his own recent travels, McCoy sighed and tried to let Kirk down as easily as possible. "Jim, I just got home- "

"We're talking a week," Kirk said. "Or two- at the most."

"I've been gone for too long. I want- "

"What difference will another two weeks make?" Kirk asked. "You know the planet, and I know you. I trust your guidance."

"Since when?"

Kirk smiled, probably because he sensed in McCoy's tone that he was being worn down. "Since I lost my blasted mind."

"Well," McCoy said, and allowed himself a slight smile for the first time since Kirk had arrived, "that's been a long time."

"Come on, Bones." Kirk held out his hand, offering it for McCoy to shake over the table. "What do you say?"

"Bastard." McCoy harrumphed, grasped Kirk's hand and shook it firmly. "I say I need that drink."

Chapter 2

It had been some time since McCoy had been to Starfleet Command, and to his mind it was too soon. There was a sterility about the place, from the neatly manicured trees that one would think were fake (but weren't), to the thin, hard carpeting that lined every corridor. And everything was painted white or beige. Even the uniforms were changing to those bland colors, it seemed. There were still many of the bright red, gold, and blue tunics he'd been used to, but they all seemed to be on visiting officers or enlisted personnel. Command staff officers themselves were all wearing plain jumpsuits now that couldn't help but remind McCoy of the footy-pajamas that toddlers wore. He wanted to ask the nearest ensign if he were ready for his nap, but willed himself to refrain. On his best behavior, he simply sat and waited for Kirk to get out of a meeting. Occasionally he nodded at a passing security officer who would look to make sure McCoy had the proper visitor's badge.

When the briefing room doors across the corridor parted, McCoy stood. A large number of officers spread out and went their separate ways, but Kirk guided one man straight for the waiting area.

"Dr. Leonard McCoy," Kirk greeted, "I'd like you to meet Captain Willard Decker."

McCoy put out his hand and the captain took it firmly. "Decker?" He looked to Kirk with a curious glance and wondered if there was a relation to the late Commodore Decker.

Kirk nodded. "Matt's boy."

Decker was a lean man- and who couldn't be in the new uniforms- with a pleasant smile and rather sunny disposition for a Starfleet captain. "I hear 'Matt's boy' so often, I'm not sure if that's my rank or my first name."

"Sorry," Kirk said, and patted the young man on the back. "It's a compliment, you know that, Will."

"Your father was quite a man," McCoy agreed.

"I have two sets of boots to fill, I suppose," Decker said. "His, and Admiral Kirk's."

McCoy looked from Decker to Kirk and back to Decker. "Oh?"

"Will's slated to become captain of the Enterprise," Kirk said, and McCoy wasn't sure exactly what emotion tinged his voice, but there was something there. As if "captain of the Enterprise" was a title akin to "philosopher-king." "He and Mr. Scott are overseeing the refit," Kirk added.

McCoy smiled affably. "Is Scotty actually letting you touch anything?"

"We have an understanding, but I'm learning quite a lot from him. It's an honor on all counts." Decker looked down at his inner left wrist and shook his head. "Speaking of which, I should be getting back to it." He offered McCoy his hand again. "Pleasure meeting you, Doctor." After they shook hands again, Decker turned to Kirk. "Admiral, I hope you'll come soon to see the progress we're making on the Enterprise."

"At my first opportunity, Captain," Kirk assured him, and Decker nodded a salute and walked briskly away.

McCoy wasn't sure exactly what kind of relationship the two men had, but there was a tension there, most certainly. Where it came from, McCoy wasn't sure. Jealousy, as if the Enterprise were a woman whom Kirk was loath to share? Guilt over feeling that he could have stopped Decker's father from dying unnecessarily? Only one way to find out, McCoy thought.

"Avoiding him, or the ship?" McCoy asked.

Kirk wasn't going to bite. "I'm a busy man."

McCoy grunted and decided to accept that, mainly because there was no other choice for now. Someday it would likely come up again, so he filed away the notion for later dissection. "So what am I doing here, anyway? If it's to see Nogura and have him talk me back into my commission, forget it." Gesturing down the corridor they needed to turn, Kirk said, "You're practically paranoid, you know that, right?"

"Leave the diagnosis to me," McCoy said, "and I'll do my damndest to not do any paper pushing or desk sitting while I'm here."

Kirk stopped abruptly and glared at McCoy with phasers on heavy stun. "You about finished?"

"Sure." McCoy wasn't certain if his skill at opening old wounds was because of his long friendship with Kirk or his medical degree.

Rather than continuing on, they were apparently at their destination. Kirk punched in a code on the door to their right and stood while a scanner glowed into his eye. A computer's voice responded. "Access granted. Kirk, Admiral James T."

The door opened to a severe room, the walls of which were lined with white security lockers with only keypads and numbers on their doors, Kirk waited for the door to close behind them before going right to the locker he wanted.

"Why is everything always white here?" McCoy asked.

Kirk ignored the question as he tapped a code into the locker and pulled out what looked like a thick bracelet. "This is the new standard issue communicator." He demonstrated putting it on his wrist and showing McCoy the activation button, the controls for channel and gain, and the universal translator controls.

"It's small," McCoy said.

"And with an increased range of point two A.U. Multiband transceiver, translator, recorder."

"Thrilling."

Kirk handed it to him. "Just put it on."

As McCoy did, he nodded to the rest of the contents of the locker. "What's all this?"

Kirk pointed to each item in turn. "Med-kit, tricorder, palm phasers."

"None of this looks like Starfleet issue."

"It will be," Kirk said, pocketing one of the small phasers and handing the other to McCoy. "I've had these made without insignia or demarcation, and since they're not standard issue for another two months, no one should recognize them- or us- as being Starfleet."

"I'm not Starfleet," McCoy said pointedly. "But you look the part even when you're in civvies."

"Well, I don't intend to act like I'm in Starfleet."

McCoy smirked. "I'd love to see that."

"See? Something to look forward to." The rest of the contents gathered, Kirk closed the locker and gestured toward the door. "We depart at eighteen hundred hours."

"For Mestiko?"

"Eventually. First we visit the main shipping port in that sector. Indalo Station."

* * *

For someone who wanted to act decidedly non-Starfleet for this mission, Kirk had set a very military tone, other than his civilian clothes. From the time they met, to the tone he took with the dockmaster as they departed, to the commands he said more to himself than anyone else as they made their way quietly toward Indalo in the civilian vessel Kirk had procured for the trip, he was being very by-the-book. While McCoy was no stranger to nonfleet ships, especially of late, he wondered just how often Kirk had piloted a warp-capable ship that wasn't a U.S.S. something or one of its shuttles.

"Where'd you get this thing anyway?" McCoy asked, breaking what had been at least a few hours' silence.

"This old thing?" Kirk asked, glancing up at the dorsal bulkhead and the older toggle controls to his left and right. "I own it."

"You're kidding me! This has got to be at least thirty years old."

"Forty-two." Kirk patted the console as if it were his hound dog's head. "It was Sam's. He left it to me

when..." The thought trailed off.

"Yeah." McCoy had been there when Kirk's brother Sam was killed on Deneva. That was one wound he was willing to leave closed.

"It was junk when he got it, but spaceworthy. I had it restored when I was promoted. Took it out once or twice, but this seemed like as good a time as any to test it on a long trip."

"Test?"

"It's in good shape, Bones. Better than new, I'm sure."

McCoy looked around. The colors of the bulkheads were rich and lively. It was a pleasure craft. "I'll say this, it doesn't look like fleet issue."

"It's Andorian, actually. Single merchant ship that was redesigned into a day cruiser, and then back into a merchant-type ship when Sam had it. He would take it to research colonies to set up house before bringing the family along."

There was another long silence, but not truly an awkward one. Kirk and McCoy had known each other long enough and well enough that they could be alone with their own thoughts, sitting just feet from each other, and a long silence wouldn't be uncomfortable.

"Heard from Spock?" McCoy asked after a long while, just because his thoughts had wandered to silence and those who enjoy it far more than he.

Kirk seemed to hold back a sigh. "Not really, no."

"He's on Vulcan, I heard."

"Yes. And otherwise incommunicado." Kirk played with one of the settings on the console in front of him and McCoy believed that the controls didn't need fiddling with but that Kirk did it to have something to do. "I've talked to his father. He told me Spock could not be reached and to discuss it further would be considered an invasion of Spock's privacy. I pressed that, and learned that whatever Spock's involved in isn't for offworlders' information."

"Pleasant man, the ambassador," McCoy said flatly. "You should've talked to Amanda. She wouldn't stand on Vulcan formality."

"When Spock wants to contact me, he will." Kirk was looking blankly at the main viewer, which looked more like a windshield on a large bus but was not a window at all.

"Right." Here they were, parsecs away from much of anything, the ship didn't need constant care and feeding, and Kirk was looking out the window at nothing. Damn. I thought about feeding. Now I'm hungry. "You want something to eat?"

Kirk seemed to think about it for a moment and almost reply in the negative, but as if on a whim he turned and smiled. "Sure. I had my yeoman stock the galley. Why don't you see what's there?"

When McCoy returned, he had sandwiches and coffee. The coffee was instant and the sandwiches pre-made and wrapped individually. "Like the first astronauts used to eat," he said as he set Kirk's to one side and took his own into his lap as he sat.

"The first astronauts ate normal food, just pre-cooked and processed."

"To coin a phrase, fascinating." McCoy leaned back and took a sip of the reasonably hot and mostly bitter coffee. "Jim?"

"Doctor?"

"Lighten the hell up."

Head pivoting quickly toward McCoy, Kirk looked as if he were about to snap something, then he smiled. "You're right," he chuckled, as if his funny bone had suddenly been switched on. "I'm sorry."

McCoy returned the smile. "I should get the medical tricorder and check your vitals. That's the second time today you've told me I was right about something."

"Do you ever think I'm wrong?" Kirk asked, setting a few buttons on the navigation console and then swiveling to pick up his coffee.

"Constantly."

"Well, maybe I was when I said you were right."

"You ruin everything," McCoy said.

The admiral took a sip, set it back down, and pushed it toward McCoy. "That's terrible coffee." Kirk

reached for his sandwich but something on one of the scanner screens must have caught his eye because he spun quickly back to the ship's controls.

"What's happening?" McCoy asked, unable to avoid noticing that Kirk wasn't as graceful at the console as perhaps Sulu or some of the other Enterprise helmsmen were.

"We're being scanned," Kirk said.

"By whom?"

Kirk shook his head, his gaze shifting from one readout to another. "I can't tell. We're still about fifteen minutes from the Indalo system, so it could be them, but I can't place a source."

"Why the devil not?" McCoy demanded.

"This isn't a starship, remember? I had some good scanners installed, but not the best."

"Well, it might have been a good idea for this trip."

Kirk sighed. "The whole point of using this ship and not borrowing a Starfleet shuttle is to remain inconspicuous."

"Well, someone's curious."

"I think it was just Indalo. Standard procedure," Kirk said.

"Now who's paranoid? You thought it was pirates or something, didn't you?"

Kirk just frowned and time passed in relative silence, with more tension than either man would have liked. When close enough, Kirk called the dockmaster of Indalo Station and requested- and paid for- docking rights.

"How did you just pay for that?" McCoy asked out of curiosity as they passed the time it would take to be tractor-beamed into the docking ring of the station.

"Credit account of our employer," Kirk said with a slight smile. "Who just happens to be looking to branch out to this station."

"And that is?"

"Uhura Enterprises."

McCoy chuckled and propped his feet up on the lip of the console. "You're kidding. We're working for Uhura?"

"I didn't want it traced to her, actually," Kirk said. "So we're working for her mother."

Trying to remember past dinners at Uhura's home, McCoy knitted his brows. "I don't think I've met her mother."

Docking complete, Kirk rose and ushered McCoy toward the hatchway that connected them to the station. "Picture Uhura in thirty years."

"Nice woman?"

Kirk tapped at a few controls and with a hiss the door parted and showed a small walkway to the interior dock hatch. "Nice, beautiful, and if she weren't married I'd camp on her doorstep."

"Well, we see where Uhura gets her charms," McCoy said.

They stepped into a long corridor, the end of which met a large gangway that was filled with people. An employee of the station met them, checked in the ship and had Kirk sign something, and asked if there was anything else he could do for them.

Nodding, Kirk replied. "Our employer is looking to rent cargo space and an open permanent dock. Who do we see?"

The employee, an Andorian woman with striking high cheekbones and typical pale blue pallor smiled thinly. "Your deity of choice."

