

Beyond The Veil.

Chapter One

Captains Log – Personal: The Enterprise is en-route to Star Base 12 for a long overdue shore leave. I'm weary and exhausted and I think the incident on the shuttle Halley took more out of me than I thought. My knee has recovered, but mentally I am sluggish and in need of a rest. Sulu is now also back at work and even Chekov is in a better humour. We are all looking forward to reaching Star Base 12, which is two weeks away at present speed.

Something else is worrying me. I keep having very vivid dreams of a world I seem to know. It is familiar to me, but I can't place it although it is so real I can feel the breeze on my face, smell the spicy air and see the people. I cannot close my eyes without these images appearing and it is causing my sleep to be disrupted. I often hear a tinkling in my head, both while I'm asleep and awake. Is it some sort of Space Sickness?

The doors of the Sickbay slid open and Doctor Leonard McCoy looked up and smiled when he saw his visitor.

'What can I do for you Jim?' He asked.

Kirk sighed and sat on the edge of the doctor's desk.

'I don't know Bones. What do you know about Space Sickness?'

'Ah,' Bones said reaching for the bottle of Sarian Brandy he kept in his medical cabinet.

Before answering he filled two glasses from the bottle and handed one to Kirk.

'What exactly do you want to know?'

‘Well, are vivid dreams a common symptom?’

McCoy frowned and shook his head.

‘No, I don’t believe I’ve heard of that. Why? Who’s having vivid dreams?’

Kirk didn’t answer and looked pensively into his glass and took a long drink. McCoy began to realise.

‘Jim it’s you isn’t it?’

‘Bones,’ Kirk said dismissively.

McCoy folded his arms across his chest and grimaced.

‘I know you Jim Kirk. You think you’re indestructible, but sometimes even you need help.’

He raised a quizzical eyebrow and continued in an appalling Austrian accent.

‘Tell zis oold crusdy doktor all about it.’

Kirk rose from the desk and began to pace the Sickbay.

‘A bad sign,’ McCoy found himself thinking.

His friend always was a dynamic character, but when he got upset or frustrated this energy became destructive to his physical and mental well being. McCoy knew this only too well having nursed him through many injuries, illnesses and crises. He sat back and waited patiently for his Captain, and friend, to sort out what he wanted to say.

‘Well it started about two weeks ago,’ Kirk said.

He stopped and looked at McCoy who gestured for him to continue.

‘The colours are so beautiful all pinks, lilacs, deep greens and blues and it’s so clean and bright. The air is full of the smells of spices, but it’s the people who are so memorable. There’s a beautiful woman.’

A grunt from McCoy stopped Kirk in his tracks and Kirk shot him an angry glance.

‘And just what was that for?’

McCoy looked sheepish and cleared his throat.

‘It’s just that with you there’s usually a beautiful woman somewhere.’

He shrugged and muttered.

‘Go on.’

Kirk frowned.

‘Are you sure I’m not boring you?’

‘No, not at all. You’re never boring,’ McCoy replied.

He then quickly re-filled Kirk’s and his own glass before slouching down in his chair.

‘Alright,’ Kirk said, mollified.

Then he continued.

‘The woman doesn’t say anything, but I can hear her speaking.’

‘What does she say?’ McCoy asked.

‘That’s the problem. What she does say doesn’t make sense.’

‘The thing about dreams Jim is that very often they don’t make sense. We may have come a long way in medicine, but we still know very little about dreams, or what they mean. We don’t know why we need to dream, let alone why we do.’

‘Yes,’ Kirk maintained. ‘But I feel she’s saying something important. I do hear, “help us” and “the puzzle piece is with you”, then it fades away. It’s getting so I can’t sleep without the same thing happening over and over again. It’s driving me crazy. I feel I should know what it means, but it’s just out of reach. It’s like an itch you can’t scratch.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Is that all you can say Bones?’

‘I could say, “Fascinating”, but that’s more in Spock’s line.’

He smiled, but quickly coughed and rose to his feet when he saw Kirk's face.

‘Jim I’ll take some blood and run a few tests, but I’m sure you’re fine. You just need some shore leave. God knows we could all do with some rest after all we’ve been through in the last few months.’

He led Kirk into the Sickbay and pushed him onto a diagnostic table. Once Kirk was comfortable, McCoy stood over him and with an evil smile said.

‘This won’t hurt a bit.

Chapter Two

The turbo lift doors slid open. Uhura adjusted her red uniform and stepped onto the bridge. She found that she never tired of the sight that met her eyes. Strange, after all this time, that it was still a very exciting place to her. She crossed to the Communications console and relieved Lieutenant Lomax. She quickly sat down and glanced around the bridge to find it very quiet. Captain Kirk was in the Command chair reading and signing fuel reports and other paper work. Paper work was the thing he always complained about. Sulu was at the helm and Uhura thought how nice it was to have him back; Enterprise was never quite the same without him at the controls.

Sulu turned to the navigator; a fairly new Ensign from England named Juliette Adams. Sulu had taken her under his wing and was now explaining some procedure to her, which made Uhura, smiled as the memory of how he had done the same thing with a young Russian Ensign years ago came to mind. The smile broadened as she thought how much prettier Juliette was compared with Chekov. Spock was, as ever, at his Science station, busy with something. Uhura had never known how he could spend so much time thinking. She sighed softly and returned to monitoring her board. The routine silence was suddenly shattered by the sound of sirens and the computer's voice calling out.

‘Intruder alert! Intruder alert!’

Kirk's hand darted out and hit the Comm button.

‘All decks initiate a level one intruder alert.’

He paused.

‘Mr Chekov to the bridge.’

With that he leapt from the chair and moved beside Spock.

‘Spock?’

Spock turned round calmly and raised an eyebrow before speaking.

‘Captain, I can find no evidence of an intruder.’

‘Are you sure?’

Spock folded his arms and replied.

‘The computer registered a small energy pulse, but is no longer detecting it; therefore there is no intruder aboard the Enterprise.’

‘What caused the pulse?’ Kirk asked.

‘Unknown at this time Captain.’

‘Can you tell me anything?’ Kirk insisted.

Spock hesitated before replying.

‘All I can tell you is the location of the energy pulse, but its duration was so short I am unable to ascertain its composition.’

‘Where did the pulse occur?’

‘Your quarters Captain.’

Kirk was about to ask a further question when he was interrupted by Chekov entering the bridge. He crossed and stood rigidly in front of his Captain.

‘Keptain?’

Kirk was forced to suppress a smile. Chekov has always had a tendency to become overly tense and serious although this had only become apparent since being assigned to Security where Kirk didn’t believe he was well suited.

‘Ahh, Mr Chekov. Spock says the intruder may have entered my quarters. Please accompany me there.’

‘Yes sir.’

Kirk and Chekov made their way swiftly to Kirk's quarters. Kirk pressed the entry button and the doors slid open. Chekov, phaser drawn, entered first. After a short pause, Chekov returned to the door where Kirk was waiting.

'All clear Keptain.'

Kirk entered and looked around, suddenly aware of how small and bare his quarters were.

'Well Mr Chekov,' Kirk smiled. 'What do you think caused the intruder alert?'

'I'm not sure Sir, but I will work with Mr Spock to analyse what the computer recorded.'

'Keep me informed of your progress.'

'Aye Sir.'

Chekov turned and left the room and Kirk watched him go. He found himself wishing that Chekov would relax more. He'd tried to talk to him informally, but that only seemed to make the young Lieutenant more tense, almost as though Kirk was setting a trap that he was determined to avoid. Kirk had gone so far as to discuss the situation with McCoy who had bluntly informed him that Chekov had always worshipped Kirk since the Academy. He began to model himself on his Captain, hoping to emulate him, but always feeling that he had let him down. Kirk had never felt that Chekov had let him down, but had no way to convey this to his new security officer.

Kirk took a last look around his quarters, sighed and looked longingly at his bunk reluctantly resisting the temptation to take a quick rest; he left and returned to the bridge.

An hour later the sirens went off again. Kirk swung his chair to face the Science station.

‘Spock?’ He enquired.

Slowly Spock turned to face the Captain, a puzzled expression on his face.

‘Most curious. Another energy pulse. Identical to the first and once more located in your quarters.’

Kirk shook his head.

‘What is it Spock? Are the sensors malfunctioning?’

‘I do not believe so Sir,’ Spock replied. ‘But it is a possibility. I will look into it immediately.’

‘And if it isn’t the sensors, what is it?’

‘Unknown.’

‘Care to speculate Spock?’ Kirk asked with a smile.

‘No Sir,’ Spock replied folding his arms.

‘No, I thought not. Let’s rule out equipment failure before we do anything else.’

Then he continued under his breath.

‘Not that there is anything else we can do.’

The sirens were shut off and life returned to normal on the bridge, until it happened again. Red lights and sirens, all putting the bridge crew on edge. Kirk gritted his teeth, swivelled his chair violently and shouted.

‘SPOCK.’

‘Sir?’

‘What is going on?’

‘Unknown.’

‘Don’t keep saying that. What do you know?’

‘The sensors are functioning perfectly,’ Spock said calmly.

‘There is definitely an energy pulse in your quarters, but I cannot tell you what is causing it.’

‘Alright,’ Kirk muttered, hitting the Comm button. ‘Mr Chekov meet me in my quarters.’

As he turned to leave the bridge the Comm was filled with the grumpy voice of Doctor McCoy.

‘Jim what in the hell is going on? Sirens going off, red lights flashing. It’s giving me a headache.’

‘I don’t know Bones,’ Kirk replied. ‘But I intend to find out.’

With that Kirk stormed into the turbo lift and was gone.

Another, more thorough, search of his quarters revealed nothing and a weary Kirk returned to the bridge. In the next three hours the intruder alarm sounded four more times yet despite its frequency, nothing more could be learned, but with each successive alarm made the bridge crew more jumpy. All the crew was feeling on edge, each waiting tensely for the alarm to sound again. Uhura was, for once, glad when her shift ended. When it did she, Sulu and Adams went to the recreation lounge together to get something to eat. Once the meals arrived and they were seated Adams decided to ask her more experienced friends about things that puzzled her. All the time hoping her questions would not be thought stupid.

‘Uhura? You’ve served under Captain Kirk a long time haven’t you?’

Uhura looked up and smiled. As always her radiant smile had the effect of warming whomever it was aimed at.

‘Yes, a lot of years, on and off.’

Uhura saw the young Ensign look down and fidget uncomfortably.

‘What do you want to ask Juliette?’

Adams leant conspiratorially towards Uhura and Sulu before whispering.

‘Does he normally shout at Mr Spock?’

Both Uhura and Sulu leaned back and roared with laughter and Adams was taken aback by their reaction.

‘What’s so funny?’

Uhura had to fight for control of herself before she could answer.

‘The Captain and Mr Spock are as close as brothers, though neither of them would admit that. Right Sulu?’

Sulu nodded before speaking.

‘Seven of us on this ship have been through some tough times together, risked our lives for each other. Risked our careers too, but Spock and the Captain would gladly give their lives for one another. It’s that strong because when Kirk was made Captain, Spock was already second in command under Captain Pike and many of the crew thought that he would get the centre seat, but Kirk got it instead. The youngest Starship Captain ever!

For a while neither Spock nor Scotty really trusted him until he proved he was up to the task. Now those of us who know him wouldn’t serve under anyone else.

Adams was about to ask a further question when Chekov, plate in hand, joined them.

‘Pavel. How is life treating you today?’ Sulu asked clapping his friend on the back.

‘Not well,’ Chekov growled in reply. ‘You know vot has been happening. I’ve been to the Keptains quarters five times now. Vot else can I do? I’m sure he thinks I’m not trying.’

Angrily he stabbed his stroganoff with his fork and Uhura laid a kindly hand on his arm.

‘Pavel, he knows you are good at your job. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Mr Spock doesn’t know what it is either, so calm down and enjoy your food.’

Chekov smiled at her.

‘You think I’m doing okay?’

‘Of course, and so does the Captain or you wouldn’t be doing it. He’d tell you if he was dissatisfied.’

Chekov grunted and Sulu sighed. Sometimes, he thought, it was hard work cheering Chekov up. It must be all those long dark winters in Russia that made him so moody he decided. Unlike Chekov, Sulu was the sort of person who could find a silver lining in the darkest cloud.

‘Never mind Pavel. After dinner I’ll show you the new plant I’ve grown.’

Chekov grimaced and yet another of Sulu’s endless hobbies. He glowered across the table.

‘That is supposed to cheer me up?’

The look on his face made them all laugh.

Chapter Three

Uhura was ready to leave her quarters for duty on the bridge.

‘Just one last quick look in the long mirror,’ she thought. ‘To make sure I look perfect; not that I’m vain,’ she decided.

She smiled to herself.

‘Okay, if I’m honest, maybe I’m just a little bit vain.’

As she studied her reflection she realised that the thought of wrinkles and grey hair did scare her and they did say that space travel ages you prematurely. If only she could have accepted a perfect, ageless body when Harry Mudd had offered it, she mused. She shook her head testily.

‘No, maybe not, immortality would have its drawbacks, everything does.’

She set out for the bridge still thinking about her life and the choices she had made.

To be at the top of her profession she’d had to sacrifice certain things; like a husband, children and family life. You couldn’t take those with you on a Starship voyage, well not yet. She knew she could have transferred to a permanent desk job at Starfleet Command after the first five-year mission, but she knew that after a year, she’d have longed to be back aboard a Starship. Luckily, things had turned out that, not only was she back on the re-vamped Enterprise, but Scotty, Chekov, Spock, McCoy and Kirk had ended up back here too. More by luck and circumstance than by planning, she was sure. Still, she was happy. It was comfortable working with a crew you knew and trusted.

At the turbo lift was Adams, obviously also on her way to the bridge.

‘Hello Uhura,’ she said.

‘Juliette. How are you coping with living in space?’

‘Mmm.’

Adams hesitated before answering.

‘It is different. I know they try to prepare you for it at the Academy, but it still comes as a shock when you go on your first mission.’

Uhura smiled and patted Adams’ arm.

‘You are doing fine. If you have any problems, you come and see me.’

The lift arrived and both women stepped aboard.

‘Bridge,’ Uhura ordered and the lift began to move.

‘I was wondering...’ Adams stopped and glanced at Uhura.

‘Is there a problem?’

‘Well, it’s the Captain.’

Uhura frowned at the Ensigns words.

‘The Captain?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about the Captain?’

Uhura was surprised to see her colleague blush and fidget uncomfortably.

‘Juliette, whatever’s the matter?’

Controlling her embarrassment Adams spoke.

‘This is going to sound stupid.’

She paused then rushed on.

‘I’m frightened of him.’

Uhura burst out laughing.

‘Oh Juliette, Kirk is a pussycat. You shouldn’t be frightened of him. Look, as long as you do your job the best way you know how, he’ll forgive you any mistakes,

and he'll help you all he can. I've served with him for a long time now and he always supports his crewmembers. He's saved this ship, and its crew, countless times, but he's still human and even makes the occasional mistake. There is nothing to be frightened of.'

'Okay,' Adams smiled back, relieved. 'Thanks.'

The doors of the turbo lift opened and the bridge lay before them. With a final smile Uhura crossed to her station and sat down. She settled in for another uneventful duty, or so she thought.

Chapter Four

The hum of the bridge was very soothing once you had worked on it for any length of time. The Enterprise was, to its crew, a living, breathing lady. She seemed to have a personality and a soul and Scotty knew her every mood and whim. He loved her, sometimes fought with her, coaxed her beyond the limits she was capable of and nursed her back to health after her many adventures. Today he was prowling the bridge, a rare event. He was usually found in his beloved engine rooms chivvying his staff, or tinkering with her machinery, but now, two weeks into the journey to Star Base 12 he had run out of things to tinker with.

Doctor McCoy was also on the bridge and he too was bored. Recently, all he'd had to treat were the odd headache and few minor ailments, things he could do with his eyes closed. He had grown grumpier and grumpier until, exasperated Nurse Chapel had sent McCoy up to the bridge to annoy Kirk instead. After a few minutes he had done that, so Kirk had sent him over to Spock for sheer entertainment value while he got on with his paper work. He smiled to himself, wondering how much longer Spock would put up with the Doctor's presence. If their meetings ran true to form, it wouldn't take long for one of their verbal battles to commence. Oh well, Kirk mused, it might liven up the bridge a little as it had been dull lately.

Kirk rubbed his forehead and then massaged his temples, trying to rid himself of the tinkling noise in his head. Since seeing McCoy a couple of days ago, it had become even more persistent and the dreams more vivid. Not that he had told anyone, especially the doctor. After suffering two hours probing in Sickbay, he was not going to go down there again. All McCoy had said was that he needed some rest

and prescribed some sleeping pills. He could have told Bones he needed some rest and it wouldn't have taken him two hours to reach that decision either. The tablets hadn't made any difference to his sleep; he still dreamed and awoke exhausted. He tried Ti-Chi, something he had learnt from Sulu, as it usually relaxed him and gave him peace of mind, but not this time. Before Sulu had shown him the basics, he had tried meditation, but quickly discovered that just sitting down and relaxing was too hard. He always found he had too much pent up energy to get rid of. Ti-Chi, a mixture of controlled breathing and exercise, worked much better. It had been one of Mr Sulu's more useful hobbies. Kirk let out a deep sigh. Life was not too great at the moment and the whole crew was tired and hungry for some shore leave. Thankfully it was only four more days until they reached Star Base 12. His train of thought was disturbed by the awareness of raised voices on the bridge. He turned to face the noise and was not surprised when he was facing the Science station.

'No,' Kirk thought. 'Not a surprise when McCoy and Spock are in close proximity as sparks usually start flying soon enough.'

'Why doctor, Vulcan, of course,' Spock said.

His arms characteristically folded across his chest.

'Why of course?'

Spock raised an eyebrow and looked at Kirk.

'Captain, should the good doctor be on the bridge? Would his time not be better served in Sickbay practising with his beads and rattles?'

McCoy began to bristle.

'My beads and rattles, as you call them Mr Spock, have saved you more than once, I seem to recall.'

The doctor turned to face Kirk.

‘Are you just going to sit there and let this pointy eared devil insult you’re Medical Officer?’

Kirk raised his hands above his head.

‘Bones leave me out of this. I’m sure you can give as good as you get.’

McCoy frowned and grumbled to himself.

‘It’s a sad day when a poor old country GP can be attacked by a computer on legs and my friends...’ Here he stared hard at Kirk. ‘Won’t come to my aid. What is the universe coming to?’

The last statement caused a chuckle to pass round the bridge crew, as each knew just how helpless Doctor McCoy wasn’t.

‘Och, doctor, we’ll help you against the devil if you go easy on us during our next medical,’ Scotty laughed.

The engineer was well aware of the ordeal of one of McCoy’s famous physicals.

‘Huh, I’m not in that much danger Scotty.’

The entire bridge joined in the ensuing laughter. Uhura, who enjoyed the continual sparring between McCoy and Spock, returned her attention to her Comm console to see that a message was being directed at the Enterprise.

‘Captain, there is an incoming message from Starfleet.’

Kirk turned his chair to face forward.

‘On screen.’

‘Yes Sir. It’s Admiral Kovak.’

She pressed a button on her console and the Admiral’s face appeared on the main view screen.

‘Jim.’

‘Bob. Good to see you. What can I do for you?’

‘I think I may take that welcoming smile off your face Jim. I don’t think you’re going to like what I’m about to say.’

A feeling of dread filled Kirk, but he kept the smile and forced his voice to remain neutral.

‘Oh, what’s wrong Bob?’

‘I’m afraid I must order you to divert to Alcany in the Peleides system at your best speed. They have made a request to join the Federation and you are the only ship in the quadrant. This is a first contact, something you and your crew have ample experience of.’

‘But Admiral,’ Kirk protested. ‘We are all in need of shore leave. This will make it the third time it’s been postponed.’

‘I’m well aware of that Jim, and I’m truly sorry, but you are virtually there already. You have the necessary experience for such a delicate diplomatic mission. The Alcanii have never allowed contact with other planets until now. It was a surprise to us all, so you can see how important this is to the Federation and how it has to be handled with kid gloves.’

