

Harvest of the Planters

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Chapter PROLOGUE

The scout ship had achieved orbit about the third planet of the Sol system on the Twentieth day of November, standard local calendar. They were now forty-eight days into their sixty day mission.

This was the third such scout sent to observe developments in this planetary system over the past forty-three local years. The nine person crew had come expecting to find a world just recovering from the effects of a violent economic-political conflict. Observations of a previous scout, a mere twenty-one years before, had indicated that hostilities between the planet's two largest political entities had been escalating uncontrollably into a high probability of nuclear exchange and planetary desolation.

To their astonishment, they discovered a world in which those predicted violent conflicts had evolved into a fierce, non-violent economic competition between the planet's major power blocs. The natives were working, more or less peaceably, towards the cooperation necessary for a planetary government. The areas where violence did prevail were roundly condemned by the world's electronic media.

The natives were also in the midst of exploring their planetary system with robotic and manned probes. The information channels were filled with reports of the new discoveries on Venus and Mars and the farther planets.

Humans were living and working on the Moon in temporary bases, exploiting its resources, exploring its possibilities. This was a burst of sociological and technological advances that had staggered the observers at first. These were developments that Home World social scientists had predicted would not take place for at least fifty Earth years or more.

The scout's commander frowned slightly. This was the only reflection he would permit himself of his intense concern and confusion. He looked around the ship's operations center, at the members of his crew. Even without seeing their faces, he could tell they were as disturbed as he was. TPell was recalibrating her sensor arrays once again, while Engineer Stuur checked a set of control relays. His crew was ensuring that nothing, absolutely nothing, was left unchecked, that nothing was overlooked that might have the slightest chance of malfunctioning and leaving them vulnerable to detection and therefore, self-destruction. Their observations were too important to risk.

The commander turned back to his reports, noting down everything, including his crew's reactions to their discoveries. In retrospect, he could understand how the xeno-sociologists at the Science Academy could have come to such erroneous conclusions concerning the capabilities of this system's natives. Their own people had become peaceful and cooperative only in the face of utter self-destruction and had logically assumed that other races would take much the same course.

Additionally, it was a logical assumption that the obvious external differences between the various peoples of Earth, as well as the economic disparities between the technologically developed and undeveloped geo-political areas, would make cooperation difficult. However, while these factors did have an impact, it appeared to be much less than predicted.

What totally confounded the observers, however, was the astonishing discovery that a single organization on the planet Earth was waging a purely defensive interstellar war against technologically superior invaders. Even more astonishingly, Earth appeared to be winning.

The potential of interstellar conflict was one of the reasons the observers were so cautious in their observations of other nearby worlds. Their own racial memories included an invasion

from the stars. That invasion had been stopped at a fearful cost and had left lasting psychic scars on their people. It had nearly destroyed them.

However, the observers did not understand the secrecy surrounding this particular war. Logically, such an invasion should, as it had in their own history, have involved the entire planet, forcing political unity. That it did not was utterly inconceivable. But, it was also true.

Fewer than five thousand humans in the entire Earth system even knew there was a war going on. Those five thousand treated the situation as though they were party to the Prime Directive protecting a primitive planet.

It occurred to navigator T'Reyl that the group calling itself SHADO might be from a technologically superior civilization, protecting Earth from outside influences. As evidence, she pointed out the ten shielded and sensor opaque satellites they had observed in high orbit above the Earth and to the several faster-than-light transceivers SHADO possessed and was using as sensor devices.

A suggestion was made to contact SHADO, and through it, the civilization they might be connected with.

The commander considered the proposal. He rejected it on the grounds that they had no proof that such a connection actually existed. It was possible, however unlikely, that SHADO was a purely native construct, covered under Directive One. They would treat it as such.

There was no question that the invading Rokanni would not be contacted. The crew was aware that a scout sent to explore the Rokan system had been attacked and destroyed. The message capsule from that scout had been picked up only two days before their own departure from home. Given the Rokanni's war-like tendencies, as well as the discovery of their attempt at invading the Sol system, the commander made the logical assumption that the Rokanni were not interested in the tenets of non-interference in the development of other races. To contact them might well invite them to attack the Home World. That was a risk no one was willing to take.

The observers waited and watched and recorded more observations. There was a Soviet mining base in Clavius Crater that periodically launched iron-nickel ore down to Earth to land in the Siberian wilderness. The scout ship crew documented the humans' not always efficient mining operations on the far side of the Moon and their surprisingly effective solar powered smelting operations in Siberia.

They observed the clock-like regularity of shuttle flights to and from SHADO's lunar base every seventy-two hours. They noted and commented on the breaking of the pattern as one flight from the Moon was prepared for launch a day early.

Later, they would wonder if the early launch had anything to do with the newest arrival to the Sol system that same day.

A great, brilliantly white, space-going vessel came into near Earth space from above the ecliptic. Without making any attempt at communication, the ship established an orbit slightly above the majority of the planet's artificial satellites.

The scout ship crew watched, and meticulously recorded, the arrival of the vessel, photographing it and describing the configuration. There was a large saucer section, attached by a short thick pylon to a predominantly cylindrical lower section. That, in turn, supported two long, flattened cylinders attached to the lower cylinder by thin pylons.

They also photographed, and described, the pattern of black marks across the white hull, and, the part that gave the observers most cause for wonder, the identification markings. Those were written in the predominant language of the planet below. However, by no stretch of the

imagination could the great white ship have been built by the present-day natives of Earth.

This was a deep space vessel. It was based on propulsion theories Home World physicists were only now seriously investigating.

The ship piqued the commander's curiosity. The only theory he could think of that could possibly explain the appearance of the great white ship was one that was utterly illogical.

Chapter Chapter 1

Captain's Log: Star Date 8949.2. We have just completed our diplomatic mission to the L'Jharok'ha Colonial Alliance and are enroute to Earth and Star Fleet Headquarters, as per our most recent instructions. Our mission to secure mining concessions within the L'Jharok'ha sphere of influence was successful despite President Kh'veil's overwhelming desire to execute Federation Ambassador Sorvan, a wish I fully understand....

Captain James T. Kirk sat back in his command chair as he watched his crew at their stations. Despite the relative quiet of the past three days as the U.S.S. Enterprise headed back home to Earth, Kirk was tired.

Their mission had gone well-enough, considering everything. But, it was only after the L'Jharok'ha Colonial Alliance admitted they couldn't blow the Enterprise out of space that they agreed to sit down at the negotiating table.

A few more 'diplomatic' missions of that sort could drive a star ship captain to retirement and his chief engineer to drink. Or vice versa

The President of the Colonial Alliance had refused to speak with the Federation diplomatic team when they arrived. He insisted that the 'words of diplomats were less than the words of lying dogs', or at least the phrase translated to that effect. President Kh'veil had insisted, as a condition of continued negotiation, that Kirk execute the Federation ambassador, Sorvan.

Naturally, Kirk had refused, and the L'Jharok'ha flagship had opened fire on his ship.

The Enterprise's shields were down at the time, at Ambassador Sorvan's insistence. Kirk had half considered complying with the L'Jharok'ha demands simply for the Vulcan diplomat insisting his ship remain defenseless. Luckily for all of them, the L'Jharok'ha hadn't yet invented phaser weapons.

The flagship's lasers strafed the Enterprise's upper hull, cutting across the lower hull in the areas where they should have caused the most damage. The star ship's bare alloy tritanium-duranium hull took the energy of the lasers' highest power settings, and simply got annoyingly hot.

There had been only one casualty onboard the Federation ship. A transporter technician was badly burned when a piece of equipment exploded.

Finally, in the face of the Enterprise's technological superiority, the L'Jharok'ha agreed to permit Ambassador Sorvan and his party to beam down to their capital city and begin negotiations. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so heart-stopping.

Now, the Enterprise's white, iridescent hull was marred with lines of black carbonization. The U.S.S. Enterprise, NCC 1701-A, was dirty.

Commander Uhura, at her communication station as usual, turned to Kirk. "Captain, we have clearance for standard orbit around Earth. However, Star Fleet has requested we delay authorizing shore leave for essential personnel until further notice."

A muted groan went up around the bridge.

"And, Mister Scott's request for space dock time to clean the hull has been denied."

"Do they give a reason why?" Kirk asked.

"Only that we are to stand-by for further orders and you and Captain Spock are to report to Admiral Cartwright's office as soon as possible," Uhura replied. She keyed a different combination on her communications console and listened to the far away voices a few moments. "I don't find anything on the other communications nets concerning a possible

emergency mission. According to them, everything's fine. No crises brewing, no diplomatic problems, nothing."

Kirk was openly puzzled as he turned to Spock. "If there isn't a crisis, why is Star Fleet being so mysterious?"

"I suggest, Captain, we ask Admiral Cartwright," Spock responded from his seat at the science station. "Especially since we do have instructions to be at his office as soon as possible."

Kirk sighed, stood and headed for the turbo-lift. "Spock, why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like whatever Cartwright has planned?"

"A hunch, Captain?" The doors opened and Spock followed Kirk into the lift.

Kirk shook his head. "An analysis based on past performance. When Star Fleet gets mysterious, all hell's about the break loose. It's probably another diplomatic courier mission."

"We have been given a number of diplomatic assignments recently," Spock observed.

"I'm overly not fond of diplomatic courier missions," Kirk replied. "I wonder why they won't let us into dock to clean the hull."

* * *

Within ten minutes of achieving standard orbit around its home world, the captain and first officer of the Star Ship Enterprise arrived at the broad sunny plaza of Star Fleet Command Headquarters Central, in San Francisco, North America. A maintenance robot was polishing the structure's exterior transparent aluminum curtain wall. Several gardeners tended the winter ravaged flower beds beside the foot paths.

Moments later, Kirk and Spock arrived at the Headquarters building's central turbo-lift. The lift deposited them in the hall just outside the twenty-fifth floor office of the head of Star Fleet Operations.

Burgundy jacketed passers-by gave both officers courteous nods of greeting as they hurried past on their own errands, computer-padds in hand. However, there was no sense of heightened tension indicating an emergency was brewing.

The two Enterprise officers entered the outer office. "Captain Kirk and Captain Spock to see Admiral Cartwright," Kirk announced. He smiled pleasantly at the very young ensign seated at the desk in the outer office.

The ensign didn't return Kirk's smile as she leaned low over the desk intercom and toggled the switch, announcing their presence to the occupant of the office beyond. The door to the inner office was closed.

"I wonder why we're always the ones picked to handle the hot potatoes?" Kirk muttered to Spock as the dark haired young woman completed her announcement and switched off the intercom.

"I suggest, Captain, that Star Fleet chooses us because we are very good at handling 'hot potatoes'," Spock replied, equally quietly. There was the barest hint of a smile on the Vulcan's angular face. "That is, of course assuming we are being handed such a vegetable."

"If you'll have a seat, the admiral will be with you in just a moment, gentlemen," the ensign said. She indicated the low-slung sofa and matching chairs arranged a short distance away from her desk.

With a silent sigh of impatience, Kirk sat down on the black and chrome sofa. Spock took a seat in one of the chairs.

"Uhura tells me the *Bonhomme Richard* is in space dock. I understand she had a run in with a convoy of Orion smugglers," Kirk told Spock, keeping his voice low. "I was hoping I'd

have enough time to catch up with Carmarca, see how Sulu's been making out as her XO this past year."

"Do you know Captain Carmarca?" Spock asked.

Kirk nodded. "She was a couple years behind me at the Academy. Pia was chief helmsman on the *Potemkin* while I was Captain Wynne's first officer. She's a tough lady. I hope she hasn't been too hard on him."

"I'm sure Captain Carmarca has been as impressed with Commander Sulu as we all have been. He is, after all, an excellent officer," Spock reminded Kirk. "It was unfortunate that Star Fleet chose to postpone his ship captaincy due to his involvement in the Genesis situation."

"Scotty tells me the *Excelsior* has finally finished her space trials and there's a rumor that Captain Stiles is being reassigned. Rumor also has it that Sulu's been mentioned as Stile's replacement," Kirk said.

"A rumor, Captain?"

Kirk grinned. "A rumor, problematical information traveling even faster than sub-space." The door to Cartwright's office slid open.

"You may go right in, sirs," the ensign informed them. Kirk stood and gave the ensign a nod of acknowledgment as he smoothed the front of his burgundy uniform jacket.

"Now for the bad news," Kirk muttered as he and Spock stepped past the young woman to enter the admiral's inner sanctum.

Cartwright was seated at the large teak conference table at the far end of the corner office. He was not alone. A young Vulcan male wearing the somber tunic of a scholar was also seated at the table with an attractive young human woman.

Her eyes were blue and her long ash blonde hair was done up in neat braids. She was dressed in soft pastels, a flowing silk tunic over pink slacks. Her expression was nearly as somber as her Vulcan companion's.

"I'm sorry I had to make this all sound so mysterious, Jim," Cartwright began, giving Kirk an apologetic smile. "But something 'interesting' has come to our attention, and it appears to concern the *Enterprise*."

The dark skinned officer motioned for Kirk and Spock to take seats at the table.

"Interesting, Admiral?" Kirk wondered aloud as he settled into one of the indicated chairs. He cast a curious glance at Cartwright's guests.

"This is Historian Sehtal, of the Vulcan Science Academy." Cartwright indicated the Vulcan. "And Historian Sterreka of Danae."

Both historians nodded in greeting.

"I had been hoping to meet you, Historian Sehtal," Spock stated. Sehtal simply raised one straight, dark eyebrow. After long association with Spock, Kirk recognized it as the Vulcan expression of surprise.

"I have read your analysis of the political background of Vulcan's early observation probes to Earth and the thoughts at the time concerning Directive One and the destruction before detection order," Spock explained.

Without moving a muscle, Sehtal managed to look pleased.

Spock continued: "I had hoped we might have the opportunity to discuss the differing versions of Vulcan's first contact with Earth, and how that has affected Vulcans' perception of humans."

"I would be honored to have your thoughts on these matters, Captain Spock," Sehtal replied. "I look forward to arranging time in the near future for such a discussion. Your

personal experience in accommodating the Prime Directive in first contact situations should prove most illuminating in respect to my own studies concerning the differences in perception between Vulcans and humans concerning the non-interference directive."

Spock nodded his head ever so slightly, accepting the compliment, although, if asked, neither Vulcan would admit that a compliment had been made. Their statements were made in light of logical rationality, nothing more.

Sehtal turned to face Kirk. "As I am sure you are aware, Captain Kirk, Vulcan space probes studied the civilization of the planet Earth for many years prior to the first contact between our peoples."

"From about the mid-nineteen forties, if I remember my history," Kirk replied, curious as to what a lesson in Vulcan-Earth history had to do with their mysterious upcoming mission, whatever that might be.

"May 22, Nineteen-forty-three, old calendar, to be precise, Captain," Spock amended. "The probes carried a crew of ten and were sent at fourteen year intervals, approximately. They monitored Earth's communications channels and studied the planet's environmental and climactic changes for sixty days each time."

Kirk gave him a puzzled look and Spock continued. "The pre-warp drive technology scouts only carried enough provisions and fuel for that length of study. Most of the crew was put into hyper-sleep during the actual voyage. Even taking into account the effects of time dilation, the trip took ten subjective years."

Kirk smiled. "Yes, I imagine that's a long time, even for Vulcans." Vulcans were an extremely long-lived people, but it always surprised Kirk how matter-of-factly they could contemplate taking ten or more years of their lives to devote to a single objective or field of study

Spock turned back to Sehtal. "It was my understanding, however, that all scout ship records had been released for study by the Federation. All the original participants are now dead, so the privacy issue is moot."

"All records have been released, with one specific exception," Sehtal admitted. The Vulcan historian pulled out one sheet from a pile of hard-copy on the table in front of him, and handed it to Kirk. It was a photograph of the Enterprise as it looked now, white hull marked with carbon streaks. Even the registry numbers were clear : NCC-1701-A. Earth's Moon could be seen in the background.

Kirk handed the picture to Spock.

"What's so worrisome about a picture of my ship taken as we came into orbit?" Kirk asked.

Cartwright's dark brown face took on a worried scowl. "Jim, that picture wasn't taken as the Enterprise came into orbit just now. It wasn't taken by any Federation vessel or monitoring station."

"Then, who took it?"

The Danaen historian answered. She had a low, melodic voice. "That photograph was taken by a Vulcan scout ship in Earth orbit, December twenty-third, Nineteen eighty-three, Nine-fifty-three AM, Zulu time, old calendar."

"You're joking," Kirk protested. "The Enterprise has never gone back to Nineteen-eighty-three." He stopped, abruptly realizing the significance of his own words and the meaning of the wry expression on Cartwright's face. "But, we are now, aren't we?" he completed for himself.

Cartwright handed Kirk a small data card. "Your orders, Jim. Since you were seen there,

you have to go there to be seen. Miss Sterreka will be accompanying you as historical observer. The Danaen government has expressed a certain interest in this period of Earth's history."

Kirk turned back to Sehtal, "Why is this information coming to light only now?"

"The data was kept in a secured file in the history archives at the Vulcan Science Academy. It's opening was predicated on a specific entry being made into the computer archives: The existence of a space going vessel with hull markings, in English, of NCC 1701 dash A, U.S.S. Enterprise. That event occurred four point three years ago."

"Why weren't we told then?"

"To inform you prior to the fact would have served no purpose," Sehtal replied, all Vulcan reasonableness. "The second requirement was for this vessel to have these markings on the hull. That did not occur until your diplomatic mission to L'Jharok'ha, twenty-five days ago."

"You've been waiting four years for the Enterprise to show up needing a good wash?" Kirk asked in disbelief.

"Four point three years, Captain." Spock corrected.

"Are you in on this, too?" Kirk grouched at his first officer.

Spock simply raised one Vulcan eyebrow.

Kirk sat back in his chair with a sigh. He couldn't quite decide whether to laugh or to let himself get thoroughly annoyed. He opted for annoyance.

Time travel was a tricky business at best. Besides, Kirk found himself resenting being told he had to do something because he'd already done it. Where was free will when someone could tell you what you must do because you'd already done it in their past?

Cartwright misunderstood Kirk's sigh and subsequent silence. "Jim, you and your crew are the ones who took a falling apart Klingon scout through time and back. I'm sure a properly functioning star ship won't have any trouble at all. Besides, as the Vulcan Science Academy has also just reminded us, you left about a dozen communications monitors in Nineteen-sixty-eight, and now might be a good time to go back and retrieve them, since they're certainly not it orbit now and we have no record of them ever being retrieved."

With a sigh of resignation, Kirk placed the data card with his orders into the proper slot in the computer-padd in front of him. Silently, he keyed in his security code and read the instructions as they came up on the small screen.

"Scotty is going to have a fit," Kirk muttered as his orders scrolled off the top of the screen. Cartwright and Sterreka looked momentarily confused. The two Vulcans were as imperturbable as only Vulcans can be.

"My chief engineering officer just got the trans-warp drive tuned to his satisfaction and now he'll have to take it off line for the warp-break-away procedure," Kirk explained for the benefit of Cartwright and the two historians.

"I'm sure Captain Scott will survive the experience, Jim," Cartwright assured him.

Kirk gave him a crooked grin. "Yes, but will I, after he finds out?"

Cartwright scowled at Kirk's flip remark. Spock managed to look thoughtfully amused.

"Admiral, may I make one request for an additional crew member for this little jaunt?" Kirk asked after a moment.

"Who and why?" Cartwright asked. His brows beetled into a warning frown.

"I noticed the Bonhomme Richard was in space dock for some minor repairs. Considering the delicacy of this mission, I'd really like to have Commander Sulu as helmsman. He is the only Star Fleet helmsman with this type of experience," Kirk answered. He gave Cartwright his

most innocently disarming smile.

"I see," Cartwright said. "I'll see if Captain Carmarca can manage without her first officer for a few days."

* * *

Pia Carmarca sat with her first officer in the cafeteria on the upper level of deck fifteen of Star Fleet's orbital space dock. The large ports looked out onto their ship, hanging in freefall in the enormous cavern of the docking-repair facility. Umbilical lines connected the *Bonhomme Richard* to the docks, bringing power and air to the ship. Work-pods and space-suited workmen were already scurrying over the white ship as other work-pods and men brought in replacement hull plates.

"Well, Kirk is asking for you specifically, Hikaru," the captain said peering at her executive officer over her double espresso. Cartwright's request had found them at lunch, reviewing the several crew reassignments that had come through. "I can spare you for a week or so, if you really want to go on this mission," she added.

"Shouldn't I be over-seeing the repairs, Captain?" Hikaru Sulu asked.

Carmarca smiled. "You should," she agreed. "But, I think Chief Engineer Tranh can handle it. After all, she was trained by Montgomery Scott himself."

The captain paused, her dark eyebrows drawing together with concern. "I am a little puzzled that Kirk has asked for you, though. What sort of mission has he got that he needs the best helmsman in the fleet, and my first officer? I've never heard of a star system named *December 1983*."

Sulu shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't think it's a matter of where, Captain, but of when."

Chapter 2

On a small, highly classified, military base on Earth's Moon, thirty-three year-old Paul Foster, senior-level operative for SHADO, Supreme Headquarters, Alien Defense Organization, silently bemoaned his fate.

Foster hated paper-work. He hadn't liked paperwork when he was in the RAF learning to fly. He hadn't liked it when he was a civilian test pilot, wringing out some of the hottest private planes now in production. He didn't like it now.

Only problem was, his job seemed more and more to revolve around paper-work. Even Moonbase's monthly inspection had evolved into simply more reports to be filled out, more paper-work to finish and file, in quadruplicate. Not that anyone outside of SHADO would ever read them. Foster sometimes wondered if anyone in SHADO ever read them besides Ed Straker, the organization's commander-in-chief.

Foster leaned back in his chair in the Moonbase leisure sphere. He stretched his arms above his head, working the kinks out of his back. He'd been sitting in the low chair far too long, hunched over the table in front of him, looking over paper-work.

Captain Joan Harrington, Moonbase's commanding officer, sat across the table from him. "Do we pass inspection, Colonel?" she asked brightly. There was confidence in her blue eyes, in the slight smile on the oval face beneath the regulation anti-static mauve wig.

He grinned. He knew she knew the answer to her question. Moonbase's performance was top-notch, as always, despite the arduous hours, the days and weeks of waiting and watching for the enemy. It was a boring duty, the boredom only occasionally broken by the excitement of sighting and attacking the U.F.O.s that made a habit of attacking a virtually defenseless Earth.

That was Harrington's job, coordinating Earth's first line of defense, defending the planet against invaders who came out of space at near the speed of light to kidnap innocents, to use them in unspeakable ways and to destroy what they could not take. Harrington had served on Moonbase nearly six years and had served as base commander for nearly a year. Her record was flawless.

"Looks like a clean bill of health to me," Foster confirmed, straightening up in his chair. He was glad to be done with the monthly inspection. He collected the reports from the table and initialed the top sheet, noting the date: December 22, 1983. He shoved the papers into a glossy gray folder.

"Now all we have to do is convince Commander Straker," Harrington quipped.

"Convince me of what?" Ed Straker asked, coming over to take a seat. He had a cup of coffee in his hand, light and sweet, the way he always fixed his coffee while visiting Moonbase.

"That the Christmas decorations are regulation," Foster replied with a grin. He indicated the glittering ornaments and lights strung from the ceilings and walls of the lounge. "I've given them a clean bill of health," Foster added. He handed his commanding officer the file. "You'll want to double-check it, of course." He both knew that was how Straker normally worked.

Straker surprised him. "I'm sure everything's checked out fine," he said, handing the file back to Foster without even opening it.

Straker's voice was quiet, but there was an odd breathiness that Foster didn't recall having been there before and there was a tiredness in Straker's posture, in his finely boned face.

Foster couldn't remember ever seeing his commander so fatigued before. Straker wasn't

an old man, he was only twelve years older than Foster, but there was a look of age about him, a fragility that hadn't been there even a month ago. Foster was surprised to notice for the first time that Straker's hair had gone from pale blond to pure white.

"Sir, all you feeling all right?" Harrington asked. She had also noted the grayness in Straker's complexion.

Straker took a sip of coffee and grimaced.

"Sir?" Foster said when Straker didn't answer Harrington's question. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Straker finally replied. He set his coffee on the low table and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I'm just tired, and I have a headache, that's all." He glanced up as an off-duty fighter pilot entered the room and headed for one of the food servers set into the wall of the sphere.

"It's funny, I know the temperature in here is set to seventy-two degrees and fifty percent humidity," Straker said. "But, I'm freezing!"

"Shall I check the temperature setting, sir?" Harrington asked, getting up from her seat.

"Please, Captain," Straker said. He'd started to shiver, folding his arms across his chest.

Harrington went to the environmental control pad on the wall next to the door of the sphere and checked the settings. She looked back at Foster, shaking her head.

"Thanks, Joan," Foster acknowledged. "I'll talk to you later."

Harrington nodded, her expression worried. Then she left, heading for her duty station in the Control sphere.

There was an ivory wool afghan thrown across one of the chairs. It had been knitted by one of the Moonbase astronauts to fill his time. Foster picked it up and handed it to Straker. The older man's hands were like ice.

"Maybe this will help, sir," Foster said. Straker simply nodded, wrapping the throw around himself.

Foster recalled a discussion with Alec Freeman, Straker's chief of staff, only a week before. They'd been in Straker's office, in SHADO's underground headquarters complex, north of London.

Straker had left early again that day. Tired, he'd said. He'd been saying that a lot, lately.

Doctor Frazer, one of SHADO's staff physicians, had requested a private meeting with Freeman and Foster. Frazer's long face had been drawn with worry as he informed them of their superior officer's deteriorating heart problem.

"I can't tell you how long he can survive in this condition," Frazer told them. "There have been people who've hung on for years in heart failure. But, frankly, by next month, I doubt he'll be able to work. He may well be dead."

"Does the commander know this?" Freeman had asked. He and Foster were already handling most of Straker's duties. That Straker didn't seem to notice their attempts to lighten his work load was simply one more sign of how sick he was.

"I've given him my opinion and recommended he see a cardiac specialist," the SHADO physician said. "I've told him there is a possibility that valve replacement surgery could solve the problem, but I'm not qualified to do open heart surgery."

"What did Straker say to that?" Foster had wanted to know.

Frazer's thin mouth pulled into a wry grin. "He told me he would take my recommendation under advisement," the physician reported.

"To be honest with you, I don't understand how his condition could have deteriorated so quickly," Frazer admitted to them. "We knew his heart may have been damaged when he

over-dosed on the X-50 drug last year, when Turner was killed. We've been monitoring it quite closely for the past fifteen months."

"The aortic murmur showed up only two months ago, and he's gone into full blown congestive heart failure since then. I'd say he'd picked up an infection of some sort, but nothing's shown up in his blood studies and his EKG is absolutely normal. The only other thing's that's shown up is some joint inflammation suggestive of an auto-immune disease."

The English physician shook his head. "I don't understand it and there's not much I can do except keep an eye on his medication levels and hope he doesn't come down with pneumonia."

"Thank you, Jake," Freeman said, dismissing the physician. Frazer nodded and left the office to return to his office in the medical center at the far end of the SHADO complex.

"When were you planning to let the Commission know about it?" Foster asked, watching the older man's worried expression. Freeman and Straker had been close friends for years, even before they'd started working together for SHADO. And, even though Frazer's report had simply confirmed what they'd already suspected, the news was still a shock.

"Henderson suspects," Freeman said. General James Henderson was chairman of the United Nations commission that officially oversaw SHADO's operations. They controlled the money.

"He keeps asking me how Ed's doing. I keep telling him everything's okay," Freeman explained. He sighed, leaning against the broad slate topped desk that dominated the office. "You know, the official request to relieve the commander from duty for medical reasons has to come from three senior officers and at least two staff physicians," he reminded Foster.

"I know," Foster replied. They'd been through all this before.

There was anguish in Freeman's leathery face. "Paul, it'll kill him. He's put fourteen years of his life into building and running SHADO, running this war with the aliens."

"So, what do we do?" Foster had asked.

"I'm going to talk to Kate, again. See if she can talk him into going in for the surgery," Freeman told him. "If he does, he'll be out for six weeks or so, but we can handle that."

"And if he doesn't?"

Freeman shook his head. His blue eyes had gone dull with pain. "We'll be burying him in a month."

* * *

Straker had started to cough, a deep, wracking, agonizing cough. He held a tissue to his mouth as the coughing finally subsided. The white tissue was tinged with bright blood as he took it from his lips. He was gasping for breath, his complexion gray beneath his light tan.

The pilot at the food server behind Straker watched, worry written across his young face.

"Joe, go get the medic," Foster ordered. Straker shook his head, gasping, unable to speak. The pilot stood still for a moment, apparently undecided as to which senior officer he should obey.

Foster mouthed 'GO', at him, jerking his head at the door for emphasis. The pilot ran out of the room to get the Moonbase medical officer.

The attack passed before the medic arrived. Straker took the bloody tissue, wadded it up and stuck it in his pocket, as if by hiding the evidence, he could deny its existence.

"There's a little moisture in your lungs, and your blood pressure is low," Medical officer Tze reported after quickly examining Straker. "I'm not in a position to prescribe anything for you. You might want to speak with Doctor Frazer when you get back to headquarters."

"Thank you, I'll do that," Straker said as he pulled his suit jacket back on. His expression

was stonily calm as he regarded Foster, still sitting opposite him.

Foster recognized Straker's expression. The commander was furious and working to control it. Foster wondered who Straker was more angry at, himself for being ill, or Foster, for noticing and taking action.

"We're finished with the inspection up here," Foster said, choosing to ignore Straker's anger. "There's no reason we can't leave for Earth tomorrow morning."

"In fact, I would recommend it, sir," Tze informed them as he finished putting away his equipment. "Moonbase isn't a real good place to get sick."

"Leaving early will mess up the leave schedule and leave Joan two people short," Straker reminded Foster curtly, ignoring the medic.

Foster shrugged. "Joan's been short staffed before, and I doubt if anybody up here will mind if Nina and Charlie get an extra day on Earth. We can always assign them one day's duty at headquarters," Foster told his superior. "Besides, it'll give Nina and Alec an extra day to figure out how they're going to smuggle that case of New Year's champagne up here. You know, the stuff you're not supposed to know about."

To Foster's relief, Straker actually grinned. "Paul, considering the Christmas rum came up marked as radar tracking spares, I don't think Alec will have any trouble getting the champagne up here."

Chapter 3

Captain's Log: Star Date 8950.1 The Enterprise has been ordered to travel back through time to late Twentieth century Earth. This is so we can be seen by a Vulcan Probe ship reported to be in orbit at this time, and also so we can pick up sensor monitors that were placed in Earth orbit during a previous visit to 1969.

With a silent sigh, Kirk finished his log entry. He pressed the button on the control panel on the arm of his command chair, turning off the recorder.

His ship shuddered around him, creaking with stresses that no star ship was designed to take. Kirk hated the sound, hated the idea of his ship being turned into a time machine, no matter how temporarily. More immediately, Kirk hated the feeling of impending doom that traveling through time gave him.

History was too fragile to be left to star ships and mere mortal star ship captains, no matter how experienced. The fact that he and his senior command crew had the most experience of anyone the known galaxy didn't help any. If anything, it made it worse.

Kirk knew how very fragile the currents of time were, how the actions of one individual, their life or their death, could rend history-as-it-was into shapes that were utterly incomprehensible. He also knew how impossible it was to tell at the time which actions future history demanded for the maintenance of its continuity.

"Warp-breakaway maneuver completed, Captain," Spock announced.

Determining to simply do as best as he could under the circumstances, Kirk acknowledged the announcement and looked around the bridge at his crew. Ensign Petra Mallory, petite and brown haired, newly graduated from Star Fleet Academy, was seated at navigation. Commander Hikaru Sulu, on loan from the *Bonhomme Richard*, was manning the helm. The sight of his former helmsman back at his station made Kirk feel a little better about their mission, but not much.

Commander Uhura sat at her communications station, as usual. She was tapping into the Twentieth Century carrier wave transmissions that escaped the Earth's atmosphere.

They were picking up a Spanish language station from Equador at the moment. The cheery sounds of Christmas music came over the speakers

Spock was at his science station, meticulously monitoring the various sensor arrays. Everything, down to the tiniest scrap of information, was being recorded for study by future historians.

Commander Sulu looked back to Kirk. "Earth orbit in thirty minutes, Captain. It's December Twenty-third, nineteen-eighty-three."

"Thank you, Mister Sulu."

Uhura pressed a series of buttons on her console, then she turned in her chair to address Kirk. "Beginning recording of local planetary broadcasts now, sir." She smiled, white teeth bright against her dark, fine featured face. "It's one very noisy planet, Captain."

Kirk grinned back at her. "I don't recall that anyone has ever accused humans of being a quiet species," he quipped. He keyed a switch on the communications panel on the arm of his command chair, "Cargo Transporter two."

Lieutenant Kevlin, newly transferred to the Enterprise from the U.S.S. Sagan, answered promptly. "Transporter room, Kevlin speaking."

"Mister Kevlin, you and Mister Scott may begin transporting the monitors aboard as soon as we're in range."

In cargo transporter room two, Eduard Kevlin stood at the control console. Two assistant engineers in white engineering cover-alls stood near the wide cargo transporter platform. A box of anti-grav lifters rested on the floor between them. The lifters would make moving the satellites down to the engineering section for analysis that much easier. Each satellite weighed about three hundred kilos.

"Aye, sir. Beginning locator procedures now," Kevlin responded as the transporter room doors opened and Chief Engineer Scott entered.

Scott nodded a greeting to his assistants. Then, he stepped over to the console, taking his position next to Kevlin at the transporter controls. The heavy-set Scotsman played the control board as if it were a musical instrument, guiding Kevlin through the difficult procedure of locating the radar invisible, sensor opaque, monitor satellites.

* * *

A Lunar Transport Module stood in launch position on the launch pad above Moobase's leisure sphere.

Within the cockpit of the Lunar Module, Paul Foster and his space suited copilot, Charlie Spielberg, finished their pre-launch checks. They marked each item off on the preprinted check-lists on their knee boards. Seated behind them, their two passengers patiently watched the procedures. They'd been through it all many times before.

A video monitor on the control panel blinked on and Joan Harrington came on the screen. "SHADO Lunar module fifty-four, clearance for take-off at ten, twenty-three, thirty. Trans-lunar trajectory green," she announced.

"Roger, Moonbase," Foster replied, putting away his check-list.

The count-down clock on the panel blinked down to zero.

At the touch of a button on the control panel, the module engines began to fire. Smoke and flame erupted from the bottom nozzles of the main engines, kicking up flurries of moon dust.

Inside Moonbase's Control Sphere, Harrington sat at the main control console in the center of the room. Seated at other consoles were this shift's command crew, Myra Wingate and Carol Miller. All three women wore Moonbase's regulation silver-gray uniforms and anti-static mauve wigs. It gave them a deceptively uniform appearance, which belied their differing and complementary talents and personalities.

The Moonbase command crew checked their radar screens and computer monitors, going over their own pre-launch check-lists. Miller nodded a go-ahead to her commander.

Harrington spoke into the microphone at her station: "Lift off, fifty-four."

At the touch of a lever inside the module, the module rocket engines increased their output and the secondary engines ignited. With deceptive slowness, the module lifted away from its launch pad.

Inside, Spielberg watched the various numbers that came up on the computer screen in front of him. "Everything A-okay, sir," he announced.

"Good," Foster commented. He turned to look back at his passengers, Straker and Moonbase operative Nina Barry. "Lift-off completed. E.O.I. in two hours, fourteen minutes. Rendezvous with the carrier, four minutes after that, Commander."

Barry checked the time on her watch. "That'll get us back just in time for lunch."

"After the food up here, we could probably stand a good meal," Straker commented with a wry grin.

The others chuckled. They'd all been eating Moonbase food too long not to appreciate

how boring it was.

Straker also chuckled, but the laugh quickly became another of his wracking coughs that left him pale and gasping for air.

"Sir, are you all right?" Barry asked, alarm in her husky voice. There was a faintly blue tinge to Straker's lips, and there was blood at the corner of his mouth.

"I've been having a little trouble catching my breath, that's all," he told her. He wiped the blood away with the back of his hand.

"Commander, there's a supplemental oxygen tank behind you," Foster said. He kept his voice calm, matter-of-fact, but, he couldn't dispel the worry that was clutching at him.

"Sir? Why the oxygen?" Spielberg kept his voice low. He glanced back to where Straker was still trying to recover his breath. Barry had pulled out the oxygen tank and was trying to convince Straker to take the face mask.

"The commander is very ill. That's why we left Moonbase a day early," Foster informed him, equally quietly.

"Sir, how did he get to Moonbase in that condition in the first place?"

Foster simply shook his head. He wasn't sure he wanted to explain how he and Alec Freeman had agreed to let Straker make this trip to the Moon, with the understanding that it would probably be his last.