"Come again?"

"You'll need a miracle. Everything is rented. But if there's going to be an opening, Nawaz Mazari is the man to talk to."

"He's the dockmaster?" McCoy asked.

"Of course not," the woman said. "You want the man who knows what actually goes on here, don't you?"

"Exactly." Kirk thanked her and he and McCoy headed into the crowd of people going about their business.

"Why don't we want the dockmaster?" McCoy asked.

"Because we didn't have to come all the way here to see if they had any openings. That information is available over the subspace infonet. What we need is- "

The doctor nodded, suddenly understanding. "The man who has his finger on the pulse of the station." "You're catching on."

"I still don't know why you want me here," he grumbled. "You could do this yourself."

"It'll become clear." Kirk nudged McCoy in the ribs with his elbow. "Got your med-kit?"

Looking at Kirk sideways, McCoy felt a little knot of worry develop in his stomach. "Yeah. Am I going to need it?"

"One way or another."

Chapter 3

There were a number of small watering holes on the station, but the most active of them was called, of all things, "Duffy's Tavern," and it was where Kirk and McCoy had been told they'd find Nawaz Mazari. When they entered it wasn't what McCoy had expected. He'd thought it would be some seedy dive. It wasn't. The walls were painted a lively green, hung with spacescapes. The floor was a polished wood-not something one saw in space stations- and the waitstaff were nicely dressed.

Kirk motioned toward the man who was probably Mazari. He was seated toward the rear, his back to the bar and kitchen beyond, and his eyes toward the entrance. As they approached him, McCoy noticed Kirk was glancing also at the two large men sitting at the small table to the left.

"You're Mazari?" Kirk asked, once they were close enough.

The man looked up from behind a data slate, his dark eyes thin slices. "You are?" He was human, and his family was probably from Southern Asia originally if his look and name were any indication, but the accent sounded British.

"My name's Temple," Kirk told him. "We're from Uhura Enterprises and- "

"And he is?" Mazari asked, indicating McCoy with the end of his stylus.

McCoy smiled and nodded in Kirk's direction. "His bodyguard."

At that Mazari chuckled, but there was little humor in its tenor. He seemed like a man who often laughed, but with more malice than mirth. "Right," he said. "No doubt."

The admiral gestured to the empty chairs at Mazari's table and with a motion he invited them to sit.

They did so, and Kirk began, "My name is Jim Temple, his is Dr. Davis, and we want to buy you a drink." Kirk motioned for the nearest waiter to bring a round of drinks and then shifted his gaze back to Mazari, but "the man with his finger on the pulse of the station" was looking right at McCoy.

"Doctor, eh?"

"That's right." McCoy smiled. "And I prescribe bourbon for what ails you," he said as the waiter delivered a drink to each man.

"Okay." Mazari accepted the prescription and polished off the drink by slugging it down swiftly and then snapping the glass back to the small, round table. "Have at it. But it's going to take more than one of these to grease me slick enough to buy you two as anything but amateurs."

"That obvious?" Kirk smiled sheepishly.

Mazari nodded and waved over the waiter again. "I'll have another." He motioned to Kirk. "His tab."

"Truth?" Kirk shrugged as if assenting to everything Mazari suspected.

Another dark chuckle echoed around the edges of Mazari's thin mouth. "If you can fake that, sure."

"We really do work for a shipping concern. Uhura Enterprises. Or did, until we were let go last week."

Mock-frowning, Mazari was mostly looking at his data slate and likely only half paying attention to Kirk now. "That's a pity. Sacked before your time, to be sure."

"Worse than that, we got caught stealing. They can't prove it, but we all know it, and they're cutting their losses- and us."

"I may cry," Mazari said. "Drivel does make my eyes water so."

"He's not buying this," McCoy said, matter-of-factly.

"No, he's not." Kirk leaned over. "Okay, buy this, mister. I need to transport cargo to Mestiko. It can't go through customs or inspections, either here or at their destination. And I'm willing to pay. A lot."

"You'd have to," Mazari said. "That's a hot system."

"How hot?" McCoy asked.

"Nova hot," Mazari said. "Starfleet ships're all over the Mestiko system. And you know Starfleet is always crawling up everyone's arse about contraband to their pet project planets."

The way Mazari emphasized "know" made McCoy wonder if he was more on to them than even they suspected.

"What will it take?" Kirk asked, leaning forward as if a juicy deal was just about to be completed.

Mazari stared at them, seemingly at both simultaneously. "Who are you two?"

Kirk smiled that Cheshire cat smile he had. "If you make enough money, do you really care?"

Lips twisted in what could be called a snarl, Mazari shook his head slowly. "I don't like your smell," he told Kirk.

"Gee, I showered this morning. Is it my cologne?" Kirk's tone was suddenly annoyed and McCoy knew they'd dead-ended on their first foray.

"You reek of authority," Mazari said, absentmindedly fingering the rim of his empty glass with a finger. "If I had to place it I'd say you either work for the Federation or are being paid to work for them."

"I'm not Starfleet Security- "

"I don't care who you are, Mr. Temple. Our business is finished."

"You're making a mistake," Kirk said, and poked a finger toward, but not touching, Mazari's chest.

"There's an opportunity here, and you're missing it."

"Just another bad day at the office, then." Mazari's eyes shifted to the two men at the nearby table that Kirk had been sure to keep an eye on. Now, they rose. "Good-bye, gentlemen."

One man grabbed McCoy and pulled him from his seat. The other just stood, waiting for Kirk to rise. An interesting show of respect for a thug. "Get up."

Kirk rose, slowly, then pushed his chair under the small table. For a moment McCoy thought he might lift the chair up and ram it into someone's neck.

"Show them out, quietly," Mazari said, and McCoy hoped that wasn't code for "Show them out an airlock."

Mazari's muscle walked Kirk and McCoy to the door of the drinking establishment and pushed them both out. McCoy stumbled a bit but didn't fall, and Kirk made sure he held his stance like a wall.

One of the men looked back at Mazari for a moment, then pushed Kirk down a side corridor that probably led to the back of the pub for deliveries and maintenance.

"Let's take a walk," the man said to Kirk, then to his comrade: "Watch that one." He was bigger than Kirk, and a bit taller. His brown curly hair was cut close until most of the curl couldn't be seen except a bit on the top. He looked more powerful than Kirk, and if he hurt people for a living, he was perhaps more skilled.

"Jim- " McCoy began after them but was pulled back by the other guard.

* * *

As soon as Kirk and the other man were away from prying eyes, the fight began. Kirk sensed the first blow- a right cross- ducked it, and pushed into the bigger man's chest, elbowing his solar plexus.

Curly huffed out a sharp breath and then used Kirk's proximity against him to land a kidney punch. Kirk almost doubled over as pain exploded across his back and he let out a grunt, but he recovered quickly and angled away, giving himself a few meters of distance and a little time to catch his breath.

Slowly Curly drew closer, jabbing out but intentionally not connecting. Finally he lunged forward and connected his left fist with Kirk's brow, opening a cut that dribbled hot blood down his right cheek.

Kirk dodged the next blow and threw his weight into a punch that landed squarely on Curly's jaw. As expected, he didn't collapse into a pile of jelly and instead dug his fist into Kirk's face in return. He tried to do it again, but Kirk ducked and punched Curly in the neck which got him gagging and stepping back. Heaving in large gulps that Curly only wished he could take in, Kirk swung his leg wide and behind the larger man, bringing him to the hard steel deck with a thud.

"Had enough?" Kirk asked, dabbing at the blood over his eye with the knuckle of his right thumb.

Curly nodded and leaned against the wall but didn't pull himself up. "You a Fed?" he rasped. "You don't fight like a Fed- like you'd need a phaser to win."

"I'm not a Fed." Kirk said.

The man nodded. "Then you want to go see Fizzy."

"Who?" The adrenaline of the fight was beginning to wane and the pain from Kirk's bruised knuckles, cut brow, and tender kidney was ebbing forward. "I thought your boss wasn't going to help me." He chuckled a bit, and tasted a little blood in his mouth. "For a minute I thought he wanted you to kill me."

"Maybe he doesn't want to make any more credits," Curly said, finally catching his breath, "but I do."

"Who's Fizzy?"

"My price first, and it depends on how often your shipments will be, and how big they are." Using the wall to balance himself, Curly rose slowly. Kirk gave him his hand to help him up the rest of the way.

"The more I have to work on making records change or disappear, the more it costs you, because the more I have to hide not just from the authorities, but from Mazari. And then there's Fizzy."

"You'll get ten percent of our net," Kirk said.

"Do I have to hit you again?"

"What do you want?" Kirk asked, lips pursing in mock frustration.

Without hesitation, Curly said, "Forty percent."

Kirk shook his head. "I'll give you fifteen. That's it."

After a moment of thought- probably not his strong suit- Curly partially agreed. "We'll see. It might go up later."

"Who's Fizzy?" Kirk asked again.

Curly cleaned the dust off his back and pants. "Full name is something or Fizda, or something. But we call her Fizzy because it's easier. She's Mestikan."

Kirk blinked. "A Payav? Here?"

"A what? Yeah. Payav. That's what they call themselves." The man nodded to himself as if to remember that was significant. "She's the station liaison to their Customs. One of their own."

Looking at Curly skeptically, Kirk took a gentle step toward the main gangway with him, feeling tender.

"And you know for a fact that she'd help us."

"For the right price, she'd give you the tattoos off her back."

"And where do we find her?"

"She's here a few times a week, but just left and won't be here again for another two days."

"She goes back and forth to Mestiko?"

"God only knows why."

"There's credits to be made there," Kirk said, staying in character. "We'll renegotiate depending on how much your friend Fizzy wants."

"We'll see."

Kirk blew on the swelling knuckles of his right hand. "Yeah, we will."

* * *

As McCoy closed the wound over Kirk's right brow, the admiral filled him in on the deal Mazari's man had made.

"You think that's legitimate?" McCoy asked.

Kirk shrugged and his brows moved up in a "who knows?" expression. "Greed is a universal concept."

"Name me a greedy Vulcan," McCoy said, then added under his breath, "And stop moving your eyebrows."

"They have a greed for knowledge and peace," Kirk offered.

McCoy rolled his eyes. "That's one way to define greed, I guess." He took Kirk's right hand and began to reduce the swelling and bruising with a device that would heal the underlying tissue at an accelerated rate. It would feel a little stiff for the next day or so, but there was no need to explain that to Kirk- he'd been the recipient of this particular treatment more than once. "So we wait for this Fizzy person to come back?" McCoy asked.

"Yes. And in the meantime we go through the motions of setting up contacts and business here."

"Now I see," McCoy said, closing up the med-kid and also indicating it with a gesture, "why you wanted me along."

Kirk raised his hands. "What were the chances someone wasn't going to hit me at some point?"

"Including me?"

The admiral smiled. "What about 'do no harm'?"

"You worried I could take you in a fight?"

Kirk chuckled. "Probably not."

"You know," McCoy said, "the longer we stick around, the more likely it is someone will make us."

"Make us? Suddenly you're from Sigma Iotia II?" Kirk flexed both hands, feeling McCoy's handiwork, and then rubbed his jaw.

"It seems to fit."

"Does, doesn't it?" Kirk tapped the tip of his chin with a finger and mouthed the words "still stiff."

McCoy replied with a tap on the man's shoulder and silently mouthed "live with it." There was actually a medical reason to not do more to his jaw, but why bother telling Kirk that?

"My point is, 'Jim Temple'?" McCoy asked as he stowed the med-kit in one of the storage bins near the galley of their small ship. "Kirk meaning church, isn't Temple just about too clever by half?"

"I based yours on your father's name."

"I noticed that," McCoy said, and did have to admit that he liked that touch. He had been very close to his father, and Kirk knew that. "Jim, we wait for this Fizzy person, and then what?"

Kirk pulled out his small hand phaser, checked its setting, then placed it back in the hip pocket of his dark brown pants. "Then we find out who we need to talk to on Mestiko who deals in illegal shipments."

"You don't want to just arrest her or something?"

The admiral shook his head. "I want the whole route. I want to know what's going on."

"Are you sure anything is going on? I mean, what shipping route doesn't have some way to transport contraband?"

Kirk seemed to think on that for a moment, perhaps weighing just what it was that were in those shipping irregularities. McCoy wondered as well. There was always something special about Mestiko for Kirk, McCoy knew. Something about some promise he made to Raya elMora for some damn fool thing that wasn't even his responsibility.

"I don't know," Kirk admitted, finally. "I need to run this to ground."