Kirk’s smile had now faded to be replaced by a frown.

‘Yes Bob, I know how important it is to make the right impression. I just wish someone else were available.’

The Admiral smiled.

‘I promise you shore leave as soon as this mission is completed. All you have to do is be charming and diplomatic for a few days. Just listen to what they want to say. Not too hard for someone like you.’

‘Yes Admiral.’

Kirk's reply had no enthusiasm.

'Good luck Jim. Kovak out.'

As the image on the screen faded away, a heavy silence filled the bridge. Kirk gave a heavy sigh.

'Ensign Adams, plot a course to Alcany Epsion.'

'Aye Sir.'

'Sulu, what is our estimated time of arrival?'

At the helm Sulu did a quick mental calculation.

'Twenty seven hours at present speed Captain.'

'Fine,' Kirk said absently.

He looked around the bridge very aware of the long faces that looked back at him. He was as disappointed as they were, but didn't feel in the mood for a pep talk. As Captain he knew that breaking good news, and bad, was his responsibility.

'Uhura, open a channel to all decks.'

'Channel open Sir.'

'This is the Captain.'

Kirk hesitated, trying to find better words with which to tell his crew that shore leave had been delayed for a third time.

'We have been ordered by Starfleet to divert to Alcany Epsion to make first contact with its population. I know you were all looking forward to the delights of Star Base 12, but our primary mission is to contact new life forms and civilisations. We are honoured to be chosen to be the first to meet the Alcanii.'

He paused while the news sank in.

'Therefore, we shall be a few days late in reaching Star Base 12, but I know you will agree with me that first contact missions are a rare privilege and worth sacrificing

a few days shore leave. We will arrive at Alcany Epsom in twenty-seven hours.

Captain out.'

McCoy had used the Captains announcement to move behind Kirk. Once Kirk had finished McCoy leaned over Kirk's shoulder and whispered.

'Hogwash.'

Kirk sighed again; he too was unimpressed by this further delay in reaching the Star Base.

'Bones, a man's got to do what a man's go to do.'

'Well this man is going to get himself outside a glass of Romulan ale. Care to join me?'

Kirk pursed his lips, then nodded and strode to the turbo lift, where he turned to his Science Officer.

'Mind the store Spock,' he said as he and the doctor left the bridge.

Chapter Five

Kirk settled himself into one of McCoy's armchairs watching the doctor pour the two drinks from his extensive, and often illegal, drinks cabinet. Kirk often thought that this bar was as good as any to be found on any Star Base and a lot cheaper and friendlier.

'It's funny how much more comfortable I feel in Bones' quarters than I do in my own,' he thought.

He looked around him, and although the cabin was the same size as his, it always seemed bigger, warmer and down right homely. The walls held many pictures and photographs of family and home. There were more standing on the old wooden desk, with an antique lamp and rugs covered the floor. All the furniture was made from natural fabrics and wood, instead of Starfleet issue that Kirk hadn't bothered to change. It suited the crusty doctor to a tee and felt like a small piece of Georgia in space. He was startled from his reverie by McCoy's voice.

'Here you go Jim.'

Kirk took the glass of sapphire blue Romulan ale.

'Thanks Bones.'

McCoy settled himself opposite Kirk, took a drink from his own glass, smiled and sighed with pleasure.

'Almost as good as a mint julep.'

'Yes,' Kirk agreed. 'The one thing the Romulan's do right is make this stuff.'

Kirk lapsed into silence and McCoy cocked his head to one side and watched for a moment.

'Penny for them.'

Kirk looked confused by McCoy's words.

'I'm sorry Bones.'

'Your thoughts. A penny for your thoughts. You looked miles away.'

Kirk smiled his lopsided smile that melted ladies across the galaxy.

'Not worth a penny Bones.'

'I'd still like to hear them,' McCoy persisted.

Kirk merely stared off into space.

'Come on Jim, give a little.'

Kirk maintained his silence for a time before taking another drink.

'I was wondering, how come someone who has spent as long in space as you have, still has his quarters like a room on Earth?'

McCoy smiled, his eyes shining mischievously.

'You know I never really intended to work in space. If things had gone differently I'd still be practising medicine in Atlanta.'

Kirk nodded as he knew that it was the breakdown of McCoy's marriage that had made him enlist in Starfleet. It was in a Starfleet hospital where Kirk had been admitted after being injured on the Farragut, that they had met. McCoy had been instrumental in putting Kirk back together. Kirk's thoughts recalled that that was where he had met and fallen in love with Carol Markus. It was later when he was promoted to Captain and given the Enterprise he had been delighted to find that McCoy was to be his Chief Medical Officer.

'Do you regret leaving Earth Bones?'

'If I'm honest about it, probably not. I know I grumble about how unnatural space travel is, but I wouldn't have missed all the adventures you keep finding for us for the world.'

He chuckled and finished his ale.

‘How about you Jim? How did you get space fever?’

Kirk looked uncomfortable. He didn’t like talking about his early life, not even with an old friend like Bones.

‘I suppose it was inevitable with a father in Starfleet.’

‘But you were born in Iowa weren’t you? Hardly the first place you think of as the breeding ground for future Starfleet Captains.’

Kirk gave a short, explosive laugh.

‘You’re right there. I was brought up on a farm with cornfields as far as you could see in every direction. I remember the blue of the vast skies and the gold of the ripening corn. I loved the openness and the farm horses Sam and I rode whenever we could.’

He stopped suddenly, aware that he may be saying too much. McCoy was just getting interested. It struck him just how little he knew about the young Jim Kirk and that Kirk rarely spoke of his time before Starfleet.

‘Go on,’ McCoy urged.

‘I’ll go on for another glass of ale Bar Keeper,’ Kirk said handing McCoy his empty glass.

‘You drive a hard bargain,’ McCoy grumbled. ‘Do you know how hard it is to get hold of this stuff?’

Kirk grimaced.

‘I can imagine, and I don’t want to know how you manage it either.’

McCoy touched the side of his nose with his index finger and said, conspiratorially.

‘Mum’s the word.’

He handed Kirk his replenished glass and returned to his seat.

‘Now continue.’

Kirk nodded and after sipping his drink he said.

‘The farm came from my mother’s family. She was born there and she loved it so. I don’t know how she and Dad got together as they were so different. He was already in Starfleet and waiting for his posting when they were married. It was a bit of a whirlwind marriage.’

He smiled at his captivated audience.

‘Mother wanted Dad to stay on Earth, but he wanted a career in space. I think she thought he wouldn’t go when they married, but he did. He was away for two years. While he was away, Sam was born. Mother lived with her parents on the farm and brought Sam up until Dad came home for a visit. I really don’t know why she stayed married to him. She didn’t want to go into space and he couldn’t stay away from it. I came on the scene eight years after Sam. You know Bones, its funny when I look back, and I never really felt part of the family.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I felt like the odd one out. I’m not sure I was a welcome addition to the family.’

‘Why the blazes do you say that?’

Kirk’s brow furrowed as he tried to find the right words. For a moment McCoy thought he wasn’t going to say any more.

‘I think they would have separated if I hadn’t come along. I always felt an air of resentment in the background. On the surface Sam and I were treated the same, but underneath there was a difference. I was always jealous of Sam; he could do no wrong, whereas I never seemed to measure up to George Kirk’s expectations. Sam was the brainy one, the Scientist. I have to admit, my school grades could have been better.’

He smiled ruefully and McCoy looked puzzled.

‘How could you have got into the Academy with bad school grades?’

‘I ran away from home.’

McCoy gave a double take and his mouth dropped open.

‘You ran away?’

Kirk nodded.

‘Yes. It turned out to be the best thing I ever did. It changed my life forever.’

‘How so?’

‘I was fifteen when a group of us ran away to sea. We made it all the way to San Francisco. I guess I was always a sailor at heart. We got caught trying to board a ship. My father came to get me; he was so angry I thought I was dead. He always scared me, but I wasn’t going to let him know that. I was the epitome of the sullen, disinterested youth.’

Kirk had the grace to look ashamed.

‘I’d have loved to have seen that,’ McCoy laughed.

‘I don’t think you would have,’ Kirk denied. ‘I was awful. A real pain in the neck. So my father decided I needed more discipline so he took me into space with him on a ‘safe’ trip with Captain April. I rebelled against this, as I didn’t want to go into space at all. That seems strange now, after spending half of my life in space. Back then, the only time I’d been in space was to Tarsus 4 to witness Kodo’s handiwork.’

‘Ah yes,’ McCoy said. ‘The Executioner. Wasn’t that where you saved Kevin Riley?’

Kirk blushed and mumbled.

‘Yes, well, I couldn’t let him be killed, he was only six. You know what the Native Americans say though; ‘if you save someone’s life you are responsible for

them forever'. That's a bit how I feel about Kevin. It's hard being his Commanding Officer. Am I being fair to him, or being over-protective? Not sending him on landing parties? What do you think Bones?'

'You are always fair Jim, but don't change the subject. What happened when you went on that trip with your father?'

'I grew up fast,' Kirk said with a hint of bitterness. 'I said it was supposed to be a safe trip, but you know how my luck runs? It's never that simple.'

McCoy nodded sympathetically as wherever James T Kirk went, trouble was never far behind. Kirk continued his story.

'We were attacked by pirates and it was a close thing as to who was going to survive. My father put me into an escape pod, but I managed to board one of the pirate ships and throw a few spanners into the works. The pirate was disabled through my efforts. It was the first time dad was proud of me. Captain April also took an interest in me, encouraging me, and when my grades improved, he recommended me to the Academy.'

Kirk took another drink.

'The rest is history, but, you know, even when I was best cadet and got into Command School, I still felt I hadn't lived up to Dad's hopes. Maybe I've just got a stroke of paranoia, or a deep seated inferiority complex.'

Kirk stared, morosely into his glass. With some surprise it slowly dawned on McCoy that Jim was serious, he really did feel inferior. For the first time in his life McCoy didn't know what to say. He was saved further effort by the sirens going off. Kirk was up and out of the doctor's quarters before McCoy had registered what the noise was. McCoy shook his head in wonder as he'd never imagined that Kirk was unsure of himself.

‘You learn something new every day,’ he thought.

Chapter Six

For the next three hours the ship was in turmoil. The sirens would go off and a security team would race to the location of the intruder, but each time they discovered nothing. Kirk sat slumped in his Command chair massaging his temples with his fingers, exasperated by the infernal din made by the alarms which had given him a massive headache. Chekov stood at his side, stiff as a ramrod reporting the Security team's findings.

'The teams have found no sign of any intruder Keptain. Every time we reach the location indicated, we find nothing.'

Kirk saw how uncomfortable Chekov was looking and asked gently.

'Tricorder readings Chekov?'

'Negative Keptain,' Chekov replied, shaking his head and looking very forlorn.

'Anything you can tell us Spock?'

The Vulcan looked up from his viewer.

'The energy pulses are much stronger than the last time they occurred. They are definitely some kind of life-form, but their origin and intentions are unknown at this time.'

'Hmm, care to tell me what these life-forms might be?'

Spock raised an eyebrow.

'No Captain.'

'Don't want to be wrong, eh Spock?' McCoy needed.

'I fail to see how I could be wrong Doctor, when I have insufficient data for an answer.'

‘Don’t you go twisting things into your usual double-talk Spock. You won’t speculate in case you get it all completely wrong and we find out that you are as fallible as the rest of us.’

‘Doctor,’ Spock spoke quietly and levelly. ‘I have told the Captain all I know at this time. It would be illogical to speculate any further. It may even be dangerous to do so.’

With that he turned his back firmly on McCoy and back to his viewer.

‘I think Spock won that round Bones,’ Kirk said with a grin.

The ship returned to a semblance of normality. No further intruder alarms and Kirk began to watch the stars and daydream. A small perk of being Captain, Kirk always felt. His dreams were interrupted by Uhura.

‘An incoming message from Starfleet Captain.’

‘On screen Uhura.’

‘Aye Sir, its Admiral Kovak.’

The screen burst into life showing the face of the admiral sitting in front of them.

‘Jim why is the Enterprise diverting to Alcany Epsilon?’

Kirk was momentarily too stunned to reply. He finally found his voice.

‘What’s that?’

On screen, Kovak leant forward.

‘Why are you going towards Alcany Epsilon? We are expecting you at Star Base 12 in four days time.’

‘But Admiral, you ordered us to Alcany Epsilon. We will be there in less than a day.’

Kovak looked taken aback.

‘That’s impossible. I haven’t been in touch with you since the Halley incident.’

‘Yes Sir, you did,’ Kirk maintained. ‘Seven hours ago I took a message from you right here on the bridge.’

Kovak shook his head.

‘I don’t understand this; have you a recording of this message?’

Kirk nodded and turned to Uhura.

‘Lieutenant, replay the last message back to the Admiral.’

Uhura acknowledged the Captains order and pressed the required buttons on her console. Kovak watched the replayed message with growing disbelief, but waited until it had played out fully before speaking.

‘This is incredible. That was certainly me, but it wasn’t, if you see what I mean? Jim, I did not send that message. We have not been contacted by the Alcanii.’

Kirk frowned; his head seemed to throb even more with each additional problem. He felt deathly tired, as though he could sleep for a month. Every bone in his body ached as they cried out for rest, but all he seemed to be getting were more problems. He sighed deeply and looked at the face staring at him from the screen.

‘Bob, what do you want me to do? Head for Star Base 12 or head for Alcany?’

The admiral seemed to make a decision.

‘Continue on course for Alcany Epsilon for now. I’ll get in touch with the Council and see what they advise, but on no account enter the inner system without hearing from me first. Acknowledge.’

‘Acknowledged Sir, Kirk out.’

As the screen went black, McCoy let out a long, low whistle.

‘Now that got him in a tizzy.’

Kirk half smiled at McCoy.

‘I can’t say it did much for me.’

He turned to Uhura.

‘Lieutenant, where did that message originate from if it didn’t come from Starfleet?’

Uhura looked lost.

‘I don’t know Sir. I was sure it came from Starfleet. I still would be if it weren’t for that last message.’

‘Can you find out where it did come from?’

‘I’ll try Sir.’

She turned her back on her console and started work just as Spock spoke from his station.

‘Captain, if the lieutenant was so sure that the first message was genuine, can we be sure that the last one was, or are we being manipulated by someone or something else?’

Kirk mentally kicked himself for not realising that possibility.

‘Comment Uhura?’

She sighed, took out her earpiece and looked at Kirk with troubled eyes.

‘I am as certain as I can be that the last message was genuine, but....’

She shrugged, but Kirk insisted.

‘You thought that last time.’

‘Yes Sir.’

Kirk suddenly grew tired of games.

‘Alright Lieutenant, do your best.’

He turned to Bones, expecting a little light relief, but he seemed as puzzled and confused as the rest of them.

The crew continued with their duties. Lieutenant Uhura began to detect a faint tinkling sound which made her uneasy. It was very faint, but to someone trained to listen, as she was, it penetrated her consciousness. To her, it seemed like the old fashioned wind chimes she remembered from her grandfather's house on Earth, softly moving in the warm African breeze, but there were no breezes, or wind chimes on the bridge of the Enterprise. She turned her head gently; trying to determine from which direction the noise was coming. As she turned, a flickering light caught her attention. She gave an audible gasp, there seemed to be a flickering cloud of light next to Kirk and, as she watched it, it began to take shape. To Uhura it seemed to be taking the shape of a woman. Uhura realised that Kirk was staring into the cloud, seemingly unaware of anything else. She found her voice and called out softly.

'Mr Spock, look.'

Spock turned to follow the direction she indicated as all the bridge crew became aware of what was happening. The noise had increased and the air was full of the smell of spices. McCoy moved toward the Captain.

'Jim...' He began, but was stopped by Spock.

'Do not touch him Doctor. Keep away.'

Spock turned to Uhura.

'Have a Security team sent here immediately.'

'Aye Sir.' Uhura responded. 'Security to the bridge.'

McCoy moved alongside Spock.

'What is it Spock?'

'I do not know yet Doctor, but it seems to want the Captain.'

As he spoke, Spock pulled a Tricorder from his belt and began to take readings.

‘Damn it Spock, what do we do? It could kill Jim.’

“I don’t believe its intention is to hurt the Captain, Doctor. If it was it could have done so already. Fascinating, it is registering as an identical energy signature to the pulses that have been entering the ship for some time. It has managed to do this through our shields; therefore, it is far more advanced, or more powerful than we are. If it were hostile we would be disabled by now.’

The figure had now fully materialised into a beautiful, ethereal woman and then the Captain was gradually enveloped by a gold sparkling cloud; totally oblivious to everything else. The tinkling sound began to rise and fall, as though emulating speech, but no words were heard. Spock turned to Uhura.

‘Lieutenant, this sound, is it a language? Turn on the language computers, access the records and analyse.’

Uhura took a deep breath to regain her composure and reluctantly turned back to her console to carry out Spock’s orders. The cloud over the Captain seemed to have grown thinner as the woman reached out with her hand and touched the Captain’s cheek. He immediately crumpled into his chair without a sound. As the bridge crew gasped with concern and moved to their Captain, the woman vanished.

‘Jim,’ McCoy shouted, leaping to Kirk’s side, medical scanner already in his hand. He quickly scanned the Captain and, with anxious eyes, turned to Spock.

‘His life signs are very weak. I don’t know what she did, but we must get him to Sickbay.’

Uhura didn’t need telling, she punched a button to contact Sickbay.

‘Nurse Chapel, medical emergency on the bridge.’

‘On our way,’ Chapel’s calm voice replied.

Spock had joined McCoy at the Captain’s side.

‘What damage has the Captain sustained Doctor?’

McCoy glared at the First Officer.

‘Damn it Spock, I don’t know yet. All I do know is that his heart rate, pulse and blood pressure are low and he has to get to Sickbay, or he will die.’

‘I see,’ Spock replied coolly.

Spock’s indifference made McCoy’s blood boil, but before he could reply Nurse Chapel and her team arrived on the bridge. Even McCoy was surprised at the speed with which they had reached the bridge.

‘How did you get here so fast Christine?’ McCoy asked.

Chapel frowned.

‘We were ordered here five minutes ago Doctor.’

‘Impossible,’ Spock said. ‘The Captain was only attacked fifty-seven seconds ago.’

McCoy, pausing from assisting getting Kirk on a stretcher, turned to Spock.

‘I don’t give a damn who told them, just so long as they get the Captain to Sickbay fast. Now get out of the way.’ McCoy shouted at all of them as he left the bridge with Kirk and his team.

Spock was left standing by the empty Command chair. After a moments thought he raised an eyebrow and said.

‘Fascinating.’

Chapter Seven

The Sickbay on the Enterprise had witnessed many scenes of crises and more than its fair share of tragic deaths. There were four Diagnostic beds in this sector of the Medical section and there was a further five similar Sickbays on different decks of the ship, but this was the central one, McCoy's headquarters. The medical equipment aboard a Starship was varied and vast in scope. The very nature of the ship's purpose made this essential. No one could predict what situations, life forms; new diseases or injuries the Chief Medical Officer may be faced with. On many occasions doctors were forced to invent new pieces of equipment, vaccines and medicines whilst light years from the nearest Star Base. McCoy himself had some pieces of equipment named after him when he had been forced to improvise on Enterprise's many adventures.

McCoy stood next to one of the tables watching the dials anxiously as they began to slowly respond. He let out a long breath; vaguely realising he had been holding it in, and started to relax. Kirk's vital signs gradually started to return to normal. The doctor smiled across the body of his patient at Nurse Chapel.

'I think he'll make it Christine,' he said.

She gratefully returned the smile.

'Yes, thank goodness, but what happened to him? He has no burn marks, but his symptoms pointed to him being electrocuted.'

'I agree. Very similar symptoms. An alien woman touched him and he just collapsed. No cry, no nothing. It's all very strange. Thankfully he's in great physical shape, not that I'd ever tell him that.'