Foster wondered briefly if Straker would survive this last trip back to Earth and SHADO headquarters. It might be a blessing if he didn't. Then, Straker wouldn't have to face the fact that Freeman, his closest friend, was being forced to ask General Henderson and the Commission to relieve him of duty, even if it was for the good of the organization and himself.

Foster recalled his own father's reaction at being forced to retire from his work as an aerospace engineer following a massive heart attack. He'd kept saying it was all right. He wanted to retire early, to take his well-deserved leisure.

But, within four months, Allan Foster was dead at the age of forty-five. Not of a sick heart, but of a broken one, or so Paul's mother had insisted. Straker was the same age Paul Foster's father had been at his death.

* * *

Kirk sat back in his command chair, watching the large view screen at the front of the bridge. On the screen, an early lunar transport ship could be seen, heading for orbital insertion and re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. For a fanciful moment, Kirk thought the ship rather resembled a mad artist's concept of a trilobite.

The ship was bright yellow. The underside heat shield was dark brown, shading to black where the heat of previous re-entries had left their mark. Structurally, it was divided into three lengthwise sections. A control-passenger-freight cabin was mounted above the main engines. It was flanked on either side by smaller cylindrical fuel pods and auxiliary engines.

The ship had been launched from one of the lunar bases. A quick sensor sweep had shown that the above ground portion of the base resembled a set of five soccer-balls connected by short passageways to a central hexagonal building. The sixth side of the central hexagon was connected to a passageway that ended in an airlock to the surface, facing a landing pad. It was neat and compact, and utterly human-made.

Even Scott had expressed his appreciation of the ingenuity that had gone into building the base. Each exterior graphite composite panel was individually sprung to absorb micro-meteorite impacts. Without lunar manufacturing plants, each of the modular pieces had been fabricated on Earth, shipped up by shuttle and assembled on the Moon.

Kirk couldn't even begin to guess how long it must have taken the builders to excavate the underground portions of the complex. On the lower level, there were living and storage areas and a large hangar that sensors indicated held six one-man fighter craft ready for launch. The builders would have been limited to hand tools, light-weight excavators, and explosives. All the work had to have been done in space-suits. It would be a tough job even today for the Star Fleet Corps of Engineers.

Kirk wondered a moment at how Federation archeologists could have missed finding the remains of the base. Then he realized that the underground portions still existed in the Twenty-third Century. They were incorporated into Lunagrad, the second largest city on Earth's Moon. The hangar was part of the green-house complex.

Spock was continuing his sensor scans of local space, noting, for future analysis, the debris in near Earth orbit, the positions of the various communications and observation satellites. He made special note of the fast moving micro-debris in low orbit. Apparently, those were from early attempts at destroying large chunks of debris, before it became fully evident that a few large, fast-moving pieces were less dangerous than many small, fast-moving, pieces.

After a time, Spock glanced up at the scene on the main view screen, then turned to look over at Kirk. "Captain, I have located the Vulcan Scout ship in orbit around Earth."

"Have they seen us?" Kirk asked.

"I would assume so," Spock replied, turning back to check the computer readings at his station. "They are presently in synchronous orbit with some orbital debris."

"Do they know we've seen them?"

"I think not, since they have not self-destructed. They do have standing orders of destruction before detection, in accordance with the Prime Directive." Spock paused before continuing, "I have deliberately made our scans of them appear as though we are simply surveying the orbital debris. I suggest we ignore them, Captain. Permit them to assume that our sensor scan mistook their ship as a piece of space debris."

"Pity we couldn't convince them we were a piece of space debris," Kirk commented wryly. "It might have saved us the whole trip."

Sulu frowned at a contact indication on his helm monitor. "Captain, I'm picking up four craft approaching Earth at point eight of light speed."

Kirk straightened in his chair, suddenly attentive. "Are you sure, Sulu? Earth doesn't have ships that fast in this era, and there shouldn't be anyone else in this system moving that fast either."

Spock looked back to the sensor monitors. "Confirmed, Captain. Craft speed dropping to point seven-five of light speed. Computer analysis indicates they were launched from Titan."

"Bearing?"

Sulu quickly checked the read-out on the helm sensors. "The craft are bearing one-seven-three mark two. Straight for Earth, sir. Speed dropping rapidly."

"Maximum magnification," Kirk ordered.

The scene on the large view screen changed. In place of the Lunar Module, the four mysterious space craft appeared. Kirk did not recognize the design. The ships were shaped rather like upside-down tea-cups with blob-like projections around the bottom rim. They appeared to rotate about a central axis as they moved through space.

"Identification?"

"Unknown, Captain, but sensors indicate humanoid life-forms in an aqueous oxygenated fluoro-carbon atmosphere. I read heavy weaponry and first generation warp-drive engines,"

Spock reported. "They appear to have tunable navigational deflectors and shields. Odd, I would not have expected that of such an apparently primitive design. Fascinating," the Vulcan added.

* * *

The command crew at SHADO's Moonbase had also spotted the four craft, identifying them immediately as the enemy.

* * *

In Earth orbit, in perpetual opposition to the Moon, a sophisticated communications and radar satellite known as Space Intruder Detector announced to those possessing the proper codes and algorithms: "Four unidentified flying objects bearing four-two-eight, one-two-six, green."

* * *

Captain Harrington rapped out the necessary orders to the on duty fighter-pilots of her command. "Red alert, red alert, Interceptors, immediate launch."

In another Moonbase sphere, three astronaut-fighter pilots lounged, chatting, playing cards as they waited for orders. At the sound of the red alert alarm and Harrington's voice over the speakers, they straightened up, preparing for action.

"Interceptors, immediate launch!"

With those instructions, the three men abandoned their game, jumping up to grab their helmets out of their respective cubbyholes. They dove, feet first, into the launch chutes set into the side of the room. The chutes would deposit each of them into their respective space-fighter craft, various interlocks guaranteeing them air and warmth until the ships' canopies sealed shut against the lunar vacuum.

On the lunar surface, camouflaged doors set into the ground slid aside revealing a man-made cavern. Inside the cavern were six launch pads set on hydraulic lifters, each carrying one heavily armed space-fighter.

As chutes withdrew from the fighters, three of the six launch pads rose to the lunar surface. The Moonbase interceptors launched as soon as they were in position, speeding away from the surface to locate and destroy the four incoming enemy space craft.

* * *

"Three modified L-seven-seven orbital interceptor craft have just taken off from the Moon. They are armed and are on an intercept course with the four unidentified craft," Spock announced from his station.

"Tactical," Kirk ordered.

Sulu fingered the commands into his console.

On the main view screen there appeared a tactical grid of near-Earth space. The Earth itself was a white circle set in one corner. The lunar module was represented by a blue dot nearing the planet's atmosphere. The four alien craft were green dots approaching from beyond the orbit of Mars. Three red dots converged on them from the Moon.

At her station, Uhura worked to tap into the communications of the three different types of space craft.

Kirk and his bridge crew watched as, on the tactical screen, the three lunar based interceptors approached and fired missiles at the four alien intruders. The aliens fired back, barely missing their targets. The interceptors proved to be surprisingly maneuverable.

The interceptors fired a second salvo and two of the green dots vanished from the screen. The remaining two green dots veered off, heading in a wide arc toward Earth and the small

blue dot of the lunar module.

Finally, Uhura succeeded in her attempt to isolate and decode the interceptor transmissions. A man's voice was heard over the speaker at her station: "Interceptor leader to Moonbase. Confirm, two U.F.O.s destroyed."

A woman's voice replied calmly, "Roger interceptor leader. Return to base."

On the tactical display, the three red dots turned and headed back for the Moon.

* * *

Inside the Moonbase control sphere, Harrington turned to Wingate. "What about the other two?"

Wingate checked the radar monitor and computer screen at her station, instantly interpreting their information. "They've veered off, bearing one-three-seven, four-eight-four, towards the lunar module. Interception in four minutes."

Harrington's mouth pulled into a grimace as she turned to her console microphone and keyed it on. "Moonbase to Lunar Module fifty-four. We have two U.F.O.s headed your way. Confirm E.O.I. and re-entry angle."

Foster's voice came over her speaker. "Lunar Module to Moonbase. E.O.I. in seven minutes, thirty seconds at angle two-seven-decimal-five. Three second burn."

"Roger, fifty-four. Increase angle to three-zero, four second burn."

* * *

The reaction inside the Lunar Module was one of surprise and worry.

"Roger, Moonbase," Foster acknowledged. He switched off his microphone.

"They've got to be kidding," Spielberg protested.

Straker shook his head. "I doubt it. Those Ufos could be on us in four minutes and the new angle takes us less than three." His expression was one of grim resignation.

Foster smiled mirthlessly. "And where have I heard that before?" he wondered aloud to Straker.

"I think it's a little late to try for that back leave, Colonel," Straker commented.

Foster sighed as he began the necessary maneuvers. "Maybe next time?"

* * *

"The remaining unidentified craft are on an intercept course with the Lunar Transport Module. Interception in three minutes," Sulu announced.

The tactical display on the view screen confirmed the helmsman's observations. The remaining two green dots were definitely converging on the blue dot at the edge of Earth's atmosphere.

"Captain, the lunar module's reentry angle is too steep. They'll burn up if they don't pull out," Mallory reported.

"Sir, I've managed to break the code on the lunar module's transmissions." Uhura announced, listening to the information coming over her ear-piece. "They say they're in trouble, over-heating, smoke in the cabin."

* * *

The cabin was filling with dense smoke, the air turning acrid as control circuits overheated and burned out. The main computer was gone. The auxiliary couplings to the engines and control surfaces had also failed.

Foster found himself fighting the unresponsive controls as he tried to pull the ship out of the over steep dive they'd been forced into. He could hear Straker and Barry behind him, choking, gasping for breath as the smoke thickened.

Spielberg had a fire extinguisher out and was trying to put out the fire that had ignited behind the lower control panel.

"Module fifty-four to Moonbase, Mayday..." Foster gasped into his helmet microphone.

The module radio crackled with ionization static. Harrington's voice was barely understandable. "Module fifty-four, come in fifty-four." Her voice rose in controlled panic. "Come in Colonel Foster, Commander Straker!"

The radio message was overcome by static.

* * *

Inside the Moonbase control sphere, Joan Harrington glanced at her crew. Her face had gone white.

"I have cessation of radio contact," Wingate announced quietly.

Harrington nodded acknowledgment. There could be no contact with the module until it finished re-entry, until the ionized gasses and heat created by the compression of the air in front of lunar craft due to its high speed passage through the upper atmosphere, dissipated with its drop in speed. This was also the most dangerous point in any reentry. A single error could destroy the ship instantly.

* * *

The module was buffeted by the upper atmosphere. The hot ionized gasses screamed past it. Unseen by the passengers and crew, the air was glowing and the module's nose had begun to turn red from the heat of the compressed gas in front of it.

The two alien ships followed close by, like predators waiting for their meal to tire.

Foster felt the controls respond ever so slightly, the nose starting to come up. He pulled harder and felt a stronger response from his crippled ship.

* * *

Spock looked up from his monitor. "Captain, their life support systems are failing. Internal temperature, fifty-five degrees and rising."

Kirk punched a button on his command console. "Kirk to transporter room one."

"Transporter room one, Kevlin here."

"We're tracking a lunar transport module. Lock on and beam the crew aboard," Kirk ordered.

"Sir?"

"You heard me, do it!" Kirk nearly yelled.

"Yes, sir," the transporter officer responded from his station. Kirk thought he heard a touch of surprised fear in Kevlin's reply.

Turning to Uhura, Kirk ordered: "Get a medical team down there."

"Emergency medical team to transporter room one. Emergency medical team to transporter room one," Uhura instructed as her voice was repeated in Sick-bay, seven decks below.

* * *

In transporter room one, Kevlin stood at the transporter controls, setting the coordinates of the Lunar Module. Kirk's orders had surprised him, as had the captain's fierce reaction to his innocent request for confirmation.

He activated the controls, frowning as the coordinates flickered. He increased the power to the capture field and the readings stabilized. The console data read-out indicated he had a successful lock-on despite the ionization layer surrounding the craft.

After a moment that only seemed like an eternity, four individuals materialized on the

transporter platform. Unconscious, they collapsed the instant the transporter beam released them.

The transporter room doors swooshed open and the medical team ran into the room. Led by Chief Medical Officer McCoy, the team ran to administer first aid to the new arrivals.

* * *

"Captain, the lunar module is beginning to break up," Spock announced.

On the view screen, Lunar Module 54 exploded in an actinic flash. Despite the automatic dimming of the screen, the explosion was still bright enough to make the bridge crew wince away.

"Transporter room, have you got them?" Kirk asked.

* * *

Kevlin turned to the intercom on the transporter control station as the medical team quickly removed the space helmets from the four people he'd just beamed aboard. "Yes, sir. We have them," he responded.

After a moment, Kevlin walked over to where McCoy was checking the newcomers. The woman had black hair and skin nearly the same color as Uhura's. Of the men, the youngest was about Kevlin's own age of twenty-five, with curly brown hair and a tanned face, now blackened with smoke. The pilot was a light-skinned, black haired man of about thirty-five.

But, it was the fourth, and eldest, of the party that caught Kevlin's attention. He had fair hair and was about forty or so, though it was hard to tell. He had one of those fine, almost Vulcan, bone-structures that never really revealed its age.

Even deeply unconscious, the man seemed very familiar, somehow. Kevlin frowned, trying to remember why those finely sculpted features seemed so familiar. Without knowing how, he knew the man's eyes would be the blue-gray of a winter storm.

"Sir, will they be okay?" Kevlin asked, finally recalling where he had seen that face, and not quite believing it.

"Oh, sure. You got them out in time. They've just breathed a little smoke," McCoy replied. He looked up from his patients to glance at Kelvin. "Kevlin, you look like you've just seen a ghost."

"I think I have, sir."

* * *

On Moonbase, Carol Miller double checked the radar display at her station. "The U.F.O.s have changed course again, Captain." Miller paused to re-check the computer read-out on the U.F.O.s' trajectory. "Back the way they came."

Harrington nodded, then turned to Wingate. "What about the Module?"

Wingate shook her head. "No contact, sir."

* * *

Over the Atlantic Ocean, an orange Lunar Module transport plane cruised its pick-up area. The sea below was calm. Sunlight glinted off the slight swells. A small pod of whales surfaced, blowing steam into the air.

Inside the aircraft, the pilot and his three person crew re-checked the computer gear that would guide the Lunar Transport Module into a safe aerial docking with its carrier-lander when it arrived.

The engineering officer's forehead creased in a frown as the radar read-out on her console on the right wall of the cockpit remained clear. Outside the back window of the twin tailed plane, there was a sudden flash of light in the air above them. It was about where she would

have expected to see the yellow shape of the lunar module breaking through the high clouds.

"Captain, I have no contacts within two hundred clicks, spherical scan," the officer stated. "We are plus three minutes from rendezvous. Sir, I thought I saw a flash at our six-o'clock high." "Understood," the pilot responded. After a moment of consideration, he picked-up the radio microphone that would connect him to headquarters.

"Module Transporter One to SHADO Control," the pilot announced crisply. "Lunar Module Fifty-four has failed to make rendezvous. Engineer Rillings reports seeing a flash in the sky."

* * *

Within the concrete cavern that was SHADO Headquarters, Colonel Alec Freeman stood in his usual place, just behind and to one side of the chief communications and duty officer. He listened silently as the pilot's announcement came over the communications speaker.

He glanced around at the technicians and operatives seated at the other consoles set against one of the gray concrete walls of the large chamber. They looked almost as worried and stunned as he felt.

Ford, the senior duty officer, acknowledged the pilot's report. "Roger Transporter One. Control out."

"Have our tracking stations put on full alert," Freeman said quietly.

Ford nodded and flipped the necessary combination of switches on his control board. "SHADO Control to all tracking stations. Go to full radar alert. Repeat, full radar and tracking alert. Lunar Module Fifty-four has failed to make rendezvous."

Freeman's broad shoulders hunched with worry over the fate of the Lunar Module, his friends, and his commanding officer. With a mournful shake of his head, Freeman walked out of the control room.

Despite his deep concern, his mind was already ticking off what needed to be handled in the event that Lunar Module Fifty-four, and her passengers and crew, failed to be located.

A new astronaut would have to be assigned to replace Spielberg. A radar technician would have to be brought in from one of the out-lying tracking stations so that a headquarters expert could be assigned to Moonbase to replace Nina Barry, one of SHADO's finest radar techs.

Foster and Straker were simply irreplaceable.

Freeman found himself fervently hoping that Foster would be able, once again, to pull off a miracle. He hoped Foster could get the module safely back to the Moon and Moonbase. He'd done it once before. Maybe God would smile, and Foster would pull it off again.

Freeman wasn't a praying man. He wasn't even sure he believed in God. But, he has praying now.

Chapter 4

Captain's log, supplemental. After witnessing what appeared to be a battle in space over Earth, we have beamed aboard the four occupants of a Lunar transport ship that burned up while entering the Earth's atmosphere.

Four of the seven beds in the Enterprise's intensive care ward were occupied. For all but one of the occupants, the medical monitors indicated the normal readings for healthy humans.

For that one patient, the readings indicated he was either not human, or an extremely sick one. The blood pressure was too low, as were the blood oxygen levels. The heart rate and body temperature were too high.

Paul Foster sat up in his bed and looked around in confused astonishment. To his left was an empty bed. To his right was Spielberg, also sitting up and looking around. On the next bed lay an ashen faced Straker. Straker's eyes were closed and he seemed to be barely breathing. The head of his bed was raised to about a 45 degree angle.

Beyond him, Barry sat, tailor fashion, on the fifth bed. Her dark eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. "What happened?" she wondered aloud.

"I don't know. We must have blacked out," Foster replied. He moved to sit on the edge of his bed, facing Spielberg and the others. He frowned uneasily as he tried to remember what had happened.

The last moments in the Module were a blank. Except for a vague impression of a corridor and being placed on some sort of gurney, he had no idea how they'd gotten where ever they were, or how they came to be dressed as they were.

All four of them were clothed in pale blue pajama-like outfits. There was no sign of their space suits or the street clothes they'd all been wearing under the suits.

Straker opened his eyes and pushed himself into a sitting position. He was suddenly over-come with another coughing fit.

Barry began to climb out of her bed, but Straker shook his head briefly and gestured her away. "I'll be all right," he murmured.

"You're sure?" Barry demanded. Straker nodded, managing a weak smile. His expression became faintly puzzled as he began to look around.

Foster followed Straker's gaze, inspecting their surroundings once again.

The walls of the room were a muted greenish white with brighter accents. The walls met at odd angles and there were doors set into three of the walls. A semi-circular desk sat against one wall.

The beds were narrow, set on pedestals rather than legs. Above each of the beds was a panel with coded moving indicators. The details were different, but Foster recognized the room as somebody's idea of a hospital ward.

"Well, whatever happened, Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Straker commented, voice weak.

"No, it's certainly not Kansas," Foster agreed with a wry grin. If Straker was able to joke, it meant he was doing better than Foster had initially assumed.

The door next to the desk slid open.

A tall, older man entered the room. His hair was iron-gray and he was dressed in a white uniform-like shirt and pants. On his shirt were pale olive shoulder and wrist patches with several small gold pips on the left wrist patch. A caduceus was embroidered in black over the left breast.

The man was accompanied by a small oriental woman wearing a similar uniform. She was carrying a silver and black box-like device in her hand. The woman walked over to where Barry was sitting in her bed and, with the device, began to check Barry over.

The man grinned at them. There was a good-natured twinkle in his blue eyes as he regarded the group. "Well, I see you're finally awake."

The four SHADO operatives nodded, warily watching the pair. The man's face creased into deeper wrinkles as he grinned even more broadly. His teeth were very even and white. "My name's McCoy, I'm the doctor around here." His accent said he was North American, from one of the southern states.

"This is Nurse Morita." McCoy indicated the young woman with the scanner.

"What happened?" Foster demanded.

Morita looked up from her examination of Barry, an amused expression playing about her mouth. "From what I understand, your ship had some serious trouble on re-entry."

Apparently satisfied with what she saw, Morita walked over to the next bed and began the process again with Straker. As she worked, McCoy took a similar instrument from a near-by wall shelf and went to examine Spielberg.

"We were burning up. There was a fire in the cabin," Spielberg said. His voice trailed off as he watched McCoy run the scanner down his body. He seemed unsure as to whether he should be worried or not.

"Let's just say, you were very lucky," McCoy responded, with another grin.

Finished with the young man, McCoy moved to examine Foster.

"But, where are we?" Barry asked.

McCoy's answer was obvious: "In sickbay."

"I told you we weren't in Kansas anymore," Straker commented to no one in particular. There was a bemused tone in his voice, but his expression was apprehensive as he watched Morita.

Morita frowned at the readings her scanner was giving her. She checked the unit and repeated the body scan more closely.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Checking your vital functions," Morita replied. She turned to McCoy: "Doctor?"

McCoy stepped over to Straker's bed and Morita showed him the readings on her scanner. "I've never seen readings like these, sir," Morita said. "I've double checked the settings and they are correct for Earth humans."

McCoy nodded and, using his own scanner, repeated the examination. He scowled at the readings the instrument gave him. "Get me the Tri-ox."

Morita hurried over to one of the wall cabinets and pulled out a hypo-spray-injector. She took a small vial and placed it into the injector, handing the instrument to McCoy. McCoy checked it, then gave Straker an injection at the base of his neck, over the carotid artery.

"What is that?" Straker demanded. He pushed himself into a sitting position.

McCoy smiled reassuringly. "Something to help you breathe a little easier. You were in pretty bad shape when you were brought on board. There was a lot of smoke in the cabin of your ship. So, now you just lie there and be happy you're still alive." As he spoke, he pushed Straker back down onto the bed.

McCoy scanned Straker once more, again scowling at the readings. "What the hell did you ever do to your left shoulder? There's metal in there."

Obviously surprised at McCoy's question, and at the easing of his breathing problems,

Straker answered, "I got shot. My shoulder was shattered. They had to pin the bones together."

The SHADO officer managed a lop-sided grin at McCoy's expression of disbelief. "It only bothers me when the weather changes," he added. "How did you know about the pins?"

"Who was shooting at you?" McCoy asked, ignoring Straker's question.

"People who didn't like Phantom pilots," Straker replied.

"Phantom? That's an old airplane, isn't it?" McCoy asked. "A warplane?"

Straker stared at the physician a moment. "Yes, I'd say the McDonnell-Douglas Phantom II was a warplane, even though it's not exactly old. It is still in use, you know."

McCoy simply looked mystified.

"You've never heard of jet fighters?" Foster asked.

"I'm a doctor, not an air historian," McCoy grumbled. He shook his head as he headed for the door he'd entered through. "I can't believe Twentieth Century medicine," he was muttering to himself. "They're using screws and nails to put people back together."

Foster moved to sit on Spielberg's bed, elbows on knees as he leaned closer to peer at his commanding officer. "Alec told me once about what happened," he said.

"Alec has a big mouth," Straker commented.

"Sir, how did it happen?" Spielberg asked.

"It was a long time ago," Straker replied.

"Vietnam?" Spielberg asked.

Straker gazed at the young man, his expression an odd combination of appraisal and apprehension. "I was there in sixty-six," Straker said after a long moment. "I was a flight leader with the Eighth Tactical Fighter Wing. Flew out of Ubon."

"What happened, sir?" Spielberg asked.

Straker gazed into the distance. "On my seventy-ninth flight, I zigged when I should have zagged, got caught by ground fire," he said simply. "We went down. I spent a year in a prison camp, was shot escaping."

* * *

Kirk stopped at the sickbay door and nodded a greeting to the white armored security man assigned to keep an eye on their visitors. The door slid open.

"Who did we rescue?" Kirk asked as soon as McCoy came over to him. The door slid shut behind him.

McCoy indicated each of the new arrivals in turn as he spoke: "Well, according to their identification, we have Nina Barry, Edward Straker, Charles Spielberg and Paul Foster."

"How are they?"

"In pretty good shape, considering what they've been through. Except for Straker," McCoy told him.

"Oh?"

The physician sighed. "He's one sick man. I'd like to keep him here for observation for awhile. Figure out what's actually wrong with him." McCoy paused thoughtfully. "Considering what they've been through, maybe they should all stay here for observation a while."

Kirk grinned. "I'm sure we can arrange that, Bones. And I'll keep the guard here, too. Just in case."

McCoy nodded, glancing back at his patients.

Kirk tugged at the hem of his uniform jacket and adjusted his belt as he left the protection of the doorway and stepped closer.

"Welcome aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise, gentlemen, Miss Barry. I'm Captain James Kirk."

He paused and smiled, giving the four people from the Twentieth Century a chance to look him over.

Barry spoke first. "The Enterprise ? We crashed into the ocean, then?"

Kirk shifted his shoulders, suddenly a little uncomfortable. "Not quite, Miss Barry," he said. "Your ship was destroyed while entering the Earth's atmosphere. Your pilot apparently took too steep a re-entry angle."

"That is not any naval uniform I'm familiar with," Straker pointed out. "And how do you know our names?"

Kirk gave a little shrug. "We took the liberty of checking your identification when you were brought on board."

"I see." Straker's tone indicated he didn't quite believe Kirk's explanation. Kirk didn't blame him. It was unbelievable.

"I don't understand. If we didn't crash into the ocean, then, where are we?" Spielberg asked.

Kirk took a deep breath. "This may be hard for you to understand," he said. "This is the Star Ship Enterprise."

"Star Ship ?" Foster repeated in disbelief.

Kirk nodded, permitting himself a faint smile as he watched their incredulous reactions. This was actually going better than he'd thought it would. They may not believe him, but they hadn't automatically assumed he was crazy.

"But, from where?" Spielberg asked. Astonishment was written across his face.

"We're headquartered on Earth, Mister Spielberg," Kirk replied.

"And you hail from Kansas, I suppose," Straker said.

"No, I'm from Iowa, actually," Kirk replied with a touch of confusion. There was a context he was missing, a reference floating just beyond his grasp. It was annoying.

Straker simply gave Kirk a faintly bemused smile. He gave no hint as to whether or not he believed anything Kirk was saying.

Foster's disbelief was very evident. "If this is really a star ship, then you can't be from Earth!"

Kirk sighed, reminding himself to be patient. "We're from the future, Mister Foster, conducting historical research on this time period. We happened to come on your ship in trouble and we picked you up."

"In that case, Captain, I suppose we should say 'thank you'", Straker said. His tone was pleasantly polite, betraying nothing.

"That's quite all right, Mister Straker."

Behind Kirk, the door to the corridor slid open once again and Kirk's tall, dark-haired Vulcan first officer entered. With him was a young blond woman in a flowing pink caftan with silver trim.

The four SHADO people simply stared at the pair for a long moment.

Kirk hid his amusement at their quite normal reaction to the sight of his first officer. Spock was probably the first non-terrestrial they'd ever seen. Even new crew-members were sometimes startled by Spock, despite the fact that Vulcan and Earth had been allies since their first official meeting, over two hundred twenty-five years ago. Or was that seventy-seven years from now?

Kirk was surprised, however, at how quickly Straker hid his own surprise, returning his attention to the Enterprise's captain. The other three took their direction from him. Suddenly,

Kirk realized there was no doubt what so ever that Straker was the leader of this group, no matter what his health condition.

Kirk even recognized the tactic being used on him. Straker was letting his subordinates ask the questions, express their doubts, while he sat back and observed. Using pleasantries and dry humor to disarm his opponent, he was betraying none of his own doubts and revealing as little as possible about himself and his associates.

It was a performance worthy of old Admiral Nogura, rest his soul. Kirk wondered if Straker realized how much he was betraying by simply using that tactic.

"We'll try to answer any questions you have. However, we do have some questions of our own," Kirk continued as if nothing had happened.

"Indeed, Captain," Spock commented, unperturbed as always, as he came to stand beside his commanding officer.

"Oh, my first officer, Mister Spock, and Federation historian, Iana Sterreka," Kirk introduced.

"I suppose you want us to believe he's from Earth, in the future, too?" Foster remarked.

Kirk smiled. "Mister Spock is a Vulcan. Vulcan is a member of the United Federation of Planets, along with Earth and over a hundred other planets. We're here, at the moment, by authority of the Federation."

"Doing historical research, you said," Foster reiterated. There was still a stubborn belligerence in his voice.

Sterreka replied, ignoring Foster's tone. "Yes, Mister Foster. Federation records on this time period are appallingly incomplete. The latter part of the Twentieth Century is filled with crises and decisions whose ramifications are still being debated and studied."

She paused and smiled. "So, I hope you will consent to answer my questions, as natives of this period."

Their reaction was non-committal. Kirk gave them what he hoped was a reassuring smile as he headed for the corridor door with Spock. McCoy and Morita headed over to McCoy's laboratory and office, leaving Sterreka alone to ask her questions.

* * *

"What do you think, Spock?" Kirk asked his first officer as soon as they entered the nearest turbo-lift and gave instructions for it to take them to the bridge.

"Interesting," Spock commented. "However, I am concerned at having had them beamed aboard, Captain. It was contrary to our instructions to make no contact with any native of this time period."

"I couldn't simply watch them die," Kirk replied. He peered more closely at Spock, catching the concern hiding in the Vulcan's face. "You're worried we might have another 'Captain Christopher' on our hands?"

"That is one possibility, Captain."

The doors to the turbo-lift opened onto the bridge. Spock moved to take the science station from Ensign Mallory. Kirk followed him, continuing their conversation as Mallory returned to her place at navigation.

"We saw their ship burn up," Kirk reminded him. "There was no possible way they could have survived without our intervention. We can't have interfered with their future contributions to history, because they have no future. For all intents and purposes, they're dead. Besides, the pilot issued a Mayday. Under normal circumstances, I think we would be forgiven for obeying maritime law and responding to the emergency."

"Captain, these are not normal circumstances," Spock commented.

"Spock, you have an annoying habit of stating the obvious," Kirk complained with a smile. He paused as he considered his initial impressions of the group. "They seem intelligent and adaptable. We'll simply bring them back with us. We already know that late-Twentieth Century people seem to adapt well to our time. Look at Doctor Taylor, and Khan."

Cetacean biologist Gillian Taylor had adapted astonishingly well to the Twenty-third Century. Kirk and Spock had both attended her wedding only a year before. She was now quite happily married to a Miran diver who loved whales as much as she did.

How well Khan Noonien Singh had adapted went almost without saying. During Kirk's first five year mission as master of the Enterprise, they had come upon an ancient sleeper-ship from Earth and had revived one of the occupants, the leader, Khan Noonien Singh. After nearly three hundred years in cryo-sleep and with less than twenty-four hours of study, the eugenically designed near-superman had adapted so well, he had nearly succeeded in taking over the Enterprise.

Additionally, less than five years ago, the same Khan Singh managed to capture and destroy the Star Fleet scout-ship Reliant, wreaking havoc on a Federation special project whose ramifications were still not yet completely understood. Luckily for the Federation, Khan had died with the Reliant.

Spock's expression remained concerned. "You are most likely correct, Captain," he admitted. "It is extremely probable that they were meant to die on this date."

"But, you will search our records for anything we have on them, just in case?" Kirk asked. He knew the question was unnecessary. Spock was extremely thorough in his research, especially since he'd been caught in an oversight once, many years ago, during the Enterprise's first, accidental trip through time to Twentieth Century Earth.

They'd picked up a United States Air Force pilot, Captain John Christopher, after inadvertently destroying his jet. They had intended to bring him with them, to the future, until it was discovered he was the father of the, as yet unborn, Shaun Geoffrey Christopher who was to lead the first successful manned probe to the moons of Saturn. The initial oversight was still a point of irritation with the Vulcan after all these years.

Kirk sighed and stepped down to the command deck. He settled into his chair, then swiveled around to look at Uhura, seated at her station. "Commander Uhura, How's it going?"

"Mister Scott reports that all but two of the monitors have been picked up and those last two are presumed to have been destroyed. The computers are correlating the remaining information now, sir," Uhura reported. She paused as additional data came through. Puzzlement creased her dark forehead.

"Captain, I'm still picking up some very peculiar transmissions between the Moon and something called 'shadow'. They're very concerned about their lunar module. A world-wide radar alert's been called."

"Interesting," Spock commented.

Mallory looked up from her navigation sensors. "Sir, sensors also indicate subspace transmitter-receivers in use in several different locations. On that base we scanned on the Moon, on a satellite in the L-three libration point and in four places on the planet. They seem to be using the subspace transmission modalities as a kind of radar," she reported. There was confusion in her young voice. "But, I thought Earth didn't have any faster-than-light technology in this era."

"Earth isn't supposed to have a lot of the things we've found already, Mister Mallory,"

Kirk pointed out. He turned to his first officer: "Spock, those monitors Scotty can't find, they had subspace transceivers on them, didn't they?"

"Yes, and if they were knocked out of orbit and found on Earth, that could explain how SHADO has come to have subspace radio and radar," Spock confirmed. "It is a fascinating development. Theoretically, the transceiver technology should have been too far advanced for them to have gained any insight from it."

"Obviously that theory leaves something to be desired, Mister Spock," Kirk commented.

"Agreed, Captain."

Chapter 5

Moonbase had stepped down to a yellow alert. Harrington, Miller and Wingate checked and double checked their instruments.

"Any sign of those two U.F.O.s?" Harrington asked Wingate for the fifth time in the past half-hour.

"No, Lieutenant," Wingate reported. "And no sign of the Lunar Module, either."

* * *

Within SHADO Headquarters, Freeman once again stood in his traditional spot, behind the duty officer. Lieutenant Ayesha Johnson stepped up with a clipboard and silently held it out to him. Freeman glanced at the papers clipped to it. It was a parts allocation for one of the outlying tracking stations. He initialed the bottom of the form and handed it back to her.

The olive-skinned woman stood beside him a moment as he watched the changing figures on the computer screen in front of Ford.

"Nothing yet," Ford replied to their unspoken question. "The trackers are on full alert. The module must have over-compensated and bounced off the atmosphere."

"Colonel Foster's a very good pilot and he's managed it before. They're probably heading back for the Moon right now," Johnson said. Her expression was hopeful.

Freeman's was glum. "Yeah, maybe."

"Their radio could be out, so they can't make contact," Ford speculated.

Freeman was unconvinced. "Maybe."

Johnson's face fell. "Shall I notify General Henderson, sir?"

"Yes, we may as well. He'll find out soon enough, anyway," Freeman told her. "Has Colonel Komack checked in yet?"

"No, sir," Johnson reported. Freeman nodded a dismissal and the young woman returned to her station to notify General Henderson of recent events.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Anderson called, stepping down from the upper level and coming over to Freeman. He held a glossy file folder and handed it to the SHADO colonel. "Major Natiroff asked me to give this to you."

Freeman took the file and flipped through the report clipped inside.

"We've received a report from Interpol concerning some missing persons and some mutilated bodies found near Toulouse," Anderson explained. "The local authorities say they think it's some sort of perverse cult."

"But Natiroff thinks the pattern looks more like the aliens?" Freeman asked. Anderson nodded.

"Have we picked up any other indications that an alien ship managed to get through our defenses?" Freeman asked.

"No sir, but they have managed it before," the young man reminded him.

Freeman considered the possibilities. SHADO used two frequencies in their radar because the aliens had shown themselves to be able to block single frequency radar scans. If the aliens had found a way to block the double scans, SHADO was going to have a serious problem on its hands.

"Assuming the aliens are responsible for these incidents in France, the dates on the missing persons reports would set the landing date at about a week ago," Anderson commented.

"If it is the aliens, they're underwater and we're not likely to locate them until they move,"

Freeman said, thinking aloud. One of SHADO's earliest discoveries concerning the aliens and their craft was that they reacted badly to elements in the Earth's atmosphere and could survive only forty-eight hours of exposure to natural air.

"I've already checked and we have no reports on contacts for the past ten days," Anderson reported. "Plus we did pick up those Ufos this morning."

"That doesn't mean much," Freeman said. "The aliens have made sacrifice plays before." He handed the report back to Anderson and turned to Ford. "Get onto la Piscine and ask them to keep a weather eye out on any other unusual incidents in that area."

"How do you want me to explain it, sir?" Ford asked as he began to make the required communications interface to DST, France's Bureau for Defense and Surveillance of the Territory, domestic counter-intelligence.

"Tell them we have reason to believe a lunatic fringe terrorist group has taken up residence in their territory. We think they may have acquired something like a Harrier," Freeman told him.

Ford grinned. "Anything but aliens, right sir?"

"You know the drill," Freeman confirmed. "There ain't no such things as flying saucers."

* * *

Sterreka smiled insincerely at the four SHADO people in the Enterprise's sick-bay. "Thank you very much for your cooperation. You've been most helpful," she said before turning on her heel to head for McCoy's office.

McCoy was seated at his desk, reading through some reports on his computer screen when Sterreka stalked in.

"Well?" he wondered, looking up from his reading.

She slumped into the chair opposite the desk and sighed. "They're not very cooperative, are they?"