"You, personally?" McCoy shook his head and thrust himself down casually into one of the banquette seats near the small galley. "You sure this isn't about you riding in on your white horse to save Mestiko for Raya elMora?"

Kirk was now absently looking through the galley cupboards for God-knows-what. "It has nothing to do with Raya. It has to do with- "

"Guilt for something that wasn't your fault."

"Responsibility and guilt are two different emotions. A starship captain can feel one without feeling the other."

"He can also feel both," McCoy offered. "But you aren't a starship captain anymore."

"For someone who didn't want me to take that promotion, you certainly delight in reminding me of it."

Finding some packets of mixed nuts, Kirk took one for himself and tossed one to McCoy. "I should think you'd be glad I'm out from behind that desk you hate so much."

McCoy opened the bag and fished around the various alien nuts for a good, old-fashioned peanut. "Not if it gets you killed, and me with you," he said.

"Just like old times."

"This," McCoy said, indicating the ship around them, "isn't a starship."

"She has some tricks up her sleeves, I promise." Kirk poured a handful of the mixed nuts from the packet into his hand, brought the hand to his mouth and downed them all.

McCoy's lips pressed into a frown. "Well, with you picking up bruises and lacerations like they were daisies, she'll need them."

Chapter 4

The next thirty hours or so were relatively quiet. McCoy had kept to their small ship and Kirk was keeping himself busy chatting with the locals. He'd learned much about the activity of the station and the

kinds of goods that saw port before moving on. Most of it was boring. He'd also made sure to drop some hints about what he was really after. He asked some questions that a few people seemed to feel uncomfortable about answering. He feigned apology at bothering them and moved on, but by now there were more people who were suspicious of him, and while McCoy might think that was a bad thing, Kirk knew it was not. One of the maintenance workers who fixed incoming vessels as needed, for instance, bristled at the suggestion that she might have seen wares that originated from the Klingons. A clerk in the inspections office had a similar reaction, and he was none too subtle about not wanting to speak to Kirk anymore. Part of that may have been because Kirk was a stranger to them, and was asking a lot of questions. But thinking that did him little good, so he preferred to think something else was happening. The hard part was that having sown the seeds of suspicion with these and a few others, there was little else to do but wait, and he hated waiting. In his job both on the Enterprise and now at Starfleet Command there was far too much waiting, for his tastes. At least on this mission there was a chance of some excitement, and there'd already been some. He'd not have admitted it to McCoy- and probably need not- but Kirk had enjoyed his tussle with Mazari's lieutenant. He chuckled to himself, because he still didn't know the man's name and only thought of him as Curly.

Kirk rubbed his still stiff jaw in remembrance of the event. It was by no means the first workout he'd had since giving up his captaincy, but it was the first real excitement in months. There was a big difference between hitting the bag at the gym and hitting a real person who hits back and isn't pulling punches. Just as there was a large chasm between logging desk-hours and star-hours, not that any of this mission would be logged, but- there was just a difference. Rank was important and as an admiral he could do much more than a captain... and yet so much less.

Having checked with Mestiko's embassy to the Federation, Kirk learned that "Fizzy" was actually Humal elFizda, and was indeed the Payav's customs officer for Indalo Station. She traveled frequently between Mestiko and the station, usually on the same transports that brought goods to Mestiko and then returned for resupply. Kirk knew one of two things was true: either elFizda knew about any shipping irregularities and was ignoring them, or someone was going to great trouble to make sure she didn't know about them. And it would take some great trouble. The Indalo Station dockmaster and people like Mazari might very well overlook this or that, or look the other way easily for a little graft. But elFizda's sole purpose was to make sure things that Kirk believed were happening wouldn't happen. And they were. He was sure they were.

When it came time for elFizda's arrival, Kirk wanted to nonchalantly be at that particular part of the station. A hairless, tattooed, quad-thumbed Payav would be hard to miss anywhere, but he was curious to size her up, maybe even find a moment to bump into her and meet her. He wasn't sure exactly, but he couldn't just sit and wait any longer in any case.

As soon as Kirk and McCoy had made their way out of their own docking area and into the main gangway that connected the other docks and also held various eateries and other shops, Kirk saw Curly standing with two other men. Curly nodded toward Kirk, said something to his cohorts, and all three walked straight for them.

"Yellow alert," Kirk said to McCoy under his breath.

McCoy looked around for a moment and then found Curly and the others when they were almost upon him. "How about we abandon ship?"

"Steady, Bones."

"Temple," Curly called when they were but a few meters apart. "Let's talk."

"Talk," Kirk said. "I'm listening."

Curly smirked the smirk that comes with superior numbers. "I thought it over," he said, "and I've decided it's time your business is finished here."

"You don't like our deal?" Kirk asked, keeping his hands in plain sight but unable to keep them from becoming tight fists he was sure to keep to his sides.

"I don't like you. You ask too many questions, and Mazari was right- you reek of authority. And around here, authority is bad."

"You an authority on that?" Kirk asked snidely, and it wouldn't have taken much to get him to hit Curly

again, but the busy gangway of the station wasn't the place- station security was close by- and it also wouldn't have done much other than satisfy Kirk's personal gratification.

There began a short staring match where Kirk and Curly and his two muscular friends all sized one another up. And Kirk could tell it was making McCoy palpably nervous.

"It's a shame we couldn't do business," Kirk said, finally. "Someone will take me up on the offer, however." He moved to the left, not pushing his way past Curly, exactly, but pivoting in another direction. Curly's arm came up and blocked Kirk's way. "Yeah? Well Fizzy's not comin' around here anymore, so you don't have business with her, either." McCoy backed up a bit, anticipating the worst, and Kirk looked down at the other man's arm that was pressed against his chest.

"You're in my way, mister," Kirk said, and realized that if anything was giving away his more military tone it would be in his anger.

Curly smiled, and it had about as much warmth as the dark side of Mercury. "See, I didn't say our business was finished here, Mr. Temple, I said yours was."

Kirk looked from Curly's arm to his face and to the other two men who flanked him. One was large enough to be directly related to Phobos, and the other was smaller, thinner, but looked just as mean. Again, Kirk had to remind himself that this was all he wanted- to have his suspicions confirmed that there was something about Mestiko's shipping concerns that people didn't want asked about.

"So you did," Kirk said, managing a weak smile. "Come on, Doc. Looks like we've overstayed our welcome."

"I noticed," McCoy replied, and it was obvious to Kirk that he was doing his best to cover the nerves in his tone.

"Gentlemen," Kirk said, as he turned on his heel and began in the direction of their ship. "It's been a pleasure."

Kirk didn't look back as they walked, but McCoy obviously had because when they were about halfway toward their docking port he whispered to Kirk that the three men were following.

"Makes sense," Kirk whispered back.

"Why?"

"Because they didn't want to kill us with a lot of witnesses and scanners recording it."

"Oh," McCoy said. "Wouldn't this be a good time to have a plan?"

"Working on it," Kirk said. "Give me a minute."

Something happened overnight to change Curly's opinion of his business relationship with Kirk. It may have been that Kirk was asking questions that made people suspicious, but that would lead Curly to want to cut the deal, not Kirk's throat, unless there was a lot more at stake.

McCoy glanced back, and now it was evident even to Kirk that the three were following closely.

Without the din of people from the main gangway, three extra footfalls traveled easily up the corridor.

"You know, they might think I'm easier to kill and take me first, right?"

"That's how I'd do it," Kirk deadpanned. "Just in case," he added with a whisper, "get your phaser ready. If we can avoid using them, I'd like to."

McCoy nodded and using a slow but steady movement reached into his pocket for his small phaser, which he palmed. "I'm assuming this means you have a plan."

"Yes," Kirk said. "Be ready."

"What do you want me to do?"

"On my mark... run as fast as you can to our ship, and get it warmed up and ready to depart."

"Wait," McCoy said. "You plan is for me to run? While you do what?"

"I'm going to distract them," Kirk said and tapped McCoy on the arm as he turned to face Curly. "Now go. That's an order."

McCoy ran forward as Kirk stopped and waited for Curly to pull closer. The hallway was just big enough for his two thugs-in-arms to spread out and encircle Kirk so that he couldn't make the mad dash McCoy had made. So far, so good.

"You game for a rematch?" Kirk asked Curly. "Or do you really feel you need this help? Maybe alone you're not man enough to fight me."

Curly almost snarled, but didn't take the bait. "I don't need to prove anything to you. But I will enjoy watching them tear you apart." He nodded to the thinner one who was now behind Kirk and to his right. Kirk turned a bit to keep Skinny in his periphery and saw a glint of steel drop into his palm from up his sleeve. A hidden knife was impossible to detect- in use- and a phaser would be instantly detected. That was why Kirk himself was hesitant to use his own. Unless, of course, it came down to using one or losing his life.

Skinny had a knife in his hand, Curly said he was content to sit this one out- and Kirk doubted that- and big old Phobos was likely to use his mass to crush Kirk to death. Somewhere in the back of his mind he heard McCoy saying, "This is your asinine plan?"

Kirk quickly shrugged out of his jacket and dangled the center of it between himself and Skinny. The coat was leather and could somewhat deflect a dagger blade, but that wasn't the purpose. When Skinny lunged forward Kirk wrapped the man's entire hand, knife and all, within the bulk of the jacket. He pulled Skinny down, to his knee, kicking him hard in the face- hard enough that Skinny was down for the count. "One down," Kirk said, thrusting Skinny's limp body away. "Two to go."

Phobos growled.

"Okay," Kirk said, backing off a pace. "Two and a half if we count you fairly."

Unwilling to let Phobos go down the way he had, and the way Skinny had, Curly took off his jacket and it dropped to the floor. He came at Kirk, fists balled into rocks, and pounded first a right, then a left, toward his head.

Kirk dodged low and to the left. He pushed Curly back into where he'd stumble into Skinny's flaccid form. Phobos bolted forward, moving deceptively quick for someone of his bulk. Kirk punched the larger man twice with his right hand, putting his weight into the thrust, but it didn't faze his opponent. Both hands shaped like cement trowels, Phobos snapped Kirk on either ear. Pain flashed hot into his eyes but he shook it off with a grunt in time to see Curly was unwrapping Skinny's hand, in search of his knife. Kirk spun, dropped to the ground with a roll, and slipped his legs between Phobos's. He twisted and took the moon man off his balance until he fell to the deck. If he was going to do this, fight two larger men at the same time, he could only really have either one on his feet at any one time. Sweat bubbled over his lip; Kirk was beginning to tire. Phobos weighed over a hundred and thirty kilos, easily. What wasn't easy was bringing that amount of bulk down.

Knife now in hand, Curly was taking his second run at Kirk as Phobos grunted angrily and tried to scramble to his feet. There would be one chance at this and now was the time, Kirk realized.

As Curly thrust the dagger at Kirk's midsection, he pulled to one side, grabbed Curly's wrist, and braced his back on the wall. One foot stuck out, Kirk heaved Curly over and down, his outstretched arm forcing the knife into Phobos's massive torso. Curly yelled, Phobos yelled, and Kirk decided that was enough. He jumped over Skinny, reaching down for his jacket and lugging it along as he went.

By the time he was aboard the small ship, McCoy had all the systems online and had even cleared departure with the dockmaster.

"What happened out there?" McCoy asked as Kirk slid into the pilot's seat.

"We got what we came for," Kirk said. "We don't know what exactly is going on, but it's damn certain something is."

"Is that it? Can we go home now?"

Kirk shook his head and disengaged the moorings from Indalo Station. "Fizzy didn't come back here. That means that someone warned her off- so we're heading for Mestiko."

With a sigh, McCoy sank into the copilot's seat. "Oh, joy."

Chapter 5

Approaching Mestiko was awkward for Kirk. Upon requesting orbit he didn't want to register his ship there under his name, but he somehow felt that was a breach of the trust he'd tried to foster with the Payav. Still, he didn't want to announce his presence to Space Central by broadcasting that Admiral James Kirk had arrived. If there was anything he'd learned from his last visit, it was that those who could be working with the Klingons could well be anyone.

So Space Central got the fake name and registry that Indalo Station had, and Kirk settled into first an

orbit, and then a landing approach.

"If you think you can survive without me," McCoy began as they gathered their gear once they'd landed, "I'm going to see if I can find Dr. Lon."

Kirk looked up with surprise. "He's stayed on this long? It's been years..."

"Surprised me too when I learned of it. I've kept in contact with him now and again. He's become quite fond of this place, I think."