'No you never do.'

Kirk's voice came from the table between them. McCoy looked down into a pair of hazel eyes regarding him from the pillow.

'In fact, you always say I could be fitter and leaner.'

The doctor smiled and patted Kirk's arm.

'Well Jim, I only have your best interests at heart. If I told you that you were fit enough you might not keep on training as hard as you do and then, when you need added stamina, you wouldn't have it, would you?'

'Your logic is faultless. Have you been taking lessons off Spock while my back was turned?'

McCoy saw the smile on Kirk's face and grumbled.

'There's no need to be insulting Jim.'

McCoy helped Kirk to sit up and he groaned as he swung his legs over the side of the table.

'Oh Bones, I ache all over. I feel like I've spent another day on Triskellion.'

The doctor ran his scanner over Kirk's body.

'Well, no permanent damage that I can see, but all your muscles have spasmed so you're going to ache for a day or two. What do you remember?'

Kirk rubbed his neck gingerly and a slow smile spread across his features.

'Oh I remember everything she told me.'

He paused, the dreamy expression he'd had on the bridge returning to his face.

McCoy frowned, and then relaxed as Kirk's expression returned to normal like the face of a man in command of a Star ship. Kirk jumped down from the table.

'I'll put you out of your misery in thirty minutes Bones when you meet me in Briefing Room 2.'

Before McCoy could react, Kirk strode from the Sickbay. As the doors closed behind him he left behind him one frustrated but curious doctor and nurse.

Chapter Eight

The scene in Briefing Room 2 was like any meeting anywhere before the proceeding gets under way. Mankind hadn't really changed much for all their technology and space travel. Humans still behaved much as their ancestors had done back on Earth, even if they had been born there or on some distant planet. Kirk paused at the door for a moment to survey the room. It was a fairly small conference room dominated by a table that sat eight to ten people. A library console sat in the middle of the table, accessible to all. There was a food replicator on one wall, but the room contained little else. It was a working room, unlike the larger, more comfortable Briefing Room 1. The more impressive room, however, was only used on diplomatic missions.

There were seven people in the room awaiting Kirk's arrival, chatting and drinking coffee. Kirk smiled to himself, he didn't know what reaction he was going to get from them to his news, but he knew he'd better get on with it and find out. As he entered the room the chatter died away and they all sat at the table. Kirk sat at the end of the table and regarded the others in the room. Present were Spock, McCoy, Uhura, Scotty, Sulu, Chekov and Adams. With some warmth Kirk realised that with one exception, Adams, these people had been more like a family to him than a crew. He trusted them and they returned that trust. He smiled at Adams, the new member of the team and discovered she was well worth smiling at. A tall, willowy girl, with golden red hair in a bob and huge green eyes. No wonder Sulu was spending so much time helping her, he thought. He cleared his throat.

'I'm sure you are all curious to know what happened on the bridge.'

'That's an understatement,' McCoy muttered.

Kirk frowned at him and continued.

‘The alien you saw was from Alcany Epsilon, the largest planet in the Paleiades system. As you witnessed, their technology is far more advanced than ours and they have no need of vehicles to travel through space. It was they who were responsible for the false Starfleet transmission, Uhura.’

Uhura smiled.

‘That’s good to know Captain. I couldn’t discover how they got that message to the ship. How did they manage it? It was perfect, down to the last detail.’

‘I know, and they apologise for the subterfuge, but they have been trying to contact us for a long time. They decided that a message from Starfleet would be easier to accept than an unexpected contact from Alcany; more so when they have not made contact before.’

‘Captain,’ Spock interrupted. ‘That is illogical. Why not contact Starfleet directly if they wish to join the Federation? There should be a full diplomatic team to make contact and talk with them. Why would they want a Starship to contact them first?’

‘Aye Sir,’ Scotty added. ‘Why do they want contact with the Enterprise?’

Kirk laid his hands on the table, looked at the faces around him and thought before replying.

‘I can only tell you what they told me. Their planet’s system is very inter-dependent and there has been no need to contact other worlds. They have, however, been monitoring what goes on around them in the galaxy. They have watched the people of the Earth grow, become less warlike and evolve. The Federation is now a very stable and peace orientated alliance, which has impressed them. They now feel its beliefs coincide with their way of life, so they are more confident we will be able to work together without harming their way of life. They also acknowledge that they

can offer us some technological advances that would aid us in understanding the universe. In return, they would gain certain amounts of security from other, hostile peoples.’

He looked at his senior officers who seemed unsure of how to respond. McCoy, with his usual habit, spoke before anyone else.

‘That’s all very cosy Jim, but you could have been killed when she touched you. If you had a weak heart, a shock like that would have killed you instantly.’

Kirk nodded.

‘I realise that Bones, but I’m not saying we should go there innocently and unprotected, but I genuinely feel they mean us no harm. What’s your view Spock?’

‘Captain, I am concerned with some of what you have told us. I am wondering why they should want to make contact with the Federation at all. They are more advanced than we are. We could not help them technologically and their force field that envelops their planetary system has kept out all life forms for an estimated five thousand years. They have no need of protection from ‘hostile’ other worlds with such advanced shields. So, what do they want of us? We seem unable to offer them anything of value; therefore, it is illogical for them to invite us to their planet.’

‘Captain, I agree with Mr Spock,’ Sulu said. ‘We have tried to contact the Alcanii for years, but our most advanced sensors cannot penetrate their shields. Our current weapon systems wouldn’t even dent those same shields, not even photon torpedoes.’

‘Yes Mr Sulu, but this time they have invited us. Gentlemen, it would be most impolite to say ‘no thank you’.’

His comment failed to elicit any enthusiasm from his other officers. He tried again.

‘Where’s your spirit of adventure? We will be the first humans to see Alcany. That’s something to tell your grandchildren.’

‘Ha, only if we live to have any,’ McCoy retorted.

Kirk saw Scotty nod his head in agreement and he felt a wave of disappointment.

This was not going quite as he had hoped. He turned to Sulu.

‘How long before we reach the Alcany system?’

‘At present speed, thirty four minutes Captain,’ Sulu replied.

With a nod, Kirk turned to Uhura.

‘Lieutenant, how long to send a message to Starbase 12 and receive a reply?’

‘Approximately thirty minutes Captain. We are very close.’

‘Right, Uhura send a message to Starbase 12, to Admiral Kovak. Tell him what has happened and that we intend to enter a standard orbit of Alcany Epsion to make further contact with its leaders. Ask for Starfleet’s permission to open diplomatic relations with them. Try to get a reply before we reach Alcany Epsion.’

‘Aye Sir.’

Uhura rose swiftly and left the briefing room at a trot.

‘Sulu, when we reach Alcany Epsion we will need to lower shields and establish a standard orbit. Once we achieve orbit you may start scanning the planet’s surface. I want to know what’s down there.’

Sulu nodded.

‘Ensign Adams, you will assist Mr Sulu in collecting this data and feeding it to the Science Station.’

‘Yes Sir,’ she replied nervously.

‘Chekov, if we receive permission to beam down to the planet’s surface, I will require you and two security officers to accompany the landing party. Please select two suitable personnel, preferably experienced crewmembers who are not threatening in appearance. We will be guests, not invaders.’

Chekov nodded and said.

‘I know just the right officers you need. Grimes and Carella.’

Kirk nodded in agreement with Chekov’s choice.

‘They will do just fine. We will carry phasers, but let’s not be obvious about it.

Scotty, the Enterprise will be in your capable hands.’

‘Aye Sir,’ Scotty replied morosely. He hated being Captain, even for short periods, he preferred the engine room.

‘I suppose you wish to accompany Spock and myself, Bones?’

‘You bet I do. I wouldn’t miss this for worlds, even if I do have to have my atoms scattered all over the universe by that contraption.’

‘I’ll have you know, doctor, that my contraption is perfectly safe,’ Scotty bristled, affronted by the doctor’s remark.

‘Then let’s get to it,’ Kirk said, smiling as he began to leave the room.

The others followed him back to the bridge.

Chapter Nine

One hour, thirty minutes later, the Enterprise had firmly established itself in a standard orbit around Alcany Epon. Kirk sat in his Command chair and, with his senior officers, regarded the beautiful sight of the planet shown on the screen. The planet was mostly blue, but its landmasses showed up pastel pink, its mountains in light green. For a time, no one spoke, all mesmerised by the beauty of the planet that lay before them.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Uhura murmured.

‘Indeed it is,’ McCoy agreed from his position alongside Kirk.

Of the bridge crew, only Spock had his attention fixed on his console.

‘The planet has a standard oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere and Earth-like gravity. Quite habitable for humans.’

‘Thank you, Mr Spock,’ Kirk said without taking his eyes from the screen.

He rose from his chair and moved to stand behind Sulu.

‘Are you scanning the surface Mr Sulu?’ Kirk asked.

Sulu adjusted a number of controls before saying.

‘Recording now Sir.’

‘Uhura, hail the surface and let them know we are here, but let’s be polite about it.’

‘Aye Sir. Hailing on all frequencies.’

Kirk resumed his seat, trying to relax, whilst watching Sulu, Adams and Spock begin their task of surveying and analysing the surface. McCoy prowled the bridge restlessly, an action that Kirk found vaguely irritating.

‘Bones,’ he snapped. ‘Keep still, you’re beginning to get on my nerves.’

McCoy looked a little surprised by Kirk’s attitude and glanced at the Captain.

‘Sorry Jim,’ he mumbled and leant against the command chair. ‘Little touchy aren’t we?’

‘Sorry Bones, I just get a gut feeling that there is more to this than we are being told.’

‘The way our luck’s been running the last few months, I’d lay money on that.’ Both men had the same thought as in the last two months; Enterprise had been scheduled for shore leave and a refit three times. Each time they had been forced to divert onto another assignment, with near fatal consequences. McCoy still had nightmares from being nearly frozen to death on the shuttle Halley. He had been forced, on that occasion, into having to deal with a badly injured Sulu, Kirk’s serious leg injury, a moody security officer and a suicidal engineer. McCoy remembered how Scotty had tried to repair a disabled shuttle from the outside while asteroids threatened the small craft and these memories caused him to give an involuntary shudder.

‘At least Starfleet has decided to give us the go ahead to talk to the Alcanii, so I do have some authority.’

Kirk rubbed his forehead, still plagued by a headache.

‘You know Bones,’ Kirk whispered. ‘Sometimes I’d just like to say to Spock, or Scotty, you make the decisions. You be responsible for four hundred lives. You get us out of this situation, because, sometimes, I haven’t a clue what to do.’

‘But you won’t do that, will you?’

‘No, as the saying goes, the buck stops here.’

‘You couldn’t do anything else Jim, you are a born leader.’

Kirk sighed heavily.

‘I know. I’d make a terrible Ensign. Probably get Court Marshalled for insubordination.’

Both men laughed at that, Kirk having already survived a court marshal as Captain.

‘I have a message coming in from the Alcanii Captain,’ Uhura said.

‘On screen Lieutenant.’

‘Aye Sir, it’s Kaynor of the Alcany Counsel.’

The viewing screen changed from the view of the planet, to the surface, which appeared to be covered with a swirling pink mist. Through the mist stepped two figures, one male and one female. Both were incredibly beautiful, young and graceful, each wearing diaphanous robes of pink, violet and blue. The male stood ahead of his companion.

‘Welcome to you all. We have waited a long time to greet our cousins from the planet Earth. Now you are here and we rejoice at your coming.’

Bemused Kirk stood.

‘Thank you for your invitation. As you know, I am Captain James T Kirk in command of the United Federation of Planets Starship Enterprise. The Counsel has given me full authority to talk with your people with regard to joining our Federation.’

The two beings exchanged a look; a look, which Kirk felt sure, was some method of communication. Kirk waited and watched the two aliens. The woman appeared to be the same one that had been on the bridge and had touched him. Eventually, the man turned back to face Kirk.

‘Captain we would be delighted to talk with you. We feel our planet is very beautiful and would like to show it to you. We would be honoured if you would beam down and talk to us directly.’

As he finished, the man bowed from the waist.

Kirk turned to Spock.

‘Options?’

‘We have little choice but to beam down Captain, as that is why we came here, but I would advise caution. As yet we have not located any large areas of civilisation as we know it. No cities or other large structures although the atmosphere is compatible to human life. That is all we do know for certain.’

‘Hmm.’

Kirk turned back to the screen and the waiting Alcanii.

‘We would like to meet you in person Kaynor. Would you provide us with co-ordinates that we may beam down?’

‘They are already in your computers Captain.’ Kaynor replied with a half smile.

‘Mr Sulu can you confirm that?’ Kirk asked with surprise in his voice.

Sulu scanned his instruments.

‘Yes Sir, the co-ordinates are there, but there is something else that wasn’t there five minutes ago.’

Kirk moved to Sulu’s position.

‘There Sir.’

Kirk looked at the screen indicated by his helmsman and saw that the sensors were now registering large cities. In the middle of one of them were the co-ordinates for the beam down point.

‘I don’t understand,’ Kirk said turning to Spock. ‘I thought you said there were no cities down there?’

Spock, who was hunched over his scanner, straightened and turned to Kirk.

‘That is correct Captain. That city was not there before. Now it is.’

‘Explanation?’

‘None Sir. All I can tell you is that we scanned that area before the Alcanii made contact and it registered no structures of any kind. Now there appears to be a flourishing city on the site. Fascinating.’

‘I’m sure it is Mr Spock. Is the equipment malfunctioning?’

‘The equipment is working perfectly. I cannot explain why, or how, those structures appeared. Only that they are there now.’

Kirk turned back to the screen and smiled at the Alcanii.

‘We will beam down to your co-ordinates shortly. I look forward to speaking to you and seeing Alcany.’

Both beings smiled at his words and the screen faded back to the view of the planet.

Kirk turned to his crew.

‘Uhura, contact Mr Chekov and his two security officers. Have them meet us in the transporter room. I think dress uniforms will be appropriate gentlemen, as we are representing the Federation.’

Kirk was watching McCoy as he said those words and sure enough the doctor rolled his eyes in horror.

‘Not those uncomfortable straight-jackets Jim,’ he cried.

‘I know how you love to dress up to impress Bones,’ Kirk said as the landing party headed for the turbo lift. ‘You will knock them dead in that uniform.’

‘If it doesn’t asphyxiate me first.’

Kirk laughed at his discomfort as he entered the lift. Behind them Scotty reluctantly took the centre seat.

Chapter Ten

Eight shimmering columns of light appeared on the surface of the planet and as the light faded, the eight members of the landing party took its place. Kirk gave the area a quick look over; aware of the spicy smell in the air and the faint tinkling sound carried on the breeze. They had materialised in a plaza surrounded by tall, elegant buildings, which shimmered with many colours. The sky was a combination of pink with blue striations; it was the reflected light that changed the colour of the buildings around them. The changes in colour were continuous and, at times, too bright to look at. Both Spock and Sulu were taking readings with their tricorders. McCoy moved to stand beside Kirk.

‘Jim,’ he said. ‘This place is what you described to me when you told me about your dreams, isn’t it?’

‘Yes Bones, it is,’ Kirk replied. ‘But why or how could I have dreamt about this place when I’ve never been here before and didn’t know what it was like?’

‘Precognition?’

Kirk glanced at McCoy.

‘How much do you know about that subject Bones?’

McCoy looked affronted.

‘A lot more than you do. It is an acceptable answer now, along with telekinesis, astral projection and reincarnation.’

Spock stopped Kirk from pursuing the subject.

‘Captain, the buildings around us are not what they appear to be.’

‘Oh? What are they then?’

‘They are not solid structures. In fact, they are vibrating slowly and give the appearance of being solid when they are not.’

‘Are you saying that they are illusory Spock?’

Spock gave a final look at his tricorder before replying.

‘No Captain, not illusions, but not solid as, for example, the Enterprise is solid.’

‘They are vibrating harmonically, Captain.’ Uhura interjected.

Kirk turned to face her and noticed that she was listening with the Comm kit translator.

‘Harmonically Lieutenant? What do you mean?’

‘Well Sir, the noise we heard on the bridge, I recorded it and have been working on it ever since and it is a language. I’m sure of that, but I still haven’t worked out how to communicate with it. It seems that everything here is talking to each other by vibration, creating different harmonics. In theory, if we practised this we could change our own vibrations and talk to plants, buildings, even animals at the harmonic level.’

McCoy stepped toward Uhura.

‘But we can’t control our rate of vibration Uhura.’

‘I know we can’t Doctor, but maybe the Alcanii can.’

‘Yes Uhura,’ Kirk said. ‘That makes sense. It may even explain how they travel through space without vehicles. Is that a possible theory Spock?’

‘Yes Captain, quite possible.’ Spock replied.

‘Keptain, the Alcanii’s,’ Chekov said, pointing to five beings who were approaching from one of the crystal buildings.

They seemed to glide over the ground and covered the distance between them at astonishing speed. Kaynor, for it was he who led the group, opened his arms to greet the Enterprise party.

‘Welcome cousins to our home,’ he said.

‘Thank you Kaynor. On behalf of the United Federation of Planets, may we say that it is an honour and privilege to be here,’ Kirk replied.

The five aliens smiled as Kaynor spoke.

‘We would very much like to show you our planet and our technology. I have brought with me some guides who are experts in different fields, which might be of interest.’

Kirk was surprised; he had thought that the leaders of the planet would speak to them before any sightseeing trips were arranged. He recovered from his surprise and nodded at his hosts.

‘That would be most interesting Kaynor, but are we not expected by your ruling council?’

‘They are looking forward to meeting you and talking with you Captain Kirk, but they feel if you saw something of our world you may understand us a little better. I hope you understand.’

The words were spoken with a warm smile, but Kirk wasn’t sure he did understand. However, under the circumstances he was in no position to refuse, or complain.

‘Of course,’ Kirk said. ‘We would be delighted to see your world.’

Kaynor stepped aside and gestured to a tall, thin, dark haired man who stepped forward.

‘I am Kristen. I am a technician. Mr Spock, Mr Sulu, perhaps I could show you our buildings?’

Spock glanced at the Captain, who nodded imperceptibly.

Another Alcanii, a petite, but attractive female with blonde hair and shimmering robes stepped forward.

‘I am Aira. I am a language expert; I can show you, Uhura, and you Mr Chekov, much.’

She laughed, giving Uhura the fleeting impression of talking to a nymph or fairy spirit.

Next, a tall, dark haired woman came forward.

‘I am Mellic. I will show Doctor McCoy our healing rooms. Perhaps Mr Grimes and Mr Carella would like to see them too?’

‘My dear,’ McCoy said, taking her arm and with a twinkle in his eye. ‘I’d love to see them.’

Finally, the woman who had touched Kirk on the bridge stepped forward.

‘I am Celestine Captain. I will show you our city and its beautiful gardens.’

Kirk was about to step forward when Spock called to him.

‘Sir, may I suggest you take Mr Carella with you?’

Kirk was somewhat peeved by Spock’s suggestion, he felt in no danger.

‘You really think that advisable Spock?’

‘Captain, we do not yet know precisely what we will find here. You will be isolated from the rest of the party. It would be prudent to take Mr Carella with you.’

‘Yes Spock, I see your point. Mr Carella, you are with me.’

The security officer moved to a position just behind Kirk. McCoy noticed that Celestine and Kaynor exchanged a pointed look, obviously communicating. They did not seem too pleased that Kirk was taking a security man with him. He was perplexed by this, but shrugged and put it down to being too over protective of his friend. The

group broke up, each Enterprise member following their appointed guides across the glittering plaza. Kaynor was the only one that did not move; he stood and watched his guests depart. To anyone watching his face appeared trance like. Kaynor was, in fact, communicating with the leaders of Alcany by telepathy.

‘The one named Kirk is with Celestine, but he has a security guard with him. What should she do? We need to scan him soon to see if he is the one we have searched for.’

Kaynor waited.

‘The Kirk one must be probed quickly. Celestine must do a scan while showing him the garden. Kaynor, you will distract the guard.’