McCoy shrugged. "I'm not too surprised, considering the circumstances. We're asking them to believe something pretty unbelievable." His expression brightened. "At least, they haven't threatened anyone, especially their kindly old ship's doctor. And they haven't tried to escape, yet."

"Do you expect that they will try?"

"Miss Sterreka, you're human. . . "

Sterreka stiffened in her chair. "I am Mellantyn," she announced coldly.

McCoy waved his hand, dismissing her objection. "Close enough. How would you feel if you were minding your own business, heading home, and you woke up someplace fantastic, confusing, with people who insist they mean you no harm, but who you know have absolutely no intention of sending you home again?"

"I am descended of an entire population that happened to. As soon as we had the technology to do so, we sent an exploration ship back to the Home World, to find out exactly what did happen," she stated. There was an angry brittleness in her voice. "It was never heard from again. We adapted to our circumstances."

McCoy nodded agreement. "So will they, once they realize they have no choice. They just don't believe it, yet. And I don't blame them one bit. They're not stupid, you know."

"I accept that," Sterreka said. "However, I do find it hard to accept Captain Kirk's cavalier disregard for his orders and the Prime Directive. Surely, rescuing these people constitutes a clear violation of those principles?"

The woman's voice and expression were bitter. The tendons in her hands stood out in

harsh relief as she clutched her computer-padd.

McCoy shrugged and said mildly, "Well, that's something you'll have to discuss with the captain. Now, if you don't mind, I have patients to attend to." With that, he smiled and stood up.

Sterreka glared at him a moment, then stalked out of the physician's office.

"I wonder what's eating her?" he wondered aloud to himself.

* * *

As soon as Sterreka left the ward, Foster climbed out of bed to stretch. Lying in bed when he was perfectly healthy was not his idea of fun. He strolled around the room, looking it over. He tried the cabinet doors, peering into the ones that were unlocked.

From his bed, Straker watched the younger man. After a time, Foster came over and sat on the edge of Spielberg's bed, facing Straker once again.

"I get the feeling she's not very happy with us," Foster commented, nodding in the direction where Sterreka had disappeared.

"I'm not overly concerned about how she feels," Straker informed him. "Or any of the others, for that matter."

"Sir, do you think they could be telling us the truth?" Spielberg asked.

Straker shrugged in a faintly Gallic gesture, turning his palms up. "About being from the future? They could be, but then again, who knows? We have no way to find out."

"But, what do they want?" Barry wondered.

"That depends on whether or not they're telling the truth, doesn't it?"

"But, our people will be looking for us, won't they?" Spielberg asked. He looked worriedly from Straker to Foster.

Foster nodded. "Oh, yes. They'll search for forty-eight hours from rendezvous failure. Then, if we're not located, we'll be given up as dead. That's standard procedure for all space personnel."

"But, where do our people look for us in the meantime? We don't know where we are, or how we got here. We could be anywhere," Barry pointed out.

"The module was over-heating, We'd lost the hydraulics, there was smoke in the cabin and a fire behind Spielberg's control panel. There were two of them right behind us," Foster reminded them. "I doubt we made it through re-entry in that condition, and I don't really think we're dead. This certainly isn't my idea of heaven."

"You don't think this could be some sort of alien trick, do you, sir?" Spielberg asked.

Straker grimaced. "I don't know what to think, Mister Spielberg. We're at one gravity here, which means we're either on Earth, somewhere, or our 'hosts' have artificial gravity, or enough power to keep us at a constant one gee acceleration."

"Of those options, I think I prefer the one that says we're on Earth, somehow," Foster commented. "Even if it means it's an alien trick."

"I don't know, Paul," Straker admitted. "We don't have enough hard facts to determine the truth. But, I do know I have no intention of just sitting here while our 'hosts' decide what to do with us." With that, Straker threw off his bed-covers and moved to sit on the side of his bed. He paused to catch his breath, his skin ashen once again.

"Commander, I don't think that's such a good idea," Barry warned. There was worry in her dark eyes as she swung her feet to the floor.

"I'm getting tired of people hovering about, telling me what I should and shouldn't do," Straker grated. He glared in her direction. "I'm fine, so leave me alone."

Barry didn't comment.

Ignoring the disbelieving looks he was getting from both Barry and Foster, Straker pushed off the bed, onto his feet. He gasped at a sudden, crushing pain in his chest and his knees buckled. Instantly, Foster and Barry were both at his side, supporting him as he slid to the floor and unconsciousness.

"Doctor! " Spielberg shouted.

McCoy and Morita came running from the room beyond. McCoy brushed Barry aside as he knelt next to Straker. Foster was sitting on the floor cradling Straker's head. Straker's chest was heaving, his skin pale and clammy. Quickly, McCoy scanned the unconscious man with his medical tricorder, then gave him an injection.

"What happened?" McCoy demanded, looking up at Foster.

"He decided to go for a walk. Then he just collapsed." Foster answered. He couldn't keep the worry out of his voice.

Between them, Straker began to stir. A groan escaped through his clenched teeth.

"Morita," McCoy yelled. "Get me some Thor kinase, Dithalzone, and Pavadorin, and then get ready to start oxygen therapy and a demand infusion of Dithalzone."

Morita ran to get the drugs from the laboratory.

"What's wrong with him?" Foster demanded.

"Your boss has a very serious heart valve malfunction and his coronary arteries have gone into spasm. He's not in good shape," McCoy told him. "Frankly, the last time I saw something like this was in a Vulcan."

"Can you help him?"

"I'll let you know in a minute," McCoy snapped. Morita ran up and handed McCoy two hypo-spray injectors. Quickly, the doctor injected the drugs. He then sat back on his haunches and waited, eyeing the scanner he kept aimed at his patient's chest.

After a long moment, Straker's jaw relaxed and he opened his eyes.

"Feeling better?" McCoy asked, placing his hand on Straker's shoulder. Straker nodded shakily.

McCoy's expression became stern. "Mister Straker, you were not given permission to leave that bed."

"I wasn't aware I needed your permission," Straker responded in a unsteady voice. He began struggling to rise and Foster helped him as he managed to get to his feet.

"Will Doctor McCoy and Historian Sterreka please report to the briefing room?" Uhura's voice called out over the sick-bay intercom.

McCoy glowered at Foster. "Get him into bed." Then McCoy went to the wall intercom, "I'll be right there, Uhura."

Foster and Barry forced Straker back into the sick-bay bed. After a moment, the physician stepped over to the foot of Straker's bed and glared at him. Straker's expression had gone sullen and he glared back.

"Mister Straker, my patients are not allowed to leave their beds without my permission," McCoy informed him angrily. "And, if you leave that bed again, before I say you can, I will have you restrained and sedated. Is that understood?"

Surprise and worry flickered across Straker's face. "Perfectly, Doctor," Straker murmured. He laid his head back as if suddenly too tired to argue.

He gave no resistance as Morita set up an infusion pump for the Dithalzone. She worked quickly and efficiently. Straker simply laid back and closed his eyes, opening them only when

she hooked up an old-fashioned nasal cannula to provide him with extra oxygen.

McCoy motioned Morita to join him by the door when she was finished. "Keep an eye on his C and L levels. I also want a complete gene scan on him, nuclear and mitochondrial. Do all four of them, in fact. I have a hunch his scan is going to be very interesting."

"Yes, Doctor," Morita acknowledged as McCoy turned and left the ward.

Chapter 6

McCoy found Kirk and Spock already seated at the large conference table in the main briefing room. Also seated and waiting were Scott, Sulu, Uhura, Security Chief Pavel Chekov, Ensign Mallory, and the historian, Sterreka. McCoy took his seat next to Spock, murmuring an apology for being late, as usual.

Kirk noted the harried look on his chief surgeon's face. "Something wrong, Bones?"

"One of our guests has a serious heart valve malfunction."

"Straker?"

McCoy nodded. "I need to do more tests, but it looks bad. What bothers me is that late-Twentieth Century medicine should have been able to correct the most obvious problem. I can't understand why he hasn't had it taken care of."

"Maybe he doesn't like doctors," Kirk speculated. McCoy made a face at him. "Well, Bones, if you don't think you can handle it, we can just stick him in stasis until we get back to our own time."

"If you're going to sit there and insult me, I'm leaving," McCoy groused, half getting up from his seat.

Kirk waved him back down with a grin and turned to look at the others seated at the table. "All right, what do we have, so far?"

At Kirk's nod in his direction, Spock began. "First, we have located, and been seen by, the Vulcan Scout ship we were told was here at this time. We are maintaining our surveillance of the scout by visual only. We have completed the pick-up of all but two of the orbital communications monitors. Those two we have been unable to locate and we assume they have fallen out of orbit. As far as our orders are concerned, we have completed our mission in 1983."

"However, we have also discovered some unexplained anomalies, four of whom I had beamed aboard," Kirk reminded him.

Spock nodded agreement. "We have, in fact, been witness to what can only be interpreted as a skirmish in an interplanetary war that, historically never occurred and concerning which, no Vulcan records have been released."

"Also, something called SHADO has subspace devices, which aren't supposed to be invented for nearly a hundred more years," Mallory reported. "We have to assume their possession of the devices is related to the two missing monitors."

"Any chance they could pick us up with it?" McCoy wondered.

Scott grinned. "I've rigged our deflector screens to make us invisible to their radar and subspace radar frequencies. Besides, there's not much they could do to us, even if they saw us."

"Which we don't want them to do," Kirk reminded them. "This is an extremely paranoid planetary culture. There's no telling what their reaction might be to the discovery of a star ship in orbit. At least one group appears to be at war in space, and they do have the capacity to damage us if we're not careful."

He turned back to Spock. "Is it possible we've inadvertently gone back to some alternate universe? That this isn't our historical Earth we've gone back to?"

Spock considered the question a long moment before answering: "The theories behind the warp-break-away time-travel technique do indicate some slight possibility of that occurring, but, it is highly unlikely. By our own records, SHADO did exist."

"And what, exactly, is 'SHADO'?" McCoy asked. He looked from Spock to Sterreka.

The historian answered: "The few records we have indicate SHADO, Supreme Headquarters, Alien Defense Organization, was, or is, a para-military group associated with the United Nations. It was chartered in Nineteen-seventy-one. Speculation has it that they were involved in some sort of anti-terrorist activity. Terrorism was a major concern of most governments during this era.

"SHADO had a very large budgetary allotment, but no indications as to what it was spent on," she went on. "However, I think our observations here have managed to clear up a number of other historical mysteries concerning this time period."

"Such as?" Kirk prompted.

Sterreka looked around the table, gauging her audience. Then, she placed a data card into the reader slot.

A picture of an archeological dig appeared on the wall view screen - a large concrete structure at the bottom of a very deep hole. The depth of the hole was marked in red on the sides of the excavation, twenty-seven meters to the top of the underground building. Various shots of empty concrete rooms and corridors appeared on the screen. One picture showed a large, two level room with a high vaulted ceiling.

"That's the Harlington archeological dig, outside old London, isn't it?" Chekov asked.

Sterreka seemed openly surprised at his knowledge. "Yes. Tests indicate it was constructed in about Nineteen-seventy or so, and abandoned in about Two-thousand-ten. A study group from the Star Fleet Corps of Engineers has reported that the complex could have withstood almost anything of the time period including a direct nuclear strike. However, the time of construction and abandonment don't coincide with any known international crisis that would have justified the expense of building such a complex."

She paused to watch their reaction. "The coordinates of this complex match those Commander Uhura has calculated for SHADO's main communications center."

"That is SHADO headquarters?" Chekov clarified.

"So it would appear, Mister Chekov," Spock agreed. "Our scans indicate this complex is directly beneath an 'entertainment recording complex', Harlington-Straker Film Studios. Our guests' identification papers indicate they are associated with that company."

"What a marvelous cover for a covert operation," Sulu mused. "You could go almost anywhere, do almost anything, and nobody would pay any attention because it was for an entertainment tape."

"I tend to agree with you," Spock said. "It would also appear that we may have discovered who was mining the second moon of Saturn before it was explored by Earth."

"The mysterious aliens from those unidentified space craft?" Kirk asked.

Spock nodded. "We have made a tentative identification of those craft." The Vulcan science officer pressed a series of keys on the console in front of him. The Harlington site photos were replaced by a picture showing a half-built U.F.O. It was partially buried in the debris of a shattered building. The background showed a desolate, barren landscape and a bloated sun dimly shining through a reddish haze.

He pressed another series of buttons and the first picture shrank to half size while another photograph came onto the other half of the screen. The new slide showed the four U.F.O.s that had been attacked by the Lunar Interceptors only a short time before. The visible portions of the buried alien craft closely matched those of the flying ships.

"The craft would appear to be from the second planet of the Shelmat system. However,

we had no concrete evidence prior to this, that they had, in fact, developed any sort of interstellar travel," Spock stated. "They did have interplanetary travel and had extensively mined their system, which was unusually poor in the heavier elements."

"But, the population of that planet died out centuries ago," Chekov pointed out. "Supposedly, war and over-exploitation wiped out their ecology and fatally contaminated their atmosphere. Even now, the planet is unsuitable for colonization without terraforming."

Sulu looked thoughtful. "Actually, the archeologists studying the planet are pretty sure it wasn't that simple. With their supposed level of industrialization and interplanetary travel, there was no reason we know of that they couldn't have colonized one of the other planets in the system, or in a system near-by. Plus, they didn't simply 'die out'. There is some evidence of a massive evacuation, but no clues yet as to where they might have evacuated to."

"Who has reported evidence of a massive evacuation on Shelmat 2?" Sterreka asked. Her tone had gone cold as she glared at Sulu.

"The Federation Science Council's archeological section," Sulu replied. "Professor Hatch and his team have been excavating on Shelmat 2 for several months now."

Sterreka snorted. "Maurice Hatch's expertise is limited to pre-space flight cultures. He is hardly qualified to have an opinion concerning the technological capabilities of the Shelmat civilization," Sterreka announced.

"Then, what did happen to the Shelmat people?" Sulu asked, expression carefully bland.

"They were obviously murdered by SHADO," Sterreka stated. Her expression indicated she wasn't willing to listen to any argument on that score. "Earth does have something of a history concerning genocide, even as early as the Twentieth Century."

"I won't argue that Earth's history has had some incidents which aren't exactly flattering to the human species," Kirk admitted. "That doesn't necessarily mean that's the case here and now." He turned back to his first officer. "Spock, is it possible that a war with Earth was the last straw for them? That, even without interstellar capability, SHADO actually managed to damage a world light years away? Damaged them enough to force them into extinction, or evacuation, without leaving any traces of it either on Earth or there?"

Spock's answer was typically cautious. "From present evidence, I would not say that it was impossible. However, we do not even know why SHADO is involved in such a conflict, or why they have found it necessary to keep this information secret."

"Why do you need to know why, Mister Spock?" Sterreka demanded. "Isn't it enough to know that they are involved and what the results of that involvement must be? As to their secrecy, the answer must be obvious, even to you. SHADO is top secret to prevent the rest of the planet from knowing they are committing genocide."

Spock raised one eyebrow at Sterreka's outburst. "Since, at this time, there is no evidence, as yet, that SHADO has committed, or will commit, genocide against the Shelmat, I fail to see the logic in that reasoning. If anything, the reverse is far more likely. The Shelmat pose an extremely serious threat to Earth at this time."

"I can think of at least one reason for such secrecy from SHADO's point of view, Mister Spock," Uhura put in. "To prevent panic. An interstellar war is pretty frightening, even in our own time. For it to occur to a pre-space flight culture against a technologically superior race, that would be utterly terrifying."

"But, on the other hand, a first contact with an alien species, even a hostile one, frequently becomes the impetus for a unified planetary government," Sulu reminded them. "The people of this time period are making attempts at a single planetary government and I'd

say there's less than a hundred years difference, technologically, between the two cultures. With a single world government, there's no reason why Earth would not be able to beat off an invasion from Shelmat 2, assuming that's what actually happening here."

"Obviously SHADO does not agree," Chekov stated with a rueful smile.

"A blatantly military attitude," Sterreka snorted.

"SHADO appears to be a military organization at war," Chekov reminded her, still smiling. "A military attitude is to be expected of them."

"Well, we won't get any more information or assistance from our 'guests'," Sterreka stated.

"And why do you say that, Miss Sterreka?" Spock asked.

Sterreka shook her head. "When I interviewed them, they seemed cooperative enough, at first. They were quite free with information concerning politics, the trouble spots in their world. They appear to be quite knowledgeable concerning the dynamics of their culture and its history," Sterreka reported. She brushed a strand of blonde hair from her forehead.

"I even asked them about some of the people we know will become prominent in the near future, like Khan Noonien Singh, Joachim Maria Lopez, Adolph Hauptmann. Mister Straker recognized the names. He told me he'd actually met those three particular men," she said. "He said they were students at Oxford University. He described them as 'right wing racist extremists'."

"In fact, he called Khan Singh a 'Neo-Nazi sociopath with delusions of grandeur'," Sterreka added with a faint smile. "I gather he wasn't impressed by the three of them."

Kirk gave her a rueful grin. "Having known Khan, I tend to agree with Mister Straker's assessment of the man. But, what's the problem, aside from the possibility that they might be genocidal maniacs?"

Sterreka's mouth pulled into a disappointed pout at Kirk's sarcastic tone. "When I tried to get them to talk about that military base you detected on the Moon, a full ten years before Earth's first permanent Lunar base is to be opened, and why they were even on a Lunar transport ship, they clammed up, totally. The only statement they would make concerning the ships that nearly killed them was 'There's no such things as flying saucers'."

"I am not entirely sure that I blame them. If they are engaged in a war, they are not likely to cooperate with potential enemies," Chekov told her. "They do not know, for a fact, that we are not allied with their enemies."

"You're absolutely right, Mister Chekov," Kirk agreed. "And, since I suspect they're going to be with us for some time, we'd better make ourselves some friends, genocidal maniacs or not." Kirk looked around the table. "Have we got anything on them?"

"Aside from the identification they were carrying, we have surprisingly little," Spock reported. "Miss Barry and Mister Foster served in the British Royal Air Force. Mister Spielberg and Mister Straker are both from the United States of America and served in that nation's military service."

As he spoke, individual photographs of Straker, Barry, Foster and Spielberg came on the view-screen. The photographs showed younger faces than the ones in sick-bay, but they were still quite identifiable. Barry and Foster were wearing Royal Air Force uniforms with insignia indicating they were both lieutenants.

Spielberg wore the uniform of a lieutenant in the United States Navy, with pilot's wings above the left breast pocket. Straker's picture showed him about thirty years old. He was wearing the uniform of a United States Air Force colonel, with pilot's wings and several rows

of decorations. The decorations included a Distinguished Flying Cross and a Purple Heart.

"Paul Foster was a highly regarded test pilot, until he retired from that industry following an accident that killed his co-pilot," Spock continued.

"Straker has a Masters degree in astrophysics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and attained the rank of Colonel in the United States Air Force. He apparently had a brilliant military career until he retired or resigned following some sort of vehicular accident that killed British Cabinet Minister Melvin Talbot, in Nineteen-seventy. He then became associated with Harlington-Straker Film Studios.

"After that, the only thing we have is a newspaper article concerning a change in management at the film studios approximately fifteen months ago, following Mister Straker's having been hospitalized for a serious, but unspecified, ailment."

"Nothing on his death?" Kirk asked.

"Nothing else on any of them, Captain. No marriages, no children as far as we can determine, and no death certificates. It is as though they simply disappeared," Spock replied. The faintest hint of a frown creased his angular face. "In point of fact, except for newspaper references to a military career, I have been unable to locate anything else on Edward Straker. I have been unable to locate his birth or military records, and I am at a loss to explain why, since North American records are fairly complete."

"Is it possible he's associated with Gary Seven, a plant from an advanced civilization?" Kirk wondered.

"It is possible, but I don't think it's likely, Jim," McCoy stated. "Straker's reactions are entirely consistent with those I would expect of an intelligent, well educated, late-Twentieth Century North American man. There are some physical anomalies with him, but nothing to mark him as being from any advanced civilization." McCoy shook his head at what he'd already discovered. "Hell, he's got a shoulder with metal pins in it. He said he was a pilot, got shot for flying in one of their jet airplanes."

"Bombing innocents, no doubt," Sterreka muttered.

Kirk glanced at her quizzically.

"Most of the wars in Earth's late Twentieth century concerned nationalist movements against the colonialism of both the Euro-American and the Soviet blocs. Entire indigenous populations were bombed and burned out of existence by the technologically superior military complexes of the industrial powers," she explained.

"That's a rather large over-simplification, Miss Sterreka," Kirk objected, his tone mild. "Most of the major conflicts of this century were in response to overt violence against legal governments, to invasions against neighboring independent nations. They were then assisted by their own allies to repulse the attacks on them. I admit even that's an over-simplification.

"It was a very rapidly changing, complex time in Earth's history," Kirk continued. "However, our concern here is not so much an analysis of the war-like tendencies of this period, but of how our own actions may possibly effect this era's historical continuity."

"Considering how we found them, we shouldn't have too much to worry about. I mean, they should have died," Uhura reminded them.

"Perhaps, Mister Uhura," Spock replied. "However, I am reluctant to make any assumptions concerning them, considering the meagerness of our information."

"Then, we need to get more information," Kirk said, deliberately stating the obvious.

"Of course, Captain," Spock agreed.

"Doctor McCoy, I assume you've been working on psychological profiles of our guests?"

Kirk said, turning to McCoy.

"Yes, I've been working on it," McCoy stated briefly, glancing in Sterreka's direction.

"And?" Kirk prompted.

"I'll give it to you when I'm finished, Captain," McCoy said. Kirk gave him a surprised look, but McCoy didn't elaborate.

"Doctor, you said Straker was a pilot?" Sulu asked.

McCoy nodded. "Something called a Phantom-two."

Spock keyed the information into a data request from the library computer archives. After a moment, a series of names appeared on the screen in front of him.

"I have asked for a list of Twentieth century United States Air Force pilots, surnamed 'Straker'," Spock explained. Sulu peered over the Vulcan's shoulder at the computer screen.

"There's an Barrett Anthony Straker, died 1987. But there's no 'Edward Straker' listed," Sulu observed. "The closest match for age is a 'Johannen Straker'. Born Nineteen-thirty-eight, died in Twenty-thirteen. He served in Thailand in 1966, flew Phantom jets. He became a general and was head of the joint manned Mar's mission project when it launched in 1996."

"That's hardly helpful," Sterreka complained. "It is obviously not the same man. Edward Straker had to have died in late Nineteen-eighty-three. He could hardly head the Mars mission thirteen years from now."

"Perhaps SHADO removed his records from the air force data base?" Chekov suggested.

Spock shook his head. "That is possible, but unlikely, Mister Chekov. A more logical explanation would be that our records are more incomplete than we realized, or that he is, in fact, not native to this era at all, in the manner of Mister Seven."

"Who is Mister Seven?" Mallory asked, looking around at her senior officers.

Kirk answered. "Gary Seven was a human agent trained by an, as yet unknown, highly advanced alien civilization. We ran across him some years ago. His field of operation was this period in Earth's history."

"And he is not in violation of the Prime Directive?" Sterreka asked. Amazement colored her voice.

"His assignment was to ensure that Earth's history, in certain specific aspects, followed its necessary course in accordance to history as we know it," Kirk explained. "Besides, his controllers are not members of the Federation and therefore are not signatories to the Prime Directive agreement."

"How can you be certain this Mister Seven is acting in Earth's best interests, if he is controlled by non-humans?" the historian demanded.

"That was the basic issue we had to resolve twenty-two years ago, Miss Sterreka," Kirk replied. "We determined at that time that his training and mission were not a threat to Earth's future history, since, when we looked for it, we found evidence of his life, and death, in our own records. He is part of Earth's recorded history. He belongs here because he was here."

"Perhaps we should contact this Mister Seven and see what he says about our 'guests'?" Sterreka suggested.

"I do not believe it would be to our advantage to contact Mister Seven. Controlled by non-natives or not, he is native to this time period," Spock responded stiffly. "It would be better for us to work with the data at hand to solve this particular mystery, assuming it is a mystery and not simply an oversight on our part."

"Do you seriously believe our lack of data on Straker is due to a simple oversight?" Sterreka asked.

"I believe we do not, as yet, have enough data to make that determination," Spock replied. His voice and expression were tightly controlled, indicating to Kirk that the Vulcan was vexed.

"Do what you can, Spock," Kirk instructed mildly. He turned to his borrowed helmsman, "Mister Sulu, was there any possible way at all for the pilot of that Module to have saved the ship?"

Sulu shook his head. "I can't see how, Captain."

"Very well, I suspect it is a fair assumption then, that our 'guests' are legally dead, whether or not we can find records of their deaths," Kirk announced. "It's possible that, for security reasons, SHADO never permitted their deaths to become known."

"It is possible, Captain," Spock agreed.

Kirk stood, indicating the meeting was over. He watched as Spock and Sterreka began to collect their data cards while Scott hurried away to go back to his own duties.

"Mister Chekov," Kirk called as his security officer prepared to leave. Chekov stopped and turned back to his commanding officer. "I think it might be a good idea if we arranged that our guests not have access to the ship's technical specifications and engineering data."

"I can put a security lock on the engineering and security files, sir, with access by verified voice only," Chekov said. "Engineering won't like it, but I imagine they can work around it."

"Excellent, Mister Chekov," Kirk agreed. He smiled. "It's not that I don't trust our guests, but I'd rather not take any chances. We have been through this before, as you'll recall."

Chekov grinned. He remembered Khan Noonien Singh. Pavel Chekov had been the first officer of the Reliant when Khan hijacked that ship to wreak his revenge against Kirk, over four years ago. Chekov still had scars from that encounter.

"I'll get right on it, sir," Chekov promised as he hurried away. Sterreka followed him out.

Kirk looked over at his Vulcan first officer. "I think a formal dinner might be in order. Welcome them to our time. What do you think, Spock?"

Spock considered the proposal a moment. "I believe that would be in order. I will make the arrangements."

Sulu and McCoy who were still waiting. Sulu looked worried. "A problem, Mister Sulu?" Kirk asked.

"I'm not sure, Captain," Sulu admitted. "I'm wondering at Miss Sterreka's reaction to Professor Hatch's discoveries on Shelmat 2. It didn't seem to be very professional, if you know what I mean."

"She did make it very plain she didn't have a high opinion of his work," Kirk agreed.

"I know archeology was never one of my interests," Sulu stated. He chose to ignore Kirk's feigned surprise at his statement. Even on Carmarca's ship, Sulu's ever changing hobbies were legendary.

Sulu continued: "But, the Bonhomme Richard has been running supplies out to Hatch and his team for the past two months. The professor spent two days talking my ears off the last time we stopped by. He also had us do a full range sensor study of the planet. Our readings are pretty convincing evidence that the inhabitants didn't simply die."

"Oh?" Kirk prompted.

"They disappeared, taking most of what they had with them, their art, their literature, their valuables. There are no bodies, no rubble, no evidence of any planet wide disaster, outside of the ecological damage. They simply disappeared," Sulu explained. "Professor Hatch described the buildings as looking like somebody simply moved out."

"He's asked Captain Carmarca and me to support his petition to the Federation Science Council for permission to access the Guardian of Forever to find out what really happened to them," Sulu added.

"Why does he need Carmarca's support?" Kirk asked. "I thought the Science Council was granting nearly every historical research proposal that came through?"

"That's what I thought, too," Sulu admitted. "But Hatch's petition for access was denied less than a week ago."

"Why?" Kirk wondered. "Did they give a reason?"

Sulu shook his head. "Only that it wasn't a priority project and Hatch's physical evidence appeared to be more that sufficient to prove his point."

"That the Shelmat took off for parts unknown?" Kirk asked. Sulu nodded. "I wonder why Sterreka is so insistent that they all died?" Kirk mused.

"I'm wondering the same thing, Captain," McCoy admitted. "Also, she was pressing our guests pretty hard with her questions, but I don't think she was interested in their answers."

"Interesting," Kirk commented. "When do you think you'll have the psychological surveys finished on them?"

McCoy grinned and handed Kirk a data card. "They're finished. I just didn't want her to know about it." Kirk waited for McCoy to continue. "They're not genetically designed supermen, for one. However, they are extremely intelligent and adaptable."

"And Straker's the leader?" Kirk asked. McCoy nodded.

"And he's about as stubborn as a certain Vulcan we both know. He may be sick and about three hundred years out of date, technologically, but, frankly, it wouldn't take all that much to put him into an Admiral's job at Star Fleet Headquarters."

"What about Foster and the other two?" Kirk asked

McCoy grinned. "Foster'd make one hell of a ship's captain. In fact, he reminds me a bit of a very young star ship captain I once knew."

"Who?"

McCoy stabbed a finger at Kirk's chest. "You."

Chapter 7

It was mid-afternoon when a posh, chauffeured limousine passed through the main entrance gates of Harlington-Straker Studios, ten miles north of London. The gray Rolls Royce stopped in front of a medium-sized glass and brick office building just inside the main gates. The liveried chauffeur climbed out of the car and opened the door for his one passenger in the rear seat.

Retired U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General James L. Henderson exited the automobile and entered the office building. He walked with a barely perceptible limp, the legacy of a shattered hip from a U.F.O. attack fourteen years before. He'd been riding in the ill-fated Rolls Royce with his aide, Colonel Edward Straker, and Defense Minister Talbot when the aliens drove the car off the road into a ravine. There was a thin white scar under his left jaw, yet another permanent reminder of that attack.

The heavy set, gray haired man crossed the wide marble floored lobby with its over-sized lobby posters of recent film productions. There was no one else in the lobby. It was the middle of the Christmas hiatus. Except for the business offices and security, the studios were shut down until the first week of January.

Henderson entered the outer office of the studio's chief executive officer, Ed Straker. Straker's secretary was seated at her desk, as usual.

"Good afternoon, General," Miss Ealand greeted. "You can go right in." She indicated the double doors opposite the entrance.

A small green light showed through a small grill above the doors, indicating the office beyond was free. The electronically controlled doors slid open as the woman pressed a toggle on a control panel on her desk.

"Thank you, Miss Ealand." Henderson said, entering the inner office. The doors slid shut behind him.

He went to the desk and raised the lid to the silver cigarette box set on the widely curving black desk top. "Henderson," he spoke aloud. He knew SHADO's security drill.

"Voice Print identification positive, Henderson, James L., zero-zero-two," the dry, weirdly disembodied voice of the security system computer stated. Thus accepted, Henderson reached inside the box and flipped a switch.

He leaned against the desk as the entire room began to move downward in the manner of a high-speed elevator. Through the window opening, level markers could be seen on the concrete wall of the elevator shaft, marking the room's descent to SHADO Headquarters, eighty feet below the film studios.

* * *

Henderson found Freeman pacing the dark rubber-tiled floor of SHADO Control.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," Henderson said mildly.

The Australian SHADO colonel stopped pacing and nodded a greeting. "General."

Henderson looked around the room. He noted the glum expressions of the operatives seated at their stations. There were indications on the monitors of a radar alert, but nothing else important seemed to be happening at the moment. There were no aliens speeding in from space, preparing to wreak havoc on an otherwise unsuspecting Earth.

"What's this about you losing one of your Lunar Modules?" he asked after a moment.

Freeman's reply was subdued. "It didn't make its scheduled rendezvous with the pick-up plane. They were being chased by two Ufos that got through Moonbase defenses. The radio

blackened out during orbital insertion, the Ufos veered off. But, the module hasn't been picked up again. No contact at all."

"And you think maybe the aliens grabbed it?"

"We don't know," Freeman admitted. "They could have crashed into the ocean, bounced off the atmosphere back into space, burned up. We just don't know. We're carrying out the standard search procedures, but no luck, so far. You know that if we don't locate them within forty-eight hours... "

"They'll be declared missing and presumed dead. That is standard procedure for all space personnel, isn't it?" Henderson said.

"Yes, it is."

"So, what's the problem?"

Freeman looked surprised. He glanced over at Lieutenant Johnson. The young woman flushed and looked away, a guilty and embarrassed expression on her face.

"Colonel Foster was piloting the module," Freeman reported to Henderson. His voice was quiet.

"So?"

"Commander Straker was on board. He was very ill."

Henderson's eyes widened at the news. After a moment, he began to walk towards the SHADO commander's office, across the hall from the control center. He beckoned Freeman to accompany him. The SHADO officer fell in to keep pace with the older man.

"Have you spoken with Colonel Komack?" Henderson asked.

"Yes. She called in from Stansted. She was picking up her brother at the airport," Freeman told him. "It's funny, but she didn't seem very worried when I told her the module hadn't made it through."

"They've been married about six months, haven't they?" Henderson asked, knowing the answer.

Freeman nodded. "About that. She's done a good job running the studio for us. They're firmly in the black and she's taken a couple of the weirder projects from down here and pulled them into the studio for space and financing."

The doors to the commander's office opened automatically, permitting the two men to enter.

"I assume you mean Major Kelly's microphotography research?" Henderson said. "I never did get a report on the results of that billion dollar probe Straker and Kelly sent out four years ago, to the aliens' base planet."

"We didn't get much back," Freeman admitted. "We were pretty sure they were using Titan as a base. The pictures confirmed that, but not much else. Even after we went back and reconstructed the distance and magnification instructions so we could get a proper interpretation, there just wasn't much there."

Henderson went to the slate topped desk and sat down in the brown leather chair behind it. He watched as Freeman stepped over to the small bar set into one corner of the office and poured himself a tall whiskey.

"Colonel Freeman, if the module isn't located within that forty-eight hour time limit, I'm going to have to call an emergency meeting of the Astrophysical Commission to appoint a new commander," Henderson informed him seriously. He ignored the drink in Freeman's hand.

"Of course."

"And, as senior SHADO officer, you'll most likely be given the job."

"I don't want the job," Freeman told him.

"Your protest is duly noted, Colonel. However, since Colonel Foster was on board the module with Straker, and it'll take at least a month to clear a replacement, I don't think you have much choice."

"What about Colonel Lake?" Freeman asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"She's not qualified, and you know it," Henderson confirmed.

"Colonel Komack?"

"The Commission won't sit still for it, especially since she married Straker and she's my only niece. It smacks of nepotism." The general paused, then continued in a kinder tone. "I don't want it like this any more than you do, Colonel. But, I think you're stuck with it."

"Thanks, General," Freeman responded bitterly, taking a long swallow of his drink. He sat down on the leather bench set against the wall opposite the desk. His expression was glum as he cradled the glass in his hands.

"Seriously, Freeman," Henderson said. "This puts a nasty crimp in my plans, too. I'm planning to retire from the Commission soon and I was hoping Ed would agree to come on board to take my place. The Commission has some big projects coming up that would be right up his alley."

"I hadn't realized that," Freeman admitted. "Ed certainly hasn't mentioned the possibility of getting promoted out of here."

"Since when does Straker let anybody in on anything that isn't nailed down tight?" Henderson asked with a knowing grin. Then, his expression became serious once more. "Freeman, what are the chances of Foster bringing that module in?"

"Seriously?" Freeman said. "Not real good. The engineer on the transport plane thought she saw a flash of light about where the module should have broken through the clouds. It may have been the sun reflecting off something."

"But it could have been the module's fuel cells exploding?" Henderson asked. Freeman nodded.

"You know what's weird?" Freeman asked after a moment, taking another swallow. "You've been trying to talk Ed into taking a promotion out of here, right?"

Henderson nodded.

"Well, Monday, the day after Christmas, Paul and I were going to try to convince Ed to go in for the heart surgery Frazer's recommended. We have the officers necessary to petition the Commission to replace him as C-in-C of SHADO. We were going to use that as our lever."

"I hadn't realized his condition was that serious," the general admitted. "He certainly hasn't said anything to anyone about it."

Freeman grinned. "Since when has Ed ever admitted to being sick or hurt? He won't ask for help for himself, even though he'll lay it all on the line for somebody else." He took another swallow. "He's come close to killing himself with overwork putting SHADO together, making sure it works. He's the stubbornest S.O.B. I know, but I can't think of anybody else who could have done a better job of it."

"Maybe Foster can manage to get him back, so we can all yell at him for being such a damned stubborn fool," Henderson said.

Freeman nodded. "Maybe he can. I hope so. It's the waiting and not knowing that bothers me the most. I just wish I knew for sure where they were."

Chapter 8

Morita sat at the nurse's station, keying information into the medical computer as McCoy walked into sick-bay. She looked up from her work as he came over to her desk.

"Have they been behaving?" McCoy asked. From the other side of the room, the four SHADO people were watching them.

Morita smiled. "As well as can be expected, Doctor. I fed them." She pointed out the four meal trays on the bed tables. There was evidence of bowls of chicken soup, one of McCoy's favorite nutritional remedies. One meal tray appeared untouched, the soup cold, the buttered bread uneaten.

"Mister Straker wouldn't touch his meal, so I added glucose with supplements to his intravenous infusion," Morita explained as she handed McCoy a data card. "Here are the results of the tests you ordered."