Already at the door, McCoy was ready to open the hatch and Kirk had to wave him off. "We've landed, but the platform has to be pulled underground before we can disembark."

While Dr. Marat Lon's air-scrubbing satellites had done wonders for Mestiko's ravaged atmosphere over the last few years, much of the planet's surface was still relatively uninhabitable for long periods. It wasn't enough to have a breathable atmosphere for an hour, a day, or even a month- the air had to be clean enough to sustain life for year after year without causing long-term health problems. Mestiko was some years off that standard, and so the vast bulk of the populace was still living under pressure domes or underground. More domes had been built in the years since Kirk's last visit, but landing pads were still open to the air and needed to be pulled underground for ship storage. Should Kirk and McCoy need to make a quick escape of the planet as they had Indalo Station, that wouldn't be an option.

Once out of the ship, Kirk and McCoy walked toward the underground city that had become Mestiko's market capital simply because it was both the home of the Zamestaad- their main governing body- as well as their Space Central agency, which now had more than a few cargo transports provided by several shipping concerns who wanted to do business with Mestiko.

Both men were used to navigating around strange, new worlds and so they went their separate ways, McCoy off to see Lon and Kirk to the Mestiko office of elFizda. Even though Fizzy wasn't to return to Mestiko for another day, that didn't mean there wasn't something for Kirk to learn at her office.

Walking through the "city," Kirk was astonished with how the Payav had adapted to their hindered lives underground. Whereas the last time he'd visited the people were living in more makeshift accommodations, it was clear changes had taken place. Shops with doors and even windows were on either side of the main causeway and the grade was an upward angle that soon gave way to ground-level streets under the pressurized dome. The air inside the dome was clean and smelled amazingly fresh considering that just outside, the atmosphere was still thick with muck. Kirk looked up past the dome and into the sky. The reddish-brown hue was mostly gone, but that didn't mean much to one's lungs. From the reports he'd read it wasn't sound to breathe the outside air for longer than a few hours.

Mestiko was most assuredly a work in progress, which psychologically must have been something to deal with for her people. As a planet they'd just started touching the stars when the Pulse pounded them back a few hundred years. But it didn't just beat them back; it also knocked them forward quickly. It was a dichotomy: the same disaster that forced them to live primitively in relation to where they'd been was also forcing them to step too quickly into the realm of interstellar relations. There were growing pains.

As Kirk walked to the relatively nearby customs office, many Payav looked at him from the periphery only, refusing to make eye contact. That wasn't strange- many cultures crowded for space considered direct eye contact almost a violation of privacy. What did concern Kirk was that the universal translator had a more sensitive "ear" than a human, and it was picking up some under-the-breath comments from people he passed by.

"A'sloointa Dinpayav," one man spat quietly. "Step off from me." The first word wasn't in the translator's language base but Kirk knew "Dinpayav" was their word for offworlders, and the rest was pretty clear. Many other similar comments were being made, and one mother instructed her child not to look at the "offworld filth."

Upon his last visit there was a growing anti-Federation feeling among many- even Raya's grandmother. One would have thought she'd have had a bit better perspective since she was closer to the real story of all that had happened, but if anything Kirk remembered worrying whether she was going to influence Raya into turning down Federation help. Thankfully, that hadn't happened. And after the incident with Klingon interference in Payav politics it would seem the anti-Federation feeling had become an antialien

feeling. That was probably why outside of the landing deck itself, Kirk had seen no other offworlders, only Mestiko natives. It crossed his mind that they might even have certain regulations about where Dinpayav could travel unrestricted, but not only would he know that from his position at Starfleet, Space Central would have informed him if something had recently changed. No, this was probably a voluntary segregation, and that perhaps made it even more uncomfortable.

The customs office was in one of the older buildings that hadn't been destroyed by the Pulse. It had obviously been braced by thermoconcrete, probably from the Federation, as the technology for such materials was as yet beyond the Payav. Well, the know-how wasn't beyond it, but their level of industry was completely geared to subsistence still, and most of that came from offworld. There was yet another dichotomy. The Payav relied on trade for their lives, yet didn't want to deal with those who supplied the very source of their survival. It was going to take decades for Mestiko to rebuild its economy to the point where it could be fully independent- if ever. Kirk mused how Earth might be if she decided not to trade with other worlds. He was sure it would be difficult. Not impossible, but difficult. It wasn't in the nature of spacefaring cultures to be economically isolated. Just as tribes gave way to city-states, which gave way to nations, and finally planetary governments, local economies gave way to national, then global, then interstellar economies. Enterprise was going under an almost total refit and if Starfleet were to remove all the non-Earth technology, there would be little more than an empty skin to the ship.

The trust among the founders of the Federation took years to cultivate and now those relationships were their joint strength. Mestiko had been thrust into similar relationships out of dire necessity. It wasn't easy, and the trust wasn't quickly forthcoming, especially considering how it began.

Taking a lift to the third floor of the customs building, Kirk approached Fizzy's office. It was a small, two-room affair, with an assistant in the reception room, sitting behind a simple desk, and only two chairs for the long line of waiting Payav that flowed out into the hall. Beyond the assistant's desk Kirk saw elFizda's office behind an older wooden door that was painted with gold, official-looking lettering. He didn't know what the lettering said, but he assumed it was her name and title.

Pushing past those in line, and irritating many by doing so, Kirk made his way to the man behind the reception desk. He smiled, sure not to bare his teeth, as local custom demanded. "Hello," he said, and let the universal translator relay the greeting in the Payav language.

"Greetings," replied the Payav man in Kirk's own language.

Admittedly, Kirk was taken aback. "You speak English?"

"This is a customs office," the man said in a monotone that was perhaps a universal standard for bureaucratic jobs. "I speak a variety of Terran, Vulcan, Andorian, Centaurian, and Orion languages." Orion, too. Figured. "What about Klingonese?" Kirk asked, and searched the man's pale features for a response. There was none. Perhaps it might have been easier to see a change in skin tone if the young man's head and face had not been so covered with elaborate tattooing. The Payav were basically humanoid, and even rather Terran-looking, except for a porcelain pallor, longer-than-average necks, an extra thumb on each hand, and a complete lack of body hair. Any deficiency of decoration that a lack of hairdo might cause was often made up for with intricate tattoos.

"I speak some Klingonese as well," the man said after a long moment.

Kirk nodded, offered up his fake name, and asked to see elFizda, even though he knew she wasn't going to be there.

"She's out today," the man replied expectedly. Which meant she was neither on Indalo Station nor on Mestiko. Or at least she wasn't making herself available. All because Kirk was asking questions?

"What are all these people waiting for?" Kirk asked, gesturing to the two seated people in the reception room as well as the long line of thirty or more people that meandered out the door.

"Work," the Payav man said flatly. "We don't frequently have openings, but every day these number or more show up in hopes there will be something and they'll be first to apply for it."

Growing pains everywhere, Kirk thought, and thanked the man for his time. On his way out he asked a few people what kind of work they hoped for, but his requests went ignored. People looked away or down, avoiding him completely. One man, who stood near the back of the line but whom Kirk hadn't approached followed him to the street.

"Federation?" the man called after Kirk.

Turning back to the man, Kirk shrugged, not wanting to suggest he worked for the Federation. "I'm from Earth, if that's what you mean."

Thin, pale lips curving into a tight smile, the Payav man put out his arms in the traditional greeting that Kirk had learned some years ago. Grasping the man's hands, and having his grasped by those extra thumbs, brought back memories of his last visit.

"You have questions that people would not answer," the man said. He was an older gentleman, Kirk wasn't sure how old by Payav standards, but his tattooing was a bit faded, and his skin showed signs of having lost some elasticity.

"But you'll answer?" Kirk asked.

The man's head lolled around in what was probably similar to a nod. "I do not dislike Dinpayav. I do not believe the conspiracies that tell us the Federation did this to us."

"I appreciate that." Kirk gestured to a bench at what was probably a tram stop for the city's mass transit system. "Can we talk?"

They sat, the small man toward the middle of the otherwise empty bench, Kirk toward the end.

"What's your name?" Kirk asked.

"Izra," he replied. "Izra orCina. What is yours?"

"My friends call me Jim." Kirk smiled lightly, and then leapt into his questions. "What kind of work were you looking for with the customs service?"

"Any kind," Izra said. "I'm not so old that I can't work on a ship, or be a clerk, or whatever job you have, I can do."

Suddenly Kirk's heart sank. Izra wasn't just being kind, he was looking for work and assumed that Kirk was an offworld trader with ships that needed employees.

What now? Get more information, or risk disappointing him enough that he won't talk anymore? Kirk sighed and couldn't let the man assume something that wasn't the case.

"Mr. orCina, please understand, I don't have any jobs. I'm not looking for workers, or..." He let his sentence trail off as Izra's face fell into a deep, sad frown that suddenly made him look older still.

"I understand," the Payav man said, clearly crestfallen. "I appreciate your honesty. You are a journalist doing a story?"

"Why would you think I'm a journalist?"

"You are asking questions," Izra said. "Is that not what journalists do?"

"Maybe I'm just a trader new to Mestiko."

Izra laughed. "I assumed you were a trader who had come to look for help among those waiting for jobs because frequently Dinpayav do so here. But you are surely no one new to Mestiko."

Kirk looked quizzically at Izra, but couldn't help but return the man's laughter with a smile. "Why is that?"

"You knew the hand greeting perfectly," Izra explained. "So this is not your first visit to Mestiko. And you say you're not looking for workers, yet you ask questions, so you must be a journalist."

If Spock were here he'd say that logic was flawless. Kirk didn't answer the accusation, however, and instead wondered just what Dinpayav came to find workers here.

"What kind of people come here to find workers?"

Izra rubbed his chin with one hand in a motion that would look very human if it were not for the two thumbs at either side which met each other with a light tapping. "What kind of people? Dinpayav. Offworlders," he said as if the question truly confused him.

"Do you know from what planet? What they looked like?"

"They had fur, like you." He shrugged. "They were Dinpayav."

Kirk chuckled. To Izra, all Dinpayav looked alike. Well, that was fair. To Kirk, all Horta looked alike.

"Have you heard of anyone working for Klingons?" Kirk asked.

Izra's face crumpled into sour disdain. "No, I would remember that. I do not care for them."

Nodding, Kirk patted Izra's shoulder. "Can I tell you a secret?" He leaned in and whispered. "Neither do I."

Smiling again, Izra tapped Kirk back. "I wish I could be of more help."

"Do you know anyone who mentioned working on a ship or offloading cargo from a ship where something seemed out of the ordinary, or too secretive?"

Looking up in thought, Izra was silent for a moment. "You know, I believe so. A friend of mine recently got a job offloading cargo and clerking for one of the traders. I asked if he could get me such a job as well but he said they would not likely hire me." Izra leaned in as if confiding some great secret. "I have been told I'm too talkative, and Dedir said he could not recommend someone with weak lips."

Interesting. "Do you suppose I could meet Dedir? Do you know where he works?"

Izra hesitated. "I... I do not want to cause trouble for him."

"What trouble could a journalist cause?"

To that Izra laughed so heartily that he began to cough. "Forgive me," he said when he could catch a breath. "There are few people more disliked on my planet. Perhaps only Dinpayav are considered more so, oh, forgive me, I meant no offense."

Kirk waved off the comment. "No offense taken. And I promise not to tell Dedir who told me where to find him."

"Very well." Izra smiled again. "His name is Dedir orTola. He works at dock seventeen of the main dock complex."

"You've been very helpful, Izra," Kirk said as he clasped hands with the Payav man again. "And if I hear of a job, I'll be sure to let you know."

"Thank you, Jim. Good luck and safe journeys to you."

Chapter 6

De-dir orTo la was a stout figure, and that was an interesting sight for Kirk. It spoke to a rich diet, and when foodstuffs were scarce, that was what might be considered a real, live clue. If Dedir was eating well, that meant he was being paid well, and when there were people lined up for jobs, obviously trying to supplement whatever the government and help agencies could give them, a job that paid well meant someone needed very specialized skills. Hefting crates around, keeping track of them, and coordinating shipments didn't require great expertise.

When Kirk approached him on the large platform that was dock seventeen, he was standing with an older-fashioned data slate, poking in commands to its interface with a short, dirty stylus that probably used to be white but had turned grubby with time.

"De-dir orTola?"

The Payav man looked up slowly, connected with Kirk's eyes for a second, then looked back down.

"What?"

Again, English, no need for a translator.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions- "

"I don't got time for no questions," Dedir snapped, and began walking toward an office cubicle at one corner of the bay.