Kaynor nodded to himself and swept out of the plaza. He had to rendezvous with Kirk and Celestine in the garden to carry out their plan.

Chapter Eleven

Celestine seemed to float before Kirk in a sea of swirling colours and he was struck by how peaceful the place was, with its air warm and scented. The buildings brilliant and shimmering with countless colours and the musical tinkling of the talking plants and animals was very soothing to a weary space traveller. He marvelled at the pink soil and the crystal clear water. Everything had a vibrance that he'd never experienced anywhere else in his travels. He felt at peace for the first time in many months. Kirk and Carella followed their guide from the plaza and everywhere, many Alcanii were gliding around on their daily business, all of them seemed beautiful and graceful. In fact, thought Kirk, there was nothing on the planet that wasn't beautiful. From the plaza they passed under a crystal archway of staggering magnificence that seemed to be humming and beyond lay an area, which on Earth would be called a garden, or park.

'I must apologise for hurting you when we talked aboard your ship. I did not realise that touching you would have such an effect.'

Kirk smiled, anxious to remove the look of concern from her face.

'I know you meant me no harm. As you can see there were no permanent effects. I am perfectly well now so think no more about it. We all learn from our mistakes.'

He stopped walking at some particularly stunning purple and orange flowers.

'What are these called?' He asked.

Celestine seemed a little surprised at his interest.

'They are called Sondels,' she answered.

'A lovely name for a lovely flower. Do they have a scent?'

'Oh yes. What is a flower if it has no scent?'

Kirk bent to smell the bloom, then stopped and looked at Celestine.

‘I hope they don’t sting as well.’

She smiled.

‘No Captain, they are quite safe to smell and touch. Nothing will harm you or your crew on Alcany.’

‘I am relieved to hear that.’

Kirk stooped and smelt the bloom. It had a rich, intoxicating smell, so strong it gave him a momentary dizziness. He stood up quickly and swayed as everything here seemed more powerful than anything he was used to.

‘Are you all right Sir?’ Carella asked.

He was by his Captain’s side before Kirk had fully recovered from the effect of the flower.

‘I’m fine lieutenant, just a bit strong for me,’ Kirk laughed.

Celestine joined in with his joyous laughter as she began to discover that she found these humans quite entertaining.

‘Come she said. ‘I wish to show you the round garden. It is the most beautiful place on Alcany.’

They walked on and met Kaynor coming down another path to join them.

‘Ah Captain,’ he said. ‘Are you enjoying the tour?’

‘Indeed I am Kaynor. It is the most beautiful place I’ve ever visited.’

‘Has Celestine showed you the round garden yet?’

‘No, we were on our way there now.’

‘May I join you? I’d like to hear what you think of it as we are very proud of it.’

‘We would be delighted to have you with us Kaynor,’ Kirk replied.

Kaynor bowed and took up a position next to Celestine. The two humans were so busy marvelling at the many wondrous sights around them; they failed to notice the two Alcanii communicating telepathically.

‘You must scan Kirk to see if he is the one. Take him through the Colour Gates while I distract the security guard.’

‘I understand, I will see if he is the one we seek.’

They both began to watch the two humans as they strolled among the flowers.

Watching them touch and smell flowers totally unfamiliar to them as there were no plants like this on the Enterprise’s bio-deck. Celestine moved to Kirk’s side.

‘Captain, come with me to the round garden.’

She took his arm and led him between two large sky blue hedges into a circular space.

The garden had been built on four levels, similar to the multi-level chessboard.

Crystal pathways led to different types of garden. The effect was truly breathtaking.

‘Come,’ Celestine said. ‘This way.’

She led him into the circle and he found himself floating inside a swirl of colours.

Kaynor had managed to distract Carella by the simple expedient of engaging him in conversation. The security man was unaware that he had lost sight of Kirk and then suddenly, realising his dereliction of duty as he noticed Kirk’s absence. Excusing himself from Kaynor, he dashed into the round garden and stopped in amazement.

Had he been asked to describe his first sight, he would have found it almost impossible. It seemed huge, but at the same time took up little space. It diminished and grew, pulsed and breathed, like a living organism. The four levels seemed to join and flow into each other. Merging and mixing endlessly, it was impossible to tell where one section began, or another ended. He turned to Kaynor who had followed on behind him.

‘Where is the Captain?’ He demanded. ‘What have you done with him?’

‘Calm yourself. The Captain is quite safe. He is in the round garden. You cannot see him because it is partly on another level of reality, but he is with Celestine and she will take great care of him.’

Kaynor smiled in an attempt to assuage the security man’s concern. But Carella was not wholly convinced and unsure of how to proceed. He finally took out his communicator and flicked it open.

‘Lieutenant Carella to Mr Spock.’

‘Yes Mr Carella, do you have a problem?’

Carella sighed with relief.

‘Yes Sir, the Captain.....’

He paused.

‘The Captain is missing.’

‘Missing? Lieutenant Carella, how is he missing?’

‘He went into a place called the round garden Sir, and I can’t see him any more.

Kaynor is here, he says he will be all right as he is with Celestine, but I can’t see him.’

He almost added that he hadn’t a clue what to do, but decided that a security guard with his experience shouldn’t be so easily panicked.

‘Mr Sulu and myself will come to this garden directly. Report if anything else occurs. Spock out.’

Carella felt a sense of relief hearing that Spock was on his way. To lose the Captain, he decided, was likely to be considered careless and not a very good career move. To his surprise his communicator gave a bleep.

‘Carella here.’

It was McCoy.

‘What happened to the Captain, Carella? What are you playing at? You were supposed to look after him, for God’s sake.’ Snarled the voice from his communicator.

‘I know Doctor, but you have to see this garden to appreciate my problem,’ he said with some exasperation.

‘Damn right I’d better see it. I’m on my way to your position right now. You’d better have a damn good explanation for this mister. McCoy out.’

Carella groaned out loud, the doctor had a better line in telling someone off than the Captain. For a supposed southern gentleman, McCoy had a fine collection of humiliating insults. Aboard ship everyone knew that when McCoy lost his temper, everyone should get out of the way. All Carella could do now was pray the Captain was all right.

Kirk had found himself afloat in the sea of coloured energy. His body was very light and he found the whole experience very relaxing and pleasant. He remembered thinking that this was like no garden he had ever been in. It was then that he felt his body and mind separating. He sensed he was, somehow, leaving his body behind and floating out of it. He felt freer, lighter as a feeling of peace descended upon him. He was not the least bit frightened. He was more curious than scared as he became aware of another person beside him, he knew it was Celestine, but could not see her.

‘James.’

Her voice came from out of the colours.

‘I am with you. Do not worry, you are quite safe.’

He felt the words in his head, knowing that there had been no sound. He relaxed even more, feeling safe and protected in these wonderful colours. Her voice returned.

‘I want you to think back to your childhood.’

Kirk's memory drifted back to Iowa and the family farm. It was, he decided, in retrospect, a happy childhood with lots of freedom.

'Now James, you are going even further back, to before your life as James T Kirk.'

The Captain was stunned. He'd never thought of who he might have been in a previous life, in another time, although, most now believed that humans, and Vulcans, had lived at other times on other planets. It was still a contentious issue with many religious and philosophical arguments, but Kirk did believe he had lived before so he tried to concentrate and he started to remember a life as an outsider in 21st Century Earth. He felt the anger of the injustices done to him and others like him. He felt the despair at not being able to change things, to make his life better. He knew he was happy to leave that life behind.

'Go further back James. To a life before that one.'

He found himself on a golden beach with palm trees and he was looking at a three mast sailing ship with a number of rowing boats between it and the shore on which he was standing. He felt a wave of love for that ship, similar to the way he felt about the Enterprise. He knew he was part of the sailing ship's crew and began to understand his long love of the sea and sailing. His life came to an end by an accident aboard ship and he regretted leaving this life. It had been hard work, but he had been strong and fit. He had enjoyed the life and it had suited him well.

'James, it is time to travel back again.'

He floated and then found himself in a familiar landscape. He was on Alcany and this time he was taller and blonde. He saw Celestine as he saw her in the round garden. They had been together before, maybe even married, but definitely together. He began to remember how life was here and that the spiritual development of the individual was the prime goal to the collective good of Alcany and its six sister

planets, then, ultimately, to the universe. He also knew that he had visited Earth in that lifetime and he had hoped to enlighten them to a more spiritual, less materialistic lifestyle. They hadn't understood his message as its people were warlike and corrupt. They could not put the good of the planet before their own petty needs. Greed ruled and motivated them and it had upset him deeply as he could see how wonderful their planet could have been, but he, and the others, who had gone with him, returned to Alcany, disappointed by what they had seen. They had hoped to monitor Earth's development and try again when the time was right, and this time, their help would be accepted. Now something happened that ended his life, and that changed his soul's journey.

‘James, it is time to come back. Follow my light back to your body and we will leave the round garden together.’

Slowly, the feeling of the floating began to subside and he felt himself growing heavier, more connected. His mind and body rejoined and he found himself exiting the garden to find quite an audience waiting for him.

‘Jim, are you okay?’

McCoy rushed forward, his medical scanner checking Kirk before he had a chance to reply.

‘I'm fine Bones. No need to panic. This is quite a reception committee Spock.’ He could see the entire landing party waiting for him.

‘Yes Captain,’ Spock said. ‘Mr Carella reported you missing.’

‘Really?’

Kirk turned to Carella.

‘How could I have been missing Mr Carella? I was in the round garden.’

Carella looked decidedly uncomfortable.

‘But Sir, I couldn’t see you. You just reappeared, but in there you were invisible.’

Kirk chuckled.

‘I was perfectly all right Lieutenant.’

He turned to McCoy who seemed amazed at how Kirk was reacting. It was so unlike his recent irritable behaviour of the last few days. McCoy exchanged a glance with Spock, who merely raised an eyebrow as Kirk beamed at the others.

‘As we are all together, we might as well go and meet our hosts. Would that be acceptable Kaynor?’

The Alcanii bowed.

‘We would be delighted to take you before our council. Please follow us.’

Celestine and Kaynor moved off, followed by the landing party. Kaynor used this opportunity to ask Celestine if she had scanned Kirk. He was delighted when she replied.

‘It is Ashata. He is the one, our searching is over.’

Kirk found McCoy at his elbow, virtually breathing down his neck.

‘Yes? What is it Bones?’

‘I don’t know Jim.’ McCoy said irritably. ‘You tell me.’

Kirk looked confused.

‘Bones, you are not making much sense.’

McCoy, put out, growled.

‘I’m not making any sense. You’re the one who’s gone peculiar, not me!’

‘Bones.’

Kirk placed his arm around McCoy’s shoulders and spoke in the same tone you would use to placate a child.

‘Have you been working too hard? Relax. This is a beautiful, peaceful, safe place. For once we are not being attacked or threatened, enjoy it. That’s an order.’

During the conversation the two men had fallen behind the others. Kirk strode away to catch up leaving McCoy standing with his mouth open in amazement.

‘Interesting.’

The voice came from slightly behind McCoy. Spock nodded slightly.

‘The Captain seems remarkably relaxed about this mission Doctor. Uncharacteristically so. He appears to see nothing odd about Alcanii, it’s inhabitants, or it’s structures and he believes that there is no danger here at all.’

‘And you feel there is?’

‘Nothing that we have been shown is as it appears. The buildings are not solid, yet they appear so. The plants look and smell like ordinary plants, yet they have a language. I’m not certain, but I believe they are capable of movement also. The round garden had areas in it that my tricorder could not scan and our hosts’ readings fluctuate wildly. This gives rise to the question, what is real here and what is not?’ McCoy fell into step with Spock and pondered the Vulcan’s words.

‘Something is not right with our hosts. Have you noticed they seem to want to separate Jim from the rest of us?’

‘Indeed, I did notice that, but for what purpose would they want the Captain? Is it the Captain of the Enterprise they want, or is it James Kirk?’

McCoy hadn’t considered the fact that the Alcanii would want the Captain of a Federation Starship, he’d simply assumed that they wanted Kirk, or do the Alcanii want control of the Enterprise?

‘I don’t know what they are after, but I think you and I should keep an eye on the Captain until they reveal what it is they do want.’

‘A wise decision Doctor. I suspect a hidden agenda behind their request for membership of the Federation. As yet, I have no firm evidence to substantiate my suspicions, only logic Doctor tells me we have nothing to offer the Alcanii in either technology or security. Therefore, logic suggests they want something else. Something they have not yet told us about and something we may well refuse them.’ Even McCoy could see the wisdom in this.

‘I’m sure you’re right Spock. The only trouble is not knowing what they want makes it difficult to prepare ourselves as it could be anything, which leaves us groping in the dark.’

He shook his head in frustration, irritated by the uncertainty of the situation.

‘I’m sure we will find out soon Doctor,’ Spock said.

‘Is that good Spock?’

Spock did not speak; he just raised an eyebrow and continued with the rest of the party toward the crystal council hall.

Chapter Twelve

The council hall appeared to be the largest of the buildings in the plaza. In the council chamber the council of five Alcanii were seated around a large table waiting to greet them. Like all the Alcanii they had met, these were beautiful people, who rose to their feet to welcome them. The leader appeared to be a tall, lean man with very blue eyes, pale skin and raven black hair.

‘Welcome,’ he said, stretching his arms wide. ‘We are the Alcanii council and we are honoured to welcome our cousins from Earth.’

He smiled and bowed to Spock.

‘And Vulcan.’

Spock returned the man's greeting with a slight nod. The Alcanii continued.

‘I am Baylon, head of the council. Celestine and Kaynor you have already met. This is Rissa, Gaylen, Carmel and Raylan.’

The other four bowed; Rissa was female, slender with red hair, Gaylen, a brown haired male, shorter than the rest while Carmel, a slim woman with chestnut hair and Raylan a tall thin ash blonde man.

Kirk bowed to them and said.

‘On behalf of the United Federation of Planets, and of course, the crew of the Enterprise, we thank you for the invitation to visit you. We would be honoured to have you and your sister planets as members.’

He paused, waiting for a reaction. To Kirk the council seemed to be communicating by telepathy and he wished he knew what it was they were discussing. He waited patiently with his crew, wondering what would happen next. Baylon’s eyes focused on the members of the crew before him.

‘We look forward to discussing our entry to your Federation, but first let us eat. Please come this way, dine and enjoy.’

Both races moved to a table in a smaller antechamber and seated themselves, the Alcanii on one side, the Enterprise officers on the other. McCoy’s eyes nearly popped from his skull when the food was brought in and Chekov seated to the right of the doctor exclaimed.

‘Is that food real?’

The doctor recovered himself and replied.

‘More to the point, is it edible?’

He turned to Spock who was on his left.

‘Is it Spock?’

Spock had been scanning the food unobtrusively with his tricorder.

‘It is edible Doctor, but like many things we have seen it is not what it seems.’

On the table before them lay roast turkey, vegetables, assorted pies and puddings all smelling delicious. Spock turned to face the doctor.

‘It appears to be a traditional North American Thanksgiving dinner.’

‘No Stroganoff!’ Chekov grumbled.

McCoy chuckled.

‘No, but they do have blueberry muffins. I haven’t had blueberry muffins for years.’

He reached eagerly to take a couple.

‘Strictly speaking Doctor, you are not having blueberry muffins now. All this food has been replicated.’

‘Don’t be a spoilsport Spock. If it tastes like a blueberry muffin, it damn well is a blueberry muffin.’

McCoy glared at the Vulcan, daring him to disagree. Spock considered his options and decided that logically he could not win this argument.

‘As you wish Doctor.’

The meal was a very convivial affair and the food was much better than the food aboard Enterprise, replicated or not. The Alcanii were the perfect hosts making sure everyone had plenty to eat and drink and asking intelligent questions about the crew, their travels and what life was like on Earth. Kirk felt full and satisfied and then he watched his crew enjoying the meal and the company. Even Chekov looked relaxed and was smiling, something Kirk hadn’t witnessed for some time. He felt the burden of command grow lighter on his shoulders and sighed with relief. Unknown to the landing party the Alcanii leader Baylon, was discussing, telepathically, with Celestine about what she had discovered in the round garden.

‘Baylon, he is Ashata.’

Her thoughts carried her sense of joy and relief.

‘He has come to us at last.’

‘This is excellent news Celestine, but will he help us when he is told what we need?’

‘I think he will,’ she replied. ‘He reacted well to the experience of seeing his past lives. Our Earth cousins have evolved well since our last contact with them. They are spiritually wiser and calmer than they were when we last tried to help them all those hundreds of years ago.’

She paused, remembering a time when life for them was very different, before the transition to the light. At that time they could feel a touch, a kiss, and love; a time, she sometimes greatly missed. She sighed and continued.

‘I think if we explain what we need, he will be willing to enter the crystal to help us.’

Baylon nodded.

‘I agree, but I have picked up the thoughts of his friends who are deeply concerned for his safety. He is their leader, but more than that, he is loved by them. I think we must also tell the ones called Spock and McCoy. Without their co-operation I doubt we will succeed.’

Celestine nodded at his words and Baylon continued.

‘We must do this soon, time is against us. Already we have reports that the forgotten are breaking through the shield and attacking isolated areas. It is only a matter of time before our shields fail totally. He is our only hope.’

Around them the party was breaking into groups and drifting away from the table.

Kirk sat with Spock and McCoy discussing the sights each had seen since their arrival on Alcanay.

‘The healing rooms are like crystal chambers, which if I understood correctly, are used as transmitters to channel different beams of coloured light into the patient to heal them. They don’t use medicines or any surgery at all.’

‘Eminently better than your probing and prodding technique Doctor,’ Spock interrupted.

McCoy made a face at the Vulcan and, pointedly carried on.

‘Jim, all their healing is by sound or colour. They could certainly teach us a great deal about healing.’

‘Yes Bones, from what I’ve seen I think we could learn a lot from the Alcanii,’ Kirk replied.

McCoy gave Kirk a sharp look as the Captain still seemed distracted. He dismissed his doubts putting Kirk's mood down to fatigue and the beauty of the place as he is probably exhausted, McCoy thought.

Spock shifted his position and looked uneasy, even for a Vulcan.

‘Captain, I am concerned by what we have all seen.’

‘Why Spock?’ Kirk asked as he turned to face his second in command.

‘The structures, the technology Mr Sulu and I have observed with our guide are far in advance to anything the Federation has to offer. Doctor McCoy has stated how advanced medical techniques are here. Uhura is deeply impressed by their use of telepathy and inter-spatial communications. All facets of their lives are highly advanced.’

‘Yes Spock, but what is your point?’

‘My point, Captain, is – what could the Federation give to the Alcanii in return for the benefits that they could give to us? We are centuries behind them in both technology and medicine. So why did they contact us? Not for protection certainly. Their planetary shields are more than enough to protect them from any enemy known to the Federation. Again, I have to ask; why do they need us? Also, I am curious to discover why they chose to contact the Enterprise rather than Star Base 12. Something they could have done with the same amount of effort, given the state of their technology.’

‘Why, I do believe that you are developing a suspicious nature Spock.’ The doctor goaded.

‘Doctor, you misunderstand me,’ countered a cool and logical Vulcan.

Kirk decided to step in here, before another verbal battle could get under-way.

‘Okay gentlemen; let's concentrate all our attention on these anomalies first.’

He was about to continue, when the peace was shattered by a woman's scream. Quickly they rose and faced the door just as a second scream galvanised them and they raced from the crystal hall into the darkness outside. Chekov and Grimes flanked them, phasers drawn as they entered the plaza. It was very dark and they paused to allow their eyes to get accustomed to the lack of light so it was Spock who noticed movement first.

'Over there Captain.'

He pointed off to his right and slowly the rest of them could make out something moving slowly towards them. It looked like an animal, about two feet high swaying and moaning. Cautiously, they moved towards it, fanning out with phasers trained on it. As they got nearer they saw it wasn't an animal at all, it was a person wearing a Starfleet uniform.

'Good God, I think it's Uhura,' McCoy said, running to the figure.

Kneeling he touched her arm and Uhura screamed.

'Uhura, it's me, McCoy.'