McCoy took the card and placed it in the reader slot at the nurse's station. He peered at the graphs and schematics that appeared on the screen.

"I'll be damned," McCoy muttered to himself in astonishment as the pieces of information he'd been puzzling over suddenly came together in his mind. "He's a full blooded Mellantyn, and Barry's got the same mitochondrial markers."

"Sir? That's impossible."

McCoy shook his head and pointed out a pattern on the screen. "Maybe so, but that's the mitochondrial signature of the Doreen Clan of the Mellantyn. And, it certainly explains the funny immune system readings I was getting from him. The Mellantyn have an extremely sensitive immune system that's easy to throw out of whack. They're highly susceptible to auto-immune diseases."

McCoy straightened up and walked over to his four patients. Spielberg was sitting, tailor fashion, on his bed. Foster was seated on the end of Spielberg's bed, facing Barry and Straker.

Barry sat on her own bed, speaking quietly to Foster. Straker seemed to be ignoring them. They fell silent as McCoy approached.

"How're you feeling?" McCoy asked, stopping to stand next to Straker's bed.

Straker shrugged. "I've been better." His voice was soft.

"Nurse Morita says you didn't eat lunch." McCoy nodded to the untouched food tray.

"I wasn't hungry," Straker replied.

"Do you think you're strong enough to get up?" McCoy asked.

That caught Straker's interest and his expression brightened. "Does that mean I have your permission to get out of bed?"

McCoy smiled. "I want to do a more thorough work-up on you in the examination room. You had some very odd test results, you know."

Straker managed a grin. "I don't doubt it. People keep telling me I'm odd."

McCoy gave an amused snort at Straker's statement and unhooked the infusion pump from the arm band. The physician watched as Straker pulled off the oxygen cannula and climbed out of the bed.

Despite the drugs in his system, Straker still seemed very weak. He leaned back against the bed for a moment as if to rest. McCoy took Straker's arm to help, and suddenly realized how frail the SHADO officer really was.

"How long has it been like this?" McCoy wondered aloud.

"About two months, maybe," Straker replied. "It got bad a couple weeks ago."

Foster came around the bed to help, but Straker brushed away his hand. "I can still walk, thank you," Straker informed him. McCoy noted Foster's hurt expression as Straker permitted McCoy to help him cross the ward to the door beside the nurse's station.

The examination room was dominated by the large, semi-translucent examination table. The shape clearly indicated it was for use with humanoids of approximately human size and shape. A medical view screen filled one wall of the examining room. There were several smaller flat screen monitors in a row beneath the main viewer.

Lowering one end of the table, McCoy and Morita helped Straker onto the diagnostic table. Then, they raised the foot of it so that it was horizontal again. Foster came and stood in the doorway, watching.

McCoy positioned Straker's hands at his sides, palms down on the table. Straker began to shiver.

"Cold?" McCoy asked. Straker nodded. McCoy turned to Foster, "There are blankets in that cabinet over there." He indicated a closed cabinet near the doorway.

Wordlessly, Foster stepped over to the cabinet and pulled out a light-weight blanket. He unfolded the soft material and placed it over Straker's shivering body.

"It'll be all right," the younger man said. Straker made no reply and Foster went back to stand by the door to watch.

On the view-screen, a body scan appeared in near-transparent detail. The heart appeared enlarged and the lungs were mottled with different computer generated colors. The dead metal pins in the left shoulder appeared hard and out of place against the live bones and muscles.

"Well, I must say, your doctors did do a pretty good job on your shoulder, considering," McCoy commented. "You have what, ninety percent mobility in that arm?"

"About that, yes," Straker agreed. He'd almost stopped shivering. "Luckily, I'm right handed and the nerve damage wasn't extensive."

"Remind me, when we get back to Star Base One, to arrange for regeneration treatments for that shoulder," McCoy said, peering closely at the auxiliary displays. "It'll take about a week, but it'll fix you up as good as new."

"Why can't you do that with my heart?" Straker asked.

"I may, if you need it," McCoy stated, turning to smile at the SHADO officer. "The problem isn't really your heart, you know. It's this damaged valve." He turned back to the monitors and beckoned the nurse to come closer.

"Morita, look at that calcium ring around the aortic valve. That's the textbook signature of Mellantyn degenerative aortic stenosis." McCoy pointed out the area in question on the computer generated display screen. There was a clearly defined ring surrounding the tri-part valve leading from the heart into the aorta. Patches the same color as the ring mottled the valve itself.

"Get that historian down here, will you? I have a couple questions for her."

"Yes, Doctor," the nurse acknowledged, going to the wall intercom. "Will Historian Sterreka please report to Sick-bay?"

"So, what's wrong with him?" Foster asked.

McCoy was surprised to see Foster still standing there. "From all appearances," McCoy turned back to Straker, "you have Mellantyn degenerative aortic stenosis, coupled with second stage Mellantyn hyper-immune syndrome."

"I know what aortic stenosis is," Straker informed him. "It's a thickening of the aortic valve from the heart. It can lead to an enlargement of the heart and to heart failure."

McCoy raised both eyebrows in surprise. He hadn't expected a textbook definition. Straker gave him a crooked smile. "I do know how serious it is and I have seen a specialist."

"What else did your specialist tell you?"

Straker's expression became bleak. "I'm scheduled to go in for surgery right after Christmas. Only problem is, I know I won't live through the operation. At best, I'll end up a vegetable. I'm allergic to nearly all the drugs they use in that kind of surgery."

Foster was appalled. "Ed, why didn't you tell us?"

"Why didn't you tell me that you and Alec had agreed I shouldn't return to work when we got back from Moonbase?" Straker responded angrily. "You were going to talk to Henderson about arranging for my early retirement."

"That's different," Foster protested. "It's been pretty obvious you're too sick to keep on working. You haven't spent a full day at work in the last four weeks. But, why didn't you tell us how bad it really was?"

"Because there's nothing any of you can do about it," Straker explained with a reasonableness that would have done a Vulcan proud. "Besides, I don't want you all fussing over me. It's bad enough to be sick without being treated like a child. I don't want to die, but if I'm going to, I'd rather do it in peace, not being treated like an invalid or an idiot." Straker's tone became bitter.

"You still should have told us," Foster insisted.

"I neither need nor want your pity, Paul," Straker replied. "Nor do I need your coercion to come to terms with the few options open to me."

"Aren't you lucky medical science has improved some in the past three hundred years?" McCoy asked. His tone was deliberately light and he gave Straker a grin. He watched Straker force himself to relax.

"Do you have any idea what might have caused it?" Straker asked.

"Well, hyper-immune syndrome is an auto-immune disorder, triggered by an idiosyncratic reaction to a strong neuro-stimulator, coupled with exposure to high amounts of an allergen like bee venom or penicillin," McCoy explained as simply as he could.

"But, I've never been exposed to anything like that," the SHADO officer told him, openly puzzled.

"Yes, you have," Foster contradicted him. "Sixteen months ago. It was an overdose of X-50 that put you in the hospital. You were in a coma for five days with a high fever, remember?"

Straker didn't comment, but a worried look came into his eyes.

"You went into anaphylactic shock twice, from exposure to antibiotics," Foster continued quietly. "Your blood tests indicated possible heart damage."

"Didn't your doctor tell you?" McCoy asked Straker.

Straker shook his head. "I have no real memory of the events that put me in the hospital. My doctors said it was better that way. I'm told I had a real bad time of it, convulsions, cardiac arrests, renal failure, the whole nine yards. I was told my heart may have been damaged, but there was no way to tell how bad it was."

"There was probably no way to tell, then," McCoy admitted. "The condition is progressive, it gets worse over time."

"So, what now?" Foster asked.

"There are some medications. First, we have to treat the hyper-immune syndrome." He

turned back to Straker. "Your immune system is attacking your body. In this version of the Mellantyn syndrome, it goes after the heart, the pancreas and the joints."

McCoy looked up the view screen and pointed out the general area of the pancreas. "You've already got minor damage there. Without treatment, assuming the heart problem didn't kill you first, you'd end up diabetic and severely arthritic."

The corridor doors slid open and Sterreka entered Sickbay. She stopped at the door of the examination room. "You wanted to see me, Doctor?"

McCoy nodded to the historian in greeting, then he turned to his nurse, "Morita, get me five cc's of Floroxidine and three cc's Amyloxior-fifty."

Morita left to get the drugs from the adjacent laboratory. McCoy turned back to Sterreka. "That exploration ship you told me about earlier, it was manned, wasn't it?"

"Of course. There were twelve families aboard. One family from each of the clans. About fifty people altogether," Sterreka answered. She seemed puzzled by the physician's line of questioning.

"About what Earth year would it have arrived?"

"Sometime between eighteen-ninety and ninety-five," Sterreka answered. "Why?"

McCoy grinned at her. "I think I know what happened to your missing ship."

Morita returned with the drugs. McCoy checked them and then gave Straker an injection at the base of his neck. "You may feel a hot flush as this takes effect."

Looking back to Sterreka, McCoy said, "Your ship made it to Earth and probably crashed. But, there were survivors, and they went native."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because he," McCoy pointed to Straker. "Is a full-blooded Mellantyn, with all the immune system and mitochondrial markers."

"That is impossible," the young woman protested. "There were no survivors of that ship. There can't have been, otherwise they would have contacted us."

Straker pushed himself up on his elbows. There was an annoyed look on his face. "May I ask a question? What, pray tell, is a 'Mellantyn'?"

"The Mellantyn are the inhabitants of Beta Persei Two, also known as Danae," Sterreka explained with forced patience, to McCoy's amusement. "We are descended of Earth stock, taken from Earth about a thousand years ago."

"Who the hell was stealing people from Earth a thousand years ago?" Foster demanded.

"What they are called depends on the culture, some call them the Wise Ones. Generally, they are known as the 'Preservers'. The Mellantyn call them the 'Planters'," Sterreka answered. "There are dozens of planets in this part of the galaxy whose inhabitants derive from various pre-technological societies of Earth."

"But, why?" Foster asked.

"That, Mister Foster, is one of the great mysteries of all time," McCoy said. He turned back to his patient. Straker was still propped up on his elbows on the diagnostic table. "How're you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess. I'm still a little cold," Straker told him. McCoy lowered the foot of the table and helped him to a near-by chair, wrapping the blanket around his shoulders. Straker pulled the blanket closer and looked up at Sterreka. "You're Mellantyn, right?"

"Yes," Sterreka admitted. She folded her arms across her chest, a defiant look on her face. "I was born in the city of Ille Thiol, to the Clan Sterreka. My father was Clan Conollen."

"I see," Straker commented. He sat back in the chair, expression thoughtful. "They were

taken from Northern Europe about a thousand years ago. A minimum of ten thousand, preferably at least twenty thousand, people to maintain the technological base."

"That's right," the historian admitted. There was surprise in her voice. "The actual number was eighteen thousand, five hundred, equally divided male and female. They were taken in Thirteen-forty-seven, from areas threatened with the Plague."

"Thirteen forty-seven is only six hundred thirty-six years ago," Foster pointed out.

"Oh, but you're forgetting, Paul, they're supposed to be from three hundred years in the future," Straker commented. "If nothing else, they're very consistent on that one." Despite his cheerfully disbelieving tone, Straker's face had gone pale once again. He shivered under the blanket.

"Your blood pressure's still a little low," Morita explained, as she quickly scanned him. She helped Straker to his feet and started to lead him back to his bed in the ward. In the doorway he stopped and looked back at Sterreka.

"You're wrong about the possibility of survivors, you know," Straker commented. "If the ship did crash, the communications equipment could have been destroyed, preventing them from calling their home base."

Sterreka gave him an annoyingly superior look. "The ship's technicians had the skill to rebuild the equipment, from elemental components, if necessary."

"And if the only survivors were the children?" Straker asked. Sterreka glared at him as Morita helped him back to his bed.

Foster began to follow them, but McCoy took his arm. "I want to ask you some questions," McCoy told him. He led the SHADO officer through the examination room to his office.

McCoy beckoned Foster to take a chair. The physician leaned back against his desk, rubbing his hand over his chin. "If I'm to help him, I need to know what happened to him sixteen months ago."

"What makes you think I know what happened?" Foster asked. The belligerence had come back into his voice.

"I assume you know because you were telling Straker about what happened," McCoy told him. "And, he says he doesn't really know."

Foster sat back in the chair. After a moment, the young man sighed. "I guess I should start at the beginning."

"That usually works best," McCoy agreed.

"One evening, a year ago August, Ed left work to pick up one of our employees, a Miss Lake, from the airport. The next morning, we found him on the company grounds. He was out of his head, delirious, or maybe drugged. Our security people also found one of our technicians shot to death and Ed's fingerprints were on the gun that killed him. Miss Lake was found unconscious on the roof of the one of the office buildings," Foster related.

"When we got Ed to the medics, he'd gone catatonic," Foster continued. "One of the staff psychiatrists said it was probably a reaction to whatever had happened to him that night. Whatever made him kill the technician."

"What had happened?" McCoy asked.

Foster frowned. "We're not really sure, except it was pretty traumatic for him."

"What happened then?" McCoy prompted.

"We had the psychiatrist question him, to find out what had happened. Under a truth drug, Ed admitted taking the drug X-50. Apparently, the situation warranted it. X-50 is a very

strong, very dangerous, stimulant," Foster explained. "He also admitted killing the technician. Then, he went into cardiac arrest, from the drugs in his system, we assume."

"He was in a deep coma for several days, with a very high fever," Foster went on. "That was when we discovered someone was trying to kill him. Twice he was injected with antibiotics he was allergic to. By some miracle, he managed to pull through without any detectable brain damage."

"Who was trying to kill him, Mister Foster?" McCoy asked.

Foster frowned and shook his head.

"Was it the aliens SHADO's at war with?"

Foster's eyes widened in alarm. "What do you know about them and SHADO?"

"I know there were two ships chasing your Lunar Module just before we rescued you. I also know SHADO appears to be at war with them," McCoy stated.

"I'm afraid I don't have anything more to say, Doctor," Foster announced, leaving his chair. McCoy let him go.

* * *

Barry and Spielberg were still sitting on their beds as Foster walked in. He sat down on Spielberg's bed.

"What did Doctor McCoy want with you, Paul?" Straker asked quietly. There was a haggard look about him, as if even the trip to the examination room had taken more strength out of him than he had to spare.

Foster inhaled deeply, breathing in and out through his nose. "He wanted to know what happened to you that landed you in the hospital."

"And what did you tell him?" Straker asked.

"I told him some of what happened, the parts I witnessed, that you already know about," Foster admitted. "If they want more than that, I guess they're out of luck." He paused. "They know about SHADO, and about the aliens."

A faintly bemused smile appeared on Straker's face. "Well, that's hardly surprising, is it, Paul? If this is an alien trick, of course they'd know. For that matter, if they are from the future, or somewhere else, all they have to do is look around and listen to what's going on in near Earth space."

"Of course," Foster agreed. "The fact they know about SHADO proves nothing."

Straker nodded, staring off into the far distance. Then, he focused on Foster and grinned. "You know Paul, you once told me you thought I was something other than human. According to Doctor McCoy, you may be right."

Foster snorted. "As I recall, I was thinking more in terms of computers and convincingly human robots at the time. As far as I know, I've never actually accused you of being an alien from outer space."

"No, you haven't," Straker agreed. "But, remember that genetic report that Colonel Sprenger got hold of a while back?"

"What report, sir?" Spielberg asked.

"Some researchers came up with genetic evidence that we had some personnel whose DNA, they felt, wasn't totally human," Foster explained. "It caused us a few problems. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so weird, and if our military liaison at the time hadn't taken it so seriously." Foster paused as he recalled exactly how much trouble that report, and that liaison, had caused them.

"I thought we'd decided that report was seriously flawed in its conclusions," Barry

commented dryly. She and Straker had both been mentioned in that particular paper and had suffered in consequence.

"Maybe we were premature in our conclusions," Straker said very softly.

"You're not taking it seriously, are you?" Barry asked.

Straker shrugged. "We know our aliens have made it to Earth from another star system. It's not unreasonable to assume some other group could have made it here even earlier. The fact that there's little evidence we can point to proves nothing."

"You are taking it seriously," Foster stated.

Straker shook his head. "Not really. Eighteen-ninety-five puts it at about my grandparents' time. Even if it were true, there's nothing I can do about it. I was born in Boston and I have a valid United States passport. I do wonder at Miss Sterreka's negative reaction to the possibility, though. I would have expected that finding survivors, even descendants of survivors, would be a positive discovery."

"Even if it's you?" Foster wondered aloud.

The doors to the corridor opened. The SHADO people looked over to see Kirk and Spock come in. The pair walked over to the doorway of the examination room where McCoy stood with Sterreka. Spock held a highly polished wooden box in his hands.

"Are they behaving, Bones?" Kirk asked.

"They're about as cooperative as the rest of my usual clientele," McCoy reported.

"Are you saying some of your patients aren't cooperative?" Kirk replied, giving his friend a pout of feigned hurt.

"I'm saying most of my patients don't know the meaning of the word," the physician retorted. "With your permission, Captain, I'd like to release them from sick-bay."

"You're sure, Bones?"

"I think it would be a friendly gesture to begin introducing them to our time. You're the one who said they were going to be with us for a while," McCoy reminded his captain.

With a nod of agreement, Kirk straightened his jacket and stepped towards the SHADO people.

"Doctor McCoy tells me you're fit to leave sick-bay," Kirk informed them. "So, I think it's about time you got better acquainted with us. If you'll come with me, we'll arrange for your quarters and get you something more appropriate to wear."

The SHADO people looked at one another in surprise. They hadn't been expecting Kirk's invitation.

"However, Mister Straker is staying here," McCoy announced.

Straker didn't seem surprised by McCoy's statement. Foster gave Straker a quick look of concern, suddenly reluctant to leave his superior.

"Go on, Paul. Don't worry about me," Straker said.

Foster was unconvinced. "You're sure?"

"I'm very sure," Straker informed the younger man with surprising firmness. Foster nodded but he was not happy about leaving Straker alone. After a moment, he sighed and headed for the door, beckoning Spielberg to accompany him.

Barry leaned over and gave Straker a quick kiss on the cheek. "Take care, Ed. Okay?" she murmured. "We'll check on visiting hours."

Straker simply nodded, giving her a faint smile as she went to join Foster, Spielberg and Kirk by the door to the ward.

The little group paused in the doorway as they heard Spock say: "Mister Straker, do you

play chess?"

* * *

An armored security guard took a position behind them as Kirk led the group to the nearest turbo-lift. Kirk appreciated their astonished looks at the corridor around them. Compared with their lunar module, even SHADO's Moonbase, the Enterprise was huge.

Eduard Kevlin was walking down the corridor towards them. His brown eyes widened in surprise at seeing the three 'visitors' with his captain. "Good afternoon, Captain," he greeted.

"Afternoon," Kirk said, stopping in the corridor. Kevlin halted in front of him. "Mister Kevlin, isn't it?"

The young man nodded. "Yes, sir. I came aboard yesterday from the Sagan."

"Good ship. How is Captain Prentice?"

"Fine, sir."

"Good," Kirk said. "I wanted to let you know you did a fine job on that beam-out."

"Thank you, sir," Kevlin replied. His face flushed at the unexpected compliment. "The ionization around the ship made it a bit tricky, but there was really only one moment when there might have been a problem. That was when the ship exploded. I nearly lost the lock."

"But, you didn't," Kirk reminded him. "And it's the results that count." Kirk turned to his guests. "Mister Kevlin was the officer responsible for actually bringing you on board."

"Captain," Kevlin said tentatively. "I wanted to apologize for questioning your order, sir."

Kirk gave the young man a wry smile. "I quite understand, Mister Kevlin. I hadn't been expecting to bring anyone on board from this time period either, until I decided to." Kirk paused. "Just don't let it happen again."

"Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir," Kevlin said in surprised confusion. Kirk grinned and nodded a dismissal.

"How did you bring us aboard, Captain?" Foster asked, watching after Kevlin as the young man disappeared down the corridor.

"I would prefer to leave explanations like that to when you're better acquainted with us, if you don't mind," Kirk said.

Several uniformed crewmen passed the group, giving Kirk courteous nods and brief greetings as they went about their business.

"How large a crew do you have, Captain?" Foster asked after a short time.

"Five hundred."

"Men and women?" Barry asked.

Kirk nodded, surprised at the question. He kept forgetting the vast differences between his culture and theirs, despite the similarity in language. "The crew is mostly human, but we do have a number of non-humans and even some non-humanoids." As he spoke, one of the non-humanoid crew members, a rock-like Horta, scraped past them, bent on some unidentified errand.

"That's Ensign Corous," Kirk identified. "She's in astrophysics."

Foster and Barry said nothing, simply staring down the corridor after the Horta.

At the turbo-lift, the doors opened and Kirk ushered his guests in. He stepped over to the grilled wall control panel beside the doors. "V.I.P. suites, deck four," he instructed the control grill.

The lift began its journey. The three visitors were momentarily startled when the car began to move sideways, then up again.

"V.I.P. suites?" Barry repeated.

Kirk gave her his best, disarming, smile. "You're our guests."

The car stopped and the doors opened onto another corridor. A squat, yellow skinned, lavender haired humanoid with horn-like antennae sprouting from his head stood waiting for them.

Kirk gestured the SHADO people and the guard to leave the car. "If you'll excuse me," he told them, "I'll leave you in the quite capable hands of the quartermaster. We're having a formal dinner for you in the Officer's Mess at eighteen hundred hours. I'll send someone for you."

The turbo-lift doors closed, leaving the three from the Twentieth Century alone with the alien quartermaster and the apparently human guard in his white armor.

"Miss Sterreka has been assigned suite A," the quartermaster told them, ignoring their wary glances in his direction. "So I've assigned suites C and D for your use." He led the way down the corridor, to their rooms. "You'll find suitable clothing in your quarters. If you desire something else, you need only ask and we can synthesize it for you."

"What about our space suits and the clothes we were wearing when we were brought on board?" Foster asked, finally finding his voice.

"Chief Engineer Scott has your space suits. Your clothes have been cleaned and are hanging in your quarters," the quartermaster informed the SHADO officer.

"Thank you," Foster murmured. "Sir, if it isn't impolite, what, where are you from?"

The quartermaster smiled, in as human a fashion as his lipless mouth would allow. "I come from Denalonda, a planet in the Beta Quadrant. And, while it is not exactly impolite to ask such things, it is not generally done. One's origins should be less important than one's skills, don't you think, sir?"

Foster was forced to agree.

With a flourish, the quartermaster opened the door to Suite D and ushered them inside. They entered a small bedroom area with two single beds. To the left was a larger sitting room with a dining booth, desk, built-in table and at the far end, what appeared to be a control console of some type with a large screen above it.

The quartermaster briefly explained the food processor near the entry door and showed them how to access the computer system through the desk terminal. He also explained the controls to the bathroom plumbing.

"Do you often get guests who don't understand the plumbing?" Spielberg wondered aloud.

The quartermaster barked out a laugh. "As a matter of fact, we do," he explained. "The Enterprise is frequently called upon to transport diplomatic delegations. There are a few worlds in the Federation that have star travel but have not yet mastered the intricacies of indoor plumbing."

Foster smiled at the quartermaster's statement and went back to the computer terminal in the other room. At Foster's first request, a female voice replied: "That information is accessible to Engineering personnel only until further notice."

"Sir?" Foster called. The quartermaster came to the arched doorway to the sitting room.

"I was trying to ask the computer about how we were brought aboard. This machine is telling me that information is accessible only to engineering personnel until further notice," Foster said.

"I assume the Captain has ordered a security lock-out on certain information concerning the ship," the quartermaster replied reasonably.

"But why?" Foster demanded.

"I fear you will have to ask the Captain for the answer to that question, sir," the Denalondan told him. "However, even if you are not permitted access to certain security sensitive materials, I believe you will find more than enough information to occupy you. We have a quite complete film and book library available, if you wish entertainment." He showed Foster the key sequence that would bring up the ship's film catalog.

A list of titles appeared on the computer screen. Foster noted the list included films that, as far as he was aware, were not yet finished. One of the films, a George Lucas space spectacular, had just ended filming on sound stages four, five and six at Harlington-Straker Studios. It wouldn't be finished until next year. Foster checked the copyright date on the computer list -- 1984.

"You have a film here from 1984," Foster told the quartermaster.

The Denalondan bobbed his head in a nod. "Our film list is quite extensive, except for the most recent productions. My predecessor was something of a film buff. Her favorite film period was mid to late Twentieth Century, so our collection from that period is excellent."

"But that film by Lucas, it isn't even finished yet," Foster protested.

The quartermaster gave him one of his lipless smiles. "Mister Foster, that film is over three hundred years old."

Nina Barry walked into the work-sitting room as the quartermaster left the suite to return to his other duties. She had changed out of the sick-bay pajamas into a one piece dark gray jumpsuit that accentuated her slim figure. "They are, if nothing else, very consistent on that point," she commented.

Foster gave her a crooked grin. "They are consistent, and considerate," he agreed. "I just wish they were as considerate about sending us home."

Chapter Chapter 9

Captain's log, Local Date, December 23, 1983, old calendar. Doctor McCoy has released all but one of our 'guests from the past' from sickbay. Since it is obvious that but for our intervention, they would have perished, we are trying to orient them in preparation for bringing them with us to our own time.

Kirk finished his log entry and pushed the off button on the control console as he slouched back in his chair. The blue orb of the Earth could be seen on the main view screen. The Vulcan scout ship was still half hidden in the space debris.

Lieutenant Brady, manning Uhura's station, reported: "Captain, geology section has been running sensor scans on Saturn's moons. They confirm that the surface mining there is very recent, within the last five years."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Sir, Engineer Scott would also like to know when you plan to initiate warp-breakaway for our return home," Brady added.

Kirk grinned. "Tell Scotty, if everything looks okay from his end, we'll begin in about eighteen hours. We'll let Alpha shift get a good night's sleep before we run the rapids."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk sat back to watch the view screen.

"Captain, those two Shelmat craft are back," Ensign Mallory announced from the navigation station. The helm seat was vacant.

Kirk straightened up, suddenly attentive. "Put it on the screen, Mister Mallory."

Mallory pressed the necessary controls on the nav-console and the screen changed to show the two U.F.O.s approaching from space. Mallory checked the readings on nav-computer again. "They seem to be headed for Earth, sir."

"Two U.F.O.s on positive track, bearing four-two-eight, one-four-one, Green. Speed, Sol zero-decimal-seven and decelerating," SHADO's satellite, S.I.D., announced over the Enterprise's communications speaker.

* * *

Inside the Moonbase Control Sphere, Wingate checked the computer read-out at her station. "Confirmed."

"Moonbase to SHADO Control, confirm two U.F.O.s bearing four-two-eight, one-four-one, green," Harrington reported, relaying the information to SHADO Headquarters.

* * *

"Correction, Captain. Shelmat craft bearing one-three-seven-mark-eight, towards the Moon," Mallory reported.

"Shall I open hailing frequencies, sir?" Brady asked.

Kirk shook his head. "No, we're only supposed to be observing, nothing more."

"U.F.O.s on positive track, bearing four-two-eight, one-four-one, green. Speed: Sol zero-decimal-six. Range: two million miles and closing," S.I.D. announced.

* * *

Within Moonbase, Captain Harrington made an additional announcement: "Red alert, red alert. Interceptors immediate launch."

* * *

Mallory went to the science station and peered into the sensor monitor. The main view screen, on tactical display now, showed the two U.F.O.s as they approached the Moon from

two million miles out.

"Captain, the lunar installation has just launched three interceptor craft. They are on an intercept course with the Shelmat. I.P. in three minutes," Mallory announced.

Kirk and his bridge crew watched as, on the main view screen, the three interceptors approached and fired on the two U.F.O.s.

One of the cup-like enemy ships exploded.

Except for the normal background noise, the bridge was silent as, on the screen, the one remaining Shelmat craft changed course once again.

"Captain, the alien vessel is now bearing three-five-two mark seven. Straight towards us," Mallory announced from the science station. She seemed stunned by the observation.

"Evasive action, Mister Mallory!" Kirk ordered as the Shelmat craft came closer. Shaking herself from her surprise, Mallory ran back to the navigation station as Kirk took over the helm.

"Yes, sir!" On impulse power, the young officer rapidly plotted and executed a violent course change, taking them out of visual range of the remaining extra-terrestrial ship.

On the tactical screen, the Shelmat vessel could be seen making a wide arc though the area of near-Earth space the Enterprise had been occupying only moments before. The three Moonbase interceptors were following close behind. The lead interceptor fired again on the Shelmat and it altered its course, away from Earth.

Mallory checked her nav-station monitors. "The surviving Shelmat craft is now on a bearing for Titan. The three interceptors are returning to base."

"Thank you, Mister Mallory," Kirk said. Still seated at the helm, he stared at the tactical display, lost in thought.

"Sir, do you think they saw us?" Brady wondered aloud. Kirk looked over at the woman.

"I don't know," Kirk admitted. "I certainly hope not."

* * *

In the Sick-bay ward, the violent evasive maneuver was felt as a jerk.

"What was that?" Straker wondered aloud.

"I believe we've engaged thrusters for an evasive maneuver," Spock replied. The Vulcan was sitting on the medical bed to Straker's right. A table had been placed between the two beds and a classically fashioned flat chess board was set up on the table top.

"Why?" Straker asked. He was playing the white.

"I assume it was to avoid detection," Spock replied. "We are under strict orders to avoid being detected by the natives."

"Wouldn't my presence here be in violation of those orders?" Straker asked.

"You are hardly in a position to report your findings, sir," Spock replied.

"That's very true," Straker picked up a pawn and moved it. "I'm afraid it's been a long time since I played chess," he told his Vulcan opponent.

Spock played one of his pieces. "You play quite well, Commander."

For just an instant, Straker froze. Then, he moved another of his pawns as though nothing had happened. "Thank you, Mister Spock."

Spock played his bishop, capturing a white rook. "We have been monitoring Earth communications channels since we arrived in this time period, including those belonging to a group calling itself 'SHADO'," Spock explained. "And even when your 'associates' do not actually say it, they do, Commander."

Straker permitted himself a small smile. "Yes, I suppose they do, don't they?" he

conceded. "Doctor McCoy told Paul Foster that you people knew something of SHADO, and the aliens we're at war with."

"We have a few historical references to a group called SHADO, but no documentary evidence concerning its purpose. Nor were we aware of extra-terrestrials visiting Earth at this time," Spock informed Straker. "However, we have made a tentative identification of the alien craft that were pursuing your transport module."

"Oh?"

The Vulcan played. "We believe they may have originated on Shelmat-two. The intelligent life on that planet appears to have disappeared in approximately this time period. However, the archeological evidence there, and the records we have from Earth, gave no indication the Shelmats had ever visited Earth, although there is some evidence to suggest that they were of Earth stock, originally."

"Stolen from Earth by the Planters, like the Mellantyn were?"

Spock raised one eyebrow in surprise. "Yes, Commander."

"Doctor McCoy thinks I'm a Mellantyn, descended from one of their exploration ship crews," Straker explained. "Miss Sterreka didn't seem very happy about the possibility. The whole thing's awfully funny, considering."

"Considering what, Commander?" Spock asked. Puzzlement showed ever so faintly in his voice.

Straker shook his head, a wry, amused expression on his face. "Nothing." He paused and then continued more seriously, "You said the aliens come from Shelmat-two? I'm not familiar with a constellation by that name."

"There is no reason you should be, Commander. The star is a K-6 dwarf, about five parsecs from Earth. I believe the name was given the system by a Vulcan scout ship, based on a transliteration of the natives' name for their system," Spock told him. "However, I fail to comprehend why we have no records of their visitations to Earth. Surely the arrival of extra-terrestrials would be of immense importance to a planet in Earth's present developmental stage."

Spock moved his rook. Straker sat back, studying the chess board.

"We're not ready," Straker said after a moment. His expression had turned grim. "We first got indisputable proof of their 'visitations' in Nineteen-sixty-nine. Before that, all we had were reports of sightings, inexplicable disasters, mutilated bodies with organs missing for no apparent reason. We had studies and rumors and speculation, but no hard evidence."

"And when the proof arrived, SHADO was created to deal with the problem?" Spock asked.

Straker nodded. "We did try to make contact with them, to communicate with them. A Soviet cosmonaut announced his government's intention to contact the aliens. He made one radio callback to Earth, saying he'd seen one of their ships. That was the last we heard from him. We located the capsule on far side of the Moon about eight years ago. His body had been plastered all over the inside of it. Most of the major organs were missing."

Straker shuddered at the unbidden images the memory brought forward. He'd been on the team that had found the capsule on the Moon. He still had nightmares about it.

"Commander, I still find it difficult to understand why it has been found to be necessary to keep all these events secret," Spock commented.

"There are a couple major reasons," Straker said. "First, there have been a number of studies conducted dealing with a first contact scenario. They all indicate a strong probability

that the event would create a severe polarization of Earth's population, between those who would insist that a technologically superior species would naturally be a peaceable one, and those who would be equally insistent that any aliens there might be out there would be a deadly threat to Earth.

"The numbers vary between the studies, but the consensus is, if the contact takes place on Earth, even with peaceful, friendly aliens, we can expect ungovernable chaos from the polarization and face a strong possibility that one or more Earth factions would actually attack the visitors," Straker continued.

"I can see how that would present a problem for Earth's present government systems," Spock commented. "But, aside from the fact that SHADO is at war with them, what evidence exists that Earth is in danger from these people?"

Straker's tone became angry, bitter. "Mister Spock, you've never seen what they do on Earth during their 'visitations'. The aliens use Earth humans as donors in multiple transplant operations for themselves, and as brain-wiped cannon fodder.

"I mean, human beings are bad enough in the way they treat one another and anything else they get their hands on. To have to deal with such... " He paused, searching for the proper word. "*Barbarity* from outside would be beyond comprehension. Can you possibly imagine the reaction if people found out we were being used as a 'stockyard' by creatures who just happen to be more technologically advanced than we are?"

Straker lay back. He was breathing hard, visibly working to regain his emotional control. Morita glanced up from her work at the nurse's station and gave Spock a warning look.

"Right now, Earth is in about the same position the Indians were when the Europeans came calling," Straker said more calmly. "The only thing that's saved us, so far, is that the aliens don't seem to want anybody to know they're here either. Why, we haven't yet figured out."

"Humans do seem to be prone to a certain amount of barbarism," Spock commented quietly. "That does not mean that the tendency cannot be overcome, or that a peaceful contact with extra-terrestrials is not possible."

"Overcoming that tendency can be rather difficult, Mister Spock," Straker admitted. "Especially when it may only be our barbarism that keeps us from extinction. The aliens don't seem to understand exactly how bloody-minded and vicious Earth humans can be, or how hard we have to fight to stay civilized. They seem to think that if they can prove to us we can't win, we'll simply give up and let them have their way. They don't understand that we don't work that way."

"So, SHADO fights a war that officially does not exist, that history will never hear of, against technologically superior extra-terrestrials," Spock commented.

"So SHADO fights a war," Straker agreed.

"Which you and your companions are now casualties of," Spock reminded him.

Straker conceded the point with a brief nod. "Every war has casualties."

The SHADO officer inspected the chess board. The white king was in jeopardy, with no way out. He forfeited the game, tipping over his king with one finger. "Thank you, Mister Spock, for a very interesting game."

"Thank you, Commander Straker," Spock responded. The Vulcan stood and began picking up the chess pieces, placing them in their wooden box. Morita noticed they were finished with the game and left her desk to come closer.

"Is Doctor McCoy busy?" Spock asked the nurse as she approached.

"He's in his office working on the crew physical reports," Morita replied. "I'm sure he'll welcome the interruption."

Spock gave her a nod and headed for the chief medical officer's office.

Morita turned her attention back to her patient. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

Straker looked exhausted and his voice was soft. "Okay, I guess. I shouldn't have gotten angry like that. It wasn't his fault." He laid back against his pillows. Morita looked up momentarily to check the readings on the medical panel above Straker's bed, then turned her attention back to her patient. His readings weren't good.

The nurse tucked the bed covers around him. "Try to get some rest."

"Yes, ma'am," Straker said, giving her a faintly troubled smile. She headed back to her station and her computer work.

The door to the corridor slid open and Kirk stepped in.

"Good afternoon, Mister Straker," Kirk greeted as he looked around for his first officer.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Straker responded quietly. "I assume my associates have settled into quarters somewhere?"

Kirk smiled and nodded. "They've been assigned to V.I.P. Suites C and D on Deck-4. You can call them if you'd like." Kirk indicated the computer terminal by the bed.

"Maybe later, thank you. I'm very tired," Straker said. Kirk simply stood for a moment, studying the other man's face. Then he stepped closer, taking a seat on the bed on the far side of the table. The wooden box of chess pieces was still on the table top.

"Who won the game?" Kirk asked after a time.

"Mister Spock," Straker answered. "I don't have time to play much chess any more. It's a game that needs practice if you're going to be any good at it."