"You speak well," Kirk said. "You've mastered the double negative, at least."

De-dir turned a half step, and Kirk could see his expression was confused. "What?"

"I've heard good things about you," Kirk said. "I wanted to offer you a job."

Chuckling, Dedir turned away again and made way for his office, and Kirk followed him. "I have job," he said. "Get missing."

"Get lost, you mean." Kirk stood in the doorway of Dedir's office as the chubby Payav folded himself into the seat behind his narrow desk. "You've not even heard how much the job pays. It might be much more than you make here."

"Get lost, I said."

"At least you learn quickly."

"Whatever, a'sloointa Dinpayav," he said, this time all in his own language.

Every person Kirk spoke to was different and each required his own brand of finesse. With Dedir, Kirk moved quickly across the room and pressed his hand down onto the arm of Dedir's chair, pinning his right hand down. "I'm going to assume," Kirk said, easily blocking a useless, leverageless blow from Dedir's left hand, "that 'a'sloointa' isn't the nicest thing you could say to a person on this planet."

"Let me up," Dedir struggled, and Kirk pressed down harder on his wrist.

"I have questions, Dedir," Kirk whispered. "Starting with who pays you."

"I work for the people who own this dock- "

Kirk shook his head and spun the chair fully toward him. With his right hand he pinned down Dedir's other wrist to the arm of the chair and now a look of fear truly fell across the Payav's hairless brow. He struggled, to no avail.

"You might work for them in name, but I want to know who you work for in deed," Kirk said, and leaned close. "And don't lie to me."

"Get your furry hands off me!" Dedir insisted.

"No." Kirk pressed harder still, putting as much of his body weight on Dedir's wrists as he could. "Who is paying you to get fat?"

Finding straining useless, Dedir eventually gave up. He sank back into the chair and his face furrowed into what seemed more mentally than physically pained. "They will kill me," he said slowly, through gritted teeth, "and they will kill my family, and most pleasant of all they will kill you."

"Who?" Kirk demanded. "Who?"

"Alur," the Payav spat. "Now leave me to take my family away before they know I told you."

"Alur who?"

"Everyone knows Alur, now let me go!"

Kirk released him and instantly the man jumped up, knocking Kirk out of the way as he scrambled his plump form out of the office.

Moving faster than Kirk would have thought possible, Dedir was halfway across the docking bay as Kirk managed to get to the office doorway. He certainly hoped everyone knew who Alur was, because if not, his talk with Dedir was going to be just another dead end.

* * *

When Kirk went back to the ship, McCoy was waiting for him.

"I was beginning to worry," the doctor said.

Kirk raised his arm and pointed to the wrist communicator as his jacket sleeve fell away to reveal it. "I was a communicator signal away."

"Like I'm going to learn how to use this blasted thing."

Over a meal, Kirk told McCoy what he'd learned about a fat Payav named Dedir and his boss, Alur, which wasn't much, so it didn't take long to bring the doctor up to speed.

"I'm not sure which of us had the more interesting day," McCoy said.

"How is Dr. Lon?" Kirk asked, shunning the terrible coffee in favor of bottled water.

"Different." McCoy took a bite of his roast beef, then looked at the packet again as if to be sure it was, in fact, what it claimed to be. He shrugged and took another bite.

"Different how?"

"I'm not sure. More mellow isn't quite the word for it. A little more sympathetic, maybe? That doesn't quite fit either. I think he likes these people more... maybe as pets."

Kirk coughed out a chuckle as it interfered with a swallow of potato salad. "You're being too hard on him."

McCoy paused for a moment and seemed to consider the possibility. "I dunno. How do you spend all this time on a planet and talk more about its ecology than its people? Wouldn't you make some connections with the natives?" He looked at Kirk, then said, "Well, you would, if she were pretty enough."

Kirk ignored the dig and changed the subject back to Mestiko. "And how's the planet doing? The air looks more clear, but readings I took as we were landing tell me looks are deceiving."

"Nitrogen oxide levels are down a lot since Lon's satellites were put into operation. They've upgraded the original satellites, too, and added some to replace the ones that got blown up. Most of the acid rain is gone- or at least is more on par with what you'd expect for mid- to late-industrial societies. Oxygen levels are up enough that the ozone layer's under repair, and UV radiation is going down, too."

"That all sounds very good," Kirk said.

"Well, it's not all hearts and flowers." McCoy took his half-finished tray of food, its package, and his empty coffee cup and stowed them in the trash bin. "The planet's natural biomass was and is in steep decline. Massive flora and fauna extinctions, Jim. What the radiation didn't wipe out, the smog got. What the smog didn't kill, the falling temperatures destroyed, which is why other than what the Norrb can contribute, and some municipal greenhouses under the domed portions of the city, Mestiko is getting most of its food from off-planet."

Kirk nodded and McCoy continued.

"And while the air is clearer now, increased ice and snow cover is reflecting too much sunlight back into space. Temperatures are still way below normal. The ice caps are larger than as far back as Payav records go, because the last several hundred years Mestiko was on a warming cycle, coming off an ice age a few millennia back."

Stowing his own dinner remains, Kirk shook his head, remembering the devastation of the initial pulsar disaster, and then a few years later the ramifications of what to him always made him think of a massive planetary attack, as if the pulsar was an enemy that Kirk had failed to defeat.

It was probably a mistake to look at it in those terms- natural disasters weren't evil, they just were.

Perhaps that was why the Payav sometimes looked for a scapegoat in the Federation. They needed someone to blame, someone to curse other than nature, and the Federation had been there since the beginning- Dinpayav who appeared when their world became an icy, poisonous rock. Who could fault them for coping in the easiest way they could?

Kirk felt McCoy's hand on his shoulder and he turned toward the doctor.

"Jim, you still listening?"

"I'm sorry," Kirk said. "I guess I wasn't toward the end."

McCoy looked at him, his brows knitted with worry. "I asked what you want to do now."

"Talk to Raya." Kirk opened a panel in the bulkhead to the right of the galley and revealed a keypad. He punched in a code, and the keypad gave way to a retinal scanner.

"Access," he told the computer.

"Identify for retinal scan."

"Kirk, James T."

"Identity confirmed."

"What're you doing?"

With a slight hiss, a safe door opened. "Just in case the ship was searched at some point, I didn't want this found." Kirk pulled out a card holder and showed it to McCoy. Out came a flashing ID card, showing his name and rank. "I don't think Jim Temple and Dr. Davis will get an audience with the Jo'Zamestaad. But I'm guessing this will get us past security."

* * *

It actually had not been that long ago that Kirk had first met Raya elMora. She'd appeared on the forward viewscreen of the Enterprise, the new leader of a ravaged planet, her position chosen by default of who survived the initial pulsar devastation. From the moment they met Kirk had the oddest feeling that he should've been protecting her, and had never quite been able to.

They kept in touch from time to time, but she was busy, he was busy, and subspace letters were never Kirk's strong suit.

"The years have been good to you." Kirk flirted when he first greeted her, clasping her arms in the traditional Payav handshake, and then giving her a good old warm human hug.

Raya smiled and greeted McCoy in the same manner. "Doctor, I trust you'll be treating the admiral's eyes at his next physical." She motioned for them to sit in front of her poorly organized, messy desk.

"If memory serves," McCoy said, lowering himself into one of the three plain chairs that adorned her austere office, "he has an allergy to the standard cure. We'll have to work out something else. But I suspect he's fine for now, because he's right: you're looking radiant."

"I see Starfleet still has training programs in flattery," Raya said. "I'd hoped it would. As Jo'Zamestaad I am treated more to diatribe than adulation." There was a confidence in her that Kirk had seen somewhat in their first meeting, more in their second, and now it was fully in bloom. "I am surprised to see you," she

continued. "Pleasantly so, of course. But I received no subspace connect that told me you would be visiting."

"We were in the neighborhood," Kirk said, and watched her brows knit with confusion.

"James," Raya said in an admonishing tone. "I thought we were to be- I thought you of all people would know better than to be coy with me."

Kirk smiled. "Of course. We're here unofficially, however, so we need to be discreet."

She nodded. "That would explain why there was no record of your having arrived planetside, and no record of a Federation ship in orbit." When McCoy looked as if he was about to ask a question, Raya offered: "I would have been advised by Space Central had either event occurred."

A woman came into the room and handed Raya a data slate that looked much like the ones Starfleet used some years back. In fact, it might have been an old surplus item. "Thank you, Blee," Raya said, handing back the signed slate to the woman.

"You have an appointment you're late for, Jo'Zamestaad," Blee said on her way to the door. "The subcommittee on housing is to deliver its report."

"I promise not to be too late, thank you," Raya called after her. When Blee was gone, Raya leaned forward as if sharing a secret. "I don't know what I'd do without her. She practically runs the government despite me, and the two years she was a councillor in her own right I was lost without her."

Kirk nodded and smiled politely, but something was wrong. He could feel it. Raya was different. Warm and yet distant. Despite an odd misgiving not to, he was frank with her about his reason for being on Mestiko. He explained in detail his belief that shipments from Klingons were covertly finding their way to her planet, that someone was going to some amount of trouble to keep people from knowing about it, and that by asking questions at Indalo Station about Klingons and their shipments, a lot of very non-Klingon feathers had been ruffled- which was in itself unusual if there was nothing to hide.

Finally, he told her about his conversation with chunky Dedir and the name he'd given Kirk as his boss: Alur.

She listened, hands clasped before her, the appropriate amount of shock registering in her pale expressions, until he was finished, when she steepled her fingers in a manner reminiscent of Spock, save when he did it there were not two sets of thumbs.

"This is very disturbing," Raya said, finally. "I will have the Pesh-Manut look into this immediately, and I appreciate you bringing this to me, finally. I only wish you might have come to me first- I may have been more help."

"I didn't know enough to bring you until now," Kirk said. "Can you help me find out who Alur is?"

Raya seemed to shrug. "I will be in contact once the Pesh-Manut have investigated this to the fullest, I assure you."

"Well," Kirk said, "do you think I could talk to someone named elFizda in the customs office?"

Her features becoming ashen, Raya hesitated for too long a moment. "The woman of whom you speak was killed upon leaving orbit yesterday," she said solemnly. "I am told it was an accident. An imbalance with the engine."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Kirk shared a look with McCoy.

Raya stood, came around the desk, and gave Kirk a brief hug again. "I fear I am running too late at this point and Blee will not allow me to hear the end of it. But I am always glad to see you, and perhaps if our mutual schedules allow we can all have a meal together before you depart?"

Despite being suddenly ushered out, Kirk smiled politely and gave Raya the information she was looking for. "We should be here long enough for that. Dr. McCoy needs to meet with Dr. Lon for a bit."

McCoy glanced at Kirk but said nothing about the lie until Raya was gone and they were both on their way back to the ship.

"You don't trust her," McCoy said matter-of-factly, not asking a question.

Kirk wanted to trust her. He needed to at some level. "She has a look in her eyes that I've seen before, Bones. I know a hostage when I see one."

"A hostage?"

"Of circumstance."

McCoy was silent for a moment, waiting, and finally he said. "You going to explain what you mean? I thought the reason I was here was for guidance. That's a damn hard thing to do if I don't know what the blazes you're talking about."

Nodding, Kirk took in a long breath and began. "Her assistant coming in and telling her she was already late for some meeting was a dodge. I've used it myself when someone's made an appointment with me and I didn't want the meeting to run too long."

"That could just mean she's busy- "

"It's not just that." Kirk shook his head and thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "She knows there's more to elFizda's death than meets the eye. Did you see how quickly she wanted to leave after I mentioned her? And she's going to have the Pesh-Manut investigate."

"Yeah, what is that?"

"It's a conglomeration of intelligence organizations from several different Mestiko factions," Kirk said.

"It's a mess. It was formed just after the disaster and it's too hard for all those once separate agendas to mesh well together. Raya herself has complained about them to me in letters."

"I didn't know you two kept in touch."

Kirk shot him a glance. "We do."

"So why did you lie and tell her I'd not seen Dr. Lon yet?"

Pulling a hand out from his pocket, Kirk wagged a finger at the doctor. "Ah, now I didn't say that. I said you had to meet with him for a bit."

McCoy grunted with disdain. "See, you're as much a politician as she is."

"Didn't you always tell me to be more diplomatic?"

"You're thinking of Spock."

"Must be."

"So," McCoy began as they found the entranceway to the underground part of the city where the docking platforms were protected. "Why did you tell her I needed to see Dr. Lon again?"