He spoke to her gently, before scooping her up in his arms and with Kirk's help; he carried her back into the crystal chamber. On the way back she made whimpering sounds and seemed almost comatose. Once inside, they placed her on the table and McCoy took out his scanner and ran it over her body. They could all see that her uniform was torn, her face scratched and bleeding.

'Well Doctor?' Kirk asked, both upset and impatient. 'How bad is she?'

McCoy ignored him and continued with his examination. Kirk, seeing he wasn't going to get much from McCoy for the moment turned to Spock.

'Spock, I don't understand this. Why would anyone on Alcany attack Uhura?'

‘Unknown Sir, but then much here is not what it appears to be. I am of the opinion that anything is possible here. I find this planet very disturbing. The only predictable thing here is that nothing is what it first appears to be. It is most illogical.’

To Kirk’s surprise, Spock almost seemed upset; if you could ever apply that word to a Vulcan. Another time both Kirk and McCoy would have made much of his human response, but not now with a colleague and friend injured. McCoy sighed and faced the Captain.

‘I can only find superficial injuries, but she is highly traumatised. I want to get her back to Enterprise’s Sickbay just to make sure.’

Kirk nodded.

‘Yes Doctor, transport immediately.’

Uhura croaked something and Kirk swiftly leant forward.

‘What is it Lieutenant?’

She struggled to clear her head and make her voice work properly.

‘Carella,’ she whispered.

Kirk looked up at Chekov.

‘Where is Lieutenant Carella?’

Chekov shook his head.

‘I don’t know Keptain. He was here earlier.’

Uhura touched Kirk’s arm to gain his attention.

‘Yes Lieutenant,’ he said quietly.

Uhura winced.

‘He was with me. He tried to protect me.’

She slumped after the effort of speaking and started to cry and McCoy stepped forward.

‘That’s enough for now Jim.’

Kirk nodded.

‘Get her back to the Enterprise Bones. Look after her.’

McCoy nodded and spoke into his communicator.

‘McCoy to Enterprise.’

‘Enterprise here, what can I do for you Doctor?’ Scotty’s voice asked from the communicator.

‘Uhura has been attacked. Beam us both up immediately.’

He slammed his communicator shut angrily and seconds later they both shimmered and disappeared. Just as they vanished, Sulu and his Alcany guide, Kristen, came running into the hall and as Sulu saw the expression on his friends’ faces he became worried.

‘What’s happened?’ He asked.

He regarded them one by one before Spock replied.

‘Lieutenant Uhura has been attacked and Lieutenant Carella is missing.’

Sulu was stunned as this news was so unexpected. Everything since their arrival had been peaceful and filled with beauty so they were all unprepared for anything like this. Sulu finally found his voice.

‘How is she?’

‘She is very traumatised, but not badly hurt,’ Kirk replied.

‘McCoy has taken her to Sickbay.’

He turned to face Chekov and Grimes.

‘We need to find Mr Carella, but we can’t search without some lights. We’ll have some transported down from the Enterprise.’

He flipped open his communicator.

‘Scotty?’

‘Here Captain,’ Scotty replied immediately.

‘Lieutenant Carella is missing, last seen in the plaza area. Use the ship’s scanners to locate him.’

On the bridge, Scotty turned to Lieutenant Giotto at the science station.

‘Start scanning the plaza area for human life signs.’

‘Aye Sir.’

The swarthy lieutenant turned back to his console and pressed the appropriate buttons.

‘Scanning.’

‘We also need some lights down here Mr Scott. There are no lights in this area.’

Scotty punched a button on the command chair.

‘Samuels? The Captain needs torches on the planet. Get five light units to the transporter room immediately.’

‘Aye Sir, five light units on the way. Samuels out.’

Scotty could not help smiling to himself at Samuels’ voice as he could never get used to such a tiny wee girl being like a tiger; efficient, resourceful and tough. All the men she ever met wanted to protect her, but they soon found out they were in more need of protection than she was, being a master of several martial arts and expert with a variety of weapons. Scotty turned his mind back to priorities.

‘I’ll have those torches to you momentarily Captain.’

‘Good. Scotty, how’s that scan going?’

Scotty turned to Giotto who grimaced and shook his head.

‘No luck so far Captain.’

Scotty looked round at the bridge crew. They were all very quiet, they knew that a scan could only locate a living human and they all accepted that one of their crewmates could be dead, or a prisoner to whomever had attacked Uhura.

Back on Alcany, Kirk's face showed his frustration and anguish. He always blamed himself if anything happened to any member of his crew; sometimes it felt like having 430 children depending on you. The burden of command was a heavy one. He became aware of someone approaching and turned hoping to see Carella, but was disappointed. Kaynor was hurrying into the hall, clearly distressed.

'Captain, what has happened?'

Kirk turned to Kaynor barely containing his anger.

'One of my crew has been attacked Kaynor, and one is still missing. What can you tell me about that?'

Kirk was now shouting and stabbed a finger at the trembling Alcanii. Kaynor recoiled from Kirk's hostility and tried to compose himself.

'Captain Kirk, I do not understand. One of your crew, injured? That cannot be, not on Alcany.'

He seemed genuinely confused and saddened.

'Well it has happened on Alcany.' Kirk retorted. 'Where you told us we would all be perfectly safe.'

By now more Alcanii had gathered in the room, disturbed by the shouting on their tranquil planet and seeing that Kirk was now in danger of creating a diplomatic catastrophe, Spock decided that it might be a good time to step in.

'Captain, may I speak with you?'

Kirk glared at the Vulcan, clearly irritated by the interruption. He was just ready to tell Kaynor exactly what he thought of both him and Alcany.

‘What now Spock?’ He snapped.

‘Sir.’ Spock said, steering Kirk away from Kaynor, giving them both time to calm down.

Spock saw that Kirk was breathing heavily and seemed on the verge of collapse.

‘Sir, I feel the Alcanii are as puzzled and upset as we are over this attack I do not think they know any more than we do at this time. Shouting at them will not help the situation.’

Kirk’s muscles relaxed and he shook his head, smiling at Spock.

‘As usual Mr Spock, you are right.’

He paused, now fully in control.

‘I apologise for shouting at you Kaynor, but I am very worried about Lieutenant Carella.’

Kaynor bowed and smiled back.

‘I understand your distress. I will do what I can to help.’

A faint noise was heard as five transporter beams deposited the torch units on the floor. Kirk stepped toward them, forgetting all about Kaynor.

‘Chekov, check the torches over and be ready to start a search.’

He turned back to Kaynor.

‘We are going to look for our missing crewmember. Whatever you can do to help would be much appreciated, but now we have no more time to waste.’

Chekov handed Kirk a torch and Spock took out his tricorder. With that, the five members of the Enterprise stepped out into the darkness of the Alcany night in the search for their missing colleague.

Chapter Thirteen

After two hours of fruitless searching, Spock managed to persuade Kirk to take the remainder of the original landing party back to the ship for some rest. He would continue to co-ordinate three more search details which had beamed down from the Enterprise. Kirk had to admit that he was so tired that he was almost sleeping whilst walking and he felt more of a liability than a help. He beamed back with Chekov and Grimes to a subdued ship.

Before he could rest, he made his way to Sickbay to check on Uhura. When he arrived he found McCoy asleep at his desk.

‘Bones?’ He said softly into his ear, placing a hand on his shoulder.

The doctor mumbled something indistinct and struggled awake, his hair askew, rubbing his eyes.

‘What...what’s going on?’ He muttered in best McCoy fashion.

His eyes focused on Kirk.

‘What are you doing sneaking around scaring people? You should be in bed.’

Kirk could see that McCoy was covering his embarrassment at doing something he always told Kirk off for doing.

‘Jim, you look all in.’

Kirk sat heavily in the other chair and rested his arms on the desk.

‘You’re right there Bones. I’ve just about had it for today, but before I sleep I wanted to know how Uhura is.’

McCoy pulled a chart in front of him.

‘She has a number of contusions and a deep cut to her neck. Luckily it missed anything vital. She’s in shock, but with rest she’ll be fine.’

Kirk's face showed his relief.

'That's good news.' Kirk said, and then added grimly. 'We could use some.'

Kirk sighed and rested his chin on his arms making him look to McCoy he looked as a young Jim Kirk might have.

'Any sign of Carella Jim?'

Kirk grimaced.

'No. So far we haven't found a trace of him by sensors or searching. Spock's still down there with the search teams. He sent us back.'

'Good job he did by the look of you. You'd be no help stumbling around in the dark, getting in the way.'

Kirk sighed again.

'I know Bones, but I feel...'

McCoy finished his sentence for him.

'Responsible?'

'Yes, I guess that's the word.'

He smiled then struggled to his feet.

'Well I'm off to bed.'

'Good. Stay there for at least seven hours. Doctor's orders.'

'Chance would be a fine thing.'

Kirk's smile broadened.

'Do you think that's likely?'

McCoy shrugged as Kirk left the Sickbay. No, he decided, seven hours sleep for the Captain of any Starship was a bit of a luxury; still, he might get lucky. On the other hand, he probably won't. McCoy now decided it was time to take his own advice and made his bleary way to his quarters.

As the first rays of Alcany Prime hit Alcany Epton, sending pink and purple streaks across the dawn, a search team reported to Spock that they had found the body of Lieutenant Carella. He was found five miles from the plaza in a meadow of pink and lilac flowers. By the time Spock arrived, the sky was blue and the meadow basked in the sunlight; another beautiful day marred by the sight of Corella's body. He was on his back, arms out-flung, eyes staring into eternity.

Kirk awoke slowly, stretching and yawning and he felt good this morning. It was the first time he had slept well for months. The feeling of euphoria did not last long.

'Carella,' he muttered and leapt from the bed, pressing his intercom button.

'Kirk to bridge.'

'Sulu here Sir.'

Kirk was surprised, he had expected Scotty. Perhaps, he thought, I've slept longer than I thought if Sulu is back on duty.

'Sulu, have they found Carella?'

Before Sulu could reply, Spock cut in.

'Captain, Spock here. Please come to the Sickbay.'

Kirk ran his hand through this tousled hair, then across his stubbled chin. A summons to the Sickbay boded ill.

'I'll be there in five minutes. Kirk out.'

The door to Sickbay opened to reveal McCoy and Spock waiting for him. From Bones' expression, Kirk knew Carella was dead.

'Spock, what happened?'

‘We located his body five miles northeast of the plaza area, at first light this morning and he had been dead for several hours. We beamed his body to Sickbay to allow the doctor to do a post-mortem. All search teams are now safely back aboard the Enterprise.’

Kirk nodded.

‘Thank you Mr Spock.’

He walked over to where Carella’s body was covered by a sheet.

‘How did he die Bones?’

McCoy moved alongside Kirk.

‘He was stabbed several times. He put up a struggle, but more than one weapon was used. He didn’t stand a chance Jim.’

They stood in silence over the body until McCoy decided that this wasn’t helpful or healthy.

‘Come on, let’s talk in my office.’

He led the way into his inner sanctum where both Kirk and the doctor sank into chairs, leaving Spock standing over them. Kirk recalled when he first joined Enterprise, how Spock’s habit of towering over him, rarely sitting down, had irritated him. He thought, at the time, that the Vulcan was showing how much more superior he was to his young captain which irked Kirk a lot. Now, after many years together, he found this towering presence both comforting and reassuring. He rubbed his forehead, on waking he had felt great, but now, the headache was coming back. Sometimes he felt he would have been better off running the family farm. Kirk looked up at Spock.

‘Do we know who, or what killed Carella?’

Spock folded his arms with deliberation.

‘From the tracks left on the ground, they appear to be humanoid. We estimated that there were five or six of them. The search team followed the tracks for a mile past where the Lieutenant was found. I do not believe he was killed where we found him.’

‘Why do you say that?’ Kirk asked in surprise.

Spock frowned slightly.

‘There were no indications of a struggle where he was found; yet, as the doctor has stated, he did try to defend himself. I am of the opinion, based on the facts we know that he was killed at the plaza when Uhura and Carella were first attacked. For some reason, his body was taken away and left where we found it.’

Kirk looked at McCoy.

‘Do you agree Bones?’

The doctor nodded.

‘Yes Jim. He died almost instantly. The fatal wound went through his heart; he couldn’t have survived for more than a minute or two.’

Kirk sighed.

‘But who would want to kill the landing party, and why?’

He had said these last words more to himself than to his two friends and McCoy looked at Spock before speaking.

‘Spock has a theory. Don’t you Spock?’

The look that Spock gave the doctor made McCoy smile as he enjoyed placing Spock in an uncomfortable position, then watching him trying to struggle out of it. McCoy felt that although Spock usually managed to get out of these situations, it was well worth trying for the rare occasion when he couldn’t. Spock collected his thoughts before saying anything.

‘Captain, it has always appeared illogical for the Alcanii to want to join the Federation. The reason they have given for wanting to join does not stand up to close scrutiny. With their technology so far in advance of our own, we have to ask what we could offer them in return. Therefore, logic demands, there must be another reason as to why we have been diverted here. Whatever their reasons, they do seem to be trying to isolate you Captain.’

Kirk frowned, but did not interrupt.

‘For what reason we do not know, but we are sure you are the target.’

McCoy nodded in agreement and it seemed to Kirk that they were, for once, in agreement which was such a rare occurrence that Kirk had to believe that they had something. Spock had not finished.

‘There is something else I find disturbing.’

He crossed to McCoy and faced the captain.

‘It is the law of the universe that where there is light, there must be darkness. Ying and Yang on your planet Captain. On mine, it is Spara and Sarta, evil and good, male and female, harmony and disorder, peace and war, order and chaos.’

Kirk raised his hands to stop the Vulcan.

‘Yes, yes Spock, I get the message.’

He shifted his weight in the chair.

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘Captain, on Alcany, we have only encountered the light.’

He paused, and then added.

‘Until last night, when the darkness attacked Uhura and Carella.’

‘I’ve heard whispers of the forgotten,’ Kirk said softly.

‘Who are they?’ McCoy asked.

‘I don’t know, but I’d like to find out. I suppose I’ve been blind to what’s really going on here.’

He looked at his friends.

‘I’ve been caught up in the beauty of the place, I haven’t been objective and now one of my crew is dead and another injured. I can’t believe I got so involved so quickly.’

He was annoyed with himself and McCoy rose and went to his side.

‘We are only human Jim. Even you.’

McCoy smiled reassuringly and Kirk straightened his shoulders.

‘We had better find out what is really going on here before anyone else is hurt.’

He was about to leave the Sickbay for the bridge when the intercom beeped.

‘Bridge to Captain Kirk.’

Kirk altered course to the wall-mounted intercom.

‘Kirk here.’

‘Sir, a message from Baylon on Alcany.’

Kirk looked at McCoy and Spock.

‘Maybe we’ll get a few answers now.’

He pushed the comm button.

‘Pipe it to Sickbay, Lomax.’

‘Aye Sir.’

A few seconds later Baylon’s voice was heard on the intercom.

‘Captain?’

‘Yes Baylon, what can we do for you?’

‘Captain, may Celestine and I come aboard your ship to talk to you, Doctor McCoy and Mr Spock?’

All three in the Sickbay registered surprise at the request, but they all knew that here was a good opportunity to find out what was going on.

‘We would be delighted.’ Kirk replied. ‘If you will give me your co-ordinates, we will beam you aboard.’

‘That is quite unnecessary Captain, we will leave now. Thank you.’

Even before Kirk could reply to Baylon, he and Celestine materialised in front of them. It was unnerving to think they could, if they so wished, come aboard as easily as walking into another room. McCoy’s office wasn’t big enough for more than three people, so when the Alcanii were ready Kirk escorted them to a briefing room. Once there, he helped himself to a coffee, he knew he drank far too much of it, but it kept him going. They all sat around the briefing table and waited for Baylon to begin.

His pale face was not as serene as the last time they had seen it on Alcany.

‘Firstly,’ he began. ‘We must apologise for the death of one of your crew. How is the young lady who was injured?’

‘She will recover.’ McCoy replied. ‘She was very lucky.’

Celestine looked very distressed and McCoy felt he must reassure her. He hated to see such a lovely face looking so sad.

‘Uhura will be alright, my dear.’

She managed a smile at his concern for her, but Kirk was growing impatient.

‘Baylon, what is going on, on your planet?’ He asked. ‘I really think it is time you told us the real reason for your invitation to visit your Alcani.’

Baylon bowed slightly.

‘Yes Captain, we are ashamed by our behaviour, but when we have explained things to you, we hope you will forgive us.’

‘This had better be good,’ McCoy mumbled.

Kirk shook his head at the doctor, but Baylon had, either not heard or chosen to ignore the remark. He now had their full attention.

‘Centuries ago Alcanii was struggling to overcome many of the problems Earth had faced; wars, pollution, religious wars, economic disintegration. It was a dark time and many died in the upheaval, but out of this a new way was born; the path of non-violence and love. It took many generations for this spiritual path to replace the old ways, but eventually those who remained here chose to live in harmony and practise spiritual, as opposed to religious ways. We as a people moved into a new spiritual direction, a high vibratory rate and we neither eat, sleep nor grow old. Eight of us were chosen as keepers of the sacred ways, and once the planetary shield was in place we each received a part of the knowledge on how to maintain it. No one knows it all, so no one could rule independently of the others.’

‘So no dictators.’ Kirk said.

‘That is correct Captain, and one of the eight was a man Ashata. The rest you have met. They are the present ruling council of our planet. Later, we felt it was time to spread our message further, to other neighbouring worlds. So a small group, led by Ashata, went to Earth. Your planet was a very violent place, full of superstition and darkness. Our people were considered to be witches and our message was lost in the hysteria our presence there created. In the end, our people had to withdraw and return to Alcani. Once back, Ashata became sick. We never discovered what had caused this sickness, but even with our medical knowledge, nothing could save him. His loss to us was immense. Not just as a leader, and as one of the founders of the new order here, but also his knowledge of the shield was lost too.

He paused, looking at his audiences rapt expressions.

‘As you know, the other side of light is darkness. Last night the forgotten broke through into the light and your crewman was killed. We have lost a piece of our defence and only by finding Ashata’s soul can we retrieve this knowledge, then we can repair our shield. Without it, we will be overrun by those that live in the dark. Those who love to kill destroy and terrorise. We are no longer able to fight back, nor do we wish to. So, we started to search for Ashata.

‘But who are these ‘forgotten’, and where did they come from?’ Kirk asked. A look of annoyance momentarily appeared on Baylon’s face, and then he recovered and smiled at Kirk.

‘A good question,’ he said. ‘They came from out there.’ He pointed to the hull of the ship and beyond.

‘They are not one race, but many, who have left their own worlds for one reason or another. They do not believe in harmony or co-existence, so we had to erect a shield so they can live separately from us.’

Which was all perfectly logical but disturbing?

‘Why can’t you all live together?’ McCoy asked seconds before the Captain could. Baylon sighed.

‘We have tried Doctor, but they are primitive beings, unable to comprehend harmony, balance or even peace. They fight amongst themselves, steal, and kill for greed and gain. Unfortunately all attempts to educate them have failed and they now want our land as well as their own, so we have to find Ashata.’

‘But how?’ McCoy asked. ‘You said he was dead, so how can you find him?’ Baylon smiled.

‘We know that no one ever truly dies. Their physical body may cease to function and be discarded, but the soul lives forever. I believe you call this process of living different lives, reincarnation.’

Spock spoke.

‘Yes Baylon, Vulcans too believe as you do. The soul, or the divine spark in every individual, be they human, Alcanian or Vulcan, will return to incarnate at another time, in another form; to continue to grow and evolve on the spiritual plane. Every life has a goal, a purpose, or a potential to learn from its mistakes, which allows the soul to advance. Every experience, good or bad, is an opportunity for growth.’

Baylon nodded in agreement.

‘That is very true. So, we knew Ashata’s soul would incarnate into someone else, somewhere else, but how to find him? We could scan vessels that passed our world and send out scouts to different worlds, but it is a large universe and over so long a time.’

He sighed, and then continued.