"Don't feel bad about losing to Spock, Mister Straker," Kirk said. "There are, maybe, a half a dozen people in the known Galaxy who can beat him consistently."

"How often does he beat you at chess?" Straker wondered.

Kirk grinned. "Not very often. I hate losing," he admitted. Straker nodded quietly. There was a long pause as the two men regarded one another.

"Why are you here, Captain Kirk?" Straker asked abruptly.

"I'm waiting for Mister Spock," Kirk replied. Straker wasn't amused. Kirk sighed, suddenly uncomfortable under Straker's calculating scrutiny.

"We're orbiting Earth in this time period because yesterday morning I received urgent orders from Star Fleet's chief of operations instructing me to be here," Kirk explained.

"Why?"

Kirk considered the question a moment before answering. "Apparently there are records of a ship matching the description of this one being seen in orbit of Earth at this time. So, we're here to make sure it happens."

"Do those records include anything about you picking us up?" Straker asked. His expression had softened a bit.

"Not as far as I know," Kirk admitted. "But, then, I didn't know we were even going to be here until yesterday. I was expecting to get orders sending us on another damned diplomatic courier mission. Instead, I got saddled with a historian who doesn't like what we've found so far."

Kirk paused to gauge Straker's reaction. The wry, unrevealing half-smile was back. Kirk decided Straker was probably a very good poker player. He only revealed what he wanted his opponent to know. "Miss Sterreka told us you weren't very cooperative when she was asking

her questions," Kirk said. "She wasn't very happy about it."

"She was asking questions we weren't prepared to answer," Straker admitted. "Her attitude seems a little suspect. I don't know how it is in your time, Captain, but in mine, we expect scientists, even historians, to at least attempt to keep an open mind concerning new evidence in their field."

"And you think Miss Sterreka is having a problem doing that?" Kirk asked.

"From her line of questioning, I'd say she was having a definite problem with that," Straker said. At Kirk's questioning look, he continued, "I don't know what your history says about the problems of the Twentieth Century. What you have may well be incredibly distorted. I don't know. I do know that your so-called historian has no interest in our interpretation of the events we lived through."

Spock came out of McCoy's office and went to stand by the corridor door, waiting for Kirk. "I can see where that would be quite irritating, Mister Straker. I'll mention it to her," Kirk responded. He stood up. "Maybe we can talk some more about it later."

Straker nodded briefly, then laid back against his pillows again and closed his eyes.

Kirk picked up the box of chess pieces and stepped over to where Spock was waiting. He handed the box to the Vulcan and gestured for the officer to accompany him into the corridor.

"There was another battle just a little while ago. Those Moonbase interceptors managed to destroy one of the Shelmat craft that escaped the first time," Kirk reported as he and Spock headed down the corridor. "We had to change our orbit to avoid being seen by them."

"Interesting," Spock commented. "Are you certain we were not seen?"

"No, I'm not certain we weren't seen," Kirk admitted. Spock considered the new information. Kirk looked over at the Vulcan, curious. "Straker told me you won the game."

"Yes," Spock confirmed. "Commander Straker has a remarkably ordered and rational mind."

"Commander Straker?"

"Yes, Jim. Commander Straker of SHADO, arguably one of the most powerful, and deliberately least known, of all of this century's military commanders," Spock said.

"You found all that out from one chess game?" Kirk marveled.

They arrived at the deck-seven recreation room and went inside. Two crew members sat at a table in one corner, eating lunch and talking quietly. They looked up briefly as Kirk and Spock entered, nodded a greeting and went back to their conversation.

At another table, Miss Sterreka sat alone, reading from her computer data-padd. She hadn't looked up when the two officers came in and appeared to be ignoring everything but the data stream in front of her.

Kirk chose to overlook her as he went to the food server set into the wall. He keyed in a request for a cup of coffee, deciding against ordering a donut to go with it. McCoy had been chiding him again for not keeping his weight down. He wasn't about to give McCoy any more ammunition than absolutely necessary.

"I did review our information concerning SHADO, and Commander Uhura's recordings of the organization's communications channels," Spock continued. "The orbital monitors picked up a surprising amount of information concerning SHADO's operations over the past several years."

"Oh?" Kirk moved over to one of the tables and took a seat. Spock ordered a Vulcan herbal tea from the food processor. When it arrived, he took the cup and sat down at the table to face Kirk.

"Miss Barry holds the rank of Lieutenant and is a radar technician. That would appear to roughly correspond with one of our senior sensor engineering officers. Mister Foster holds the rank of colonel and is a senior command officer in the organization," Spock reported. "Straker is the commander-in-chief of SHADO operations."

"And he may be one of the most important men on Earth today, only we have no evidence, so far, that he was even born on the planet," Kirk muttered. He took a sip of his coffee.

"His intuitive understanding of tactics is excellent, very nearly equal to your own," Spock commented. "It was a quite enjoyable game."

Kirk looked over at Spock in surprise. "How close did he come to beating you?"

Spock permitted himself the faintest of smiles. "The commander was distracted and so was not playing his best, I am sure. However, I do now understand why SHADO's war is so secret."

Kirk gave him a curious look and the Vulcan continued. "Their reasons are quite logical, based on an intelligent evaluation of how violent the population's reaction would likely be to this crisis and the pattern of human history in regards the use of military technology to coerce less technologically advanced cultures."

"Like the Europeans against the American and Australasian native populations?" Kirk asked. "Only in this case, the Indians are armed and organized and mad as hell?"

"The Americas was the example the commander used," Spock said. "And, as with the initial contacts with the Americas, the initial incursion is small enough to be controlled, both in the intelligence and military sense."

"I've always wondered what would have happened to Earth history if the Haitians had managed to kill Columbus and his crew on that first voyage," Kirk told his Vulcan friend. "Although Commander Straker doesn't look much like an Indian."

"Doctor McCoy has told Commander Straker that he is of Mellantyn descent," Spock said. "I tend to agree. The Mellantyn are reputed to have psionic potential similar to that found in Vulcans. I believe I detected such potential in the commander. Fortunately for us, he is not married."

"Oh? Why?" Kirk asked, putting down his coffee cup.

"Like the Vulcans and a number of other races, the Mellantyn are reported to be able to mentally link with their bond-mates," Spock explained. "That would, of course, mean that his wife, especially if she were of Mellantyn derivation as well, would have certain knowledge that he is not yet dead."

"Of course. That is one complication we certainly don't need," Kirk mused. "Mellantyn? Spock, wouldn't it be strange, the Enterprise is sent back in time to be seen at a certain place and time by Vulcan observers, only to discover descendants of another interstellar ship, fighting an interplanetary war to defend a planet that has only just begun to explore its own solar system?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"We seem to have a talent for finding them," Kirk noted with a rueful grin.

The recreation room door slid open. Kirk and Spock looked up to see Uhura and Sulu enter, followed by Foster, Barry and Spielberg, and the security guard. The three SHADO people had changed out of the sick-bay pajamas into the one piece dark gray jumpsuits the quartermaster had provided them.

"Good afternoon, Captain, Mister Spock," Uhura greeted. "Sulu and I thought we might

give our guests a quick tour of the ship."

Kirk nodded and turned to Foster. As he turned he noted that Sterreka had finally looked up from her reading to watch the group. For just an instant, he thought he saw a flicker of something that looked like hatred. Then, her expression became unreadable again.

"Well, how do you like the Enterprise so far, Mister Foster?" Kirk asked.

Foster paused before answering, "It's a big ship for a crew of only five hundred."

"We've discovered humans need a certain amount of room, and privacy, when a ship and crew is expected to spend five years or more exploring the nether regions of the galaxy," Kirk explained.

"Is that your usual assignment?" Foster asked.

Kirk nodded, picking up his coffee cup and taking a sip. "The Enterprise and her crew have explored more of the Galaxy, so far, than almost anyone else in the Federation."

"Including exploring time and history?" Foster wondered.

Kirk considered the question a moment. "Very rarely does our exploration include time travel. In point of fact, I believe this is only the third time a star ship has deliberately traveled back through time to old Earth." He glanced at Spock, who nodded once in confirmation.

"It's only been done four times altogether, that I know of," Kirk continued. "The first time was an accident that showed us it could be done, and how dangerous it could be."

Sulu had gone to the food processor and ordered coffee for the group. He handed a cup to Foster. Foster took a sip, then turned in surprise to his companions. "It's real."

Kirk grinned. "We also serve the best cup of coffee in Star Fleet. Spock and the quartermaster's department keep trying to see who can get the best price on hundred ton lots of Arabica for us. He also invented the storage system for us so it's always fresh. There's nothing worse than bad coffee."

"Pity we can't get coffee this good on Moonbase," Spielberg muttered to Barry. She smiled and shrugged as she took a seat at the table next to Spock.

"It's the moon dust we have to brew it in," Barry said. "That'd ruin the best coffee in the world."

Sterreka left her chair and stepped over to the group. "I wanted to ask you about your impressions of the ship and crew, Mister Foster."

He shrugged. "I'm impressed. If it's a hoax, it's unbelievably intricate."

"I promise you, it's not a hoax, Mister Foster," Kirk said.

Foster shrugged. "So you say, Captain. If you don't mind, I'll reserve judgment on that, for the time being. You see, I've been in the film business for about four years now. I know how easy it is to create the illusion of reality, at least temporarily."

"You are a stubborn man, Mister Foster," Spock commented.

"So I've been told," Foster said. He looked around the room once again, taking a sip of his coffee. "It is impressive, though. It's almost enough to make me a believer."

"But not quite enough?" Kirk observed.

"Not quite," Foster agreed. "Besides, this is exactly the kind of trick I would expect of the aliens."

"That is exactly the attitude I would expect of a Twentieth century militarist," Sterreka complained. There was an unpleasant whine in her voice. "Anything you don't understand automatically becomes the enemy so you don't have to bother understanding it." Oblivious to the stares at her, she turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

Kirk sighed and gazed into the distance, a forlorn expression on his face. "Do you think a

formal complaint to the Danaen government would do any good?"

* * *

Colonel Freeman was nursing a cup of coffee as he paced the Control Room, watching the monitors. He was tired. It had been a long day, even without the additional worry of the Lunar module's failure to rendezvous, but he didn't want to leave just yet.

He looked around the Control room once again. It was a little after four o'clock, Beta shift, Foster's usual shift. The second watch was already on duty. Colonel Virginia Lake was taking Foster's place this evening.

Lake was dressed in a dark blue jumper with a white silk blouse. The jumper complimented her dark blonde hair. Freeman took a moment to watch her as she skimmed the day's logs at a desk on the upper level. Once, he had hoped they could become romantically involved, but that was now long past. They were simply colleagues.

After a moment, Lake finished reading the reports and came down the steps to join Freeman by the evening duty officer's station. "We haven't found anything yet?" she asked.

"Nothing yet. We managed to get one of those Ufos. But, no sign of the module," he told her.

"It's been less than five hours," the woman commented.

Freeman looked at her, wondering.

Dark blue eyes gazed into his. Despite her obvious worry, she was determined to put the best face on the situation. "Paul was in a module that was lost for sixteen hours and he managed to limp it back the Moon. Craig Collins was missing for eight weeks before he was found."

"Virginia, you know what happened after they got back. We found out they'd both been programmed by the aliens to murder Ed Straker. Collins ended up dead and Paul was damned lucky he didn't," Freeman reminded her.

"Yes, I know that, Alec, but, we can't give up hope. Not yet," she said. "Paul is one of the best command pilots SHADO has."

"Colonel Freeman?" Lieutenant Azzarillo called out from his station. "We've got some additional information concerning those mutilation incidents in France."

Freeman stepped over to the operative. Lake followed close behind him. "Yes?"

Azzarillo handed him a blue file folder. Freeman opened it and glanced at the several pages clipped inside.

"The reports came through just a minute ago. The type of mutilations reported matches the aliens' modus operandi pretty closely. Hearts, livers, kidneys missing," Azzarillo reported. "There are also reports of several missing persons in the area. They're all said to be healthy, athletic individuals, late teens to early twenties. No apparent connection between them, no apparent reason for any of them to disappear."

"Exactly the type of people the aliens seem to take whole," Lake commented. "Young and healthy."

Freeman sighed and shook his head at the havoc the aliens created by their depredations.

"Sir," Azzarillo said softly, looking around to be sure no one else was listening. "One of the missing persons listed is a Lucille Duvall. She's the youngest daughter of Emil Duvall, from the Astro-physical Commission. She was out hiking with her fiance. His body was found mutilated."

"Does Commissioner Duvall know yet?" Lake asked.

"I don't know, sir," Azzarillo admitted.

"Christ," Freeman muttered. "When trouble comes our way, it sure comes in spades."

"Alec, how much trouble do you think this will cause us?" Lake wondered.

"I don't know, but I can just about guarantee it will cause trouble," Freeman said. "First Commander Straker and Paul Foster are missing, probably dead, and now the aliens are picking up relatives of the Commission members. If I were paranoid, I'd suspect somebody was picking on me." Freeman walked away from Lake and Azzarillo, shaking his head. He went over to operative Roberston at the main communications station.

"Have we picked up any unusual air traffic in the area of southern France?"

"No, sir. But, we are on yellow alert on all tracking stations," Roberston reported.

"Inform all stations to maintain yellow alert until further notice," Freeman ordered. "I want the stations in Western Europe put on red alert and a mobile team sent to the area where the bodies were found."

"Aren't you over reacting just a little, Alec?" Lake asked. She kept her voice low so only Freeman could hear.

"Call it a hunch, Virginia, but I think the module's disappearance and those disappearances in France are related," Freeman told her. "I don't know how they fit together, but they do."

Lake nodded her understanding and turned to Roberston. "Assign Captain Green to lead the mobile team."

Freeman nodded. "Yes, if there's anything there at all, she'll find it."

Lake gazed at Freeman thoughtfully. The worry and tiredness in his leathery face made him look older than his fifty-one years.

"Alec, why don't you go home, have some supper," she suggested. "We'll call you if anything big happens."

Freeman stood quietly for a moment, thinking. "Actually, I think I'll stop by Kate's for a little bit. See how she's making out."

"How did she take the news?" Lake wondered. Freeman shook his head, eyebrows drawn together in puzzlement.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "She didn't seem too worried. She insisted Ed was still alive, but she wouldn't tell me why she thought that."

Chapter 10

The Officer's mess had been redecorated for a formal dinner. The mess officer, Sorensen, a dark, taciturn woman, from one of the Martian colonies, had outdone herself once again, with both the setting and the menu. The table had been laid out with linen table clothes and napkins, polished silver and crystal. The Enterprise's white, blue and gold china service was set out. There were real candles burning on the table. Greenery gave the room a winter holiday feel.

The menu had been selected of strictly Earth items. There were buffalo steaks with mushrooms and onions. It was a taste Kirk and McCoy had acquired on Star base 12. Several different side dishes were being served along with freshly baked bread.

Sorensen had selected a red wine to go with the meat. It was one of her new discoveries, a Cahors from Chateau Picard. It was a well balanced, vigorous, highly agreeable red, served at cellar temperature. It promised to become very popular.

The music was Spock's selection, renditions of Bach and Mozart, and instrumental Christmas music. Kirk thought he recognized a few pieces by Williams, but he couldn't be sure. Music was not one of Kirk's strong points.

The dinner proceeded smoothly. The conversation was amiable and low key. Foster even complimented the chef.

The party eventually ended up in the officer's observation lounge, also redecorated to what Spock and Sorensen had researched as late Twentieth-Century formal. A dessert buffet had been arranged on a narrow table set up against the wall opposite the view ports. On the table was the ship's silver coffee service, several bottles of liquor with crystal ware. Several dessert trays were filled to overflowing with the various desserts Sorensen had chosen for the occasion.

The cloudy, night dark Earth and the Enterprise's warp nacelles could be seen through the four large view ports of the observation lounge. There was a storm front moving in over western Europe from the Atlantic. The lights of London and Paris and other cities could be seen, flickering though the cloud cover as night fell over New York.

Foster and Spielberg were dressed in light gray tunics with matching pants and soft shoes. One of the young lieutenants from Engineering was entertaining Spielberg with a story. It was probably a space battle, from the figures the girl was forming in the air with her hands.

Spielberg seemed more interested in the girl's almond eyes than her story. Montgomery Scott, wearing his formal kilt, was watching the both of them like a fondly overly protective uncle.

Uhura had taken Barry aside. They were sitting in one of the corners, chatting amiably. Barry was dressed in a brightly colored caftan that complimented her dark coloring. Uhura wore a similar dress, in darker colors. Her bright silver jewelry tinkled as she moved.

Seen together, they could be mistaken for sisters. They had the same coloring and similar build, although Uhura, ten years older than Barry, had thickened a little with age. It was a problem Kirk was familiar with. He too had thickened a bit with age.

Historian Sterreka stood against one wall, as if trying to make herself invisible as she watched the party. However, the scarlet satin sheath she was wearing made it hard to ignore her. Silver chains decorated the sleeves and accentuated her waist. A heavy silver collar completed her ensemble.

Foster was managing to ignore her. He held a goblet of Romulan Ale as he stood by one

of the view ports gazing out at Earth.

"The good Lord's made some beautiful planets. But of all of them, this is the one I come home to," McCoy said, quietly moving to stand next to Foster.

The young man did not look at him. "'Who has not felt how sadly sweet the dream of home, the dream of home, steals o'er the heart, too soon to fleet when far o'er the sea or land we roam?'"

"Sunlight more soft may o'er us fall, to greener shores our bark may come: But far more bright, more dear than all, that dream of home, that dream of home'," McCoy completed the verse.

"Thomas Moore, The Dream of Home," Spock identified the poem.

"You sound surprised, Spock," McCoy chided softly.

"I am frequently surprised by you, Doctor," Spock replied, equally softly. "I did not know you had a fondness for Nineteenth century Irish poets."

Foster ignored them, speaking instead to Kirk, as the older man came to stand beside him. "You're not going to let us go home, are you?" Foster continued to gaze out the viewport at the Earth below. "If you're really from the future, our future, you can't afford to let us go. We might change something. And, if you aren't, if this is an alien trick, well, this is something of a coup, Imagine, capturing two senior SHADO officers."

"I'm sorry, Colonel Foster, but you're right," Kirk agreed solemnly. Foster turned to look at the Star Fleet officer as Kirk continued. "We can't let you go back. The facts are, for all intents and purposes, you all died about six hours ago. Now, you can accept the situation or not. But you can't change it."

"Commander Straker seems to be accepting the situation," Spock pointed out.

Foster sighed and took a sip of the ale, letting the harsh liquid burn his throat.

"Commander Straker is dying, and I expect even this is preferable to dying on the operating table, or being an invalid for the little time left to him. He's a very proud man. Getting sick like this has been hard on him, hard on all of us. I half suspect he intended to die on Moonbase, or on the flight home."

"Well, he's not going to die at all if I have anything to say about it," McCoy insisted.

"You don't know Commander Straker," the SHADO officer warned, with a sharp laugh.

"He can't be any worse than any Admiralty officer I've treated," McCoy announced, giving Kirk a dark look. "You know the type, know-it-all, refuses to follow doctor's orders." Kirk shrugged and grinned back at him.

Spock raised one eyebrow in the physician's direction. "I would hope you do not frighten the commander too badly with your beads and rattles, Doctor."

From Kirk's bemused expression at the exchange, Foster assumed Spock's remark was on the order of a long standing joke, although Uhura had mentioned that Vulcans did not joke. He gave Kirk a questioning look.

The older man sighed and shrugged. "It's when they stop sniping at one another, I get worried."

Foster turned his attention back to the viewport. A light winked on from behind one of the dead soviet satellites he'd spotted just above and behind the star ship's engines.

"What's that light from?" Foster wondered aloud. He pointed out the light in question to Kirk, who peered out the thick window.

"I believe that's a Vulcan observation ship, Colonel," Kirk told him.

"Vulcan?" Foster glanced over at Spock, who had taken a seat by the viewport to observe

Spielberg and Barry. "Are the Vulcans into time travel too?"

Kirk shook his head, taking a sip of his brandy. "No, Colonel, that ship is native to this period. The Vulcans have been observing Earth periodically for the past," he paused to make the mental calculation, "forty years or so. Since Nineteen-forty-three, as a matter of fact."

"What are they doing here?" Foster asked. There was a tinge of suspicion in his voice.

"They're observing, listening in on the planet's audio and visual transmissions. Radio and television, I think you call it," Kirk replied.

"Reconnaissance for an invasion?" Foster asked. The belligerence had returned to his voice and posture. Kirk sipped his brandy and shook his head again. Foster's paranoia was just a little tiresome.

"No, Colonel," Kirk said. "Curiosity brought the Vulcans to watch Earth, and maybe a little concern about the effects of our lack of emotional self-control when our two species meet. Which they have, and they will, in my past and your future."

Foster nodded in the direction of the small light, blinking among the space debris. "If they can get here, they have the technology to help us. Instead, they're just sitting there, watching us fight off an invasion we may not be able to beat?"

"Colonel Foster, the fact that we are here, from your future, means SHADO, and Earth, won against your alien invaders," Kirk explained reasonably. "As a matter of record, this war never even made it into our history books."

Foster's glower told him the younger man was still unconvinced. Kirk sighed softly, wondering if he had ever been that young, or that difficult to convince. Foster was about the same age Kirk had been when he was first given the Enterprise to command.

Historian Sterreka had been listening and stepped closer to Kirk. "Colonel Foster, I am curious to know why this war never made it into Earth's history books. Surely, it would be cause for celebration, winning a war against insurmountable odds, completely exterminating the population of another world?"

"I don't understand what you mean," Foster replied. "We haven't exterminated anybody. We're just trying to keep from being invaded. Personally, I wouldn't mind if they'd just call us up and ask to talk about how this all started. But, until they do, we're defending ourselves to the best of our abilities."

"In that case, you should be gratified to learn that another Shelmat ship was destroyed by your Moonbase fighters only four hours ago." The room went very quiet as the woman waited for Foster's reaction.

"Shelmat?" Foster wondered aloud. He glanced at Kirk, his curiosity piqued despite his fuming anger.

"We've tentatively identified them as the aliens you're at war with," Kirk told him.

"Why didn't you rescue those pilots, while you were at it?" Foster asked.

Kirk grinned ruefully. "I wasn't supposed to pick you up. My 'altruistic' tendencies got the better of me," he admitted. "As a matter of fact, I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do to upper echelons when we get back home."

There was something in Kirk's expression that made Foster want to believe he was telling the truth. Foster managed a grin over his ale. "I know the feeling," he said, pausing as he remembered his own occasional disregard for orders, and the resultant angry lectures in Straker's office. "Boy, do I know the feeling."

* * *

Straker was sitting up in his bed, reading the material on the library computer screen set

on the movable mounting arm beside the bed. On a table nearby was a tray with his dinner, which he hadn't quite gotten around to dealing with. The information he was accessing was too interesting to ignore in favor of soup and bread.

The Beta shift duty nurse was seated at the nurse's station on the opposite side of the empty ward. She had introduced herself as Kira Chee. She looked Amerind, with long black braids pinned around her head and soft brown eyes. She had a light reddish-brown complexion with high, sharply defined cheek-bones. If she wasn't actually native American, she certainly looked the part.

Chee looked up from her work to watch Straker for a moment, then she got up and walked over to him.

"Commander, if you can't eat and read at the same time, I'm going to take the monitor away," she warned. She used the irritatingly soft, rationally patient tone normally reserved for use with small children and anencephalics.

"You sound like my wife," he complained, but he pulled the meal tray closer and took a bite of bread, taking care not to tangle the tubes running from the medication pump. Straker wasn't sure what drugs McCoy was still giving him, but he was feeling better, at least for the time being.

Chee smiled. "What are you reading that's so fascinating, anyway?" She turned the monitor to look at it. On the screen was a picture of a white metallic obelisk on a low platform of the same material. Both the obelisk and the platform were covered with odd, unreadable, symbols. There were flowers placed as offerings at the base of the platform.

"The Preservers, or Planters," Straker said, swallowing the bite and running a finger down the text that scrolled down one side of the screen. "That Mellantyn historian said there were dozens of planets planted with Earth humans, but your computer only lists five confirmed instances, and Beta Persei Two isn't on the list. Neither is Shelmat Two"

"That's because those five worlds are the only ones with actual Preserver artifacts on them," Chee explained. "The others are assumed to have been planted, because that's the only way to explain them. Except for some genetic anomalies that are believed to be artificial markers, all those worlds have populations that are fully, to the nth decimal place, Earth human."

"Danae's the only one we know of to actually have a written history that refers to having been taken and planted elsewhere," she continued. "Even they don't really know by whom."

"You seem very knowledgeable on the subject," Straker commented.

Chee pointed to the obelisk on screen. "I was born on that planet."

"That's listed as Corionor one, first surveyed by the U.S.S. Enterprise, James Kirk, commanding, star date forty-eight-forty-two-point-six," Straker read from the screen. "Planet protected under the Prime Directive." He looked up at her, questioning. "What does that mean, 'protected under the Prime Directive'?"

"The Prime Directive is Star Fleet's first guiding principle. It instructs that all societies, especially those less technologically advanced, must be accorded the right to develop without outside interference," the nurse explained. "In this case, contact with the natives is forbidden, except in the most proscribed, or extraordinary, circumstances."

"Wouldn't Earth in the Twentieth Century come under those provisions, or are we considered an extraordinary circumstance?" Straker asked with a smile.

Chee grinned. "That's probably a fair description. And before you can ask, yes, I'm an extraordinary circumstance, too. Star Fleet periodically checks on protected planets, to study

their development and to make sure nobody else is violating Federation law," she explained. "When one of those parties came to check on my world, I took advantage of the event to get aboard their ship. By the time the captain realized what had happened, it was too late, they couldn't send me back. Captain Leyland arranged for my education and sponsored me into Star Fleet Academy. So, here I am."

"Do you regret your decision?"

Chee's brown forehead crinkled. "I love my work, but sometimes, I wish I could let my mother know I'm not dead. That I found my way into the Star God's world, and it's a beautiful and marvelous place, beyond anything my people could possibly imagine."

At her words, Straker's expression became distant, and a little sad.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Chee asked.

"I was just thinking, I'd like to let my wife know what's actually happened, but, that's impossible. I'm supposed to be dead," he told her.

"We can't notify her, but we could look her up in our records," Chee offered.

Straker's expression brightened. "Well, I suppose you must be able to. I've already looked up your captain. He's had something of a checkered career, I must say. Star Fleet Academy's youngest cadet, received a commendation over something called the Kobiyashi Maru simulation. He was Star Fleet's youngest star ship captain, promoted to the Admiralty at thirty-seven. Finally demoted back to star ship captain for disobeying direct orders to stay away from a classified project. Only they couldn't be too nasty to him, since he'd also just saved Earth from certain destruction by a probe looking for humped-back whales," Straker reported his findings.

He briefly wondered what he'd have done with Kirk if he'd been on that Admiralty board. Probably the same thing, given the circumstances. Good officers were hard to come by and a certain amount of insubordination was tolerable, provided the job got done. God knew how often he'd turned a blind eye to his own officers' insubordination just because the officers were so very good at their jobs otherwise.

"The Whale song incident took place four and a half years ago," Chee told him, more than a little pride coloring her voice. "The Enterprise is considered the finest ship in the fleet, and Kirk one of the finest captains of his generation. Tell you what, you eat and I'll help you find out what we have on your family."

"Fair enough," Straker agreed. Chee moved over to sit on the edge of the bed, pulling the computer screen around so they both could see it. Then, she pulled the tray table over to where she could watch him eat.

"First though, I'm curious about this Kobiyashi Maru simulation," Straker said. "Your records say Kirk got a commendation for original thinking in regards to it, but I can't find out anything about the simulation itself."

"Actually, I'm not really sure myself, since I was in medical, not command training," Chee admitted. "I do know Star Fleet doesn't want cadets to have prior knowledge of the scenario."

"Which is?" Straker prompted.

"Well, according to my roommate at the Academy, the Kobiyashi Maru scenario is one which no matter what you do, it can't be won," Chee said. "Even the right decision turns out to be wrong."

"So, what was Kirk's solution that got him a commendation?"

"I don't know. I believe the Captain was the only cadet to successfully complete the mission," Chee said. "As far as I know, no one else has been successful at it," she said. She

turned to the computer screen in front of them.

"First, I think we should look you up," she said, keying in the necessary information. A moment later, a photograph and text appeared on the screen. The photo was of Straker, in his Air Force colonel's uniform, age thirty-two.

Straker recognized the photograph. It was one of the few passable photographs of him. It had been printed in the London Times following his surviving, unscathed, the alien attack that had seriously injured General Henderson and killed every one else with them.

"There you are," she commented, pausing to read the information from the old newspaper article. "Cabinet Minister killed, miracle survival of Colonel... London Times, November nineteen, Nineteen-seventy," she read aloud. She pressed a key and two other articles appeared on the screen.

She continued reading. "'Merger rumors denied, Harlington-Straker Film Studios to remain at Borhamwood site.' They quote Edward Straker, CEO, and they mention an early retirement from a brilliant military career. London Times, March five, Nineteen-seventy-three. There's another piece here about a little boy killed in an accident, parents Edward Straker and Mary Straker Rutland. London Times, August fourteen, Nineteen-eighty."

There was a quick gasp from Straker. Chee looked over at him. His expression had gone bleak. "I'm sorry, I hadn't realized...," she murmured.

Straker's voice was very quiet. "That's all right, you didn't know. How could you? It happened three years ago, a stupid accident. He ran in front of an oncoming car, died a few hours later at the hospital." He paused, taking a shuddery breath. Then he said, "There's nothing as bitter as the death of one's child."

"Captain Kirk's son was killed about five years ago, murdered by a Klingon," Chee told him. "I'm told he still has trouble dealing with it, sometimes."

Straker put his head back and closed his eyes. The one thing he didn't want to talk about was his oldest son's death, or his ex-wife's hysterical blaming of him for it all, for his failure to do the impossible.

"Are you all right, sir?" Chee asked, worry creasing her forehead.

Straker opened his eyes and gave her a weak smile of reassurance. "I'm okay. You said we could look up my wife."

"Yes, sir. What was, what is, her name?"

"Elizabeth Kathryn Komack, she goes by Kathryn, or Kate."

"Date of birth?"

"September twelfth, Nineteen-forty-seven, Boston, Massachusetts."

Chee keyed in the information. After a moment, a photograph of a young woman with auburn hair and green eyes appeared on the screen. She was beautiful, in a very classical way, and her eyes indicated a keen intelligence. Several rows of text appeared below the picture.

"Elizabeth Kathryn Komack," Chee read from the screen. "Born Nineteen-forty-seven, obtained a Masters Degree in Business Administration from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Nineteen-seventy. No spouse listed, one child, Esther Krystin Komack, born November eighteen, Nineteen-seventy-seven, San Francisco, California, North America."

"That's odd," Straker commented at the record's omissions. "We were married six months ago. We have a little boy. He's four months old."

Chee shook her head and shrugged in puzzlement. She wasn't a computer expert and her knowledge of Earth history was sketchy at best. "I could look him up and see what happens," she suggested. "His name, birth date and place of birth?"

"Alexander Paul Straker, August twenty-third, Nineteen-eighty-three, London, England."

Chee keyed in this information. Another picture, this one of a young fair haired man in a stark gray uniform, came on the screen. She read from the text at the bottom: "Alexander Paul Straker, born Nineteen-eighty-three, died Twenty-fifty-five, natural causes. Wife: Anita Marie Bradley, three children, John, Suzette and Edward," Chee read. She scrolled up additional text. "This says he was instrumental in the early colonization of Mars. Grandson Edward Andrew Straker was a senior engineer on the UNSS Icarus, the ship that made first contact with the Alpha Centaurians in Twenty-sixty-eight."

Straker stared at the picture on the screen. The young face was unfamiliar, but Straker could almost detect traces of himself and his wife in the young man's bearing, in his finely honed features.

"So that's what Alexander's going to look like," Straker murmured. "What do your records say about Alexander's parents?"

She keyed in the request and more text scrolled onto the screen. "Parents, Johannes and Elizabeth Straker," she read aloud. Puzzled, she looked back to Straker. "But, that's not right. Is it?"

Straker frowned thoughtfully. "No, but I know what happened."

"But, I thought your given name was Edward."

"Johannen was a family name, but I've never used it. Every once in a while it shows up in records, usually misspelled as Johannes. I've been Ed or Edward ever since I can remember," he explained. He didn't bother to tell her that he'd always hated having to explain 'Johannen'. Personnel officers assumed it was a misspelling of Johannes or even Jonathan. It had been an ongoing battle to keep his name spelled right when he was still on active duty with the Air Force. Finally, he simply gave up. 'Johannen' wasn't even on his driver's license.

"Well, now you know your son will grow up and become an important person in the Martian colonization, and your great-grandson will be part of one of Earth's first contacts with a different race," Chee told him.

"What about Esther, my daughter?" Straker asked.

Chee nodded and tapped in the request. There was a slight pause, then a picture of a middle aged woman came on the screen. She was blonde and slender, wearing a simple suit. "Esther Straker Kimborough, senior administrator of Habitat One," Chee read off. "She was the chief administrator of the first permanent Earth orbiting space station to declare its independence, after successfully fulfilling its financial obligations regarding its construction."

"So, she'll be an important person, too," Straker commented.

"You seem to be blessed with illustrious offspring," Chee remarked. "I'll save this for you."

"Thank you."

Chee put a yellow data card into the reader slot and saved the information. When the recording was finished, she took a marker from her pocket and wrote his name on the card. He took the card, then lay back, suddenly exhausted.

It had been a long day. He wondered how Foster and the others were fairing and what more discoveries were in store before the morning.

* * *

Eduard Kevlin tried to concentrate on the vitronic-B board in front of him. He laid his palm on the neuro-plate as he attempted to match the mind-patterns being created on the board by Petra Mallory. "What's wrong with you?" Mallory asked, after Kevlin scored another

zero, a total mismatch of patterns.

"I don't know," Kevlin admitted. "I guess maybe I'm worried about those people we beamed aboard. You know, the ones from that burning lunar ship."

"So, what's to worry about them?" Mallory asked reasonably. She brushed her long black hair out of her eyes. On duty, she wore it pinned and braided, Vulcan style, to keep it out of her face. Off duty, and loose, it tended to fly everywhere.

"The captain thinks the Prime Directive's intact because there's no way they could have live through that re-entry," Mallory continued. "I hear they're all having dinner with the captain and Mister Spock, up in the Officer's Mess."

"Well, all except Commander Straker," Dorotea Morita corrected, coming over to join them. She had a plate of egg rolls in one hand and a cup of hot tea in the other. She sat down beside Mallory. "His condition is still pretty serious."

"Commander Straker?" Kevlin asked.

Morita nodded, taking a bite of her egg roll as she balanced her plate on her lap. "Mister Spock says it's a title, rather than a rank, and he's the local equivalent of the Star Fleet C-in-C," the nurse informed them. "Answers only to a United Nations Commission, and the President of the U.N."

"Kind of like Admiral Morrow answering to the Federation Council and the Federation president?" Mallory clarified in terms she was more familiar with.

"You got it," Morita agreed. "Lieutenant?" Morita was suddenly worried. Kevlin had actually gone pale and looked like he was ready to faint dead away. "Are you all right?"

After a long moment, Kevlin's eyes focused on the dark haired nurse seated at the game table. Some of the color returned to his cheeks. "Commander Straker?" he murmured to himself.

"What's wrong, Kev?" Mallory asked, also wondering at the transporter officer's reaction. She knew him from the Academy. Kevlin hadn't been the most sensitive, or imaginative, member of his class. It would take something very serious, and very real, to cause this reaction.

Kevlin shook his head. "I need to check something out, first," he said, the game totally forgotten. He didn't want to say anything about his suspicions until he was certain, but he had a strong feeling that they had a very serious problem on their hands, and his name was Straker.

* * *

Inside his quarters, Kevlin pulled an ornately decorated metal box from one of the shelves in the wall above his bed. He gazed at the intricate silver filigree, the letters and words hidden in the design, the enamel-work, that to the initiate, showed a star map. The box was heavier than he remembered as he placed it on the top of his dresser.

Carefully, he undid the hidden latches, letting the lid spring up to reveal a large book filling the box cavity. Reverently, cautiously, he pulled the book out of its protective case, running his hand over the fine gold and silver filigree decorating the cover. He carried the book over to his bed, propping himself against the wall as he settled down to read.

* * *

With nightfall, the storm had broken, bringing with it rain and snow. By morning, Great Britain would be covered with ice.

Alec Freeman drove his black Saab through the entrance gates of one of the new subdivisions north of London. An old farm had been divided up for a development of up-scale housing for newly rich oil and computer company executives.

He stopped the car in front of one of the new houses, a classically designed gray stucco building with a dark tiled roof. A wrought iron street lamp cast a surreal light on the yard.