"Because I need more time. Dedir said everyone knew Alur. Maybe that means that Raya wouldn't, and maybe it means she would, but when I said the name there was a flicker of recognition."

"You know, you're basing a lot on the reactions of someone from a different planet and culture as you,"

McCoy said. "Who's to say you know her well enough to read her every twitch?"

They approached the location of their ship and Kirk said, "Who's to say I don't?"

McCoy was about to argue but Kirk used one hand to stop McCoy from moving forward and with his other hand he pulled the palm phaser out of his pocket.

"What's wrong?" McCoy whispered.

"Someone's on the ship," Kirk said, and indicated a light flashing on the keypad that gave one egress to the craft. "Internal sensors detecting motion inside." He motioned to McCoy. "Get your phaser out."

As he did so, McCoy protested. "Jim, I've not qualified with a weapon in over two years."

"Set it on wide angle stun," Kirk snapped as he cautiously approached the hatchway, "and try not to get me in front of the muzzle."

Chapter 7

"How do you know you don't just have mice?" McCoy asked in hushed tone.

Kirk ignored the question and punched a series of commands into the console next to his ship's hatch.

"We could lock him in and call the authorities," McCoy offered.

That wasn't what Kirk wanted, however. Every time someone approached him he learned more. While McCoy may not believe it, someone waiting on their ship, even if their goal was to try to kill them, was a good thing. Besides, Kirk wasn't sure which "authority" they should contact. "The port and customs authorities may be in on this up to their eyebrows," he said.

"They don't have eyebrows," McCoy muttered.

"Come on. Let's find out who's inside." Kirk tuned his phaser to a new setting, then hid it from view in the cup of his hand. "Bring out your weapon if you need to, but otherwise let's see what develops."

"What did you do?"

"I reset mine to the lowest nonstun setting." A stun would knock someone unconscious. Kirk wanted

whoever was inside to be talking.

With another code pressed into the key console, the hatch hissed open and Kirk took a tentative step in. "Keep yours on wide-stun and hope we're attacked by the broad side of a barn."

McCoy followed him. "That's not very damned funny."

The lights were on, and the main cabin looked clear. Kirk searched forward, looking in the head, then the galley, then finally the small bridge, which was where the two men were sitting, in the pilot's and copilot's seat.

"Gentlemen, you're on my ship."

Kirk didn't actually set foot on the bridge. He wasn't sure there wasn't a third hiding behind the lip of the doorway.

"You're Temple?" the man in the pilot's seat said. He wasn't Payav, but some non-descript thickish, human-looking offworlder. For a moment Kirk was fooled- the man was bald and had some tattoo on his neck, but the eyebrows, eyelashes, and lack of a neck said he was not a native.

"That's him," the other of the two said. He was, in fact, a Payav, also pretty strong, but didn't have a great deal of tattooing. Kirk was able to see just how pale their skin was without the inked decorations, and it was ghostly. "He killed Dedir."

Dead? Kirk couldn't imagine Dedir killing himself, but he likely tried to run, and perhaps when the man named Alur found out, he killed Dedir. Or had it done.

"You're mistaken," Kirk said, and took a step back, which led McCoy to take a few steps back as well. Kirk wanted them out of the bridge and into the main cabin.

"You were seen on the surveillance record," the Payav said. "You assaulted Dedir."

Kirk didn't try to debate the assault. "I didn't kill him."

The oily human-looking one smirked. "You misunderstand," he said. "We saw what he told you. You pressured him into giving you our employer's name, and the result is that he was killed for his betrayal. That makes you responsible."

"Legally?" Kirk asked, all owing a bit of his anger to tinge his voice. "Maybe we should call the local constabulary and see if they agree."

Moving forward into the main cabin, the human pulled out a weapon- some type of disruptor Kirk was unfamiliar with but had a distinctly Klingon style- and aimed it at Kirk. In his periphery Kirk could see McCoy silently brace himself.

The Payav followed his human companion, and now all four of them were in the largest part of Kirk's small ship. The Payav had his own disruptor, and it looked to be specially made with a modified grip that accommodated his additional digit.

"The constabulary can't help you," the human said. "Unless you want to end up like Dedir, we suggest you leave this planet, and do not return."

Kirk nodded, more to himself than anyone else, as if weighing the offer. "You killed Dedir because he caused you trouble. Why not kill us?"

"Jim!" McCoy shifted his balance anxiously. "Let's try not to give them unnecessary suggestions."

"That is," the human said, "a very valid option... Jim."

"But you'd rather we just left." Kirk smiled politely.

"I would," the man admitted. "Two dead humans are harder to explain than just another dead Payav."

At this the Payav reacted, ever so slightly. Kirk saw his jawline twitch and his eyes narrow as he quickly glanced at his human comrade.

"That doesn't mean," the man continued, "that we can't choose that option should it become necessary."

"I don't suppose we could talk this over with your employer," Kirk offered.

The Payav spoke this time. "That is not an option at all."

Holding up his disruptor in a threatening manner, but not pointing it directly at Kirk, the human made the mistake Kirk was waiting for.

"Message received," Kirk said, and then without moving his hand from his side, he slipped his phaser into position and fired once- point blank- at the man's hand. In a flash an orange beam connected Kirk's weapon with the human's wrist. Skin sizzled and he dropped his disruptor with a yelp. When he saw the

burning flesh wound that cut down to bone he screamed and covered it with his other hand and collapsed to his knees in shock.

"What the hell? What did you do? What did you do!" he hollered.

Pivoting quickly, Kirk now fully aimed his weapon at the Payav man who instantly tossed his disruptor to the deck.

"Best option yet," Kirk said, keeping his phaser trained on him as McCoy slipped around Kirk and pressed a hypo to the other man's arm.

With the hiss of a hypodermic, McCoy stopped the injured man from grunting in agony. He collapsed, sedated, but for all the Payav knew McCoy could have killed him where he lay.

"Now," Kirk said. "I want Alur's full name, and I want to know where I can find him."

The Payav twitched again, his expression one of emotional agony. They were an expressive people and this one in particular broadcast his fear easily. "I will be killed."

"I can try to protect you," Kirk told him. "But you have to answer my questions."

"I will not," the Payav insisted. "I will not. I will not."

Thumbing the control on his phaser back to stun, Kirk fired and the Payav collapsed back against the doorjamb to the bridge.

McCoy moved over to him for a moment, checked to make sure his head hadn't hit the bulkhead too hard, then collected the disruptor on which he'd collapsed.

He handed it to Kirk, who'd scooped up the other man's weapon as well. Kirk examined it, but found no markings, no serial numbers, no indication as to its origin. It certainly wasn't Payav technology.

"This is a Klingon design," Kirk said to McCoy, holding the weapon up. "I'd stake my braid on it, Bones."

"What do we do with them?"

"I'll contact Raya, have the Pesh-Manut arrest and question them." Kirk tapped the barrel of one of the disruptors on his palm a few times. "Get your tricorder and we'll send a detailed scan of these back to Starfleet. I want to know where this came from."

* * *

The next morning Kirk and McCoy had brunch with Raya and her elor, her grandmother. The meal was a mixture of local favorites- or what had become so since the disaster. There were foods from all over the Federation, and locally grown greens from the hydroponics fields of the Norrb. Some of it was delicious, and some Kirk found gag-inducing, but the company was more important than the fare.

"I'm glad we had the chance to see your elor again," Kirk told Raya, but looked and smiled at her grandmother. "You know, I don't think I even know your name, other than to call you Raya's elor."

A wise woman, with not just years behind her but much experience, she said, "Raya could not pronounce elor as a baby, and so I have been her Elee for so long within our family and to friends as well, that Elee I have been and Elee you shall call me."

"Elee it is," Kirk said, and tipped his juice glass toward her with honor.

"Oh, be careful of this one, child," Elee said to Raya, removing her spectacles and rolling them between the thumbs of her right hand. "He is a charmer."

Finishing his plate and pushing it away, McCoy covered it with his napkin. "Does that mean you've changed your mind about what the Federation has to offer?" He asked in jest but from her expression, Elee took the question very seriously.

"I imagine you ask this," she said slowly, returning her eyeglasses to her nose, "because of my comments upon my first meeting your captain."

Raya leaned toward her grandmother and whispered, "He's an admiral now, Elee."

She waved the comment away as if it were a morning gnat. "What have you. It's hardly the point."

Slowly, choosing her words carefully, Elee continued. "I remember it well because I got quite a lecture on diplomacy that evening when my granddaughter and I returned to our quarters."

Kirk saw Elee flash a quick glare at Raya, then she looked back to McCoy, giving him her full attention.

"You know," she continued, "I was quite harsh, and I was perhaps speaking out of turn for such an event as that gathering was, but I believe in honesty."

"As do I," Kirk said, and looked at Raya, searching her eyes.

She looked away.

Elee drew Kirk's attention back when she took a deep breath as if to begin a long monologue.

"I understand what the Federation has done for us," Elee said. "I've seen the kindness of your hearts. But I also have seen the coldness of your bureaucracy. There were times in the aftermath of the Pulse that we wondered whether you were our saviors, or our tormenters. When a child is dying from radiation poisoning, and a shipment of medicine is overdue, for whatever reason... When your people's tongues swell with dehydration and clean water is on a ship that arrives too late for them, and so they've run to contaminated pools to quench their thirst..." She removed her glasses again and clasped her hands on her lap. "I am an old woman who should have died long before the millions of Payav I've seen pass from our world, including my own children. I simply ask that you forgive a woman, who has seen too much death and despair, her occasional sharp tongue. But you see, do you not, how it isn't a large leap for a very tired people to believe that their tormenters somehow planned the entire scenario for some malevolent purpose." She sighed and there was silence across the table. "In the darkest of times it is hard not to see the universe, even those who offer some light, as being as bleak as the moonless, overcast sky."

Next to her, a tear was welling in Raya's eye. Kirk reached out across the table, touched her hand, and she gave his a squeeze before pulling hers back to her lap.

"I fully understand," McCoy said, and Kirk thought there might have been the beginning of a lump in the old doctor's throat. "And anyone who doesn't is a fool."

* * *

McCoy and Elee went for a walk around the Zamestaad complex, which in the years since their first visit had grown to include many living complexes for hundreds of thousands of Payav. That left Kirk and Raya time to talk, and so they repaired to her office.

"By now," Kirk said, "you've read a report from your Pesh-Manut about who we found in my ship last night."

Raya nodded. "I'm afraid there wasn't much to learn. No more than you told the agents last night. Both men requested counsel when questioned, and refuse to speak until such an accommodation can be made."

"We have similar laws," Kirk said. "I suppose you don't have many active lawyers these days."

Behind Raya's desk were a number of framed pictures. Some of her and Elee, some with a young girl who looked vaguely familiar to Kirk, and one of what looked like a large family gathering under a large tree and had obviously been taken before the disaster.

"There are few lawyers, yes," she said, "and they are overtaxed. It will be some months before we can interrogate them again."

Kirk tried not to frown, but wasn't sure he managed it. "That's convenient."

"Pardon me? I don't understand."

"For them- it's convenient."

"I'm sure having to stay in custody is no convenience," Raya said, and it was the first flash of anger he'd really ever seen from her.

"So have the Pesh-Manut learned anything of value?"

"I don't believe so, no."

Increasingly, Kirk was both equal parts frustrated and disappointed with Raya. Before meeting with her and Elee, Kirk and McCoy had managed to do a little more legwork. They returned to the customs office that Kirk had visited the day before, and spoke to Izra orCina again. He knew well the name Alur, and confirmed it was the same man Dedir had been working for.

Even more disturbing was the fact that in their legwork Kirk and McCoy had no sign that the Pesh-Manut was investigating anything. They'd not talked to anyone about Dedir's death, they'd not talked to the docking crew about the men they had in custody who broke into Kirk's ship, and they certainly didn't want to step on the great Alur's toes.

"I think I can help you," Kirk said after a long moment of thought.

She looked at him across her paper-scattered desk. Maybe McCoy was right and Kirk didn't know how

to read her. Stranger things had happened. But if hunches were worth anything anymore, what he saw in her eyes was desperation.

"Can you?" she asked.

For what seemed like a minute and a half they just looked at each other, sizing each other up. When McCoy and Elee returned, Kirk stood and said his good-byes quickly and he and McCoy left the Zamestaad complex. He marched at such a quick pace that McCoy was beginning to fall behind.

"Jim, you're moving like a bat out of hell. Do you want to tell me where the fire is?" McCoy pleaded.

"She wants me to help her, Bones," Kirk said determinedly. "So that's what we're going to do."