‘Somehow we have managed to maintain the balance in our shield by using our seven of the eight pieces of the puzzle, but as time went by, it grew weaker and others came with their violence and hatred. We have become more vulnerable and our search more urgent. Nothing ever stays the same. This is a universal lore. It seemed to be an impossible task, but then we found a trace of him. Eighteen months ago a Starship passed close by here and Celestine felt Ashata’s presence. We scanned this ship with our thoughts and narrowed down our search to one human on board.’

Here Baylon paused, watching the faces around the table. Kirk cleared his throat.

‘You think it’s me? You think I’m Ashata?’

Celestine smiled at him.

‘Yes, I am sure you are him.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ McCoy demanded, irritated all of this. ‘How can Jim be this Ashata?’

‘Calm down Bones.’ Kirk said, laying a calming hand on McCoy’s arm.

‘I believe I could once have been Ashata.’

McCoy looked at Kirk with astonishment.

‘Don’t look at me like that Bones. I didn’t tell you what I experienced in the round garden.’

Both Spock and McCoy exchanged a glance before staring at the captain.

‘No Jim, you didn’t.’ McCoy said. ‘Maybe it’s time you did and what you know.’ McCoy’s voice and manner were bordering on the accusatory and Kirk shrugged.

‘Okay Bones. I am sorry for not telling you about it, but it was a deeply private experience, which after your prodding and probing after I told you of my dreams, I was sure I’d spend the rest of my life in Sickbay.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ mumbled the aggrieved doctor.

Kirk merely smiled.

‘When I was in the garden, I found myself floating, it was a wonderful feeling. I saw two past lives in some detail, which isn’t important now, but the third life was a life here on Alcany. I saw the life of a man whose name I didn’t know, but I was here with Celestine. That’s why I’m saying I could have been Ashata. I don’t know for sure, one way or the other.’

The doctor was dumbstruck and, for once speechless; however Spock, forever logical, wasn’t and said.

‘Logically, if you do not know that the Captain was this man, Ashata, there must be a way to be certain.’

Baylon nodded.

‘Oh yes. On our world we have a crystal chamber that helps us to separate our soul, spirit, or divine spark; however you wish to call it, from our physical body. This allows the individual to assess their past lives. To seek answers to problems now in their present life and connections, which run through the soul's existence? It is like a silver thread which links all their different lives together, showing the soul's journey, where it came from and where it may be going.’

Celestine added.

‘At one time we used the crystal a lot, but after we evolved to a higher level we didn't need to. We could access this knowledge by just concentrating on it. I, myself, am over six hundred of your Earth years old.’

McCoy gasped.

‘That's impossible.’

Celestine smiled at him.

‘For you it is, but the image that you see before you is not the real Celestine. To be seen in human form we have to slow down our vibratory rate to appear solid.’

Upon completing her words, she seemed to dissolve before them into a pulsating sphere of golden, shimmering light. She then reformed just as quickly into her human shape, smiling at their faces.

‘You see Doctor, in our light bodies we can live a very long time. We communicate telepathically and can talk to plants, animals, and even our buildings.’

‘Fascinating,’ Spock said. ‘I have observed animals here that have no fear of us. Is that because they are neither hunted nor killed?’

‘Yes Mr Spock.’

Baylon nodded as he replied.

‘We have no need to eat or hurt them. They have shared their knowledge with us, as have the plants. We all live in harmony; there is no need for violence.’

‘But you still need a shield?’ Kirk asked.

‘Yes Captain, we do, now more than ever. The ‘forgotten’ have grown stronger as we grow weaker, but even before they arrived, we used the shield to project an image of our world to passing ships, a world uninhabitable to forms such as you, so that we could live undisturbed. This worked well for centuries, until it started to weaken and a race of aggressors landed to find our beautiful fertile world. Then we had to use our shield to protect ourselves and separate our planet. It was painful to do this, but necessary. You, I am sure, have met races such as these,’ she said.

Kirk nodded, he could name five or six races in the galaxy who would like to do just that.

‘But we have the shield.’ Celestine continued. ‘Something that was given to us, from our elders that helped us move from the old level to the new. The creators, as we call them, also knew our weaknesses, as Baylon has explained. They gave each one of the eight, a piece of the puzzle, so that each was a keeper. Each of us knows only our small piece, but together the shield works. Ashata died so quickly, he had not time to tell us where and what his piece was. Thus we were weakened. At first, it wasn’t too much of a problem, but time is now running out for us.’

She looked into Kirk’s eyes.

‘You are our only hope. We need to know the piece of the puzzle that you hold in your soul.’

‘And to remember, I’d have to go into this crystal chamber?’

‘Yes Captain, you would.’

McCoy jumped to his feet.

‘Hey now, wait just a cotton picking minute.’

He turned to Kirk.

‘You aren’t going to go through with this are you Jim?’

Kirk shrugged.

‘I don’t know Bones. We would need to know a lot more about it before I make any decision.’

‘We understand your concern Doctor, but we assure you, he will not be harmed.’

Baylon said.

‘Hah! Let me be the judge of that.’ McCoy mumbled, unimpressed.

Spock had yet to voice an opinion, so Kirk turned to him aware of how much he valued the Vulcan’s views.

‘Spock, what do you think?’

‘I will have to agree with the doctor. You cannot possibly go ahead with this until we are sure that it is safe. This process apparently involves your spirit leaving your body for a length of time. Safeguards must be in place to return you when the task is complete.’

He turned to Baylon.

‘I will need to understand how this chamber works, what can go wrong and how you would rectify any problems before the Captain could consider placing himself at such a risk.’

Celestine seemed somewhat irritated by their response. She felt there was no reason not to proceed immediately. Kirk had been fine in the round garden and the crystal chamber was simply a more powerful version of that. She could see no risks, just gains for her people and her planet.

‘You were unharmed by your experience in the round garden Captain. The crystal chamber is more powerful, but the process is the same. Please say you will help us. We need that information quickly, before our shield fails. Please, please help us before it is too late.

Kirk gave her a reassuring smile.

‘I haven’t said no Celestine, but it is my life on the line. I have to be sure of the risks. I have many responsibilities to this ship and crew, not to mention Starfleet. I can’t just do as I please. Try to understand that.’

‘We do understand Captain.’ Baylon said, silencing Celestine’s further objections with a stern look. ‘We will supply any information Mr Spock requires on the chamber. You will have all the facts to help you make your decision.’

‘I will be ready to receive them Baylon.’ Spock said. ‘Please have the data sent to the science station on the bridge.’

Baylon nodded and rose; Celestine made to follow him.

‘We will leave you now and return to Alcany. The information will be passed on as Mr Spock has requested. I hope you will give us your answer soon Captain.’

‘As soon as I can and you will be informed straight away. I know how urgent this is to you and your planet.’

‘Thank you Captain. That is all we can ask of you.’

Both of the Alcanii faded away and were gone.

Chapter Fourteen

After the Alcani had left Spock returned to the bridge to analyse the information expected from the surface and Mr Scott was to assist him if necessary. This left Kirk and McCoy with nothing to do but wait, so they went to McCoy's quarters. McCoy got some drinks while Kirk collapsed onto the comfy sofa he always favoured when visiting the doctor's rooms.

'I wish you'd tell me what really happened in that garden,' McCoy complained.

'You won't give me a moments peace until you've got all the details will you?'

Kirk asked with a sigh.

McCoy found he had to agree with that, he hated not knowing what had happened.

'Don't annoy your friendly family doctor Jim. I can get my own back when your next physical comes around,' he threatened, but at the same time smiling sweetly and handing Kirk a glass of the finest Tennessee whiskey.

Kirk took a drink and shuddered.

'Powerful enough to knock you head off,' he thought. 'Only the best in this bar' He thanked the stars he hadn't taken too big a drink, but experience had helped, he had been caught once too often by one of McCoy's exotic drinks.

'It's very hard to explain what it was like unless you have experienced it.'

He thought for a moment, and then continued.

'It was very peaceful and safe. I just seemed to float out of my body and I didn't care about it. I saw it as a shell, not really who I am, just a method of getting around. It felt very natural to be without a body.'

He paused again and glanced at McCoy in an effort to gauge his reaction to what he had said. McCoy just sipped his drink, waiting for Kirk to go on, which after a long pause, he did.

‘I was as light as air. I could sense Celestine’s presence, but I couldn’t see her. She talked me back into the past. Back beyond this life as Kirk, to another in the twenty-first century on Earth and further back to one on a sailing ship. Then, I found myself on Alcany, maybe as Ashata.’

‘But how did you know these were past lives?’ McCoy asked.

Kirk gave a heavy sigh as he knew he would have difficulty with McCoy. He was a stubborn man at the best of times.

‘I just know they were Bones.’

He saw the disbelief cross his friend’s face.

‘It wasn’t just a feeling; it was much more than that. Please try and understand. This was a very deep, personal experience. I know I’ve lived these lives. I can’t tell you how I know, I just do.’

Kirk’s sincerity had half convinced the still sceptical doctor. At least now he believed that Kirk believed he’d lived before, but was he Ashata?

‘Okay Jim, but what about this crystal chamber? You’d be risking your life to find out if you were this Ashata. Is that wise, or a responsible action for a Starfleet Captain?’

Kirk didn’t really know his own thoughts about entering the chamber. He was no fool and he knew it could go wrong. He was as nervous about the unknown as anyone, but could he refuse to help an entire race because he might get hurt? He knew himself too well to lie and so did McCoy.

‘I know I’ve done a lot of crazy, irresponsible things in the past Bones, you’ve told me that often enough, but I don’t think I am this time.’

He quickly raised his hand to stop McCoy from speaking.

‘Just listen to me a minute. This planet is in real trouble and I can help them by giving them a single piece of information I hold inside me. What would you do Bones? The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one. How many times have we applied that to others? Lazarus was prepared to give up his own life to save two universes. I don’t think any choice I’ll be taking is that much of a risk. If it is like the round garden it won’t be hard to go back, get the information and come back. I think you’d agree that that is the right thing to do.’

McCoy stayed silent, considering all that Kirk had said.

‘But you will wait for Spock to analyse the data before making your decision?’ He asked finally.

‘Of course,’ Kirk said nodding. ‘If Spock says it is not safe I won’t do it. I owe the crew of this ship and Starfleet that.’

McCoy nodded, rose and refilled his glass.

‘Isn’t this against the Prime Directive? To interfere with a planet’s development?’ Kirk had already considered this and was glad he had prepared one of his ‘bending the rules’ solutions ready.

‘Not in this case,’ he said.

‘Why?’ McCoy demanded.

Kirk smiled broadly, McCoy was going to love this solution.

‘Because Bones, I won’t be helping them as Kirk, I’ll be a being from this planet. An Alcanii named Ashata. Now that’s not breaking any rules is it?’

McCoy scowled.

‘That’s a very small loophole you’ve found there Jim. Let’s hope you never have to explain it to Starfleet, it might get you hung.’

Kirk stood up and stretched.

‘I’ll try not to Bones. They’ve tried to get rid of me before but so far I’m still here.’

He laughed and knew he always lived his life on the edge; never quite sure if he’d be the hero or the villain.

‘I’m going to the bridge to see how Spock is getting on.’

McCoy got to his feet.

‘I’ll be there after I’ve checked on Uhura.’

They both headed for the Turbo lift.

‘How is she?’ Kirk asked.

‘She’s coming along fine. Be back on duty in no time.’

‘That’s great.’

Kirk’s voice reflected his relief.

‘The bridge is not the same without her. I really miss my old crew when they aren’t on the bridge. I didn’t like it when Sulu was injured and I don’t trust these young ensigns, not to fly us into a planet by mistake.’

McCoy laughed.

‘Get out of here you old worry wart.’

He slapped Kirk on the back.

‘Get back to the bridge where you belong.’

Kirk left the doctor at level five and made his way to the bridge.

Chapter Fifteen

Beyond the shield, on Alcany, a meeting was about to take place that could change everything. The forces of darkness had gathered just outside the protection of the shield. In the darkness two lights appeared and formed into the shapes of a man and a woman. These two looked around them and were surrounded by twenty to thirty beings, each wearing a variety of battle-dress. All the clothes were dark in colour and very dirty and one stood out from this gloomy crowd. He was huge in both height and breadth and his features showed clearly that he was a half-breed. Half Alcanii, half Klingon, which gave his appearance an awesome quality. He was the undisputed leader of this faction and his name was Ged'lek.

The huge man moved in front of the paler, slimmer Alcanii and spoke, with a voice that had the timbre of deep, far off thunder.

‘Well? What has happened that we must meet?’

He scowled at the two Alcanii.

‘If this is a trap, you will pay dearly for your treachery.’

The Alcanii male glided closer to the leader.

‘Ged'lek, we have a great opportunity to rid Alcany of this shield and the diversion of our planet into dark and light.’

Ged'lek cocked his head to one side in interest. He was a strong, forceful leader with a low and cunning mind but he'd never trust these puny creatures, although he would use them if he could and he could destroy them later. His objective was simple; he wanted to control this world, to be King of all he survived. He lusted for it, ached for it and had sold his soul in pursuit of it and there was nothing he wouldn't do to get the power that he wanted.

‘What has changed little ones?’

He smiled his question menacingly.

‘We have found Ashata,’ the female replied.

There was a muted gasp from the surrounding beings and a whisper passed through their ranks.

‘They have found Ashata.’

Even Ged’lek’s mouth dropped open in amazement and he looked stunned by the news. Every being on Alcany knew of the search for Ashata and knew what his return would mean. Light would be supreme forever; darkness banished to the hell of being at the mercy of invaders and space pirates; to be hungry and in despair. In the light life was protected, safe and all requirements plentiful. All the denizens of the darkness longed for a chance to live in the light, but Ashata’s return would stop this forever.

‘How have they found him?’ Ged’lek croaked, finally finding his voice.

The male Alcanii composed himself and then spoke.

‘Last year a Starship passed near here and Celestine sensed his presence. She was his mate, so her ties to him were the strongest. Once she touched his essence she was sent to find out where Ashata was and who held his soul now. It took many months to track this ship and eliminate each member of its crew before we could find the one who might be him. Finally, she was as sure as she could be that the captain of the ship held Ashata’s memories. To be completely sure we needed him here, on Alcany. By this time the ship was hundreds of parsecs away, so we had to be patient. Then it came back towards us and we used what we had learnt from scanning the ship to lure it here. Once here, the captain was invited into the round garden chamber for Celestine to find out if he truly held Ashata’s soul in his mind. He does! Now he is

to go into the crystal chamber to release to us the information we have searched for all these centuries.’

The group around them now grew restive with many voices were raised in both despair and anger. Ged’lek raised his hand and the muttering was stilled.

‘Why are you telling us this? What do you gain from us killing Ashata?’

A mumble of agreement met these questions and the circle tightened around the two Alcanii. Both figures looked alarmed at being quashed together by this hostile crowd.

‘Ged’lek, we have told you that we wish our planet to be free for all our people, not just for some of us. You must act quickly if you are to kill Ashata. The rest of the Eight are anxious that he enters the chamber before you hear of his arrival and stop it. He knows nothing of you, save what the Eight have told him. Even then, they have told him only what they wish him to know. He will enter either tonight or in the morning so you must be ready. We have brought you maps of the complex showing the location of the chamber. Destroy the chamber with him inside and the shield will fail.’

Ged’lek took from them the crystal tablets on which the maps were inscribed. They looked very fragile in his huge hands; even he was scared that they would break and if they did, all his hopes and those of his followers would be shattered with them. Not that he cared about his followers. His lust for power was foremost in his mind as he had always felt that he had been born to be a great hero, a leader and no one would be allowed to stop him or get in his way. He would crush any that dared into the pink dust of Alcany. He regarded the two Alcanii before him. Should he kill them now, he wondered, or wait until he had what he wanted? Luckily the two telepathic Alcanii picked up his thoughts and decided to leave.

Before they left, the male had a final word to say to Ged’lek.

‘The shield is weakest where we have marked it on the map. You can enter there and with luck remain undetected.’

With that, they both dissolved into a ball of light and disappeared. They had timed their departure perfectly as Ged’lek had taken a step forward to destroy them as they vanished. He spat at the last location of the light and cursed them under his breath but he was too late to kill them as they were now safely back behind the shield.

He turned to his second in command, a tall broad man named Cal who was devoted to Ged’lek, and ordered him to take the warriors to the weakest part of the shield; in readiness to attack the chamber and he watched his men arming themselves. He had over fifty warriors at his command, all eager to get a better life and a taste of easy living to be had in the cities of shimmering stones. He now felt that it was all within his reach; the power, glory and unlimited food in the light would be his to use. No more scraping in the darkness and the dirt; no more humiliation. His Klingon half sang in blood lust for the destruction of his enemies and soon, he thought, very soon, I will have it all!

Chapter Sixteen

McCoy made his way up to the bridge in the Turbo-lift. He was in high spirits after paying a visit to Uhura to find she was very much better. Her wounds were well on the way to being healed and she was in a more positive frame of mind. She was bored with Sickbay and McCoy had decided that if she felt like returning to duty that was probably the best thing for her. It would also please that man on the bridge to have her back on communications. He smiled to himself, he had known James Kirk for over ten years, but he was still learning what made him tick. He was a very complex man, with many insecurities and passions. McCoy was sure that he would never cease to be surprised by his friend. The lift stopped and the doors opened onto the bridge. Claspng his hands behind his back, he stepped out of the lift and looked around him. All seemed quiet. Spock and Scotty were hunched over the science station. Kirk sat in his command chair staring at the planet Alcany.

Kirk hadn't been aware of McCoy's arrival, so when the doctor placed his hand on his shoulder, he started with surprise. Noticing McCoy's smile, he took a deep breath to regain his composure.

'Bones,' he said. 'Nice of you to drop in.'

'Caught you daydreaming Jim?' McCoy chuckled.

'Guilty as charged Bones.'

Kirk smiled and returned his eyes to the screen.

'It certainly is a beautiful sight.' McCoy said.

'Yes it is almost as beautiful as Earth.'

Kirk sighed.

'All this past life information is a bit overwhelming.'

He smiled and looked at the doctor.

‘I’m not sure if Earth or Alcany is home.’

He was beginning to doubt himself.

‘Who am I?’ He thought.

‘I think,’ said McCoy with a frown. ‘You’ll have to consider yourself a citizen of the universe. I expect, in a way, we all are. If we went into the crystal chamber we would all find out we have lived many lives on many different planets, in many different forms. Whoever you were in the past, you are still James Kirk now.’

Kirk looked at McCoy.

‘I wish they’d hurry up and give me a report,’ Kirk said, indicating Scotty and Spock. ‘I need to know if I’m going to do this or not. It’s a bit like waiting for the results to one of your medicals Bones. Much better when it’s over.’

McCoy was forced to chuckle at this; giving the crewmembers their annual check-up was as much of a chore to him as it was for the crew. It entailed a huge amount of work and took months to complete, but he never let on to the crew just how much he dreaded it. Oh no, he pretended to approach the task with relish and gusto. A voice from the science station interrupted their conversation.

‘Captain, we have finished analysing the data on the crystal chamber.’

Kirk rose from the command chair and crossed to stand beside Spock.

‘And what are your conclusions gentlemen?’

Spock folded his arms and regarded the Captain balefully.

‘Mr Scott and I agree that there is nothing in the chamber that would harm you, as there is no electrical or mechanical equipment involved. It is a form of resonator; it amplifies vibrations making it easier to attain a higher level of consciousness. Its pyramidal shape helps it to do this. It is well known that the pyramid shape is

beneficial to health. In this version, the energy purifies water, dehydrates food, and eliminates migraines and toothaches. Wounds would heal faster, sleep cycles would be improved...’

‘Yes, yes Spock.’ McCoy flared, irritated and unable to stand any more of Spock’s lecture. ‘We do know something about pyramids you know.’

‘I was merely informing the Captain of some of the characteristics of the crystal chamber,’ Spock said levelly, raising and inquiring eyebrow at the doctor.