The lawn had been rolled in only four months before. The hedge was little more than a series of widely spaced twigs against a brick fence wall. The two infant flowering cherry trees planted in the front lawn whipped against their support stakes in the wind.

Freeman turned up his coat collar to the cold and walked up to the front door. He had barely taken his finger away from the doorbell button, when the door opened. He looked down to see a small blonde girl looking up at him with wide gray eyes.

"Hello, Uncle Alec," Esther Krystin Straker greeted. Her mother poked her head out of the study that opened into the right side of the entrance hall.

"Come in, Alec, and close the door. You're letting all the heat out," Elizabeth Kathryn Komack-Straker chided. Freeman stepped into the entrance hall. He shut the door behind him, making sure it closed tightly. Esther disappeared up the stairs.

"I came to see how things were going," Freeman said, going to the door of the study. "We haven't picked up any trace of the module, yet."

"It's only been eight hours, Alec," Komack said. "Too soon to give up." Freeman watched as she went back to work, putting clean sheets on the bed that been set up there.

"Katie, you know what the odds are that Paul could have pulled them through," Freeman said. She didn't seem to understand the seriousness of what he was trying to tell her.

"I do understand, Alec," she said, straightening up from her work. "I really do. But I'm telling you, as sure as I'm standing here, my husband is not dead and I will not let you bury him."

"I wish I had your faith, Katie," Freeman said. He watched a flicker of worry cross her finely boned face.

"There's coffee in the kitchen," she said. "I'll be done here in a few minutes."

The kitchen was at the back of the house, between the formal dining room and a large family room. There was a roaring fire in the granite fire place in the family room. Derek, Kathryn's older brother, was putting the final touches on the Christmas tree. The baby, Alexander, was asleep in his carrier.

"Hello, Alec," Derek greeted. "There's coffee on the counter and I'm sure you know where they hide the stronger stuff."

"I think I'll stick to coffee tonight," Freeman said, pouring out a cup for himself.

"Any news on Ed and the others?" Derek asked.

"No," Freeman admitted. "But, considering the circumstances, we're not holding out much hope. I just hope Katie'll be able to handle it when we give up looking for them. She's still insisting Ed's alive."

"Alec, have you considered the possibility that she's right?" Derek asked.

"That doesn't make any sense," Freeman complained.

"Since when does love have to make sense?" Derek asked. The tall man folded himself onto the sofa in front of the fire place. Freeman settled into one of the overstuffed chairs.

"I'll tell you a story about my mother, Kathryn's and mine," Derek said. "You know I was born in Paris before the war. Pop was a photojournalist. When the Nazi's came, Pop joined the resistance. Eventually, he got caught by the Gestapo, was arrested. Mama insisted he was alive, demanded the other members of his resistance group mount a rescue. Of course they refused. No one ever left those interrogation cells alive. After two days, she stopped demanding, announced it was too late, he was dead."

"What happened then?" Freeman wondered.

"Mama and I left France with some help. She ended up marrying the man who helped us escape. That was Nick, Kathryn's father." Derek said. There was a distant look on his heavily tanned face. "When I went back to Paris after college, I checked out the Nazi records concerning that Gestapo prison. My father died two days after his arrest."

"You're saying your mother knew exactly when he died?" Freeman said.

"I'm saying that sometimes the heart knows things the mind can't explain," Derek said. "If my sister says her husband is alive, I wouldn't start planning his funeral just yet."

Chapter 11

"Well, what do you think, Spock, Bones?" Kirk asked as the turbo-lift doors closed on their dinner guests. Kirk, Spock and McCoy were left standing in the lift foyer of the officer's mess deck.

"They're certainly hard to convince," McCoy observed, turning to go back to the dining room for one last cup of coffee.

"Spock?" Kirk prompted.

"As Doctor McCoy has indicated, they are hard to convince," Spock stated, following McCoy and Kirk into the dining room. The clean-up crew had already finished. The room was as pristine and spotless as it had been before the dinner begun.

"What? Heaven help us, Spock actually agreeing with me?" McCoy sputtered mockingly as he poured himself a cup of coffee. He held the silver urn up with a questioning glance at Kirk. Kirk smiled and held out his own cup for a refill. McCoy obliged.

"Doctor, the truth is hardly a point for dispute," Spock stated. "Colonel Foster and Lieutenants Barry and Spielberg are natives of a technologically sophisticated and justifiably paranoid society. They have little to gain by believing us, and much to lose if their fears are correct and we are allied with their enemy."

"Will they ever believe us?" Kirk wondered. "How will they adapt if they don't?"

Spock's expression became even more solemn than usual. "They will eventually come to accept what has happened, if only to avoid madness when it becomes evident that they can never return to their own time and place. How long that will take, we have no way of predicting."

"I kind of feel sorry for them," Kirk mused. "I almost wish I hadn't brought them aboard."

"Jim, given the type of man you are, you could hardly stand by and watch them die," McCoy said softly.

"I don't think Miss Sterreka would agree with you," Kirk reminded him.

"I doubt Miss Sterreka has ever been in a position to make that type of decision," Spock pointed out.

Kirk grinned. "I think you're right. She doesn't have a clear understanding of the actual provisions of the Prime Directive, that's certain."

"Jim, are you worried you might have trouble with upper echelons over this little situation?" McCoy wondered.

Kirk shook his head and sipped his coffee. "Not really. If this were our own time, there wouldn't be any problem at all. For all intents and purposes, this planet has interplanetary travel and is on the verge on interstellar travel. They have FTL technology. If this were our own time, this would-be the perfect opportunity for a first contact between the Federation and this planet. They could be full members of the Federation in twenty years or so, if they wanted."

"However, this is not our own time," Spock reminded him.

"I'm well aware of that, Spock," Kirk said. "But, I can't help feeling there's a lot more going on here than we were told. I don't like being sent into situations blind. You never know where the traps are."

"I suspect Miss Sterreka has a great deal of information she is not sharing with us concerning this situation," Spock stated. "She supposedly had ample opportunity to study the Vulcan scout records before coming aboard yesterday. I was not given that opportunity."

"Irritated by the security requirements?" Kirk wondered with a smile.

Spock straightened up as if stretching his back. "Like you, I am concerned at having been sent into this situation blind. I must assume Miss Sterreka has strong instructions not to reveal her foreknowledge or to interfere with our reactions to the events we see unfolding."

"Well, she certainly objects to the fact that I had our guests brought aboard," Kirk commented. "I don't think Foster impressed her much with drinking as much Romulan ale as he did, either."

"I did warn him," McCoy told him. "But you know youngsters, they just can't believe anything they haven't seen for themselves."

"Thirty-three isn't exactly a youngster, Bones," Kirk replied. "Foster's almost the same age I was when they first gave me the Enterprise." He gazed at his old friends, a touch of worry in his face. "Was I that stubborn and single-minded at that age?"

"Only when it served your purpose," McCoy replied, setting his coffee cup on the table and heading for door. "For that matter, you're still stubborn and single-minded when it suits your purpose." The door closed behind him.

* * *

On Deck four, the turbo-lift doors opened onto the corridor linking the V.I.P. suites. Foster, Barry, Spielberg and Sterreka left the car, followed by their assigned security guard in white body armor.

Foster still held a crystal goblet half-filled with bright blue Romulan Ale. He staggered a little as he stepped into the corridor. With a sigh, Barry put her arm around Foster's waist, putting his free arm over her shoulders as she and Spielberg guided him down the corridor to their suite.

"I can walk, thank you," Foster informed Barry in drunken seriousness, his speech slightly slurred.

The guard grinned and shook his head, wondering how much Foster had to drink at the officers' party, and whether any of the Enterprise's senior officers were drunk as well. Both Scott and McCoy were known to imbibe heavily on occasion, and even Kirk was reputed to indulge once in a while.

The Danaen, Sterreka appeared disgusted at the sight of the drunken SHADO officer.

"Come on, Paul. It's time we got you to bed," Barry said, maintaining their course down the corridor.

Foster turned to Sterreka, a vacuous grin on his face. "Not alone, I hope," he said, raising his goblet to her.

Sterreka was appalled. "I think that might be best, Colonel," she informed him coldly before she stalked away down the corridor towards her assigned cabin.

"Maybe some other time?" Foster called after her.

Barry was more than slightly annoyed. "Paul, behave yourself," she muttered.

The door to V.I.P. suite D opened at their approach and Barry steered Foster through the doorway.

"I am behaving quite well, thank you," Foster announced seriously as the door closed behind them. Tolliver, the guard, shook his head in mild amusement as he settled into his watch position beside the door.

The guard would not have been amused if he had been able to see through the closed door behind him. Upon entering the suite's sitting room, Foster straightened up, shrugging off Barry's help. The vacuous expression had vanished, to be replaced by cold sober calculation.

"I didn't think you could get that drunk that quick," Barry observed, taking a chair by the desk.

"It was a trick, I'll tell you," Foster admitted, setting the goblet on the work desk. "Alec would love that stuff, whatever it is. It has the kick of a mule."

"Doctor McCoy called it Romulan Ale. According to Ensign Murchison, it's not exactly what we'd call a legally imported liquor," Spielberg told him. "Apparently, the Romulans aren't exactly allies of this Federation Kirk says they're from."

Foster gave Spielberg a momentary look of appraisal, then grabbed the chair from the communications station. He brought it over to the desk beside Barry. He sat, turning to face Spielberg, who had taken a seat at the small table on the opposite wall.

"What now, Colonel?" Spielberg asked.

"We've got to find a way out of here, where-ever here is," Foster replied, thinking aloud. "Among other things, we have a duty to report what we've seen."

"But Paul, we don't know how to get out of here. We don't even know how we got here in the first place," Barry reminded him. "We don't even really know where here is."

Foster sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest as he cast his mind back to the abortive module flight. "I remember the module was starting to overheat. I was trying to ease upon the controls. I seem to remember some sort of a weird whining noise and feeling dizzy. That's when I must have blacked out."

"That's about what I remember, sir," Spielberg confirmed. "But, that doesn't help us much."

"No, it doesn't," Foster agreed grimly. "But, we've got to do something. You heard Kirk, he's not going to let us go. And I'm not so sure I really want to live the rest of my life as somebody's historical artifact in the Twenty-third century, do you?"

"Now that you put it that way, no sir."

"What we need is more information," Foster said. "And maybe, somebody to show us a way out."

"What about Commander Straker, sir?"

"What about him?" Foster asked. His voice went flat, without inflection.

"We have to get him out, too, don't we?"

"Those weren't his instructions."

Spielberg was appalled by Foster's apparent callousness. "Colonel, you can't be serious."

"Lieutenant, Commander Straker gave those instructions, knowing full well we would at least try to make a break for it," Foster informed the younger man. Spielberg still looked horrified.

"I don't like it either, Charlie," Foster finally admitted, steel blue eyes softening a little. "But, those were his orders."

"Paul, what are the odds we'll be able to come back for him?" Barry asked.

Foster shrugged, uncertain as to what to say. He knew that Barry and Straker had been friends for a long time, since the early days of SHADO.

"What were the odds we'd get the two of you out of Sky-diver when it went down on that ledge three years ago?" Foster finally asked. It was a rhetorical question.

Barry, Foster and Straker had been aboard one of SHADO's undersea hunter-sub jet-launchers, when it was attacked by a Ufo. The sub went down on a ledge and one crewman was killed. Despite his own dislike of submarines, Straker had insisted that the crew get out first.

Later they discovered that Barry had gotten trapped inside one of the escape tubes wedged against the sand of the ledge. Disregarding the risk to himself, Straker managed to get her out of the escape tube and back into the sub. Then, the electrical system failed totally. They were both trapped in a wrecked submarine with increasingly toxic air, and no way for a rescue party to get to them.

Finally, the rescue team made the decision to plant shaped explosive charges on the ledge and to blast the damaged sub loose from the rock. It was hoped that would free the torpedo tubes so rescue divers could get inside.

The odds were appallingly. The damaged sub might have split apart, killing the two of them instantly. But, it was the only chance they had.

They won, that time.

"We'll do everything we can, Nina," Foster promised.

* * *

The lights were dark in Sick-bay, except for a work light at the nurse's station, and the medical monitor lights above Straker's bed. Quietly, McCoy entered the ward and went over to the nurse's station.

"How's he been?" McCoy asked softly.

"He fell asleep a little while ago," Chee told him, nodding in the general direction of her sleeping patient, cloaked in the darkness. "I got him to eat a little. We looked his family up in the computer records."

"Yeah. His little boy died about three years ago," McCoy said. The Vulcans had a saying: 'I grieve with thee'. It was hard for McCoy to imagine losing a child, even though he had friends who had, including Kirk. His own daughter was grown and married and had three school age children.

"I told him the captain had lost his son, too," Chee said. "I think it helped a little, knowing it happens even in our time. We're not all that different, you know. I saved the data on a card for him."

McCoy nodded and went over to Straker's bed to check on his patient. Straker's vital signs seemed stable. McCoy looked up as the corridor door opened.

Lieutenant Kevlin walked in, clutching a large, ornate book against his chest. The young officer looked over at Straker. His worried expression was detectable even in the dim light.

"Lieutenant Kevlin, what brings you here?" McCoy asked, curious.

Kevlin kept his eyes on the pale sleeping form in the sick-bay bed. "I thought I might talk to Commander Straker about something."

"It's a little late at night for that. Why don't you try tomorrow, when he's awake?" McCoy suggested.

Kevlin's face fell. "Yes, sir. I'll come back in the morning, before I go on shift," he agreed softly, turning to leave the ward. Suddenly, he looked back at McCoy. "Sir, he will be all right, won't he?"

"Oh, sure," the Enterprise medical officer assured him. "I may have to operate, but he'll be all right." The dim light glinted off the filigree of the book cover, catching McCoy's eye. "What've you got there, Lieutenant?"

"The Book of Rokan," Kevlin replied, startled by the question. "My people's holy book. I wanted Commander Straker to see it."

"I thought outsiders were forbidden to see the Book of Rokan," McCoy said, keeping his voice low. Straker stirred in his sleep and McCoy beckoned Kevlin to come with him, away

from the bed.

"They are," Kevlin agreed, following McCoy to the nurse's station. "But, Commander Straker of SHADO isn't an outsider. He's..." Kevlin paused, at a loss at how to explain. "Well, he's part of it. That's what I wanted to speak with him about."

"Well, you can talk to him in the morning," McCoy told him. The physician spoke quietly to Chee, "I'm going to bed. Call me if there's any change in his condition."

"Yes, Doctor," the Amerind nurse acknowledged as McCoy gestured Kevlin to accompany him out of the sick-bay ward.

* * *

Tolliver started when the door to V.I.P. suite D opened and Paul Foster stepped out into the corridor. The guard noted briefly that Foster had changed his clothes and now wore a white knit roll-neck shirt and black slacks. The SHADO officer staggered a bit as he stepped closer to Tolliver. The smell of the ale was still strong about him.

"I wanted to apologize to Miss Sterreka for my behavior earlier," Foster enunciated carefully.

"Sir, maybe you'd better just sleep this one off," Tolliver suggested, taking Foster's arm to guide the dark haired man back into his room.

The door to the suite opened again, and Spielberg stepped out. The young Enterprise crew-man turned to face the SHADO officer, irritation beginning to bubble to the surface of his consciousness.

Suddenly, Foster clipped him across the back of the neck. Tolliver dropped, unconscious, into Foster's arms. The security man was totally unaware of Foster and Spielberg dragging him into Suite D, laying him on one of the beds. He didn't feel Barry tying him up with strips torn from one of the bed covers.

Barry took Tolliver's phaser and handed it to Foster. "I assume this is a weapon," she said, referring to the object.

Foster inspected the item carefully, especially noting the switches on its upper surface. "Well, it certainly looks like one," he commented. "It has an off switch and three force settings."

Foster handed the weapon to Spielberg, who looked it over before tucking it into his belt.

"Now what, sir?" the young man asked.

"Now, we find somebody to help us out of here," Foster explained reasonably.

"I don't think we're going to get to many volunteers, sir," Spielberg pointed out.

Foster looked surprised. "Who said anything about asking for volunteers?" he asked as he led the way out of the suite, into the corridor beyond.

Suite A was only three doors down. Stopping at the door, Spielberg and Barry flattened themselves against the walls on either side as Foster rapped his knuckles against the beige enameled door.

"Miss Sterreka, I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier. Can we talk?" Foster called.

The door opened and Foster saw Sterreka standing in the doorway. She was dressed in a filmy nightdress that, in other circumstances, might have evoked intense interest on the part of the SHADO officer.

"Mister Foster, I don't believe we have anything to talk about," Sterreka informed him.

Before she could finish speaking, Foster had grabbed her arm, pulling her into the corridor. The door to her suite closed behind her as Foster twirled her around, holding one of

her arms behind her back and placing his free arm across her throat.

Spielberg stepped forward, pointing the phaser at her.

"We're leaving," Foster informed her softly. "And you're going to help us." Sterreka began struggling in his arms and Foster tightened his grip.

"You can't believe you can get away with this!" Sterreka managed to choke out despite the pressure on her throat.

"Watch us," Foster spat out as he began to move down the corridor, towards the turbo-lift, dragging her with him. He motioned with his head for Spielberg and Barry to follow them.

Sterreka still struggled in Foster's arms. "You're hurting my arm!"

"Keep that up and I'll break it," Foster promised grimly, maintaining his hold on her.

Sterreka was appalled by his attitude. "You're a barbarian!"

"Of course I'm a barbarian," Foster responded angrily. "This is the Twentieth Century and we're in the middle of an interplanetary war! What do you expect?"

Suddenly, Sterreka stopped struggling, letting Foster pull her along.

As they approached the turbo-lift, the doors suddenly opened. Lieutenant Kevlin, holding his book protectively to his chest, stepped out of the turbo-lift, into the corridor, followed by the Gamma shift security man sent to relieve Tolliver.

Spielberg opened fire on Kevlin, who dropped to the floor in a stunned heap. The guard leapt back into the turbo-lift, out of Spielberg's line of fire.

"Doors Emergency Close!" he shouted. The turbo-lift doors snapped shut as Spielberg managed to get off a single shot into the car.

The security man hit a button by the intercom grill. "Security Emergency, deck four, turbo-shaft three."

Security Chief Chekov's voice came over the intercom speaker. "Chekov here, what is the emergency?"

"Sir, this is Hanson. Someone just opened fire on Lieutenant Kevlin and me, on level four, near the V.I.P. Suites. Kevlin is down. I believe they have a hostage, sir," Hanson reported, catching his breath.

On the bridge, Chekov was seated in the command chair. "Understood," he responded, then pressed a series of buttons on the command console. "Security, emergency containment D-deck. We have a possible hostage situation, take all necessary precautions," he ordered, his Russian accent barely discernible.

He hit another series of buttons on the console. "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Kirk responded, traces of sleep in his voice: "Kirk here."

"Captain, we have a security emergency on D-deck, near the V.I.P. suites. I've ordered emergency containment," the Russian officer reported.

Kirk sat up in his bed, suddenly fully awake. He spoke to the intercom by his bed. "Very good, Mister Chekov, carry on. I'll be on the Bridge in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir, Bridge out."

"Blast them!" Kirk muttered to himself as he turned off the intercom. He crawled out of his warm bed and started to dress.

* * *

A shrill alarm rang through the level-4 corridor. Foster still held onto Sterreka, who now seemed like a dead weight in his arms.

"That'll be a security alarm," Barry reasoned. Like the well-trained operative she was, her

voice was calm. Only her eyes indicated how worried she was.

"Is there another way off this floor?" Foster demanded of Sterreka.

"I don't know. I'm not a Star Fleet officer," the Danaen woman told him sullenly.

"Damn!"

"Now what, sir?" Spielberg asked.

Foster's expression turned calculating as he looked down at Sterreka. "We have a hostage, maybe we can negotiate something."

"Star Fleet does not negotiate with hostage-takers!" Sterreka announced.

"Good policy," Foster agreed. SHADO had a similar policy of non-negotiation with hostage-takers. "But you're not a Star Fleet officer, are you?" he pointed out, knowing that a conscientious military commander would not willingly put a civilian at risk, no matter what policy dictated. He'd seen Straker struggle with the problem more than once.

Foster felt certain that Kirk would, in fact, negotiate. What happened after that was anybody's guess.

* * *

An angry and tired James Kirk entered the night darkened bridge of his ship.

"What's going on, Mister Chekov?" Kirk asked, stepping down to the command deck to stand beside the command chair. Chekov started to get out of the chair, but Kirk waved him to sit back down.

"Ensign Hanson was going to level-4 to relieve Tolliver," Chekov reported, settling back in the command chair. "When he arrived, someone opened fire on him and Lieutenant Kevlin. Kevlin is reported to be down and the perpetrators may have at least one hostage. I have ordered a security containment of the area. They're locked in the corridor. A security team has taken position inside the one of the turbo-lift cars and is awaiting instructions, sir."

"Very good, Mister Chekov. With security containment in effect, we should be able to flood just the corridor with Melanex gas, right?" Kirk asked, thinking aloud.

"Yes, sir," Chekov confirmed. "The alternative is to try to rush them."

"Which would put the hostages at risk." A hostage situation was one thing every self-respecting officer with diplomatic experience dreaded. Star Fleet policy was clear, but there was a civilian at risk on that deck. "We know they're armed and if they've taken hostages, they're desperate, too."

Kirk paused a moment, considering the options Chekov had pointed out. "Flood the corridor, Mister Chekov. Then lock them in the brig."

"Yes, sir," Chekov acknowledged, pressing a button on the command console. "Security, prepare to flood level-4 corridor with security gas."

* * *

Foster headed for one of the intercoms set into the corridor wall, dragging Sterreka with him. Abruptly, the woman shifted her weight, throwing the SHADO officer off-balance. She broke away from him, striking him across the face before taking off down the hallway. Startled, Foster started after her, Barry and Spielberg at his heels.

A cloudiness appeared in the air. The air seemed to grow thick around them as they collapsed to the floor, unconsciousness over-taking them.

After a few seconds, the turbo-lift doors opened and an armed team of armored security personnel, wearing gas masks, entered the corridor.

* * *

"Sir, we have them," Suzuki, the security team leader announced into her communicator.

"Miss Sterreka appears unharmed. We are securing and moving Foster, Barry and Spielberg to the security holding area. Lieutenant Kevlin was stunned and needs medical attention, Ensign Korchek is taking him to sick-bay."

"Very good, Lieutenant," Kirk acknowledged, turning off the intercom on the command chair. He turned to head back to the turbo-lift.

"What now, sir?" Chekov asked.

Kirk shrugged and grinned back at the younger man. "I'm going back to bed. Please make sure Colonel Foster doesn't escape and take over the ship."

"Yes, sir," Chekov murmured, settling back into the command chair as Kirk entered the turbo-lift. The doors closed behind him.

Chapter 12

Thorvess of Andor was the physician on duty when security brought both Kevlin and Sterreka into sickbay. Sterreka was conscious and complaining bitterly over her treatment by both Foster and Enterprise security. Kevlin was still unconscious. After a quick check, Thorvess released Sterreka to return to her assigned quarters. Kevlin was admitted for observation, book still clutched in his arms.

Thorvess was naturally surprised when he looked up a few minutes later, after registering Kevlin's admission into the computer system, to discover that Sterreka had not yet left.

He found her standing next to Straker's bed, staring down at the man. Thorvess was not good at interpreting human facial expressions. The grimace on her face meant little to him. But he did note that she started when he moved to stand next to her and her skin temperature was higher than normal, indicating some type of arousal.

"Is there a problem?" the Andorian asked.

"I was curious," Sterreka said. "as to Straker's condition."

Thorvess inspected the readings on the board above the bed. "I would describe his condition as good."

"He's in no danger?" she insisted.

"No, Doctor McCoy's treatment appears to be successful."

"I thought Mellantyn aortic stenosis required surgery?"

"Doctor McCoy is an excellent surgeon. I am told it is a rare, but not especially difficult, procedure."

"I see," she commented as she moved to the end of Kevlin's bed. "I wasn't aware there were any Rokanni aboard the Enterprise."

"Mister Kevlin came aboard just before we embarked on this mission. Our transporter officer was severely injured when we were attacked by the L'Jharok'ha," Thorvess explained, following her. "How do you know he is Rokanni?"

"I recognize the book in his hands," she stated. "If he were at home, that indiscretion would cost him dearly. The Rokanni take their history, and their privacy, very seriously."

"Then, perhaps it is fortunate for him he is aboard the Enterprise," Thorvess commented softly.

"Perhaps," Sterreka said. She turned on her heel and walked away.

* * *

A single light showed through the upstairs window to the nursery. Kate Komack-Straker rocked back and forth in the oak rocking chair, holding her small son. He had woken up, screaming, but he hadn't wanted to nurse. He fussed himself back to sleep.

She looked down at him. He was fair haired, like his father. His eyes hadn't changed color yet, but they would, no doubt, be blue-gray.

She suddenly felt afraid. What if Ed didn't come home? Just because she could feel him in the back of her mind didn't mean he would be coming back to her. She knew, without knowing how she knew, that Ed was safe, for the moment. She would know if he died, or was hurt. That was both the blessing and the curse of her family, and Ed's as well. Another time and place, they would both be called *witch*.

Alexander stirred in his sleep.

The tears started to come and she couldn't stop them. She loved him so much, loved him enough not to stand in his way when it came to his work, even before SHADO. She had loved

him from the first day they had met, at her uncle's office at Paterson Air Force Base. He hadn't noticed her then, not until his first marriage failed and he needed a comfort Alec Freeman couldn't give him.

"Oh, dear God," she breathed. "Bring him back."

* * *

Alec Freeman found he couldn't sleep. Finally, after more than an hour of tossing and turning, he got up and turned on his television. Maybe he could bore himself to sleep. A Harlington-Straker film was on, the first one the studio had finished after Straker had taken it over for SHADO's cover. Luckily, it was nearly over. The film was awful.

The credits rolled past. Straker's name appeared at the executive producer. Komack's name was right below Straker's. Freeman found his thoughts wandering. Could Kate possibly be right, could Ed and the others still be alive, lost in space somewhere?

He fervently hoped they would be found. He wasn't sure how he would be able to console Ed Straker's widow.

* * *

The next morning, McCoy walked into sick-bay to discover Lieutenant Kevlin in one of the intensive care beds. Nurse Morita merely smiled and shrugged at McCoy's curious look at her and handed him a computer padd. McCoy glanced at it, noted the information and handed it back to her.

Looking around the ward once more, he observed the two breakfast trays, one virtually untouched. McCoy wondered briefly if Straker's lack of appetite was his normal reaction to stress, or a result of the exhaustion caused by his disease. That was something he would have to investigate. Starving would do Straker no good at all.

McCoy stepped closer to Kevlin, who was still clutching his book to his chest as though were the most valuable artifact in his universe. The physician inferred from Kevlin's belligerent glare that the book just might be that valuable to the young man.

"Kevlin, couldn't you wait till morning, like I told you?" McCoy asked lightly. The medical notes on the young man had indicated Kevlin's condition was hardly serious enough to warrant his presence in sick-bay.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't have much choice," Kevlin explained sheepishly, relaxing a little. "I took a phaser stun last night, then security flooded the corridor with sleep gas. Doctor Thorvess thought a night in sick-bay was in order."

McCoy nodded in understanding. The Andorian physician tended to err on the side of conservatism when it came to medical problems in humans. He had volunteered for duty on the Enterprise just so he could gain some experience treating 'juicy aliens', like humans, before returning home to his diplomatic medical practice on Andor.

"Who stunned you?" McCoy wondered aloud.

Straker answered for him. "My people tried to escape last night. I guess things got a little out of hand and now they're in the brig." Straker's voice was soft and breathy.

"Why aren't I surprised?" McCoy replied with a bemused shake of his head as he stepped over to where Straker lay. He began to scan the SHADO officer, frowning at the readings he was getting.

Straker's vital readings were low, too low. He was pale, his expression faintly worried. McCoy took Straker's wrist, checking for the radial pulse and skin temperature. Straker's hand was like ice, his pulse nearly non-existent.

McCoy shook his head and sighed. The drugs to dissolve the calcium build-up in Straker's

aortic valve weren't working nearly as well as he had hoped. In fact, Straker's heart problem had worsened considerably over night. McCoy reminded himself to speak with the Gamma shift nurse about when Straker's condition had started to deteriorate. He should have been called.

"How're you feeling?" McCoy asked.

"Lousy," Straker replied. "Bad news, isn't it?"

"Not all of it," McCoy responded, making an attempt to accentuate the positive. "The hyper-immune syndrome seems to be under control and shouldn't bother you anymore, so long as you stay away from the antibiotics you're allergic to. But your heart function hasn't improved."

He turned to his alpha shift nurse. "Morita, go get the O.R. ready."

"Yes, doctor," Morita acknowledged. She left the intensive care ward via the normally locked corridor to the surgical suite.

"Normally, with the type of heart condition you have, even as serious as it is, I'd use a remote laser probe to burn the scarring away. That's practically an out-patient procedure."

"However?"

"However, with the Mellantyn syndrome, open heart surgery is still recommended in order to dissolve the calcium deposits inside the tissues," McCoy explained. "The laser probe just isn't versatile enough for that."

Straker gave him a crooked grin. He wasn't surprised by the news. "I was afraid you were going to say something like that. When?"

"As soon as possible."

"And if I don't have the surgery?"

McCoy simply looked at him, expression grim. Straker sighed, dropping his head back on the pillow.

"Well, I'll say this, if this is an hallucination, it's very convincing," Straker commented after a moment.

"Hmm?"

"I've decided that this is either some sort of elaborate hallucination, created by the aliens, or, you're telling the truth, or at least, part of it," Straker explained.

"At least you haven't decided you're demented," McCoy replied, smiling a little at the sudden change of subject.

"No, I'm reasonably certain I'm not demented," Straker told him. "Of course, how can I really be sure when I'm in the middle of it?"

"I know the feeling," McCoy replied. He did know the feeling. He had vague horrifying memories of the delusions created when he accidentally over-dosed on cordrazine, over twenty years before. He could still remember the utter conviction he felt at the time that his friends were murdering fiends, the overwhelming fear the drug had created.

Straker looked up at him, a little confused by McCoy's sudden distantly worried expression. He lay back, exhausted, realizing that for the first time since he'd been brought aboard, he was actually frightened.

"Okay, when do we start?" Straker asked, overriding his fear with a control that would have impressed a Vulcan.

Morita appeared in the doorway to the O.R. access corridor. "We're ready, Doctor."

"Now seems a good time," McCoy answered Straker's question.

* * *

Foster, Barry and Spielberg sat on the narrow bed-bench inside one of the detention cells in the security area. A shimmering energy screen blocked the arched opening to the corridor, and an armed security officer stood guard beside the detention screen control panel.

The three SHADO people looked up at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Captain Kirk stopped in front of the security barrier and peered in at them. Their expressions were disheartened and Foster's cheek was showing a bruise where Sterreka had struck him.

"Colonel Foster," Kirk began, letting his voice go cold. "That was a very stupid stunt you tried last night."

Foster was not convinced. He glared out at Kirk without speaking.

"I do understand it was your duty to try, however," Kirk continued. "And I would undoubtedly do the same if our positions were reversed. But, you just don't seem to understand what's happened here. You all died at twelve-thirty-seven yesterday afternoon. Your lunar transport module burned up on re-entry due to pilot error. Your ship was breaking up as we brought you aboard."

"And if we are dead," Barry responded quietly, "And if you're really from the future, you can't very well allow us to wander around Earth, can you?"

"I am sorry," Kirk told them sincerely. "I'm also afraid we're going to have to keep you here until we return home."

"Home to the Twenty-third Century," Foster spat bitterly. "Where we will be historical artifacts for somebody's museum?"

"It won't be like that, I assure you," Kirk replied. "You're all intelligent and adaptable, otherwise, you wouldn't be with SHADO. You'll be surprised at how well those attributes, and your other skills, will fit in," Kirk smiled, trying to convince them of his earnestness. "In fact, the Federation's foremost authority on Cetacean biology is a refugee from just about this time period."

They didn't believe him and he couldn't blame them. They were trapped, and traps demanded escape. Unfortunately, that was the one thing Kirk couldn't afford for them to do.

* * *

"Has Major Graham come through with that analysis I asked for about the possibility of the aliens over-riding our radar scans come through yet?" Freeman asked.

"Yes, sir, it just came through," Robertson reported. "I put it on the commander's desk."

"Thanks," Freeman acknowledged, turning to head for the commander's office.

"Sir?" Ford called quietly. Freeman stopped and looked back at the younger man. "I was wondering, how's Colonel Komack taking it?"

Freeman shrugged, a bemused expression on his leathery face. "She insists Ed isn't dead. In fact, when I stopped by last night, she said she was pretty sure he'd be home for Christmas dinner and wanted to be sure I'd be there."

"It sounds a little like denial, sir, if you don't mind my saying so," Ford said.

"I don't know, Keith," Freeman admitted. "But, its just possible she's right."

* * *

McCoy took a moment to explain the upcoming procedure to his patient. First, a fairly strong sedative would be administered, to take the edge off the natural anxiety the promise of surgery engendered in even knowledgeable patients. McCoy didn't bother to say there was nothing to worry about. He knew Straker knew better.

Following the sedative taking effect would come the transfer from the ward to the operating room through the sterile corridor. Then, the electro-sleep-anesthesia would send

minuscule power trickles into the sleep centers of the brain, bringing unconsciousness and paralysis and blocking any possible pain before it registered in the brain.

This would be followed by the setting up of a cryogen field, holding the body in a force field that replicated the effects of dropping the body's temperature to just above freezing, where the body's oxygen demand dropped to nearly zero.

Straker had been prepped for the surgery with the speed found in a surgical unit whose members were a well-tuned team.

The cryogen field glowed faintly blue around Straker's hair as McCoy began the operation, working through the sterile field assembly across the SHADO commander's chest. Quickly, McCoy opened the chest, spreading the ribs apart to give access to the unbeating heart underneath. With a sureness that belied the rarity of this type of surgery, McCoy laid open the left ventricle to gain access to the valve leading to the aorta.

"There it is," McCoy murmured to Morita and Thorvess. Thorvess had volunteered to assist, realizing he wasn't likely to ever see another operation of this type.

"The scarring doesn't look as bad as the scanners indicated," McCoy pointed out. "I don't think we'll need a prosthetic valve. The rest of his heart seems to be in good shape for a man his age, despite the enlargement. The coronary arteries are clear. You know, cardio-vascular disease was one of the primary killers in this era."

McCoy looked over at Morita. "Get me the triple-aught laser scalpel and the ionic micro-disruptor."

Chapter 13

Kevlin was sitting up in bed, under the watchful eye of Nurse Tsoikov, when Spock entered the ward.

Spock nodded a greeting to the white uniformed nurse sitting at the nurse's station. Then he walked over to where Kevlin sat. The transporter officer had his large ornately-bound book on his lap. He appeared very worried, and Spock noted the lieutenant's eyes kept glancing over at the empty bed that had been assigned to Commander Straker.

"Lieutenant Kevlin, I had a message that you wanted to speak with me?" Spock asked softly, hands folded behind his back as he observed the young man curiously.

"Yes, sir, I did, I mean, I do need to speak with you," Kevlin confirmed nervously. "About Commander Straker."

Spock waited for Kevlin to continue. After a moment, the young officer did so. "Sir, this is the Book of Rokan." He indicated the heavy book in his hands. "This is the history of the Rokanni people, my people. We are forbidden to show this to outsiders. But, I have to, sir."

He paused as he opened the book to a pre-marked page. "Sir, when I was growing up, I thought this was like the story of Moses, or Noah, a great tale, but impossible to substantiate," Kevlin explained, holding the open book out to Spock.

Spock took it. On the open page was a photograph of Straker, age forty-five or so, wearing the uniform of a United States Air Force general.

"Mister Spock, that is Commander Straker of SHADO," Kevlin said, voice cracking with worry and nervousness. "According to the Book of Rokan, SHADO defended the planet Earth against an invasion of the Rokanni. Our planet was dying, and certain portions of the Rokan government saw no way out except to conquer the Home World.

"According to legend, Straker was leader of SHADO, and at the point of his total victory over the Rokanni, he permitted the survivors to emigrate peaceably to Earth. He didn't have to, but he saved my people from certain extinction," Kevlin said.

Spock accepted Kevlin's interpretation of the data in the book. "When is Commander Straker supposed to have done this?" the Vulcan asked.

"This evening, sir. Christmas Eve."

"I see," Spock commented. "And, where is Commander Straker now?"

Kevlin's expression went bleak. "Doctor McCoy has him in surgery, sir."

As he spoke, the sickbay lights flickered and died. After a moment, the emergency lights came on, painting the room an eerie green.

"What's going on, sir?" Kevlin asked. He was unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

"It would appear we have a power system failure in sickbay," Spock said, handing Kevlin back his book.

"What would cause that?" Kevlin insisted.

"I don't know," Spock was forced to admit as he keyed a command into the computer padd beside Kevlin's bed.