Chapter 8

Alur or Jada lived in a house, which was why once Kirk had his full name he wasn't hard to find. It was also why everyone did indeed know Alur, and why Raya's claims not to made no sense. And if it didn't make sense... it wasn't true.

For a Payav, Alur was rich. He had his own "estate," which consisted of an old machine shop that, like the customs office, had survived the disaster aftermath with little damage, and its two outbuildings, which had been damaged but strongly reconstructed. He had people living in the outbuildings- people who needed places for one reason or another- and such charity bought him a certain amount of goodwill with the populace.

There was no "sneaking" into Alur's compound, even at night. A tricorder reading confirmed a significant surveillance perimeter, and it was most decidedly not a technology native to Mestiko.

Given that Kirk's ship didn't have a transporter, the best way in was the direct way: through the front door.

As soon as he and McCoy approached, the door to the main house opened and four Payav swelled forward to confront them. Kirk wondered for a moment if he should have brought McCoy along for this one. It was his strong conjecture that Alur wasn't going to just kill Kirk and McCoy outright. There was little to be gained by that, and in fact had Alur thought he could get away with it, that would have been done already. Alur wasn't unintelligent- one didn't build what he obviously had by making stupid mistakes.

The lead Payav came forward as the others surrounded Kirk and McCoy on all sides, weapons similar to the Klingon-design trained on them.

"I'm here to see Alur or Jada," Kirk said.

"We know why you're here," the first Payav said and motioned to the one closest to Kirk. "Check him for weapons."

Before the man could get close enough, another man stepped into the doorway of the building and ordered him to stop. "He's not here to kill me, Zizandil. Let them pass untouched." He was a somewhat older Payav man- it was always a bit hard to tell without the receding or graying hair that more easily placed a human's age- who was well dressed in a thick robe of what was likely expensive material.

He ushered his men to bring Kirk and McCoy into the building, which was obviously a very large room, not brightly lit, that had been sectioned into smaller areas. An old wooden desk was in one corner, with three chairs in front of it, and a padded wooden bench beyond. Wood meant rich on Mestiko, a now treeless planet that had adored them.

The room was far less ornate than Kirk would have thought, and he was beginning to wonder if a Spartan design sensibility had less to do with the Pulse aftermath and more to do with a certain Payav tradition.

With dramatic flourish, Alur adjusted his robes so he could sit easily in his desk chair, and he motioned for Kirk and McCoy to take seats in front of him. The chair sat lower than Alur's, Kirk noticed; that little tactic was perhaps a universal standard.

"Take your men, Zizandil," Alur told his guard. "I will speak with Admiral Kirk alone."

As the other Payav men left, McCoy grumbled under his breath. "Apparently I'm not even here."

"My apology, Dr. McCoy," Alur said, and finally Kirk noticed he was not speaking his own language but a perfectly unaccented Federation Standard. "I did not mean to slight you. I just assumed," he leveled his gaze directly at Kirk, "that it was the admiral and I who had the more pressing business. I understood

you to be on Mestiko more as a favor to him, and of course to visit Dr. Lon."

"You seem to know a lot about us," McCoy said.

That he did confirmed much about Alur. "If Nawaz Mazari thought he had his finger on the pulse of Indalo Station," Kirk said admiringly, "he had nothing on you."

Alur grasped the bridge of his nose near his eyes with the two thumbs of his left hand and with the other hand rubbed his temple. "Ah, Nawaz. A bit lost, really. Good for what he does, but a bad judge of character in terms of whom he chooses to employ. I'm afraid I've had to deal with some of his bumbling associates."

What did that mean? Curly and some of the others were dead for not having killed Kirk and McCoy? Probably. That was where Alur would have wanted them killed- off Mestiko, and away from where suspicion might fall on him.

"Is that supposed to frighten me?" Kirk asked.

"No, no," Alur gestured with one hand, waving off the notion. "After last night I didn't believe you could be frightened off. And to be honest I should have realized it earlier, but it wasn't until yesterday that I learned 'Mr. Temple' was Admiral Kirk."

"And what gave that away?" McCoy asked.

Alur smiled, and for someone who didn't want to be threatening he was showing a lot of teeth.

"Bones," Kirk said to McCoy, but kept his eyes fixed on Alur, "I'd guess there's very little that happens on Mestiko, especially in the Zamestaad, that Mr. or Jada here doesn't know about."

Bowing his head slightly, as if flattered, Alur poured himself a glass of something from a pitcher that sat on the corner of his desk and offered some to his guests, who declined. "Admiral Kirk is not incorrect. Which is why I am neither trying to threaten you, nor do I feel threatened by you, which is- forgive me if I assume too much- what you'd like."

"I'm not sure it's us you should be afraid of," McCoy said.

"If not you, then..."

"Not the Pesh-Manut," Kirk offered. "I'd guess there are as many of them in his pocket, Bones, as he has pockets."

Alur chuckled. "I am unfamiliar with the idiom but I think it clear enough." He leaned forward and in the soft lighting his features grew harsh angles. "Please do not think me arrogant when I tell you that I do not merely have the pulse of Mestiko- I am her heart."

Again Alur smiled and because Kirk realized he rarely saw a Payav's teeth, even when they spoke, it was the most jarring thing about him.

"You will not find what you're looking for here, Admiral. While it may have been suggested to you before that it was within your best interests to leave Mestiko, let me put it in terms you will understand. There is no benefit to you remaining on this planet. You have no starship in orbit, and the Zamestaad will bristle should one appear." Alur leaned back in his seat as if he'd created something beautiful and wanted to take it in from a distance. "In fact, if anything were going to push the people to rekindle a relationship with the Klingon Empire, a useless show of Federation force might be just the thing to do so."

Alur was right, on many levels. Not just about the Federation deploying a starship to Mestiko, but about Kirk not having one at his disposal. Not just a starship, but his starship. And all the people who went with her. Kirk wondered how different this mission might have been had he been commanding the Enterprise the last two weeks, or the last two years. Might he have meandered less across Indalo and Mestiko had Spock and Scotty been added to his counsel?

Kirk mentally shook off the doubt. This was neither the time nor the place for it. He could wallow in regret later, and second-guess himself on the way home. For now he had to push forward.

"You're rich on the backs of your own people," Kirk charged. "Doesn't that bother you?"

Alur shrugged. "My prices are very fair, actually. And whatever I might make is poured back into the community. A strong Mestiko is... well, a strong Mestiko is in everyone's best interests. You won't suggest that the Federation doesn't want us to be strong and independent, do you?"

"Strong with Klingon backing?"

"If you could prove that, we wouldn't be talking. You'd have brought it to the Zamestaad and-" Alur

paused as if in thought, then acted as if he'd suddenly remembered an important fact. "Oh, but so many members of the Zamestaad might be implicated that it would be difficult for the body to recover. That would be sad. Careers would be destroyed, the people's trust betrayed. I can't imagine what would be more destructive to Mestiko, can you?" He shrugged. "But again, if you could prove what you believe..." "You're a real son of a bitch, aren't you?" McCoy snapped. "You'd doom your people for your own aggrandizement."

There was quite a difference between having Spock along and having McCoy speak his mind, Kirk thought, and allowed himself the slightest smirk, not just at the doctor's righteous indignation, but his willingness to be even more blunt than Kirk.

"This isn't all for me, Dr. McCoy," Alur said, his tone still mild. "I'm more using the Klingons than working for them. You see, there are other causes on this planet than those the Federation is concerned with. And- "

"And," Kirk interrupted, Alur's simple allusion to "other causes" making many puzzle pieces fall into place, "the weapons parts being delivered aren't for you."

That got Alur's attention and he turned away from McCoy.

"The parts come to you, and you manufacture the weapons, but they go to a rival Payav faction of your choice. For later insurrection. It's not about the strength of Mestiko," Kirk said, eyes narrowed on Alur. "It's about the strength of... who?"

Alur was silent, and Kirk knew he was on to something.

"I think I see it." Kirk stood now and leaned down, his palms flat across the desk. "If it's found out that offworlders- Dinpayav- are stocking antagonistic Payav factions with weapons, the Klingons have their tracks covered with your help. The Payav will only know that various Dinpayav are to blame and..." Another piece fell into place and Kirk wished he'd seen the big picture sooner. "A separatist faction? Mestiko for Payav and no one else? Except for you, who can supply them with the help of the Klingons?"

"You know nothing," Alur said with a sneer.

"I know you're a fool," Kirk barked. "If the Federation and other Dinpayav are asked to leave Mestiko, we will. All it will take is a formal request from the Zamestaad. And then you think that with your Klingon-supplied weapons you and yours can take control of this planet. But you won't. Once the Federation is gone the Klingons will come in full force. And then what will you be? Head slave in the master's house?"

Alur was silent. He simply stared at Kirk, and McCoy was doing the same.

"You're making a mistake, Alur," Kirk said. "You think you'll survive this plan, but you'll be the first to die once it's known the weapons are from offworld." He pointed right at Alur's chest, driving his finger forward with every word. "You're the biggest link to the Klingons' involvement. You're the one they'd need to make disappear."

Kirk's muscles taut with energy, as if bracing himself for Alur to rise and strike him, ached with inaction. If Alur didn't want to hit him, he wanted to hit Alur.

McCoy sat, waiting, looking between the two other men. Silence draped the room until finally Alur found his composure and he slowly leaned forward toward Kirk as he pushed himself from his seat.

"I suppose," Alur began slowly, "it would be easier to explain one dead Starfleet officer," he nodded to McCoy apologetically, "and his doctor... than it would to deal with the exposure of your allegations."

Kirk was almost sure he heard McCoy take an audible gulp. Sometimes a doctor who wore his feelings on his sleeve wasn't the best thing when attempting bravado. "That's great, Jim. You convinced him to kill us. Anyone else you want dead you can talk him into taking care of?"

Alur glanced at McCoy for a moment, and when he glanced back Kirk had his phaser out and aimed just under Alur's chin.

Kirk's free hand grasped Alur's arm through his robes. "I'm not so easy to kill," Kirk said. "Better men than you have tried."

Alur was looking at the phaser only now. It was likely he wasn't often personally threatened because Kirk could feel the Payav's body tense just through his arm.

"Indeed?" he croaked out softly.

"Open the door," Kirk ordered McCoy, and noticed the doctor now had his phaser out as well. It wasn't hard, even for a doctor, to slip into Starfleet training in times like this.

The door opened, Kirk wrenched Alur forward and in front of him, pressing the muzzle of his phaser into the small of the Payav's back. "You'll see us to safety," Kirk told him, and started him marching out the door.

McCoy brought up the rear, looking back toward the building as they all walked slowly away. When the first of Alur's guards appeared, McCoy called out to Kirk in the most military way the doctor could muster.

"Jim, his thugs are on the move at twelve o'clock."

Kirk twisted around so Alur was a shield to them. "I'm at twelve o'clock, Doctor," Kirk said. "You're at six."

"You want this blasted information or not?" McCoy bellowed. "I'm not even in Starfleet anymore."

Kirk nodded and quickened their pace but Alur was older than he looked- or could have been purposely slowing them down- and wouldn't speed up much.

"They're running for us now," McCoy said, and was far less panicked than Kirk might have thought.

"Is your phaser set the same as yesterday?" Kirk asked.

"It should be."

It better be, Kirk thought. "Stand by- on my mark." Kirk waited until Alur's men were about a meter back, just far enough and just close enough. He stopped, and shoved Alur head-on into his own guards so they almost stumbled over him.

"Fire," Kirk ordered and McCoy quickly thumbed the phaser's trigger.

A green flash washed forward, bathing the Payav in light. They buckled, falling on one another, caught in the wide-beamed stun.

Kirk nodded to himself and grabbed McCoy's arm. "Wide stuns don't last long," Kirk told him. "We have to move."

Alur and his men were left, collapsed at the gateway to the house of Mestiko's richest man.

Chapter 9

The capital city was more confusing at night than when light cascaded through the pressurized dome.

With the help of a few good-hearted Payav- who didn't know why Kirk and McCoy were running but also didn't seem to care- they made their way back to the Zamestaad by daybreak.

Maybe it was paranoia, but along the way there had been several Payav they avoided. Men and women talking into small ear-worn communicators. Possibly they were Pesh-Manut, and possibly they were Alur's own agents- but to be honest, Kirk wasn't sure what the difference would have been. That several normal Payav could be woken from their beds in the middle of the night to show Kirk and McCoy the underground passages that led to the city center said much about these people. As much for them as Alur's treachery said against them. It really was no surprise- people everywhere could be kind or cold depending on their personal stories and manners- but it was heartening nevertheless.