Kirk was forced to smile at the bickering as he never tired of the continual verbal battles between the two men. It was a constant source of entertainment, but he felt he should interrupt before things got out of hand again.

‘Thank you Spock, but enough about the shape. What about how it works?’

Spock hesitated and Kirk saw that Mr Scott was also looking bemused.

‘Spock?’ Kirk pressed.

No answer seemed to be forthcoming, so Kirk turned to his Chief Engineer.

‘Scotty? Do you know how the chamber works?’

Scotty shrugged and sighed.

‘It beats me Captain. I canny say I’ve ever seen it’s like before. We can find no energy source, or any device that makes it work. The Alcanii gave us a vid-tape showing it being used. All that told us was that the chamber seems to come alive when someone is inside.’

‘You mean it’s alive!’ Kirk exclaimed in astonishment.

‘Yes, in many ways it is.’ Spock conceded.

‘We know that all crystals are, in their own way alive. They have energy and vibrate. Although we cannot communicate with them and they don’t eat, or move as we do, they are still living entities. This particular crystal is immense and has a

hollowed centre. It has been shaped into a huge pyramid form, but it is still a crystal. The energy it is capable of producing is enormous. Back on Earth, it is believed that in the Atlantean period, the whole civilisation used crystals as the sole source of energy. I think the Alcanii, at some time in their past, did the same. It would be interesting to study their history to see if any link between the two cultures could be established.'

'Maybe Spock.'

Kirk's tone was cautionary.

'But let's not stray too far off track here.'

Kirk began to pace between the science station and the communication station, watched by most of the bridge crew. They all knew that Kirk did some of his best thinking when on the move and this was typical behaviour for him.

'So what you are saying is, the chamber itself won't harm me?'

He looked sharply at Spock.

'That is correct Captain.'

Kirk resumed his pacing.

'But once I'm in the chamber what could happen to me?' He asked.

'The only danger I can see is, once you are in the chamber and your soul has left your body, an interference with the chamber could result in the prevention of you returning to your own body. You would be safe within the chamber, but the chamber itself could be vulnerable. I therefore suggest that Security personnel be positioned around the chamber whilst you are inside, to protect it.'

'Do you believe that any one on Alcany would wish to harm me?' Kirk asked, surprised by Spock's suggestion.

‘Captain, Lieutenant Carella was killed whilst on ‘peaceful’ Alcany. I still believe that there is more to this situation than we have been told. I cannot be sure that you would be in any danger, but it would be logical to take precautions. Two or three Security personnel should be sufficient.’

‘I think that would be very wise Jim,’ McCoy agreed. ‘Even though I hate to agree with Spock.’

Kirk considered what he had been told before walking over to the command chair and pressed the communication button.

‘Security? Mr Chekov!’

A few seconds later Chekov’s accented tones came over the comm.

‘Chekov here Keptain.’

‘You and two security officers report to the transporter room. Fully armed please Mr Chekov.’

‘Aye, aye Sir. Chekov out.’

‘I suppose you two don’t want to miss the show?’ Kirk said, looking at his two friends.

‘Not for anything.’ McCoy grinned in reply.

‘Anyway you may need me.’

‘I hope not doctor.’

Kirk grimaced.

‘Not for your medical skills anyway. Spock are you ready?’

‘Quite ready Captain. This should be a most interesting experience.’

‘Each to his own,’ Kirk said flatly. ‘Mr Scott, you have the con.’

‘Aye Sir.’ Scotty acknowledged with a heavy sigh.

Chapter Seventeen

Ged'lek's forces had been successful in crossing into the light, thanks to the crystal map given to him by the two Alcanii's traitors, he and his force had found the weakened area of the shield and had slipped through undetected. Moving through the crystal city, Ged'lek noticed that a number of buildings were no longer there. In fact, they were unknown to Ged'lek; they were vibrating too fast to be seen. The shambling group moved hurriedly through the deepening Alcanian twilight. Eventually, they reached the crystal building that had been marked on the map as the one containing the pyramid chamber. Without pausing for breath, Ged'lek positioned his warriors around the building and waited for Ashata's arrival.

'Gedlek, look,' whispered Cad'lek, Ged'lek's younger brother.

Ged'lek looked in the direction in which his sibling had pointed. Across the plaza three Alcanii had appeared from the council chamber and stood waiting. Ged'lek recognised these Alcanii as Kaynor, Baylon and Celestine, members of the Eight. A few moments later six shimmering figures formed in the plaza, directly in front of the waiting Alcanii. Ged'lek heard the worried mumbling of his closest warriors. They wanted to attack now, but who to attack, which of these strangers was Ashata? Legend had it that Ashata was a tall, slim Alcanian with golden hair and bright blue eyes but none of these new arrivals fitted that description. With an air of desperation he studied them, trying to guess which it might be. His attention first rested on the tall figure in a blue uniform. This creature had black, short hair and his skin had a greenish tinge. He stood calmly, hands behind his back, listening intently to the welcoming from the Alcanii.

No, Ged'lek decided, he was not the one. He then dismissed the three men in red, as they obviously were guards as their stance was unmistakable. That left two men to be considered one in blue, the other in gold. He was undecided, neither looked like Ashata, but the one in gold had the bearing of a leader and he was the one the Alcanii were greeting.

Doctor McCoy had always hated being transported. Maybe, he thought, because he knew exactly what the transporter was doing to every atom of his body, or maybe because he didn't like the tingling, void feeling. He was always relieved to find himself in one piece afterwards, instead of floating around space reduced to his constituent parts. In front of the landing party stood the three Alcanii and Kirk bowed to them before Baylon began to say how grateful the people of Alcanii were that he had decided to enter the crystal chamber. McCoy found his attention wandering; he still wasn't wholly convinced that this was a good idea. He was firmly of the opinion the tampering with the spirit was very unwise. He glanced at Kirk and saw definite signs of unease in the Captain's face. Whatever Kirk had said, McCoy knew he wasn't a hundred percent sure of this either. Kirk's smile failed to reach his eyes, the pulse in his neck was visible and his movements jerky. McCoy knew that these signs were not noticeable to the others, but they were unmistakable to him. McCoy came back with a start when he realised that Baylon was now leading them through the plaza towards a large crystal building.

The doors to the building were huge and made of stone; each door picked out with coloured stones that formed a mosaic pattern of stunning complexity and beauty. Spock was mildly surprised that some of the patterns resembled Egyptian hieroglyphics from Earth.

'Baylon?' He asked. 'These designs, they are of ancient origin?'

‘Yes,’ Baylon replied, turning to the Vulcan with a smile. ‘They are very old and are made, as you can see, from many different types of stone, some of which are not native to our own world. We believe our ancestors collected them from many worlds. They made the doors from them and the walls inside. This is the most sacred place on all Alcany. It is much older than any other structure, but we know little of those who made it.’

‘So you didn’t build the crystal chamber?’ Kirk asked.

‘Oh no Captain. Its purpose was only revealed to us by the creators after we made the transition.’

‘Fascinating.’ Spock murmured.

Kirk turned to Spock, signalling that he should share his thoughts. Spock did so, but somewhat reluctantly.

‘Sir, I have seen some of these designs before on your own planet.’

‘You have?’ McCoy said, startled.

‘Yes Doctor. In a country called Egypt. They are very ancient and are found in the tombs of their leaders and outside their temples. The Egyptians also used pyramids.’

‘Of course Spock,’ Kirk said excitedly. ‘The great pyramids of Giza outside Cairo. You think there could possibly be any connection between ancient Egypt and ancient Alcany?’

‘It is a possibility Captain, and it would probably explain many questions that, up to now have not been answered. There are still many mysteries surrounding how ancient people could build such huge structures as the pyramids with such accuracy. Their very technology seemed to appear from no-where. It would be interesting to do further studies on this planet.’

‘Yes, a pity we don’t have more time to study this structure. Maybe another time,’ Kirk said.

It was McCoy who brought them back to the matter in hand.

‘It is all very interesting, but let’s get on with seeing this chamber shall we? Then we can finally get some shore leave.’

Inside the chamber the sight that met their eyes, was more impressive than the doors. The walls depicted huge, striding figures, some fifty feet tall and they were beautifully painted and adorned with precious stones from the far reaches of the galaxy. In the centre of this square building stood an immense pink crystal pyramid; its tip rose until it almost touched the vaulted dome above it, some eighty feet above the floor. McCoy felt surprised by its colour, he had imagined it to be smaller, and more like a diamond. Its colour reminded him of rose quartz, back on Earth. They walked toward it all in awe of its size and beauty.

‘My God Captain. It’s lovely,’ Chekov whispered.

Kirk agreed he was too lost for words at the sight before him. The three Alcanii looked on, amused and delighted at their guests’ reaction. Spock, ever on duty, pointed his Tricorder here and there, taking readings from the walls and the pyramid itself while McCoy shook his head at the Vulcan’s behaviour. Even in the presence of such overwhelming beauty he showed no emotion; he had to study it, pull it apart, label it, explain it and, in the process, strip it of its beauty. He turned back to look at the crystal and slowly walked around it. After completing his tour he was puzzled that he could find neither door nor opening. He began to think he had misunderstood the Alcanii as he had thought the captain would physically enter this crystal, but he couldn’t work out how he was to carry this out. All the sides were perfectly smooth, a perfect pyramid in every respect, flawless and breathtaking.

Confused, McCoy began a second circuit in an attempt to locate the way in as Kirk joined him. McCoy smiled absentmindedly.

‘Impressive, isn’t it?’ Kirk asked in a hushed voice.

‘You are a master of understatement Jim. It’s incredible! It’s so big; I didn’t think it would be like this.’

‘Neither did I. But then nothing on this planet has been quite how we expected it, has it?’

‘No, that’s very true. One thing is puzzling me though. Where’s the door?’

‘You’re right Bones. I hadn’t realised that there wasn’t one until you mentioned it.’

Kirk reached forward and stroked the flank of the pyramid. It was smooth and had the texture of fine silk. Reluctantly, they moved back to their hosts.

‘It is beautiful Baylon,’ Kirk said. ‘How does it work? I can’t see any door.’

‘There’s the door Captain,’ Celestine said softly, pointing back at the pyramid.

Kirk turned and there, indeed, was a door. It was recessed within the crystal and matched so well it was difficult to see.

‘Come it is time to find Ashata again and get the information we need.’

Celestine gently took Kirk’s hand and led him to the crystal door.

Chapter Eighteen

Kirk was still hesitant about this, but he had given his word and he couldn't go back on it now. That was the strength of his character, but he was forced to admit that, sometimes, it was a weakness. In some situations it would have been better to cut his losses and run, but he hated to be beaten, including by his own phobias and fears. Life was always a battlefield for James T Kirk. Feeling the pressure of Celestine's hand in his, he stepped forward into the crystal. It was cool inside and gave off an air of tranquillity. He had worried that the atmosphere might be claustrophobic, but it wasn't and he began to relax. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Celestine indicated that he should sit in a crystal chair in the centre of the room and as he did so he became aware of a faint humming sound. He started to concentrate on it as its volume began to build. It was not unpleasant, he felt it rising and falling in an endless rhythm inside him. He began to feel drowsy and warm, his eyelids became heavy and he felt comfortable and safe, as if wrapped in a warm quilt. In his mind he saw colours, faintly at first, but gradually growing brighter and brighter. He felt sure that he was moving, floating and turning through time and space. The sensation of movement was so strong that he briefly felt a wave of nausea as the separation from his physical body had begun.

At first he was unaware of it, but soon he felt his soul depart his body, though he could see he was still attached to it by a thin silver thread. Celestine had warned him of this and that this thread connected his spirit to his physical form and only at the point of death was it broken to allow his spirit to soar free of the physical world. An out of body experience, like the one he was having, was different, in that he was still

attached to his physical self. You would always return to the body if that thread was unbroken. It was reassuring to see it now, knowing that he could return at any time.

The veil of time began to lift and the pictures of his memory began to move backwards past this lifetime to a life of bitterness which he had no wish to relive. Another veil lifted; transporting him back to the life he had lead as a sailor. He caught glimpses of the blue of the sea and tall, three masted sailing ships. He could smell and feel the salt laden sea breeze. Then he moved on again and another veil lifted, moving him backward to the life he was seeking. He found himself looking at Ashata. He saw a tall, slim, blonde man hand in hand with Celestine and he was struck by the peculiarity of watching someone who was you, yet not yourself. He stared intently at the Alcanii, and then drifted into him.

Kirk was now inside Ashata, feeling his great love for Celestine, knowing how much it had hurt to leave her, knowing his hopes and plans he had had for his people would remain unfulfilled. He could feel the sadness at his lack of success on Earth as his great desire to spread the word of love and light to other worlds. He also sensed the fear that some of the Eight had no further wish to try, that they favoured cutting themselves off on Alcany, creating a paradise of little meaning and purpose. He knew he would have to fight to keep the ideas of the creator alive as the only alternative was boredom and stagnation. He knew well that if people had no purpose in life they would become frustrated and bitter but he could understand their fears, although felt the risks in making contact with other worlds were worth it. The shield that the creator had given them was more than enough protection for the home world, while representatives would travel to other planets, help them with technology, meditation, compassion...and love. Alcany was once a warring, feuding planet, but

now light had established its rule and all lived together in harmony. That was the gift he wanted to take to other worlds.

With no warning, Kirk felt a sudden, blinding shaft of pain and he reeled back from the images as all became clear. Ashata had been murdered. He hadn't died of an illness brought back from his visit to Earth; he had been poisoned, and by someone he had trusted. Betrayed! Murder, his mind screamed in an anguished voice that penetrated the darkness, but none was there to hear. He had died so quickly he had no time to tell anyone who had killed him. Kirk felt Ashata's pain, the deep gnawing hurt of betrayal.

'Why? Why did he do this?'

Pain filled him again; an aching, searing pain and the screamed word, 'Why' echoed through the void of time.

McCoy had watched stoically as Kirk had entered the crystal pyramid. He had seen his friend settle into the seat in the middle, and then.....nothing. McCoy folded his arms and frowned.

'What a waste of time if nothing happens,' he thought. 'I bet no one thought of that as an option.' He mumbled to himself. 'I could be having a glass of something on Star Base 12 now, instead of taking part in this fool's errand.'

He looked around as he realised that he had been speaking out loud, but no one had appeared to have heard him. It was then he noticed Spock staring transfixed at the pyramid and McCoy was confused, what could Spock see that he couldn't?

He became aware of movement behind him and turned from watching Spock. To look at Mr Chekov who had his two security men positioned in such a way as to cover the only entrance to the building, both had their phasers drawn. This seemed a bit

over the top to McCoy, but he knew that Chekov could be over zealous at times. Experiences with Chekov had long taught McCoy to leave him be, any offered advice or help tended to be treated either as an insult or a slur on his abilities. Chekov had certainly changed from the likeable, helpful ensign he had been when he first joined the Enterprise. McCoy had thought that security was a bad choice for the young Russian, but he appreciated that you can't live other people's lives for them. Anyway, McCoy mused, when did young people ever listen to the advice of their elders so with a heavy sigh, McCoy turned back to face the chamber.

Something was happening in there now and even McCoy could see changes in the colour of the crystal, it seemed to be pulsing like a huge heart. He watched in fascination and then there was a huge crash from behind him, causing him to spin round in surprise and alarm. The huge doors to the building were opening and a wave of dark menacing figures began rushing through the widening gap.

'Oh my God,' was all he had time to say.

Chapter Nineteen

As the chamber door had closed on Kirk, Spock had found himself unable to look away. Try as he might, he found it impossible to tear his eyes, and thoughts from the crystal pyramid. To Spock, it had started to pulse the instant Kirk had taken his seat. Slowly at first, but Spock could feel it beating, almost synchronised to his own heartbeat and with each beat it brought to his consciousness feelings he had spent a lifetime trying to suppress. He knew that even full Vulcan's had feelings, which they controlled, but for him this control was twice as difficult to achieve. Spock had lived his life on permanent guard, ready to quash any feeling that threatened to show through. As a child this had made his life a nightmare, forever provoked by his peers into looking foolish when he reacted to their provocation.

He had been an outcast on his own planet, never totally accepted which was one of the reasons he had joined Starfleet where he was treated the same as any other cadet, not as a half-breed. His relationship with his father had always been tense as he was expected to behave as a Vulcan at all times. Yet he found he could not as his human half battled against the strict, logical obedience expected of him. He found it easier to don a mask to protect himself from criticism or rejection. He had vowed that no one would ever discover how much they had hurt him. In this he had been successful and only Jim Kirk knew the real Spock and, even he did not know it all. Spock's trust for his Captain and his best friend sometimes overwhelmed him. Friendship was something new to the Vulcan but the warmth that this friendship provided calmed his human half and he was grateful for it.

Although he received many benefits from this friendship, Spock knew that he could never openly show his feelings even for his friend. His mental barriers were too

strong and rigid for such a show of emotion, but Kirk knew they were there, an unspoken bond, there forever. Doctor McCoy would never know how right he had been on the many occasions that emotion had show through Spock's defences. The doctor had often accused Spock of having no feelings, but he had them, he just couldn't show them. Never believe a Vulcan does not feel, thought Spock. He feels much more than anyone will ever know and with far more depth than any human.

The psychic telepathic links in a Vulcan are very strong and on many occasions Spock had felt the sense of others pain and their joy, but was unable to experience it for himself. The Vulcan mind meld was both painful and intrusive. He cared not for the sensation of looking into another's mind, eavesdropping on someone's life and emotions. He had only done it when it was necessary, when all other forms of contact had failed. The cost to him had been high and now standing outside the crystal, he began to experience something new. With amazement, he felt himself departing from his body.

Ged'lek and his force had watched the Alcanii lead the Enterprise party into the crystal chamber. Once they were out of sight, he signalled for his troops to close in on the huge stone doors. Not a sound penetrated from inside as the doors were too solid for sound to pass through them. He felt a surge of frustration at the lack of windows, there was no way to discover what was going on inside. Had Ashata entered the pyramid yet? There was no sure way of knowing. He tried to prise the doors open, but they refused to move so he turned to Naren. He was a lieutenant, who he didn't care for much, but he led men well; maybe, he thought, better than I do. Although he recognised his weakness, he kept it from the others. He depended on the strength of his personality to sway his men, but knew that he could have lapses of

judgement and organisational skills. He needed Naren and he hated that, but knew it to be the truth.

‘Naren?’

The smaller human moved to Ged’lek’s side.

‘Yes Ged’lek.’

‘This door is locked. Open it now,’ he ordered; looking forward to the day when he could kill this puny human but until that day comes he would use him.

Naren nodded and signalled to two of his men and they moved forward quickly carrying an explosive device. They moved without orders and began to attach it to the doors. Two minutes later they stepped back, ready to detonate on Naren’s order.

‘On your command Ged’lek,’ Naren sneered.

‘Once the doors are open follow me in. Remember we must destroy the chamber and destroy Ashata. On to victory! On to the light!’ Ged’lek yelled, raising his ceremonial sword above his head. The others cheered at his oath.

Naren did not cheer; he was unimpressed by this show of bravado as he felt that it was foolish, but knew that to question this action would lead to a swift death by that same sword that now glittered in the air. No, Naren decided, let Ged’lek lead the charge, maybe he would be killed. It would be better to wait in a safer position to see what unfolded as Klingons rush in where they should fear to tread.

Naren smiled. “No, I’m not such a fool,” he thought.

The flash of the explosive was intense and bright and the noise reverberated around the plaza. One door was lifted clear off its hinges and crashed to the floor. The other cracked clean through, slammed back into the inner wall and sagged from a damaged hinge, leaving the way was now clear for Ged’lek’s army to enter the building and his men followed him through the thick, choking smoke. At last, Ged’lek exulted. With

the sword held high in one hand, almost as a standard, he began to fire his projectile weapon with the other hand as he advanced. The weapon, firing a combination of lead and gas, was crude but effective. Before him lay the pink crystal pyramid and the aliens seemed stunned by the rapidity of his attack, frozen in front of him. His heart sang out with bloodlust, he burned with it. With a scream of 'Forward', he and his fifty men swept into the building.