"That's very odd," Spock commented as diagrams scrolled down the monitor screen.

"What is, Mister Spock?"

"According to the computer, we have a main power trunk failure in sickbay," Spock replied, heading to the nurse's station to notify engineering.

* * *

"What the hell?" McCoy muttered as the main lights went out and the battery powered

emergency lights flickered on. The cryogen field flickered and disappeared.

"We're going to lose him," Morita said, checking the vital signs on the monitor before her.

"No, we're not," McCoy contradicted. "Go get the emergency intubation kit, intubate and bag him while I finish here."

She did as she was ordered. Within a minute, Thorvess reported a strong heart rhythm and the oxygen readings had improved to near normal. With a grunt of satisfaction, McCoy finished closing the surgical wounds.

* * *

The lights flickered back on sickbay, immediately followed Lieutenant Follett, one of Scott's assistants. "Is everything all right in here?"

"In here, yes," Spock replied. "However, Doctor McCoy was in surgery."

"And I don't mind telling you, it's not easy doing open heart surgery during a power failure," McCoy grouched, walking into the room. He was wiping his hands on a towel. "What the devil was going on?"

"The main power relay to sickbay burned out," Follett answered. "So did the secondary. We haven't figured out why, yet."

"A damned annoying time for it to decide to do that," McCoy complained. "I could have lost my patient."

"How is Commander Straker?" Spock asked. The rest of the surgical team had arrived, accompanying the gurney with Straker's body.

"He'll be fine. The lights went out just as we were finishing up. Lucky for him, the damage wasn't as bad as expected and the operation went faster than predicted," McCoy explained.

Spock noticed the yellow data card with Straker's name on it on top of the computer screen next to Straker's bed. Curiously, Spock picked it up and looked at it.

"I understand that Nurse Chee was helping him last night, to look up his family in our computers," Kevlin explained.

"The commander's family?" Spock asked. "We have been unable to locate anything on his family in our records."

Kevlin shrugged. "Nurse Chee and the commander must have found something, otherwise, why would they have saved it?"

"Interesting," Spock murmured mostly to himself as he headed for McCoy's office, with Straker's data card. McCoy followed the Vulcan in.

"I know that look, Spock, what's going on?" McCoy demanded. Spock took a seat at McCoy's desk.

"I'm not certain, Doctor, but I find it suspicious that the power in sickbay failed just as you were finishing the surgery on our guest." Spock placed the data card into the reader. After a time, a look of muted alarm crossed the Vulcan's normally calm face, as he looked at one particular photograph on the computer screen in front of him.

"What's wrong, Spock," McCoy demanded. Spock turned the screen so McCoy could look at it. McCoy swore softly.

On the screen was a picture of a jovial looking group of humans, some in white coveralls and a few in military uniforms. That, in itself, was hardly alarming. What was disturbing, however, was the two faces that should not have been there, but were. Two faces that Spock and McCoy both recognized.

Spock reached over and pushed a button on the intercom grill on McCoy's desk. "Spock

to bridge."

"Bridge, Kirk here."

"Captain, we must delay our return trip through time."

Kirk was seated in his commander chair. Uhura, Sulu and Mallory were all at their stations, preparing for the maneuver that would take them all back to their own time.

"Spock, we're ready to begin in about five minutes," Kirk reminded his first officer with a touch of surprise. "What's wrong?"

"Captain, please inform Mister Scott that there will be a delay. I will explain the reasons when you get to Doctor McCoy's office." Spock stated over the intercom.

"I'll be right there," Kirk told him. He thumbed off the switch on the command console while turning to Uhura. "Uhura, please let Scotty know we're staying here for a little while longer."

"Yes, sir," the communications officer acknowledged, turning to her station to relay the orders.

"Mister Sulu, you have the conn," Kirk instructed as he left the command chair, heading for the turbo-lift and sick-bay. As the turbo-lift doors closed behind Kirk, Sulu settled into the command chair of the Enterprise.

* * *

Spock and McCoy both looked up from the screen as Kirk walked in.

"Okay, Spock, Bones, what's wrong?" Kirk asked, noting the meditative folding of Spock's hands.

"Captain, we have a problem."

"Now what?" Kirk demanded, irritation bubbling to the surface. He was tired and Foster's stunt the night before had done little for his temper.

Spock turned computer monitor on McCoy's desk so that Kirk could see the screen. "Certain information came to my attention a little while ago," Spock explained. "I rechecked that information with our computer records."

"All right, so what's wrong?" Kirk asked.

"Commander Straker is not yet dead. We must return him, and his companions, to Earth," Spock continued.

"That's impossible, Spock," Kirk insisted with more than a touch of annoyance. "We know they couldn't have possibly survived without our intervention."

"True," Spock agreed. "Nevertheless, it would appear that they must have. Our records list no progeny, for any of our 'guests'. That search was based on the names given in their identification cards."

"However, last night, Nurse Chee was able to locate Commander Straker's two surviving children, Esther Krystin and Alexander Paul, Straker," Spock related. "When I checked the records as to the parents of those children, I found their father listed as Johann Edward Straker. That individual will head the Mars development project in Nineteen-eighty-seven. That project will develop the DSY-100 class interplanetary colonization ships."

"Are you sure it's the same man?" Kirk asked, knowing what the answer had to be.

"Yes, Jim," the Vulcan confirmed. He pointed out the picture on the computer screen. "This is a photograph of the ground control crew for the first Martian colonization mission, clearly identifying one General Johann E. Straker, United States Air Force. And, although he is not identified by name, I would say this other gentleman was Paul Foster."

Kirk peered closely at the photograph on the screen. There was little doubt that the man

in the blue general's uniform was Straker. There was also little doubt that the smiling, dark haired man standing next to him was Paul Foster, only a few years older than he was now.

"Spock, as usual, you're absolutely correct. We do have a problem," Kirk agreed.

"There are a further complications, however," Spock informed them, a touch of concern in his face. "Someone has been tampering with our records of this period, erasing important cross-references concerning Commander Straker and his companions."

"Who would do that?" Kirk wondered aloud. "Who would want to?"

"Unknown, Captain," Spock replied. "However, I believe it is a safe assumption that it is the same person, or persons, who sabotaged the power relay to sickbay during this morning's surgery."

"You're sure it was sabotage?" Kirk asked.

"I asked Mister Scott to check the damage personally," Spock stated. "He found traces of an incendiary device with a timing mechanism. As near as can be determined, the device was programmed to create a power failure forty-five minutes into the surgical procedure. Fortunately for Commander Straker, Doctor McCoy works much more quickly than most surgeons."

"Any evidence as to who did it?"

"Aside from the SHADO people, we only have two other new people on board," Spock pointed out. "Mister Kevlin was in sickbay at the time. Miss Sterreka's whereabouts have not yet been determined."

"I know Sterreka wasn't happy about having him onboard, but do you think she's capable of murder?" Kirk asked.

"Jim, anybody is capable of murder if the motive is strong enough," McCoy said.

"Captain, there is something else. We must return them to their own time and place, however, we cannot simply beam them down to Earth in the spot they might have crashed, had the module not burned up."

"Why not?" McCoy asked. "Aside from them knowing too much about us."

"Because, this evening, according to the Rokanni holy book, the Rokanni people, from what we term the Shelmat system, were saved from certain extinction, by one Commander Straker of SHADO. While demanding their unconditional surrender to Earth, he also permitted them to emigrate back to Earth, where, as it happens, they still live," Spock explained.

"Commander Straker was on Earth's Moon at the time of the Rokanni surrender."

Kirk shook his head, a rueful smile on his face. "Spock, you have an unerring capacity for complicating things that should be simple." He turned to McCoy. "By the way, how is your patient?"

McCoy grinned and leaned against his desk. "As well as can be expected, considering he just came out of open-heart surgery during a power failure. In a couple weeks we won't be any sign there was ever anything wrong with him, besides his shoulder. I won't be able to do anything about that." McCoy frowned at a sudden thought. "Spock, you said Nurse Chee was helping Straker last night on the computer?"

"Yes, Doctor," Spock stated. "The computer access record indicates the commander was accessing materials through our records system, using her access codes."

"That's funny," McCoy murmured.

"What's funny about it, Bones?" Kirk asked.

"Chee's almost illiterate on the computer. She can barely manage the record-keeping her job requires," McCoy told him.

"If she's that bad, why did you specifically request she transfer to the Enterprise last

year?" Kirk asked.

"Because she's the best hands-on nurse I've seen in ages," McCoy explained. "Besides, she's getting better with the damn machines."

"Obviously, since she and Straker were able to locate information even Spock hadn't been able to," Kirk muttered.

"Captain, I think it more likely they were able to locate the information simply because Commander Straker knew what he was looking for," Spock told them. "Nurse Chee had the access codes necessary to get into the other records he was interested in. I have reviewed the items the commander looked at last night. They are a most interesting collection."

"Such as?" Kirk prompted.

"Such as the known and suspected Preserver planets, including Danae. He also did a review of the personnel records of certain senior members of the Enterprise crew, most particularly, Captain James T. Kirk," Spock reported. "Interestingly enough, he did not attempt to access any of the engineering files and he failed in his attempt to locate information concerning the Kobiyashi Maru scenario, although the logic behind his attempts to access the information is quite enlightening."

"He was looking me up?" Kirk wondered aloud. "I wonder why."

"Maybe to find out what sort of man Star Fleet gives a star ship to?" McCoy speculated.

"The first thing Khan did was review the technology so he could take over," Kirk mused. "Foster tried to get hold of the same information so he could escape, but Straker looked up me?"

Chapter 14

Captain's log, local Date: December 24, 1983, old calendar. Mister Spock has uncovered information that leads us to believe we must return the people we rescued from the burning lunar module, to Earth's Moon. How this is to be accomplished without doing damage to Earth history, we don't yet know.

Straker regained consciousness in his bed in the sick-bay ward. He was mildly surprised to discover he wasn't nauseous and that his chest hurt a lot less than he'd expected it to.

He watched silently as Nurse Morita checked the readings on the scanner and on the panel above the bed. He noted that Lieutenant Kevlin was no longer there and assumed the young Enterprise officer had been released from sick-bay.

McCoy walked in from the examination room, accompanied by Doctor Thorvess. They stepped closer to Straker, who watched the blue skinned alien with open curiosity. McCoy had a wide grin on his face. "How're you feeling now?"

"Pretty good, considering," Straker admitted, rubbing the area of his breastbone. "My chest hurts a little."

"That should pass in a couple of days, after the bones and the muscles finish mending," Thorvess explained, soft voice sibilant.

Morita finished her scans and smiled over at McCoy. "All readings are nearly normal, Doctor."

"Excellent," McCoy said, grinning broadly and bouncing on the balls of his feet. "And we may have some more good news for you. The captain and Mister Spock are trying to figure out a way to get you back home."

"I thought we were supposed to be dead," Straker reminded the physician.

"That's true," McCoy admitted, refusing to be put off. "But, apparently, the father of your two children, Johann Edward Straker, is supposed to save the Rokanni people from extinction and head an important space project in the near future."

"Well, I obviously can't do those things if I'm dead, can I?" Straker commented with a rueful smile. "The Rokanni people wouldn't happen to come from Shelmat, would they?" he asked, more thoughtfully.

"That's my understanding," McCoy replied. Thorvess excused himself to return to his quarters to rest.

Straker watched after the tall alien as he exited the room. "Doctor McCoy, my people, Earth, Nineteen eighty-three, is at war with the Rokanni, or Shelmats, or whatever you want to call them," Straker said seriously. "We've been at war for over fourteen years. What possible reason do I have for wanting to save them?"

"What reason did we have for saving you?" McCoy asked.

"I don't know, Doctor," Straker admitted calmly. "Considering the circumstances, it wasn't a logical decision."

"Hell, now you sound like Spock," McCoy retorted in annoyance.

"Doctor McCoy, you're a physician, dedicated to saving lives," Straker pointed out. "Even SHADO's physicians have tried to save the lives of the few aliens we've captured alive. They weren't successful, but they did try. However, I am a soldier. My job is, and has been, to neutralize the threat the aliens pose to Earth. Bluntly stated, my job is to kill them. So, the question remains, what possible reason do I have for saving what remains of them?"

"Because they're dying."

"So?"

"Because they're human beings, just like you, who only want a chance to live," McCoy argued.

"Doctor, you've told me I'm not entirely human," Straker reminded him. There was grim amusement in his expression.

McCoy let his annoyance show. He hated it when patients argued with him, even though it was a sign they were getting better. "The Mellantyn, like the Rokanni, like a dozen other races in the galaxy, are all perfectly human, all descended from the same Earth stock, all planted from the same seed," McCoy insisted.

"Some of that seed came up as noxious weeds, Doctor. Not a promising harvest for your Planters, is it?"

"No, it isn't," McCoy forced himself to admit. "The human race has a lot of traits, a lot of history, we're none too proud of. Do you really want to be responsible for another page in Earth's history showing how wretched humans can be, instead of how noble we can be?"

Behind them, Spock entered the ward, carrying a bundle of clothes. Quietly he approached McCoy and Straker, listening to their discussion.

"Doctor, I am responsible for the defense of Earth against those 'aliens', no matter what they're called," Straker told McCoy angrily. "And frankly I don't care if they're dying. It'll make my job that much easier. And, if I choose to believe they are dying, if I choose to offer the olive branch to them, it will be on my terms, not yours. Future history be damned."

"Commander, the decision is, of course, yours to make," Spock said, stopping at the end of the sick-bay bed. Straker started at the sound of the Vulcan's voice, and a little of his anger seemed to dissipate.

"I sound like a barbarian, don't I?" Straker commented. "I'm able to accept assistance from people with green blood and blue skin and antennae, but I can't see my way to talking peace with humans who happen to come from another planet."

"Our history, apparently, includes the Rokan people accepting your terms for their surrender," Spock informed him. "However, we cannot force you to make the decision to contact them. If you do not, they will die. I do not know what ramifications that might hold for future history."

"And if I say I will not contact them, what then?" Straker asked. "Will you try to coerce me into making the decision you want me to make?"

Spock shook his head. "I would not, Commander, even if I could."

"I see," Straker commented. Spock did not try to explain that his own statement was quite literally true. His research indicated the Mellantyn had mental and psionic capabilities that compared favorably with Vulcans. Not only would it be extremely distasteful for Spock to even try to force Straker to alter his position, such an attempt would be doomed to failure, leaving both of them damaged, perhaps irreparably.

"Commander Straker, I came to ask your assistance in planning how best to return you to your Moonbase without undue complications for you or your companions," Spock said. "You have been missing for twenty-four hours."

"Why return us to Moonbase?" Straker asked "Why not Earth? It'd be easier."

"The information we have indicates you were at SHADO's Moonbase, December twenty-fourth, Nineteen-eighty-three," Spock explained quite reasonably.

"So that's where we're going to end up, whether we like it or not," Straker observed, with a touch of amusement. "The lunar module was completely destroyed, correct?"

"Correct."

"If we could convince Moonbase that Paul limped the module back to the Moon, in a trajectory they have might dismissed as a meteorite, and if the module exploded right after we escaped from it..." Straker said, thinking aloud. He had accepted the problem as a challenge. "That might do the trick. Especially if you can manage some convincing special effects. But Paul's the one you need to be talking to. He'll have a better idea of the timing, trajectory requirements and fuel situation."

Spock turned to McCoy, who had been standing beside the bed, listening. "Doctor, is Commander Straker fit to be released from sick-bay?"

"Well, I'd rather he stay here for a while longer, like a week or so," McCoy admitted. "But, since he has to be someplace..." He shrugged, turning to Straker. "I want you to take it easy for the next couple days, nothing too strenuous, okay? You just had open heart surgery."

"Understood."

Spock laid the bundle on the bed. "Your clothes, Commander."

* * *

"Just can't stay out of trouble, can you guys? You're on a star ship for all of twelve hours and you land in the brig," Straker observed with bemused humor as he stood outside the detention cell holding Foster, Barry and Spielberg.

At the sound of Straker's voice, Foster glanced out of the cell at him. The younger man looked away from the detention barrier with a disgruntled snort. Then he suddenly looked back more intently at his senior officer. Barry and Spielberg simply stared through the energy barrier at Straker, in open astonishment. Straker looked perfectly healthy, if a little tired. He was wearing his street clothes, a pale blue roll-neck sweater and dark gray slacks.

"Ed, are you all right?" Barry asked.

Straker grinned. "I'm fine, Nina," he said. He turned to address Foster. "Captain Kirk has agreed to drop the charges against you, in return for certain technical assistance."

"And why should we cooperate with them?" Foster demanded, coming to stand just inside the screen.

"You do want to go home, don't you?" Straker asked calmly.

"Of course, but Kirk's been pretty insistent there's no way we can go home," Foster informed his commander angrily. "I burned up the module, remember? Pilot error. All hands killed."

Straker nodded agreement. "Nevertheless, it would appear that I did not die yesterday."

"Why didn't they figure that out earlier?" Barry asked.

"Apparently, it's because the information deals with me, specifically, and was filed under my birth name, which doesn't happen to be exactly the same as the one on my driver's license," Straker admitted with a rueful grin. "Because we were all together in the module, it's assumed we all survived together."

"That sounds reasonable enough, but why should we believe them?" Foster asked. The belligerence hadn't left his voice.

"I don't think we have a choice," Straker admitted quite calmly. "They will return me, no matter what. Their history states that I have, or will, do certain things and they want to make sure I have the opportunity."

"Commander, what are you supposed to do?" Barry wondered.

Straker did not answer her question. Instead, he gestured to the security officer standing beside the controls to the detention screen. The officer took an electronic key from his pocket,

inserted into its slot in the screen control, and pressed the security combination. The power screen disappeared.

"Captain Kirk and some of his officers are waiting for us in their briefing room," Straker informed his people. He waited for them to leave the cell. Foster stepped up close to face Straker. Foster was a little taller than the older man. Straker was forced to look up at him.

"They've gotten to you," Foster insisted angrily. "Brainwashed you or something."

"No, I don't think so," Straker replied softly, refusing to be intimidated, either by Foster's tone or his trick of standing close. With that, Straker turned to leave the detention area.

Foster stared after him a moment, then hurried to follow him. The security officer moved in to walk next to Straker. Barry and Spielberg fell in behind Foster, as a second guard fell in to follow them to the briefing room.

* * *

Kirk, Spock, Scott, and Sterreka were already seated at the briefing room table when the doors opened to admit Straker, Foster, Barry and Spielberg. The two security men took positions outside the briefing room door as the doors closed.

"Commander Straker, Colonel Foster," Captain Kirk greeted in friendly tones.

"Captain," Straker returned the greeting in equally friendly tones.

Kirk motioned for them to take seats at the table. Barry and Spielberg sat at the far end of the long table, as Straker stepped over to where Spock sat at the computer station. Straker gestured for Foster to join him.

"Paul, the only ones who know the module was destroyed on reentry are here, on this ship, and possibly, the aliens," Straker began, explaining the situation. "According to communications, SHADO has no idea what happened. They're still looking for us."

"Pity, you can't just drop us on Earth," Foster told Kirk, accepting, for the time being, that Straker had chosen to cooperate. "The module should have hit the lower atmosphere over the mid-Atlantic and we could probably have made it to Jamaica. Ditched in the ocean, swam ashore. We could claim it took twenty-four hours or so to find a phone."

"Unfortunately, the information we have indicates Commander Straker was at SHADO's Moonbase on this date," Spock reported.

Foster sighed. "That makes it a little tougher. Have you got a schematic on the Earth-Moon system?"

At a request into the computer, a tactical display of the Earth-Moon system appeared on the large view-screen on the far wall. Foster stepped over to look at it more closely.

"Can you show me Moonbase's position?" the SHADO officer asked. A blue dot appeared on the Moon schematic.

"Now, the module was coming down over the mid-Atlantic, heading due west over the equator," Foster explained. "If, instead, I overcompensated and we bounced off the atmosphere, we could have ended up in almost any west-wardly heading."

"The last time we had a module bounce off the atmosphere and head back to the Moon, it took sixteen hours for them to arrive," Straker reminded him. "But we've been missing for more than twenty-four hours."

Foster shrugged. "Well, if we were really low on fuel when we regained control, I'd try a coasting low fuel orbit, like the Apollo missions used, to get back to the Moon. The Apollo's took about four days. Taking twenty-four or more hours shouldn't be too hard with the module. We'd have enough air and water. There're food rations aboard, even."

"If we came in low and slow, it's possible we would remain in the Moon's radar shadow,"

Straker said, thinking aloud. "And, if our trajectory landed us outside Moonbase's ground alert perimeter, the computers there might not flag us either, at least not immediately."

"That is, assuming we had a lunar Module to land in," Foster reminded them, looking at Kirk.

"Getting you to the Moon's surface isn't the problem, we can handle that," Kirk told them. "It's making it look like you came off the module that's the problem."

Chief Engineer Scott added his thoughts. "If you landed hard, out of sight of your Moonbase, and then the ship exploded after you'd all gotten out, that would work, wouldn't it?"

"A close to ground explosion leaves a lot of debris," Foster pointed out.

The Scots engineer nodded in agreement. "Aye, but the sensor readings we have on your ship indicate it was mostly steel and titanium with a carbon composite heat shield. I can probably duplicate the materials, enough for a debris field, at least. How likely are your people to do an analysis of the materials?"

"Not very likely," Straker said.

"The Moonbase seismometers will need to register two events, a small one for the hard landing and a larger one for the explosion," Barry added to the discussion. "At least five minutes apart, so we'd have time to escape."

Kirk turned to his chief engineer, "Scotty, can we do it?"

"Aye, Captain," Scott agreed with a grin, the problem's solution already in hand. "Give me an hour to fabricate the debris and the explosive packs to fool those seismometers."

"Where are you going to put us down?" Straker asked quietly.

"From an analysis of possible trajectories, here." Spock answered. As the Vulcan spoke, a yellow dot appeared on the tactical display, a short distance from Moonbase. "About ten kilometers from your Moonbase, on the far side of this ridge."

Foster nodded as he looked at screen. "Yeah, except for the ridge, it's pretty even terrain. A good landing spot, if I were really landing."

"I'm glad you agree, Colonel," Kirk commented. He turned to Scott, "Well, Mister Scott, it's time for one of your miracles."

"Aye, Captain, one virtual Lunar module, coming up," The engineer announced as he left the briefing room.

* * *

On the bridge, Mallory rechecked the sensor readings. She reached for the switch to the intercom. "Captain, we've picked up four Shelmat craft approaching Earth."

* * *

"They don't give up, do they?" Kirk commented to Straker, thumbing off the intercom on the table top.

"They are very persistent," Straker admitted. Kirk stood and straightened his uniform jacket.

"We have a little while before Scott's ready," Kirk announced. "Why don't we go see what's happening?"

* * *

The tactical situation on the view screen seemed very similar to the previous two times, with two glaring exceptions. Space Intruder Detector and Moonbase had not responded to the alien threat.

"Why hasn't SHADO responded?" Kirk asked, settling into his center seat.

"Unknown, Captain," Mallory replied, relinquishing the science station to Spock. The Vulcan did a quick scan.

"The Shelmat craft have retuned their deflector screens. They are now invisible to SHADO's sub-space tracking system," Spock announced.

"Damn," Foster muttered, mostly to himself.

"It was only a matter of time before they figured it out, Colonel," Barry commented.

"And we're here and we can't do a bloody thing about it," Foster said bitterly. Kirk didn't bother to comment. Straker stepped down to stand beside Kirk's chair.

"Captain Kirk, what's that fifth ship on the diagram up there?" Straker asked.

"A Vulcan scout ship, observing Earth," Kirk answered. Foster stepped down to stand with his commanding officer.

"Apparently the Vulcans have been observing Earth to decide when and if they're going to make contact with us barbaric humans," Foster explained.

"Can they defend themselves?" Straker asked.

"The Vulcan scouts were unarmed," Spock answered. "They also had standing orders to self-destruct if in immanent danger of detection."

"Somehow, I don't think their orders had this situation in mind," Straker remarked.

Mallory spoke up. "Captain, the Shelmat craft are bearing one-seven-four mark four. Speed: point five of light." She looked up at the screen. "Sir, their course brings them very close to us and to the Vulcan scout."

"Within attack range?" Kirk demanded.

"No," Mallory said, then she stopped and rechecked the information on her board.

"Correction, Captain, the three of the craft have altered course straight towards us. The fourth is aiming for the Vulcan scout."

"Damn," Kirk muttered.

"Captain," Spock said from the science station. "These Shelmat craft are more heavily armed than the previous ships. They could conceivably do damage to us."

"And if we make any move to defend the scout, that crew will know we know and they'll self-destruct," Kirk said.

"Those are their orders," Spock agreed.

"A no-win scenario," Straker observed.

"I don't believe in the no-win scenario," Kirk grouched.

Straker smiled. "Neither do I." He turned to Spock. "Does the scout know the aliens are on their way?"

"Unknown," Spock admitted.

"Have they been monitoring SHADO's communications?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Good," Straker turned to Nina Barry. "Lieutenant, what's SID's newest command code frequency?"

"Sir?" Barry stared at him in disbelief.

"You can't do that!" Foster protested.

"What have you got in mind?" Kirk demanded.

"You don't dare engage them." Straker pointed out. "SHADO can, if we give them back their eyes."

"You can't," Foster repeated. "What if this is a hoax? You intend on giving away SID's command codes?"

"I consider the risk acceptable," Straker responded, voice cold.

"Well, I don't," Foster announced. "And I say you're not giving away the command codes."

"I'll keep that in mind, Colonel, when you become commander in chief of SHADO." Straker turned back the Barry: "Lieutenant, the command frequency."

Barry gave Foster an apologetic look as she moved over to Uhura and the communications station. Straker stepped up the join them. Barry quietly gave the information to Uhura.

"It's in the same modality as the transmissions we've already picked up from the satellite?" Uhura asked. Barry nodded. Uhura's fingered played across the communications console, then she nodded to Kirk and Straker. "We're ready to transmit."

Kirk frowned, considering his options.

"I don't think you have a choice, Captain," Straker reminded him.

Kirk grimaced and nodded. He turned to Mallory: "Lieutenant, raise shields. Stand-by to adjust our deflector frequencies."

Straker turned back to Uhura. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"SID, prepare to receive instruction, authorization alpha-alpha-seven-seven-one-niner-eight-bravo-zenith."

The satellite responded. "Authorization correct. Awaiting instruction."

"Load program delta-six. Run."

"Program delta-six installed. Reinitializing utronic frequencies. Done," the satellite reported. Straker nodded to Uhura, who pressed a key on her console, shutting down the connection.

Immediately, SID announced: "Red Alert, Red Alert, Four U.F.O.s on positive track, bearing four-two-eight, one-four-two-green. Speed, sol zero decimal five. Range, one million miles, closing."

* * *

On Moonbase, Wingate stared at the radar screen in front of her. "I don't see them."

"Try adjusting the utronic frequencies," Harrington instructed. She turned to the microphone at her own console. "Red Alert, Red Alert, interceptors, immediate launch!"

Once again, the interceptors launched, speeding away from the Moon on their deadly mission.

In the command sphere, Wingate announced. "I have them, captain. Confirm, four Ufos, bearing four-two-eight, one four two-green."

"Trajectory termination?" Harrington demanded.

"Indeterminable," Wingate said, frowning at the information on her screen. "Their course doesn't intersect Earth at all. Unless they alter course soon, they're going into orbit."

"Is there anything in orbit that might interest them?"

"Checking now."

* * *

On the bridge, Mallory's fingers flew across her console, readjusting the deflector frequencies.

* * *

On Moonbase, Wingate stared at her screen once again. "That's odd."

"What?" Harrington demanded.

"I thought we picked up something big in orbit, but I can't find it now."

"How big?"

"Really big, and it was right in line with the Ufo's course."

* * *

On Earth, Captain Naomi Green contacted SHADO Control from her operations center inside the mobile transport truck.

"Control, we've found several more bodies, including some mutilated animals, but no sign yet of the Ufo."

Freeman, at SHADO Control responded to her message. "Remember, they're probably underwater."

"Yes, sir," she agreed. "There's one lake in the area big enough for one to hide in. However, I haven't have any luck yet convincing the local authorities to let me depth charge it. It's a resort trout lake. They don't want us to hurt the fish."

"Screw the fish, Lieutenant," Freeman instructed.

"Yes, sir," Green agreed. She turned to her assistant. "Let's go kill some fish." There was a decidedly nasty something in her grin.

* * *

It took only two charges to force the alien to the surface. The lake water boiled as the ship lifted off. The closest mobile launched a anti-aircraft missile at the escaping craft. The missile missed its target and exploded in the lake, sending sprays of water into the air.

"Green to SHADO Control. The alien has lifted off," Green announced into her command headset.

* * *

In SHADO Control, Ford checked the readout on the screen in front of him. "Colonel Freeman, Sky-1 won't make contact," he announced.

"It'll be up to the interceptors then," Freeman commented.

"Colonel Freeman, is my daughter on board that ship?" A heavily accented voice asked. Freeman turned to see Emil Duvall standing next to General Henderson.

"We don't know if she is or not," Freeman admitted. "It is possible she could have gotten away and we just haven't found her, yet."

"Your people have been searching the area where she disappeared for the past twelve hours," Duvall reminded the SHADO officer. "What are the chances?"

Freeman just shook his head. Duvall's shoulder's sagged. "It is Christmas Eve tonight. Tonight I have to tell my wife that our youngest daughter is gone, vanished, dead."

"Duvall," Henderson said. "Why don't you hold off telling her for a while? It's just possible the aliens didn't get her. It's just possible she got away and she's too scared to come out and be found."

"Maybe," Duvall admitted. "Maybe I will go to church tonight and pray for a miracle."

Chapter 15

"Captain, the interceptors will reach I.P. in three minutes," Mallory announced. The tactical screen confirmed her observation, the paths of the interceptors converging on the four Shelmat craft. One more path appeared on the screen, coming away from the Earth.

"Sir, a Shelmat craft has lifted off from Earth," Mallory said.

"From where?" Straker asked. Mallory checked her board.

"Launch origination, central France."

Straker gave Foster a quizzical look. The younger man shrugged and shook his head.

After a few moments Mallory looked up from her board. "The interceptors have fired, three Shelmat craft have been destroyed." Echoing her statement, three of the blips on the screen disappeared. The fourth blip veered away, back the way it came. The three interceptors changed course, towards the craft that had lifted off from Earth.

"The Shelmat ship has opened fire," Mallory announced. "One interceptor has been hit." On the screen, a blip disappeared. "The interceptor has been destroyed."

One the speaker, SID's voice: "Interceptor three has been destroyed."

Spielberg bowed his head. Barry put her arm around his shoulder. "That was Joe Wilcox," Spielberg said.

Straker said nothing, but there was a troubled expression on his face.

"Captain, three more interceptors have launched from the Moon." Three more dots appeared on the screen.

"They have opened fire on the Shelmat ship," Mallory stated. "The Shelmat has been hit." She hit a square on the console and the screen switched to show the battle against the black sky. As they watched, the U.F.O. exploded.

"Scan for survivors," Kirk ordered. Spock moved to the science station, bending over the monitor.

"No survivors, Captain," the Vulcan said, then stopped. "Correction, we are picking up two life signs. Very slow, very weak, in life pods. Cylindrical. Length: two point two-five meters, diameter: point seven-five meters."

"Not very big." Kirk observed. He hit a button on the communications panel on his chair. "Transporter room, lock onto the life pods we're tracking and beam them aboard."

"Yes, sir," Kevlin's voice came over the speaker. There was no hesitation this time, Kirk noted.

He turned to Uhura. "Have a medical team standing by." Kirk left his seat and headed for the lift. "Let's go see what we picked up this time."

Spock joined him as the doors slid open. Straker and Foster were right behind them.

"Transporter room one," Kirk instructed as the door closed.

* * *

Kevlin was waiting with the medical team as Kirk, Spock, Straker and Foster walked in. McCoy straightened up from his study of the two cylinders as soon as he saw them enter.

"Well, Bones?" Kirk asked.

"Until we get them out of these canisters, all I can tell you is one is female, and they're both in severe hypothermia."

"From being in space?" Kirk asked.

McCoy shook his head. "I don't think so."

"They're in hypothermia for ease of transport, Captain," Straker said. At McCoy's

questioning look, Straker continued. "Lower metabolism, lower biological demands. SHADO has dealt with this situation before, and those canisters look very familiar. It's an aluminum-carbon composite, isn't it?"

Spock took a hand scanner and scanned one of the canisters. "Essentially correct. No sign of a locking or hatch mechanism. We shall have to transport them out of the canisters."

Kelvin inspected his transporter board. "No problem, sir. I can transport both of them directly to sickbay as soon as I initialize the sickbay emergency pad."

"Go ahead," Kirk ordered. As Kelvin's fingers flew over his console, McCoy collected his people and left for sickbay. After a moment Kelvin announced: "Transport complete."

"Shall we go see what we got?" Kirk asked Straker, heading out the door. Straker laid a hand on his sleeve and Kirk stopped.

"How did he get them out of the canisters without even touching them?" Straker asked.

Kirk shrugged. "I believe it was a Twentieth Century author who said any technology sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic," he said, heading down the corridor towards sickbay.

"Clarke's third law," Straker said, following him.

McCoy was standing between two beds in sick bay. On one bed lay a young woman of about twenty. On the other lay a slender man who looked even younger. The monitors above the beds indicated readings within the normal range, except for one. One of the lines on the young man was near zero. McCoy was frowning at his hand scanner.

"Well, Bones?" Kirk asked. McCoy shook his head.

"The woman will be fine," McCoy said. "The boy's severely brain damaged. Only his autonomic systems are intact. His higher functions have been completely wiped."

"By what?" Kirk asked.

McCoy shook his head. "Some sort of surgery, it looks like."

"He was being prepared to be reprogrammed by the aliens," Straker said. "Like I said, we have seen this before. You said the woman would be all right?"

McCoy nodded. "She's been heavily sedated, but there's no sign of damage. She should be awake in a few minutes."

Straker stepped closer to the bed, the one he'd been in only an hour before. "Oh dear God," he muttered in sudden horror.

"Ed, what's wrong?" Foster demanded.

"I know her," Straker replied.

"Who is it?" Kirk asked.

"Her name is Lucille Duvall," Straker said. He looked back at Foster. "She's Commissioner Duvall's youngest daughter."

"No," Foster breathed. "Oh no."

"Who is Duvall?" Kirk asked. Spock headed to the computer at the nurse's station.

"Emil Duvall is a member of the United Nations Commission on Astronomy and Astrophysics," Straker explained. He glanced over at Foster. "Why are they picking on commission members?"

"Without Duvall's support..." Foster said to him. He didn't need to finish. Straker understood only too well. Without Duvall's support, SHADO would have serious problems getting financing cleared through the International Astro-physical Commission.

"Captain," Spock called from the nurse's station. Kirk went over to him, Straker and Foster following. "I cannot confirm or disconfirm any information on Lucille Duvall, daughter

of Emil Duvall."

"Explain, Spock," Kirk ordered.

"The cross references and files have been corrupted. However, from the extent of the errors, I would surmise she, too, must be returned to Earth."

"Spock, this is the second set of files that we've found compromised. What's going on?"

"Sabotage, Captain," Spock answered. "I suggest we locate and question Miss Sterreka."

"What about Kevlin?" Kirk asked. "You did mention him earlier."

"True. Lieutenant Kevlin is Rokanni," Spock said.

"SHADO is at war with the Rokanni, Spock," Kirk reminded him. "Maybe he knows something." He flipped the switch on the desk intercom. "Security, Kirk here. Locate and detain Miss Sterreka. Kirk out." He hit another button. "Transporter room, Mister Kevlin, would you report to sick-bay please." Kirk waited for a response. There was none.

"Mister Kevlin, please respond."

Kirk stabbed another intercom panel button. "Security alert, Transporter Room one. Locate Lieutenant Kevlin."

"Captain," Chekov's voice came over the speaker only a moment later. "It appears that Miss Sterreka and Mister Kevlin are no longer on the ship. The transporter logs have been wiped."

"And what does that mean?" Foster demanded.

"That means they're not on this ship and we don't know where they've gone," Kirk said. He was angry with himself for not seeing it earlier. He had a saboteur onboard, maybe more than one, and had not taken steps to neutralize the problem.

"With all this technology, you can't find them?" Foster asked.

"That's exactly what I mean," Kirk said. "They could be anywhere within half a million miles of this ship."

"Are there spacesuits missing?" Straker asked.

Kirk hit the intercom. "Chekov, are there any spacesuits missing?"

"Negative, sir."

"That limits it a little, doesn't it?" Straker asked. "They're either on Earth or inside one of the lunar installations."

"Earth is an awfully big place to hide," McCoy pointed out.

"Not if their objective is to damage SHADO," Straker said. "That limits the search quite a bit."

"Commander," Foster said. "The aliens want you dead."

"Yes?"