Along the way McCoy couldn't help but treat a few Payav for vitamin deficiencies and they assumed he was part of the "Doctors without Borders" organization that had visited Mestiko frequently.

When Kirk and McCoy found Raya in her personal chambers, she was already awake, already dressed, and ushered them both quickly into the central room that seemed to serve as kitchen, dining room, and sitting room, and not with much space for any of it.

"Please," she implored, "keep your voices low. My elor is still sleeping, as is Blee's husband in their bedroom." She motioned for them to sit.

Kirk noted the contrast between the chosen planetary leader, the Jo'Zamestaad, and Alur or Jada. Both could claim to be the most powerful Payav on Mestiko. One lived in relative wealth and comfort, with an entire building to himself. The other lived with her grandmother, her assistant, and her assistant's husband, in what would be considered- back on Earth- a small efficiency apartment.

Looking shaken, and not just because she was surprised to see Kirk and McCoy this early and in her home, Raya moved back and forth, pacing nervously, unwilling or unable to sit.

"We've talked with Alur," Kirk said, and Raya instantly began shaking her head back and forth in a lolling motion that could have been- well, Kirk didn't know what it meant. She looked almost dizzy.

"Raya?" McCoy rose and helped her into a chair opposite Kirk. He took out his medical tricorder, rolled a scan around in front of her and looked up to Kirk with a shrug.

"Alur is dead," she said suddenly. "I just got word."

"Dead how?" Kirk asked, and found he'd moved to the edge of his seat.

Raya lolled her head about again. "Murdered. His home destroyed." Her voice was riddled with a fear Kirk had never heard from her. It was disconcerting. Raya was a strong leader, a person of incredible will and determination. But his first inclination when he met with her two days ago was correct: she was captive to a set of circumstances and didn't know how to escape.

"Raya," Kirk said softly. "How much did you know?"

She pulled in a deep breath. Then another. Then a third. Finally, she began, her decision to tell it all giving her a rush of vocal strength. "I- Alur, even before the Pulse, had been an entrepreneur in my district. He is- was- an important man and a generous man to the city and the people. After the disaster he helped as much as any community leader, perhaps more, to help Mestiko recover. He embraced the new ways and technology of the Dinpayav who offered Mestiko help."

So far, Kirk thought, Raya was selling him on how wonderful Alur was, which was set up for how she'd been fooled by him, and it didn't ring true. He prodded her: "How long have you known he was working for the Klingons?"

Her eyes met his, and the distrust they'd both recently demonstrated to each other melted away. "I became aware that Alur was receiving much of his inexpensive goods from Klingon-dominated areas some eighteen months ago," she said evenly, the words gathering individually on her lips, then falling sadly. "I had used Alur for my own ends, previous to his Klingon association. He supplied my constituents with goods they needed to survive, and I supplied him political cover and connections in exchange."

"But when you learned he was in bed with the Klingons?" Kirk asked, and her nose wrinkled at what in the Payav language must have been an odd metaphor.

"When I became aware... of that," she began again slowly, "Alur explained that we had been also," she shrugged and her hands drew up in confusion, "in bed together?"

"It's a saying," McCoy explained. "Politics makes strange bedfellows- strange agreements between people with different agendas."

Raya nodded and continued. "I believed we had the same agenda at first."

"And by the time you realized differently," Kirk said, "you were in over your head."

This metaphor she understood. "Yes. If I exposed Alur I was exposing myself and all the contacts in the Zamestaad that I had given him." She sighed. "I'd have not ruined only his standing, but my own and those of my political- " Raya gasped, noticing that Elee had stepped into the room.

Kirk turned to see she was in the doorway between the sitting room and her bedroom, wearing a simple dress gown and an expression of extreme disappointment. "Continue, child," she said.

With another slow intake of breath, Raya did. "I convinced myself that doing so- revealing Alur's... and my involvement- would also cut off a vital supply of much-needed goods for our people." Locked in a shared gaze that took in both Kirk and Elee behind him, Raya's voice cracked a bit now. "I deluded myself. And I also feared Alur's threats if I revealed what I knew." Looking away, she whispered more to herself than the others, "But I duped myself into believing I did it more for the greater good."

"Greater good," Elee repeated, and she sounded bitter. Two words wielded with such frequency both for good and for ill.

"I do not know what to do," Raya admitted and looked to her elor for guidance.

"Be your mother's daughter," Elee whispered. "You must."

Whatever that meant to Raya, it seemed to bolster her. She sat a little straighter, breathed a touch easier, and nodded to some internal decision.

"The Pesh-Manut are useless to protect me," she said, looking squarely at Kirk. "I am not a military leader. I have no personal security. I believe if the Klingon agents we both suspect killed Alur and

elFizda are aware of my involvement, they will seek to end my life as well."

"That sounds just about right," Kirk said gravely.

"I need your protection, James," she said, and took his hand, her thumbs squeezing him more tightly than he expected. "I must reveal to the public, to the full Zamestaad, the extent of this ignominy. I cannot prove conclusively Alur's involvement with the Klingons, and that may actually save my career, but my career is less important than ongoing Klingon intrusion into Payav affairs."

"You can prove it," Kirk told her, and pulled his hand from her grip.

She looked at him with perplexity as he wrenched a bracelet from his left wrist and placed it in her hands. Raya looked at it, seeing it was obviously more mechanism than adornment, and she held it up between the thumbs of her right hand. "I do not understand."

"It's a communicator, as well as a recorder. Transcribed for proof, on it is my conversation with Alur. He's very clear about his relationship with the Klingons, and his threats to the politicians- none mentioned by name- whom he could implicate." Kirk gestured to the communicator. "I'm assuming your people can verify his voice. It should be all the proof you need."

Studying first the device, as if it were a magical contrivance, and then Kirk's face, Raya nodded, stunned at the speed of events.

"This will mean political chaos," she said sadly. "I've brought political chaos to my people."

Kirk grabbed her shoulders and lifted her to her feet. "Any political bedlam is better than civil war," he told her.

"Or any war," McCoy said.

Epilogue

Kirk and McCoy stayed with Raya another week and on their voyage back to Earth Kirk went over her speech to the Zamestaad again and again. He was very proud of her. How often did politicians completely own up to their mistakes and take the political fallout solely on their shoulders?

The speech did exactly as expected, and the storm of political pandemonium would certainly cause her star to fall a bit. But power wasn't everything, and at least the Zamestaad agreed to allow an intermediary body to monitor shipments to Mestiko as well as trace previous consignments in the hopes of collecting any Klingon weaponry already distributed. Those councilors in the Zamestaad who protested were targeting themselves as members of groups who'd received such weapons, and would likely be the first under investigation.

"You think she'll be okay?" McCoy asked as he and Kirk played a round of cribbage and put the ship on autopilot through open space.

"Raya?" Kirk looked up from behind his cards. "She's a strong woman. She'll bounce back."

"Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them," McCoy said.

Kirk nodded. "In her case I think greatness collapsed in on her. But since the Payav authorities looked seriously for any remnants of Klingon agents, it's likely they removed themselves from the planet as soon as Raya's speech hit the news-connects." Kirk played his cards and then counted. "Did I tell you I asked Raya to find Izra or Cina a job? She said she would."

McCoy looked at Kirk sideways, studying the man as he pegged his points. "How is it you're able to gloat without saying anything? Just by sitting there."

Innocently, Kirk looked at the cribbage board and then up to McCoy. "I'm four points ahead. Who's gloating?"

"Not about the game, about your hunch. You were right- about the shipments, about the Klingons, about everything."

Kirk smiled and shuffled the cards. "Yeah, I noticed that."

"How long are you going to be this insufferable?" McCoy asked.

"How long have you got?"

Unable to keep from chuckling, McCoy refilled both their glasses with some Payav liquor he procured before they left Mestiko.

Kirk took a drink, sucked his teeth dry, and gestured for McCoy to refill his glass again. "You sorry I

dragged you along for this?" Kirk asked him.

McCoy shrugged. "Someone had to save your ass. How could I leave you all alone on a hostile planet?" This time having just short sips of a liquor Kirk could almost describe as both fruity and buttery at the same time, the admiral contemplated the confused planet and people of Mestiko. "Not that hostile, really. All things considered."

"You ever find out what 'a'sloointa Dinpayav' meant?"

For the first time in a long while, Jim Kirk actually laughed. "I made the mistake of asking Raya," he said.

McCoy leaned forward, his brows arched with curiosity. "Well?"

"Dinpayav you know," Kirk said tauntingly.

"Yeah, non-Payav. Got that."

"It means, Raya told me with much embarrassment," Kirk chuckled and took another sip of his thick drink, "no-necked."

"Come again?" McCoy felt his neck. "I have a neck."

"Not for a Payav," Kirk said. "And it would seem it's the highest insult."

Thinking for a minute, McCoy finally nodded his head and chuckled. "You know what? I think I like it. I might use it on Nogura next time I see him."

"Don't start," Kirk admonished, and felt the drink pulling at him a bit, slowing him.

"Will you at least admit that this is where you belong?" McCoy asked. "Out here, and not behind a desk?"

"If not for the papers that pushed across my desk, I'd never have known anything was going on with the Klingons and Mestiko," Kirk said. "That must count for something." He took another slug of the Mestikan drink.

"You convincing me, or yourself?" McCoy asked pointedly.

Kirk didn't reply. He dealt the cards, and motioned to McCoy that it was his crib. The truth was, he was trying to convince both himself and McCoy. There was a lot of future left for Kirk- he was yet a young man. Could he picture himself behind a desk for the next thirty or forty years, an admiral's braid on his sleeve? Maybe. Could he picture himself settling down and having a family? There was that side to him too. Did he still yearn to be in that center seat, on that starship, pushing past the frontier? Yes. Every moment of every day.

"What admiral takes a step back to captain?" Kirk said aloud.

McCoy was ready with an answer. "Since when do you wait for a precedent to act?"

Looking through the narrow doorway that led to the bridge, Kirk focused on the viewscreen above the navigation console. In the distance, stars pushed away as if spreading for his ship to pass.

This didn't feel like his ship; it still felt like Sam's. It probably always would.

Jim Kirk's ship was neither as small, nor available.

His ship was named Enterprise.

TO BE CONTINUED

Acknowledgments

I think it goes without saying, if you've read the other authors' acknowledgements in this series, that the writers collectively had a blast in discussing and planning their respective works with one another. I so enjoyed the wit and intelligence of them all: Dayton Ward and Kevin Dilmore, Mike W. Barr, Christopher L. Bennett, Howie Weinstein, and Margaret Wander Bonanno. Working with these folks has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my writing career, and I'd not have missed it for the world.

Which leads me to especially thank Keith R.A. DeCandido for having the crazy notion to bring us all together for this most enjoyable of projects.

Thanks as well to my friends and my dad for being understanding about deadlines, and to my brother Josh for his last-minute proofreading skills. Any typos are his fault, you know. If you e-mail me with complaints about them, I'm just forwarding them to him, be warned.

Last, but most important, thanks to the folks who forty years ago brought us what would become the legacy of Star Trek: Gene Roddenberry, Gene L. Coon, D.C. Fontana, Bill Shatner, Leonard Nimoy,

DeForest Kelley, James Doohan, George Takei, Nichelle Nichols, Walter Koenig, and Majel Barrett. I could go on with a list of names that would greatly extend the length of this book- so many helped to build the mythos of Star Trek- but their names are writ on the episodes we can forever watch, and remember, and love. Thanks to all of them, and the casts and crews of all past and future Star Trek shows for reminding us that "the human adventure is just beginning."

About the Author

DAVE GALANTER has authored various Star Trek projects, among these the Voyager novel Battle Lines, the Next Generation duology Maximum Warp, the S.C.E. eBooks Ambush and Bitter Medicine, a short story in the Tales of the Dominion War anthology entitled "Eleven Hours Out," and most recently a short story in the Constellations anthology entitled "The Leader." His not-so-secret Fortress of Solitude is in Michigan, from where he pretends to have a hand in managing the message board websites he co-owns: ComicBoards.com, a comic book discussion site, and TVShowBoards.com, a similar site dedicated to television and movies. He also edits and is the main contributor to his own blogsite, SnarkBait.com, on which he babbles about philosophy and politics. Dave spends his non-day-job time with family and friends, or burying himself in other writing projects. He enjoys feedback on his writing, positive or negative, and would appreciate seeing any comments you have on his work. Feel free to e-mail him at dave@comicboards.com.