"We're supposed to be on Moonbase, right?" Foster asked. He looked over at Kirk. "That's where Kirk was going to set us down. That's where they are."

Kirk nodded. "It makes sense, assuming that's what they're after." He gave Straker a thoughtful look. "Assuming that's what they're after, how do you think they intend on going about it?"

"I assume your security people haven't found any weapons missing," Straker said.

"Chekov would have told me if there were," Kirk said.

"Then they're using something already on Moonbase," Straker said.

"But that could be anything," Foster protested.

Straker shook his head. "If you were going to destroy Moonbase, Paul, obliterate it, how would you do it?"

"How badly do you want it obliterated?" Foster asked.

"Unlike *our* aliens, they won't be worried about keeping it quiet," Straker said. "Or making it look like an accident."

"Detonate an interceptor warhead."

"Exactly," Straker agreed. "Not only would you wipe out Moonbase, but the explosion would be seen from Earth. That would lead to an investigation of how American nuclear technology got to the Moon in violation of half a dozen treaties and, since the U.S. government certainly won't take the blame for us, the exposure and probable dismantlement of SHADO."

"We have to find them," Foster said.

"Yes, we do," Kirk agreed. "Can you give us the plans to your base so I can send a security team down and find them?"

"I could," Straker said. "But I won't. If you're going to send a team, that team will include Colonel Foster and myself."

There was something very cold and implacable in Straker's expression. Again, Kirk was reminded of Admiral Nogura.

"And if I refuse to risk letting you go down there?" Kirk asked, knowing the answer.

"Can you afford the risk of not letting us handle it, Captain?"

* * *

Lieutenant Kevlin woke in a dark place. He tried to move and discovered his hands were tied and the gravity was much too light. He shook his head to get rid of the fuzziness in his brain and discovered his head ached and there was a metallic taste in his mouth as if he had been hit by a phaser.

He tried to think back to what happened just before he blacked out. Sterreka, the historian, had walked into the transporter room and had started asking questions about the canisters on the transporter platform, the settings he had used to beam the survivors to sickbay. He had started telling her, then turned away to finish his adjustments on the control console.

Then, there was darkness.

He heard movement somewhere near and realized he still had his eyes closed. He opened them to discover the darkness was not quite as complete as he had assumed. The room was lit by red lamps set at intervals into rough stone. The floor was stone as well, but it was finished more smoothly than the walls.

A dozen metal racks stood around the chamber, like the racks that held the photon torpedo casings in the Enterprise's weapons storage bays. Instead of the black photon casings, these racks held white cylinders with markings he couldn't quite make out, except one. That symbol was an old-style radiation hazard warning. The cylinders contained radioactive material.

"You're awake," a woman's voice said. He peered up at the historian. Her expression was pleased, but there was something ugly in it as well.

"What's going on? Where are we?" Kevlin asked.

"Underneath SHADO's Moonbase," Sterreka answered.

"We're not supposed to be here," Kevlin protested. "You know the danger of contacting anyone from this time. What do you think you're doing?" He tried to keep his voice low, but a touch of panic crept in despite his efforts.

"I am remedying an historical blunder, so that our people can take their rightful place as rulers of this world," Sterreka said.

"What do you mean?" he said. Then it dawned on him. "You're Rokan, too."

"How perceptive," she sneered.

"But why are you doing this? It doesn't make sense. If you destroy this base, our people won't be allowed to come home and they'll die. You know that. That's what the Book says."

"Yes, that's what the Book says," Sterreka spat angrily. "That's what the frightened old men say. But Earthers are weak and stupid. Even here and now they depend on the Danaen to defend them against us. Without their defenders they will fall and we will rule. Despite everything the Planters have done to us, we will rule the Home World. I brought you here because I thought you would understand. I thought you would want to be part of Rokan's glorious triumph."

"It'll be a little hard to appreciate when we're dead," Kevlin said.

"I overestimated your loyalty to our people," Sterreka said. "I should have realized what a weakling you were when I saw the Book in your hands last night. No true Rokanni would ever reveal even the existence of the Book to outsiders."

"What good is hiding the truth?" Kevlin asked.

Sterreka walked away from him, turning her attention to one of the missile cylinders. She opened a small maintenance panel on one of them and began to probe the electronics with a small device Kevlin didn't recognize.

"What good is hiding the truth?" Kevlin repeated, trying to buy time. "Our people were dying because the world the Planters set us on was unsuitable for colonization and the Shui government decided that allowing Earth to be terrorized was the solution. Only, it wasn't."

"They failed because they let that coward, Su'un, handle the invasion," the woman said.

"Su'un saved our people," Kevlin argued.

* * *

Kirk opened the transporter room weapons locker and handed Straker and Foster hand phasers before clipping one to his own belt.

"I have them locked on stun," he explained.

"You don't trust us, Captain?" Straker asked.

Kirk shook his head ever so slightly. "No."

He beckoned to Chekov, Hanson and Korchek. "Under no circumstances are we to make contact with the natives. We're going in to get Sterreka and Kevlin and we're getting out."

"Understood, Captain," Chekov acknowledged for his team.

Spock and Scott were standing at the transporter controls. "Spock, I need to know what that woman was hiding from us, what she wiped from our library."

"Already working on it, Captain."

"All right, gentlemen, let's go," Kirk ordered. Foster and Straker stood back and watched as the Enterprise people stepped onto the raised platform and positioned themselves over circular floor lights. Kirk gestured for them to stand on the two remaining lights.

"Captain, I'm beaming you into a corridor just beyond the target area. Sensors detect fairly high levels of positron radiation in the weapons bay," Scott said. "I won't be able to beam you directly out of there."

"Understood, Mister Scott," Kirk said. "Energize."

* * *

Kevlin struggled against the cords tying his hands. Sterreka was ignoring him, continuing her work on the interceptor missile. One of the knots gave way and he was free. He lay still, trying to decide what to do. He couldn't call the ship, he had no communicator. Sterreka was armed, he could see a Klingon style disruptor hanging from her belt and he assumed it was set

to kill. He didn't want to attack her and risk her firing into one of the missiles, setting it off. She moved to a different rack and began to work on a second warhead.

* * *

The transporter room dissolved away and reshaped itself into a cold, rough hewn corridor carved out of lunar rock. The rock was coated with a thin layer of epoxy to keep it airtight. Ahead of them was a heavy door with a hand-print pad beside it and an electronic key pad.

"You didn't mention it was locked," Kirk commented to Straker. His breath steamed in the cold.

"I didn't mention the security cameras either," Straker said. He pointed out a caged video camera set high on one wall, watching the door.

By pure luck, Scott had beamed them into the corridor just out of range of the camera.

Straker turned to Foster. "Paul?" Foster nodded and pulled out his pocketknife. He gestured for someone to give him a boost up. Korchek obliged while Foster tapped the end of his knife into the clear lens cover. It shattered, but stayed in place, obscuring the camera's view.

"We really have to do something about those lens covers," Straker commented, going to the door.

"It's on the maintenance list," Foster said. "It's just that this plastic gets brittle when exposed to the cold. I figure we have about ten minutes before somebody comes down here to check."

"Right," Straker agreed. He placed his right hand against the hand-print reader and keyed a code into the lock control pad with his left. After a moment, the hand-print screen went green and the door swung open.

Korchek and Hanson went through first, crouching, one to either side of the entrance. Chekov and Foster followed them in, looking around the room. Kirk and Straker were the last in as Hanson and Korchek moved around the perimeter of the room.

"Miss Sterreka, we know you're in here and we know what you want to do," Kirk called. "You also know we can't let you do it."

"Captain, she's over here," Kevlin yelled. A disruptor shot went over Kirk's head. Korchek and Hanson ran to tackle her, only she had moved. The racks made the room into a maze.

"You can't hold us off forever," Kirk said. Foster and Chekov had moved further into the room, checking the storage lockers along one wall. Another disruptor shot hit the wall, just missing Foster. The acrid smell of burning epoxy filled the air.

"I don't have to, Kirk," Sterreka shouted. Kirk and Straker both oriented on the voice. The men quietly moved to the opposite ends on one rack and into the space beyond. She was there, disruptor in hand.

She saw Straker first and aimed. Kevlin moved and her shot caught him in the back. His weight knocked Straker to the floor beyond the rack, out of firing range. Kirk didn't miss and Sterreka collapsed into a heap on the hard cold floor.

Straker pulled himself out from under Kevlin. The young man's uniform was scorched and burnt. There was a burned, raw wound in the center of his back and pieces of blackened bone could be seen.

Kevlin moved his head and gasped for breath. "Did you stop her?"

"Yes," Straker said.

"Su'un was a good man," Kevlin gasped in pain. "You'll like him, I think." The young

man's face lost expression and the light went out of his eyes. Straker checked for a pulse at his throat. There was none.

"Are you okay?" Foster asked as Straker climbed to his feet. Straker nodded. He was pale and Foster noted a slight tremble in the nod.

"We need to figure out exactly what she did and undo it," Straker said.

"We don't have much time," Foster pointed out.

"Then we'd better hurry," Straker stated, going to the nearest rack and quickly inspecting the missile casings. One service plate was loose on one missile. Straker pushed it aside to see a small device attached to the control board.

"I found one," Straker announced. Chekov stepped over to look at it.

"It's a timer of some sort," Chekov said. "It's Klingon, set to go off in five minutes."

"Do you know how to remove it?"

"This model is tamper resistant," Chekov said. "I remember reading that any attempt to remove it will detonate the device it's attached to."

"Can we use that transporter gizzy to get it out of here?" Foster asked.

"We would have to move it into the corridor for transport and moving it may also detonate it," the Enterprise security officer explained.

"Wonderful," Foster grouched. "We can't defuse it and we can't move it."

"Yes, we can," Straker contradicted. "Paul, get me a long screwdriver or a crowbar." He went to the front of the missile and removed the shroud covering the warhead itself.

"Everyone else get back and start looking around to see if she got to another one," Straker ordered as Foster handed him a long screwdriver from one of the lockers.

"What the hell are you doing?" Foster yelled as Straker took the screwdriver and drove it into the warhead mechanism, twisting it into the delicate materials surrounding the nuclear charge.

"It's an American warhead, Paul. Permissive Actions links and fail-safes," Straker said. "It cannot detonate without the explosive lenses being perfectly symmetrical." He pulled the screwdriver out and put the shroud back into place. "Now all it will do is make a mess when it goes off."

"I found another one," Korchek announced. Straker followed the same procedure on that warhead, disabling it.

"Any others?" Straker asked.

"Negative, we've checked all of them," Foster announced.

"We have less than two minutes to get out of here," Kirk announced. Korchek hefted Kevlin's body over his shoulder. Chekov and Hanson held Sterreka between them as they left the missile storage room, locking the door behind them.

Two muted explosions rocked the corridor as Kirk opened his communicator.

"Scotty, eight to beam up."

"No Captain," Foster said. He had his phaser out and was pointing it at Kirk. "Six. You can leave Commander Straker and me right here."

"No, I can't," Kirk said as the transporter beam began its warning whine.

* * *

Two Moonbase security men jogged into the corridor leading to the main missile storage area. Two explosions nearly knocked them off their feet but they kept moving.

The heat sensors in the storage area had picked up heat signatures of what looked to be several people. That, coupled with the security camera lens shattering, had put Moonbase on

security alert.

They rounded the corner to see the bright red radiation light flashing above the door.

"Security team one to Control," Che said into his hand held transceiver. "We have a radiation leak in the main missile storage area. We're going to need radiation suits to go in there."

"Roger, Security team one," Harrington acknowledged. "Any sign of intruders?"

"If there were, they're behind the door and they're dying," Che said.

In the Control Sphere, Harrington turned to Wilcox. "Maintain yellow alert. I don't want anything coming within one hundred miles of this base without us knowing about it."

"Yes, sir."

Harrington turned to look back at Miller. "I also want to know how SID managed to pick up those Ufos when we couldn't."

"Sir, Commander Straker did the last major repair and upgrade on SID," Miller reminded her commanding officer. "Maybe he added some new detection programs he didn't tell us about."

"Maybe isn't good enough, Lieutenant."

* * *

Kirk grabbed the phaser away from Foster as soon the transporter beam freed them aboard the ship. Foster glared at him.

"No, I can't," Kirk repeated. Straker said nothing as he handed his phaser to Kirk. Foster turned to glare at Straker.

"He could have just left us," Foster said. "We're supposed to be on Moonbase anyway."

"Think about it, Paul," Straker said. "Nina and Charlie are still here. Even if we did stay down in that corridor, we can't explain how we got there. We had no spacesuits, no evidence of the module, and we were in a secure area."

"We can tell them the truth," Foster insisted.

"And who will believe it?" Straker asked very quietly. Foster looked away, ashamed at his outburst, angry at Straker for being so coldly reasonable in a situation that was totally unreasonable. Korchek dropped Kevlin's body on the deck, then went to help Chekov and Hanson deal with the struggling, protesting Sterreka. They left the transporter room, heading for the detention area.

"How old was he, Captain?" Straker asked, looking down at Kevlin's body.

"About twenty-five, I think," Kirk answered. "He came aboard only a few days ago."

"I think the worst part of being the one in charge is having to tell the parents how their child died," Straker said. "He had to have known her weapon was set to kill."

"You're probably right," Kirk agreed.

McCoy walked in. He checked Kevlin's body. "Third degree disruptor burns," McCoy said. "Did Sterreka do this?"

"Yes," Kirk replied. "Chekov's taking her to the brig."

"Good," McCoy said. He turned to Straker, running his medical tricorder down the SHADO officer's body. "You must keep your medical staff pretty busy keeping you in one piece," he complained.

"Why do you say that?"

"First you overdose on a precursor to cordrazine," McCoy said, giving Straker a hypospray shot of hyronalyn. "Now you've gone and gotten exposed to radiation. I should just let you go ahead and get radiation sickness. It would serve you right, not listening to your

doctor." McCoy wandered away, still grumbling as he gave Kirk and Foster injections to neutralize the radiation poisoning from their exposure to the uncovered warheads.

"Lucky for you, medical science has improved some in three hundred years," McCoy said. "You'll all be fine."

"Thank you, Bones," Kirk said. He dismissed McCoy with a nod and waved the two SHADO officers to join him as he headed back to the bridge.

"It'll be another half hour or so before Scotty's ready to send you back to the Moon. Your Moonbase has gone to alert status. Now he has to make something with the module's radar signature." He gave Straker a quizzical look. "How did you know we had an effective radiation treatment?"

Straker shrugged. "You didn't try to stop me when I opened the warhead."

The turbo-lift doors opened onto the bridge. Spielberg and Barry were still there, waiting with the Enterprise bridge crew.

"That could have been due to ignorance," Kirk said as he settled into his command chair.

"Maybe on the first one," Straker conceded. "Not on the second one."

"Would you have gone ahead if I had objected?"

"Yes."

"You're quite a gambler, Commander," Kirk commented. "Do you play poker?"

Straker smiled. "Occasionally."

"I bet you don't lose very often."

"Not very often," Straker agreed. His smile faded. "What about Lucille Duvall?"

"I have not finished reconstructing the files Sterreka destroyed," Spock said.

"But you were sure she must belong back on Earth," Straker reminded him. "You could set her down somewhere in the vicinity where the Ufo took off. SHADO will find her, take her home."

"Captain Green is still searching the area," Barry said. "We've been listening in on communications."

"Very well, but what about the boy?" Kirk asked. "What do you want done with him?"

"You could send him back, but he'll be a vegetable," Straker said. "We don't have the science to undo what the aliens did to him."

"Frankly, I don't know if we do either," Kirk admitted.

"But you probably have a better chance than we do," Foster added to the discussion. "We don't even know his name."

"Elias Frommer," Barry said. "He was a tourist from California. His parents were found dead. Aliens."

"Poor kid," Straker murmured.

Kirk hit one of the buttons on his chair console. "Scotty, as soon as McCoy gives the go ahead, beam Miss Duvall down somewhere near, but out of sight of, one of the SHADO vehicles."

"Captain, she was brought aboard stark naked," Scott reminded him.

"Send her back, Scotty, stark naked," Kirk ordered.

* * *

Naomi Green notified SHADO Headquarters. "We have Lucille Duvall, she's all right." Green looked over at the young woman who was sitting in the weapons control officer's seat, wrapped in a blanket. She cradled a cup of coffee in her hands.

Green's team had found her naked, hiding in the brush. Maybe 'all right' was an

exaggeration. She was cold, dirty and rambling hysterically about being taken to a place surrounded by people dressed in red. But that was to be expected. She had escaped, somehow, from the aliens and survived to tell about it.

Considering the date, maybe there really was a Santa Claus, Green thought to herself before refilling Miss Duvall's coffee cup.

* * *

A sigh of relief went around SHADO's control center at Green's announcement.

"I'll call Duvall and let him know she's been found," Henderson volunteered.

"Thank you, General," Freeman said as Henderson headed to the commander's office to place the call. "Tell him that Green's bringing her here to headquarters for evaluation. It might be better if he was here when she was brought in."

"I'll let him know," Henderson promised. He stopped in the doorway. "Maybe Foster will be lucky and bring the module in, too."

"It's been twenty-six hours," the Australian reminded him.

"It's Christmas Eve, Alec," Henderson said, addressing Freeman by his given name for the first time ever. "The season of miracles."

"I never believed in Santa Claus," Freeman said.

* * *

"How's the reconstruction going, by the way?" Kirk asked.

"Adequate, Captain," Spock said. "Miss Sterreka was using a Klingon virus that, as it happens, I am familiar with. This last file indicates Miss Duvall did need to be returned to Earth, although the records indicate she was missing for several weeks before she was found, originally."

"What about Miss Sterreka?"

"She is under heavy guard in Sickbay. Doctor McCoy is working on neutralizing the poison she took," Spock said. "She is not Danaen. According to her gene scan, she is a Rokanni. Mister Chekov believes she may be from the Shamari colony. There is an extremely fundamentalist Rokan religious sect active in that community. Some of the neighboring colonies are concerned due to the nature of the Rokan Shui rhetoric. It is quite reminiscent of both the Nazi and Eugenic beliefs of racial purity and superiority."

The Vulcan turned to Straker. "We also have reports that the Rokan Shui are particularly opposed to the Danaen and have been lobbying for their exclusion from the Federation. They have been implicated in terrorist attacks against Danaen holdings within the Federation."

"But, the Rokan Shui are a terrorist splinter group, correct?" Straker asked. "They don't represent the Rokanni as a whole?"

"For the most part, the Rokanni are law abiding, peace loving people, as are most members of the Federation," Spock explained.

"I see," Straker said. The troubled look came back into his eyes.

"Scott to Captain Kirk," Engineer Scott's brogue came over the intercom speaker.

"Kirk here."

"We'll be ready to return the Commander and his party in thirty minutes," Scott said.

"We've already launched the radar decoy."

"Understood, Kirk out," Kirk said, hitting the intercom. He started out of his seat. "Almost time for you to go home."

"Captain, one problem does remain," Sulu reminded Kirk.

"And that is?"

"These people have seen the face of the future," the helmsman pointed out.

"True, Mister Sulu," Kirk sighed. He was aware of the problem, but disliked having it pointed out so bluntly. "Spock, have you any suggestions as to how we deal with this part of our problem?"

"SHADO has an amnesia drug," Barry reported helpfully.

Straker shook his head. "Our drug won't work. It only blocks the previous twelve hours. Any other drugs could be detected in our bloodstreams during standard medical checks. We can't afford that complication."

Spock's look became thoughtful as he gazed at Foster. "Vulcans have developed certain mental disciplines over time. It should be possible to block your recall of this time period, without resorting to drugs. However, the technique requires a lowering of mental barriers that can be quite distressing to the parties involved."

"I can't order my people to cooperate," Straker said.

"Commander, if forgetting this happened is the price we have to pay for getting home, I'm certainly willing to pay it," Foster said. Spielberg and Barry nodded in agreement. "I figure our people will figure it out pretty quick if we've been alienated'."

"You're probably right," Straker agreed.

"I think that covers everything, doesn't it?" Kirk said. "You should be back where you belong in about twenty minutes."

"Yes," Straker replied. "I still have a question, though."

"Yes?" Kirk asked.

"The Kobyashi Maru. What is it?"

"Star Fleet's infamous no-win scenario," Kirk said.

Straker waited. After a moment Kirk continued. "Spock told me you tried to get information on it. It's a simulation. You're the commander of a ship patrolling the border between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. A Star Fleet vessel crossing the border is considered an act of war, and the Klingons would like nothing better than to provoke a war. You pick up a distress call from the freighter Kobyashi Maru, two days out of Altair 6, carrying two hundred passengers. She says she struck a gravitic mine and is in serious trouble. What do you do?"

"We can confirm the Kobyashi Maru in fact left Altair 6 two days before and was traveling a known shipping lane?" Straker asked.

"Yes."

"Can we confirm she is still in a known shipping lane?" Straker asked.

"Yes."

"Have other ships been reported lost in the area?"

"No," Kirk answered. He gave Straker a puzzled look. Straker was asking different questions than the ones usually asked by trainees during the simulation.

"Very well, first, send a message to headquarters, giving our location and a recording of the distress call from the freighter, informing them of our intention to assist."

"Star Fleet won't get the message for nearly a week," Kirk said. "Crossing the border is an act of war."

"So? Someone has mined a known shipping lane. An unarmed civilian vessel has been damaged, possibly lost."

"It's probably a trap," Foster put in.

"Of course it's a trap," Straker agreed. "That doesn't alter the fact that there are civilians

at risk in what must be interpreted as a war zone."

"But war hasn't been declared," Kirk reminded him.

"Mining a known shipping lane isn't an act of war?" Straker asked. "If it is a trap, then the other side has already fired the first shot. If it isn't, they should have no problem with allowing a rescue. Either way, headquarters will have the information to handle the diplomatic problems that are going to result."

"Crossing the border means you'll lose the ship," Kirk said.

"Naturally, Captain," Straker said. "That's why you can't win. It's a trap, but you can't prove the other side is preparing to go to war unless you spring the trap. And, unless everything I read last night is a lie, to fail to try to rescue the other ship, the civilians, is to go against everything Star Fleet stands for, defending a free people."

"I've never heard it put quite that way before," Kirk said. "I'm almost glad we have to put you back. I don't think I could stand having you as my commanding officer." He looked at Spock, who had his eyebrows raised at Kirk's comment. "Cartwright would do it, you know. Just to make my life miserable."

Spock managed to look amused.

Kirk checked the time on the ship's chronometer. "We'd better get going."

Straker took Barry's arm. "I hope you remembered your ruby slippers, my dear."

"I wouldn't leave home without them," she quipped back.

Kirk stopped in the doorway to the turbo-lift as the reference finally clicked into place. "Kansas."

Straker grinned. "This isn't Kansas, or Iowa, either."

"It does qualify as over the rainbow, though," Kirk said as the turbo-lift doors closed behind them. "Transporter Room one," he instructed.

"About ten thousand miles over the rainbow, at least," Straker agreed.

Kirk did a quick conversion in his head. "Eleven thousand."

The lift doors slid open on the corridor across from Transporter room one and Kirk and Spock left the lift accompanied by the four SHADO operatives.

* * *

"Captain Harrington, I've picked up a trace approaching the Moon," Wilcox said. "It's very slow."

"Meteorite?" Harrington asked.

"Could be," Wilcox admitted. "Whatever it is, it'll hit in about ten minutes."

"Location?"

"About twenty miles west of us."

"Normally, I wouldn't worry about it," Harrington admitted. "But with all the weird stuff that's been happening around here today, I'm not taking chances. Send a Moon-mobile out there to check it out."

"Yes, sir," Wilcox acknowledged, passing the order onto the Moon-mobile crew.

Chapter 16

Scott stood at the controls in the transporter room, Kirk and Spock standing with him. Straker, Foster, Barry, and Spielberg stood nearby. They wore their space-suits, gloves on, as they are checked each other's air-hoses and environmental packs. Their helmets were on the floor beside them.

A buzzer sounded on the transporter station, and Scott touched the intercom button. "Transporter room, Scott here."

"Chun here. The first detonation's gone off."

"Very good, Mister Chun," Kirk replied. He turned to the SHADO people. "It's time to go."

"How did you win against the simulation?" Straker asked.

Kirk grinned. "Some friends and I reprogrammed the simulator to make it a little more realistic'. We were able to go in and rescue the freighter without springing the trap."

"You cheated," Foster said.

"Sometimes you have to rewrite the rules," Kirk said. A faintly worried frown came into Straker's face.

"Something wrong, Commander?" Kirk asked.

"I'm just wondering how I'm going to explain being well after having supposedly been lost in space and dying for twenty-six hours," Straker explained.

Kirk smiled thoughtfully. "I've always thought the Universe was too big a place to discount the possibility of miracles. I've watched stars die, I've seen universes being born. I've met beings who've claimed to be gods and other beings who might well have been but claimed they weren't. Don't discount your miracles, Commander."

"God works in mysterious ways, is that it?" Straker mused.

"I've been assured repeatedly that God protects fools and ships named Enterprise," Kirk replied with a grin. "Maybe God also has a fondness for SHADO commanders, too."

"I hope so, Captain. I need all the help I can get."

Spock stepped over to the SHADO people, leading them to their proper positions on the transporter platform. Stepping over to Spielberg. Spock placed his right hand over Spielberg's face, quickly locating the proper psionic points. Spock didn't see, but knew from the meld, Spielberg's surprise at the mental contact.

After a moment, Spock disengaged from Spielberg, who stood, eyes closed, on the transporter platform. The Vulcan went over to Nina Barry. As Spock initiated the mind meld, one part of his mind observed that Foster had taken Spielberg's helmet and was securing it over the young man's head, carefully checking the attachments.

As soon as he was finished blocking Barry's recent memories, Spock stepped over to Foster. Behind him, Straker secured Barry's helmet, taking extra care to check the seals.

Foster had watched as Spock touched Spielberg, and then Barry, with his long fingers. He watched their expressions of surprise, then calm blankness. He wasn't sure what it meant. He wasn't sure he wanted to go through with it. Then, he felt warm fingers against his temple and cheek, the Vulcan's hot breath against his other cheek.

He tensed, not knowing what to expect. The mind-touch came as gentle as a caress, silently asking permission to proceed before tracing out memory paths, blocking this one and that one, painlessly reinforcing another.

"Forget, This all is but a dream, easily forgotten..." Foster heard Spock's voice, both in his

mind and in his ears, as though in a dream. "You are Paul Foster, pilot of a lunar module that crash landed on the Moon following an aborted re-entry attempt. You have been in space for twenty-six hours."

Quietly, painlessly, Spock broke his mental connection with Foster. He then took Foster's helmet and placed it over the SHADO officer's head. Spock noted Straker's concerned look as he came over to check the helmet seals and fittings. Satisfied, Straker moved back to his place on the transporter platform and Spock stepped over to him.

As with the other three SHADO operatives, Spock located the psychic contact points at the forehead and temple and cheek. As with the first three, the mental contact was gentle, subtle, and totally controlled by Spock's Vulcan mind training.

He was startled, therefore, by the strength of the mind he was touching, the logical mental pathways, precariously balancing the emotional ones, quintessentially human, yet utterly unique.

He permitted himself a brief note of dismay at discovering the bonding between Straker and the beautiful auburn haired woman reflected in the commander's thoughts, his wife. Spock could sense her bright presence in the corners of Straker's mind and wondered how he could possibly have missed it earlier. Quietly, the Vulcan withdrew from the meld, realizing even that small touch may have been sensed on Earth, through the bonding.

"Commander, I cannot block your memories," Spock explained softly. "For me to try would risk serious damage to your mind. We must, therefore, trust your discretion in this matter."

Straker gave Spock a puzzled look, then smiled. "Mister Spock, I happen to be very good at keeping secrets," he said. "Besides, since they will have no memory of all this, I will have no witnesses, and no corroborating evidence. Who would believe me?"

"A very logical analysis, Commander."

Spock helped Straker on with his helmet, leaving a faceplate open for the time being. He then left the platform to go stand next to Kirk. Spock turned and gave Straker the Vulcan salute. "Live long and Prosper, Commander Straker of SHADO."

"And you, Mister Spock," Straker replied. The SHADO commander looked at Kirk. "Good bye, Captain. God speed and have a safe journey home."

"And you, Commander," Kirk replied as Straker lowered his helmet faceplate and tightened its fittings.

"Energize," Kirk ordered.

Scott pulled down the transporter controls and the four SHADO people shimmered and disappeared.

* * *

"Thank you, Colonel Freeman," Emil Duvall said. SHADO medical had given his daughter a quick check and agreed to allow her to go home with her father.

"For what?" Freeman asked.

"For giving me back my daughter," Duvall said.

Freeman shook his head. "Doctor Jackson agreed to let her go home with you. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"I meant for ordering your people to keep looking for her, for not giving up," Duvall explained. "She would have died."

Freeman had nothing to say to that.

Kate Komack walked into the control room. Freeman allowed himself a moment of

surprise at seeing her inside SHADO Headquarters. She didn't often come down to the underground complex. Her job has up top, running the film studio.

"I thought you'd be getting ready for Christmas eve," he said.

"They're coming home," she said. Her eyes were bright.

"How can you be so sure?" Freeman asked.

"Because I know," Komack said.

* * *

On the lunar surface, the four SHADO operatives shimmered back into existence. They stumbled at the sudden change in gravity, from full normal to one-sixth, as some distance away, there was a large explosion.

"What happened?" Barry wondered aloud, turning on her suit radio.

"I don't..." Foster began, then paused, collecting his confused thoughts. "The lunar module must have exploded," he reasoned finally, recognizing his surroundings. He couldn't quite understand why the Moon's surface seemed so strange, as if he should have been somewhere else entirely.

"Yeah, that must be it," Spielberg agreed, equally unwilling to admit he didn't quite recall how he got where he was.

Foster turned to find Straker standing nearby, watching the ridge the module must have hit when it came down. "Commander, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Straker's voice came over Foster's suit radio.

A Moon-mobile crossed the ridge, heading directly toward them. The group waved to the craft, which dipped its landing out-riggers in acknowledgment. They would be home shortly.

Chapter 17

Captain's log, Local date December 24, 1983. We have returned our four guests to their time and place. Miss Sterreka is in custody. Our mission here is complete and we will be returning home this evening. We can only hope that our interference has not damaged history as we know it, that Commander Straker will find it in his heart to do what we know he did do. On the Enterprise's bridge, Kirk sat in his command chair, Spock standing on one side of him, McCoy on the other. Scott sat at the engineering station, feeding in the corrected equations for their trip home to the Twenty-Third Century

Uhura turned from her station to look back at Kirk. "Captain, I have a communication from the Moonbase to SHADO control. They report they've located the Commander and the others and they're in good health. The module was totally destroyed by an explosion a few minutes after impact."

"Scotty, it looks like we did it," Kirk announced.

"Aye, Captain."

Kirk smiled. "I think the Federation historians will be reasonably pleased with the data we've managed to collect, don't you, Spock?"

"I think they will be very interested, Captain, especially since, once again, our interference with history appears to be part of history," Spock replied. "We seem to be drawn with the washes and currents of time."

"So it would seem, Spock," Kirk agreed. "I wonder though, if the Federation is ready for the facts about Earth's true first contact with a non-terrestrial race. That Earth *won* an interstellar war, before we even had interplanetary travel."

"A war which no one ever heard about, except for a select few. A war between Earth and one of the seeds planted by the Preservers, led by a descendant of yet another people transplanted from Earth. A war that officially never was."

* * *

Inside SHADO's Moonbase, in Central Park, a party was being held. The off duty Moonbase astronauts raised non-alcoholic toasts to Foster and Spielberg, Nina Barry and even Straker, saluting their return from the void of space. Straker simply nodded acknowledgment as he sat before at the small communications screen set into the wall of the room.

On the screen was Elizabeth Kathryn Komack-Straker, her face wreathed with delight at the sight of her husband. "*Alec's happier that anybody that you're safe. Uncle Jim told him he was going to get your job if you and Paul didn't show up,*" she told him.

Straker grinned. "Poor Alec."

"He's sending another module up for you tomorrow," she told him. "With any luck, you'll be home in time for Christmas dinner."

"Good, that'll work out just fine," Straker replied, his expression thoughtful, his gaze locked on some distant scene.

Komack noted the change in expression. "Ed, what's going on? What happened?"

Straker smiled, eyes suddenly focusing back on her. "I'll tell you all about it when I get home, okay?"

"Okay" she returned the smile. "Love you, husband."

Straker touched the screen, gently outlining the face on it. "Love you, wife."

The screen went blank. Straker stood and stretched, looking around the compact area, at the planters with live flowers and green plants. Spielberg and Barry were holding court on one

of the sofas, describing in minute detail their long trip back to the Moon in the crippled module.

Straker shook his head in mild amusement and went over to one of the view ports set into the outer wall of the sphere to look out at the stars. Joan Harrington came over to him, a cup of coffee in her hand.

"Welcome back, Commander," she said. Straker gazed at her quietly, then smiled, accepting the coffee. Then he went back to looking out the view port.

"Commander," she said. "While you were lost, there were two attacks. During the second one, SID's Utronic frequencies changed, so we could track them. Do you have any idea how that might have happened?"

"What does SID's program log say?"

"Whatever changed the frequency erased the program log."

"Are you asking if I did it, from the module?"

"The thought had occurred to me," Harrington admitted.

Straker took a sip of his coffee. After a moment: "We weren't the only ones out there who could have done it."

"But, why would the aliens alter SID's frequencies so we could track and destroy them?"

"Captain, not all the aliens are against us, you know. We've run across two who seemed willing to make peaceful contact," Straker said. "Maybe that's what happened this time?"

"Do you really think so, sir?" Harrington asked.

"Stranger things have happened," Straker reminded her. "Unless you want to believe Santa Claus did it."

"I'm beginning to wonder," Harrington said with a smile. She went back to the party, shaking her head. Straker turned to the view-port once more.

After a moment, Foster stepped over to him. The younger man leaned against the wall, watching Straker watch the stars.

"Paul, I'm going to need your help," Straker said finally, not moving from his place at the port. His voice was quiet, barely loud enough to be heard above the chatter of the party. "I need you to trust me."

"What happened out there, Ed?" Foster asked, puzzled. "You were dying."

"Yes, I was dying," Straker admitted quietly. "The lunar module bounced off the atmosphere, we were missing for twenty-six hours. You brought the module in, we landed hard, it exploded only a few minutes after we got out of it."

Foster nodded. "I know. We've all reported the same thing," he reminded Straker. "But, you were dying."

Straker turned his head to look over at Foster. The faintest hint of a smile played across the blond man's thin face. "Let's just say that even in this day and age, miracles still happen. And where better to seek the face of God than among the heavens?"

"Assuming I believed that..." Foster started, not sure what to make of Straker's statement. "Well, it is Christmas Eve after all. What better time for miracles?" Foster conceded. Straker shrugged and turned back to the view port.

"You're planning something," Foster said with sudden certainty. "What is it?"

"If I tell you, you'll think I'm crazy," Straker replied, with a soft sigh. "Paul, I don't really want to go down in history as a genocide. Earth's history is bloody enough as it is. Eighteen months ago, SHADO broke the back of the aliens' military capacity. They can't really hurt us much anymore, just irritate the hell out of us. In a couple years, maybe a generation, they

won't even be able to do that."

"You're going to ask their surrender," Foster realized.

Straker simply nodded.

"You're right. I think you're crazy," Foster informed his commanding officer solemnly. Then he grinned. "But, I'm all for trying."

* * *

Historian Sterreka had been escorted to the bridge under guard. She stood with Spock and McCoy, beside Kirk's command chair on the command deck.

On the view-screen was a view of the interior of SHADO's Moonbase, of the leisure sphere. The party was over, the personnel back at their stations.

On the screen, Straker and Foster stood as a tall man with green tinted skin and a red spacesuit decorated with chains of silver circular links entered the room.

"This will not stop the war," Sterreka told Kirk. "The Shui will not accept Su'un's capitulation."

"That may be true, Miss Whatever your name really is," Kirk said. "However, I think Commander Straker is aware of that possibility."

On the view screen: "Welcome to Moonbase, Commander Su'un," General Johannen Edward Straker, United States Air Force, Commander in Chief of SHADO operations, greeted Earth's enemy.

Epilogue

The commander of the Vulcan scout ship noted the various battles, the permitted landing of one Shelmat ship on the Moon and its escorted departure a short time later. The scout ship crew puzzled over this sudden change in behavior at SHADO's war base on the Moon.

The following morning, a lunar shuttle arrived, and shortly thereafter departed from the Moon, making it safely home to Great Britain.

The great white ship with its strange markings left the system, back the way it had come, out of the ecliptic.

"I do not understand," T'Reyl said.

"Neither do I," the commander admitted. "However, it is time to prepare for our return home. We can let future historians concern themselves with this enigma."

"How far in the future, commander?"

"Based on our observations of the planet below, no more than three hundred years."

"Do you think we will be their allies?" she asked.

"Do we dare to not be?"