Chekov had been nervous as from a tactical point of view, the building was a trap. Trying to defend a building with only one entrance was poor tactics, frowned upon at the Academy. He recalled many simulations of just such a situation and the scenario always had an unhappy ending for those given the task of defending. Although one door was easier to defend, once breached, there was no other way to safety. He sighed, maybe he would be lucky and nothing would happen. Maybe he should stop worrying. But then, he wasn't the luckiest person in Starfleet, so perhaps he should worry some more.

He signalled for Mills to move to the left of the crystal, and then ordered Green to go to the right, catching the doors in crossfire. Chekov kept himself free, to roam and prowl the building anxiously. He glanced at the motionless form of Kirk in the crystal and sighed. Chekov had always admired Kirk, hero-worshipped him, his leadership may be unorthodox, but it was inspired and some of his more successful ploys were even taught at the Academy. Kirk had achieved the status of living legend and Chekov had hoped to emulate him and achieve the same respect, but felt he never would. He made do with the simple pride of serving under him.

Chekov was twelve years younger than Kirk and he wished that Kirk would take him under his direct tutelage. Treat him like a younger brother, but he knew that his

temperament always seemed to get in the way. He took life far too seriously and found it next to impossible to lighten up as he had in the past. His reverie was destroyed by a thundering crash behind him. He saw the doors begin to sag and part and he was frozen for a heartbeat before he and his men dived for cover.

Chapter Twenty

Recovering from the sense of betrayal Kirk began to search for what he needed, the information to repair the shield. He concentrated on motivating Ashata into showing him where the information was and with no warning, he found himself standing looking at one of the paintings on the wall. It showed a healer at work, massaging someone's feet and set in a headband on the man was a light blue stone, a turquoise. This was the piece needed to complete the puzzle, but there was a code to be found before it could be reached.

Kirk felt a second wave of pain as unbelievable agony engulfed and stunned him. This was not any experience of Ashata; it was his own soul in torment. He began to tumble, spiralling downwards out of control and he felt that he had been thrown out of Ashata and cast into a void of darkness and confusion. Kirk cried out for help, his spirit reached out mentally for the same source.

'Help me. Help me.' He called.

But in the chamber he went unheard.

Spock had discovered himself looking down on his body, standing rigid outside the pyramid. With total detachment, he studied himself critically. It should, he considered, be totally illogical that he was outside his body, but it was not. Strange. Feeling how light he was, he began to float further away from his physical body. He felt no concern for it, more curiosity about what lay ahead; already sure of what he was leaving behind. He could see colours and simply enjoyed their beauty, free from the need to analyse. Was this dying? He mused. If so, he was enjoying the experience.

He began to see scenes from his life before him, as if being projected on to a screen. He saw the time when he was to marry on Vulcan and he watched as the madness had taken hold of him and he had believed he had killed his Captain. It had been a painful memory, but now he could feel the emotion, but not the pain. He could understand the experience and learn from it. He could see how it had helped him to grow and develop and he saw how his relationship with Kirk and McCoy was so necessary for his own growth. Their continual challenges and questions of his beliefs were another way for him to learn and grow. It was all so much clearer from this new vantage point.

The images took him to the time when he had joined Starfleet and showed him the scene of when he told his father of his decision. He saw the only time his father had come close to losing control of his emotions and it was terrible to witness, more so in that his father had always emphasised that they were the most important things for a Vulcan to master. His father had wanted him to follow in his footsteps at the Science Academy, but Spock had known long ago that being a half Vulcan he would never be accepted there. It wouldn't matter how competent he was; he would be looked down on, even pitied. At Starfleet he would be judged solely on his abilities, not his racial background. It had been the best decision he had made, reliving it he was made surer that it had been the right decision.

As the pictures began to show him scenes from his childhood they stopped with a dramatic suddenness and he sensed another presence coming toward him. He couldn't see anyone, but knew they were there.

‘Spock.’

The voice was Celestine's.

‘I am here, Celestine.’

A ball of soft golden light formed in front of him.

‘Spock, the chamber is under attack. Kirk is in danger. We need your help.’

Kirk in danger! How could this be?

McCoy stood open mouthed as surging toward him came a ragged army of armed, mixed races. They appeared to be led by the biggest Klingon McCoy had ever seen and as the Klingon yelled his battle cry, McCoy stood stunned, unable to move. It took a projectile near miss to galvanise him into action. He dived for the floor, at the same time fumbling ineptly for his phaser, mentally thanking Spock for insisting he carry one. As the weapon fouled in his tunic, stopping him from drawing it fully, he began to curse under his breath. Seeing a stone chest to his right, he scrambled toward it in a desperate search for cover. Slipping he felt an arm grab him and haul him behind it. Ensign Green had had the same idea and had reached cover in time to help the doctor.

‘What’s happening?’ Green asked, raising himself above the level of the chest to fire a burst of fire at the intruders clustered round the door.

‘Why ask me? I just got here,’ McCoy snapped, finally freeing his phaser.

Chancing a quick look at their attackers, McCoy could see that, despite their numbers this new enemy seemed disorganised. One man began to move towards the chest and McCoy pulled the trigger. The man crumpled as the burst of energy hit him low in the abdomen.

‘I hate this,’ McCoy thought. ‘I’m a doctor. I’m supposed to save life not take it.’ Even as he completed that thought he knew that this situation was kill or be killed. The giant leader seemed to be ordering his men forward, not that they seemed too

keen despite their numerical superiority. A burst of fire from the door caused Green and McCoy to duck behind the safety afforded by the stone chest. Clouds of stone dust from the hit cascaded down on them. McCoy sneezed and wiped his eyes, glancing round he saw Chekov and Mills firing steadily from a similar stone chest on the far side of the room. It was then that he saw Spock. Surprised that Spock hadn't moved since the attack, he called out his name. At that instant he saw the Klingon leader take deliberate aim at the transfixed Vulcan.

Reacting completely against his nature, as McCoy would later say, he leapt at the Vulcan whilst firing a wild burst with his phaser at the Klingon. He hit Spock square in the middle carrying him to the floor and sliding two thirds of the way to where Chekov was watching him aghast. For the second time in as many minutes a strong arm dragged the doctor to safety.

'Are you hit doctor?' Chekov asked, continuing his heavy fire at the door.

'I don't think so. I'm not sure about Spock though.'

From his position he had not the room to check on Spock.

'How are we doing Chekov?'

'We're not winning.' The security chief answered grimly.

Right from the beginning things had not gone as Ged'lek planned. He had thought that with a superiority of ten to one, his assault would be easy but he could not have been more wrong. Although his attack had taken these aliens by surprise, they had recovered quickly. It was now obvious that he was fighting experienced troops, unlike his own untrained rabble. He had also underestimated the alien weapons. Upon seeing them land, he had thought them puny things, but their rate of fire and

accuracy was staggering. Once the aliens had recovered, they had taken excellent positions and were firing with deadly effect.

Whilst trying to think how to swing the situation his way, he heard a cry of pain and turned to watch his brother crash to the floor. His chest was a black, gaping burn and his eyes glazed with lifelessness. The sight incensed Ged'lek and he screamed at his men to advance, to pick out their targets rather than blazing away wildly. But it had no effect and he realised that he had lost control and he suddenly knew the tide had turned against them and they were losing. He had charged the building without careful planning and was now they were paying the price. He could see his grand scheme of unlimited power sliding tantalisingly from his grasp. It was then that he saw the lone alien, clad in blue, standing motionless. The others were out of sight and cutting his men down with apparent ease, but this one was an easy target.

Taking careful aim he was about to fire when a second figure swept the man behind the other stone chest and Ged'lek's shot cannoned off the crystal pyramid, barely leaving a mark to show its passage. Enraged, Ged'lek screamed at his men to follow him. He would overwhelm them in one final charge.

Chapter Twenty-One

The firing reached a deafening crescendo; so much cordite smoke filled the room that it was getting difficult to breathe. McCoy heard Green cry out from the other side of the room and saw him slump behind the chest and writhe on the floor. McCoy knew he had to help him.

‘After all, he considered, it’s only a matter of running fifty feet...through heavy fire. Easy.’

‘Chekov.’

‘Yes doctor,’ Chekov shouted over the firing. His eyes never leaving the enemy, his phaser never stopped its steady fire.

‘Green’s hit. Cover me.’

McCoy started to his feet, only to be slammed to the floor by Chekov.

‘Doctor it would be suicide.’

‘But he may die.’

‘I know, but I need every phaser we have to keep them back or certainly he will die, and us with him.’

McCoy could see the sense in Chekov’s words, but felt he was letting Green down, not doing his job. Unthinking he took his anger and frustration out on Chekov.

‘Well what are we going to do man? We have superior weapons, can’t we do something?’

Chekov felt anger rising within him. They were trapped, Green was hurt, the doctor was holding him responsible for their predicament, Spock was unconscious and the Captain was in great danger. What else could possibly go wrong? He was in charge, but of what he wasn’t sure. Whilst firing he saw the big Klingon begin to rally his

men for a last charge. Suddenly the answer was crystal clear. Kill the Klingon and the attackers might lose heart.

‘You are right doctor; I am fed up with being a rat in a trap, now we attack.’

‘Attack?’

McCoy stared at Chekov seeking the signs of insanity in the young mans face.

‘How can I attack?’ McCoy thought, ‘I’m no soldier, the man’s mad.’

Chekov was far from mad but he was getting furious.

‘I think that if we can take out that big Klingon, they may lose heart, he looks to be the leader. We need to recover our crossfire. I will move to Green’s position then we will attack at the same time.’

‘Chekov, how come it’s all right for you to get killed going over there, but not me?’

‘Doctor, I have no intention of being killed.’

McCoy reached down and took Spock’s phaser.

‘You may need this Mr Chekov.’

‘Indeed I might. Are you ready?’

McCoy and Mills nodded.

‘Very well, cover me.’

McCoy was tempted to watch Chekov’s progress, but resisted knowing that Chekov was depending on him keeping the attackers occupied. With the amount of smoke in the building it was hard to see what he was shooting at, let alone whether he hit anything. Instead of firing calculated bursts like Mills, he began to traverse his weapon backwards and forwards, sweeping the area in front of him. Surely, he reasoned, he was bound to hit something that way.

Chekov charged across the room, intent on reaching Green behind the other chest. With phaser in each hand, he fired short devastating bursts at the crowd around the door. Ged'lek had seen him appear and took careful aim. At that moment he felt the searing burn of a phaser blast in his side. Life for Ged'lek went into slow motion. His own weapon grew heavy in his hand as the charging Chekov fired once more before diving for cover behind the stone chest. Ged'lek tried to shout a battle cry, but his lungs had no air to generate his voice. As his life ended he felt himself tumbling into a tunnel of darkness.

Naren saw the giant Klingon fall, as did the survivors of the raiding party. The shots from the men with him became ragged and he knew that he must now take control before they were all wiped out.

'Get out,' Naren screamed.

All around him were only too pleased to obey.

'Cease fire and retreat.'

From behind the two stone chests came a fusillade of phaser bursts. This convinced the last die-hards that survival lay beyond the walls of the building. Naren called for them to follow, and defeated, he led the sorry remains of Ged'lek's force from the building, across the plaza, into the twilight.

Chekov had no idea what his final phaser bursts had achieved. Upon reaching cover he had realised he had not been breathing and took a lungful of air, shuddering at the closeness of some of the shots as he had dashed across the room. The firing seemed to be diminishing and he risked a look over the chest. He felt exultant when he saw the rabble of attackers fleeing the building. They had, against all odds, won the day and survived. McCoy also had sensed the turn in the fighting, but being more cautious, he waited.

‘Doctor,’ Chekov called.

‘Chekov,’ McCoy replied.

‘Green is badly injured doctor. I think it’s safe for you to come over. Mills cover the doctor. I will do the same from here.’

Mills nodded.

‘When you’re ready doc.’

‘Coming now Chekov.’

McCoy swallowed hard, rose to his feet and ran between the chests.

‘Amazing,’ McCoy thought, ‘How much faster you can go when you’re scared witless.’

As he dived behind the chest he realised that no one had fired at him. Catching his breath he grinned at the young Russian before turning his attention to Green who he could see that he was badly wounded. His tunic was blood soaked and he was still and quiet which is not a good sign. The wound was low in his shoulder and he had lost a lot of blood. McCoy worked fast, sealing the ragged hole and injecting the pain reliever. Emergency measures, but the best he could do at the moment.

‘Vill he be alright?’ Chekov asked.

‘He will be as soon as I get him back to the Enterprise. Hadn’t you better check that our uninvited guests have gone?’

Chekov nodded and signalled for Mills to move towards the door from his position whilst he mirrored the move. Chekov looked down at the body of the Klingon, almost severed in half by a phaser blast. Not a pretty sight, but better dead than alive, Chekov thought. Each of the eighteen prone bodies turned out to be dead and blood trails led to the door. Chekov smiled in satisfaction, so more were injured. The attackers had lost eighteen dead and more injured for the loss of one injured to

themselves so he felt he had done well. Outside the air was lovely and cool after the smoky heat of the building. Chekov and Mills checked all around the plaza, but there was no sign of their attackers so they returned to the chamber.

McCoy was left with an injured ensign and a comatose Vulcan when Chekov left him. Oh yes, he thought, and a lot of dead Klingons. He turned round and saw the pyramid crystal was clearing again. It had been hit many times and there was some damage to the smooth crystal sides but aside from that it was intact. He moved towards it, inside he could see the Captain. Pressing his face to the crystal he whispered the Captains name but there was no response and McCoy began to fear that Kirk was dead.

Darkness, puzzlement and fear gripped Kirk. Where was his body? Was he dead? What had happened? Thousands of questions filled his mind, but there was no way to find the answers. He began to float, helpless in the dark. Alone in the darkness he began to despair.

Suddenly he saw a pinprick of light, like a lone star in the darkness of space. Joy filled him and hope returned. Steadily the light moved toward him and as it grew larger it split into two separate lights. He felt himself touched by another presence. He knew it well, it was Celestine. She had come to him as she had always come to his side in the past.

‘No,’ Kirk thought, ‘she had come to Ashata, not to Kirk.’

Fear made him distrust her and to reunite his spirit with his body he had to trust his guide. Kirk’s mistrust of Celestine blocked her guiding spirit from leading him back. At that moment, as Kirk began to retreat from the presence, another presence touched Kirk. This presence was one he knew and trusted very much.

When Celestine called upon him, Spock had moved rapidly back to his body. He saw the battle in the room and watched it with a cold, analytical eye. His spirit began to drift back to his body, but Celestine's voice stopped him.

'No Spock, you can't help him from outside the crystal. You must come inside with me and guide Kirk back to his body.'

'How is that possible?'

'In your light form you can pass through solid objects and pass through them you will. No logic can help you now Spock, just believe and follow me.'

Spock felt that it was no small thing to push logic aside so easily, but his friend needed him and he owed his life to Jim Kirk, now here was a chance to repay the debt. On entering the crystal he saw the thin silver thread that led from Kirk's body and saw that it was frayed and thin in places, held together by a single strand. There was so little time before it parted and Kirk would be lost in the void. He moved with Celestine until he saw the light that was Kirk's spirit. He could feel his Captain's fear and confusion so he reached out with his mind, using the one word that Kirk would know came from him.

'Jim,'

'Spock,' Kirk's mind touched his friend.

'I am here.'

Relief flooded Kirk as he could trust Spock. He felt the powerful presence of the Vulcan wrap itself around him.

'Captain trusts us to lead you back.'

'Spock, what has happened?'

'The chamber was attacked, the pyramid damaged and the process disrupted.'

Kirk felt lost, why should the chamber be attacked? Who would attack it? Finally he simply asked.

‘Why?’

‘I do not know Jim, but you must come with us now. Your body will cease to exist soon. You must return before it is too late.’

Kirk felt his fear recede and he reason assert itself. Spock was with him and he couldn’t die if Spock was there. He was back in the light now, the darkness falling back into memory and all around him was the feeling of love. He moved with his two guides back through the veils of previous lives. Images swirled around him; some frightening, some sad, but most filled with love and laughter. Life after life, so many experiences, so much learnt, all forgotten. Below him he saw his silver thread and gasped in horror. So thin a breeze could have parted it and on this strand his life depended.

Floating down he saw his near lifeless body inside the chamber. On the other side of the crystal wall, McCoy was peering into the chamber. He looked at his body. It was a good body, physically strong, but it was only a shell, an instrument that he used to fulfil his destiny in this lifetime and he no longer feared death. His spirit now hovered over the body of James T Kirk, and then slid inside.

He opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was McCoy staring at him through the crystal. He smiled; it was good to be back. The door to the chamber swung open and Kirk breathed in and smelt smoke. He rose too quickly and fell into McCoy’s arms.

‘Jim are you all right? I thought you were dead.’

‘I’ll be fine in a moment Bones.’

He looked round at the damaged crystal and the bodies by the door.

‘What the hell happened here?’

Spock’s body shuddered as he returned to it with all its restrictions and frustrations crowded in on him as he realised how much a body restricted spiritual enlightenment. But even with these restrictions, he was glad to return to it. He struggled to his feet and surveyed the carnage around him and felt appalled at the waste of it all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Once the landing party had left the Enterprise, Scotty made himself as comfortable as he could in the Command Chair. It never seemed to fit him, although he was the same physical build as Kirk. It was more, perhaps, a matter of not fitting mentally. He never wanted to be a Captain and found the extra responsibility daunting and he was happiest in his engine room. He never envied Kirk, but often admired how the Captain handled all the pressures that were placed upon him. When Kirk made Captain at thirty-two, Scotty had thought Starfleet was courting disaster. How could someone that young be capable of commanding a starship? It didn't take Scotty long to realise that here was an exceptional man more than capable of handling his beloved Enterprise. He respected the Captain and had, on occasion, worked engineering miracles to get them all out of dangerous situations. Scotty was flattered by his nickname, 'The Miracle Worker', and tried hard to live up to it.

The atmosphere on the bridge was very peaceful. Everyone was doing their routine jobs so that the ship was ticking over very nicely. This peace was totally shattered by the scream of the intruder alert sirens. Scotty turned to Giotto at Spock's station.

'Report, Lieutenant.'

'Intruder sensors indicate three unknown life-forms in Engineering.' Giotto replied.

This caused a scowl to appear on Scotty's face. No one or nothing interfered with his engines. Scotty punched a button in the chair.

'Security to Engineering.'

He turned to Sulu.

‘I’m going down there myself laddie, you have the Com.’

‘Aye Sir.’ Sulu nodded as he spoke.

He had guessed that Mr Scott would be unable to sit on the bridge if his precious engine room was being invaded. Scotty left the bridge at a fast trot and entered the turbo lift.

‘Engineering,’ he growled, then waited impatiently for the lift to get him there. Throughout the journey he pondered the intruder report. How had they got aboard? If they were Alcanii’s, why hadn’t they simply asked? If they weren’t Alcanii’s, who or what were they? Impatiently he tapped his fingers against the lift doors.

‘Come on. Come on.’ He muttered.

At last the doors slid open revealing the open door to Engineering. He ran forward and almost tripped over the unconscious body of Ensign Linney. Scotty halted and looked down at the prone body and then Linney groaned and Scotty felt a wave of relief that Linney was alive.

Cautiously he advanced into the main engine room where he found five engineers pushed into the far corner. From his position he could not see what it was that held their attention. He could tell that they were all staring at the main control panel. None of them seemed hurt but they were just standing there and Scotty came to the decision that he should get them out of there and find out what was going on. Calling to them was not recommended so he waved his arm to attract their attention but no one took any notice. The Scotsman became a little annoyed; he was used to a bit more attention from his staff so he cast his eyes around trying to find something else that might gain their attention. He finally stripped Linney of his duty sash and flapped it up and down frantically. This seemed to have more effect as Samuels turned her face towards him and he gestured for her to come out. She nodded and

nudged McAndrews, who stood behind her. A quick conversation led to the group tiptoeing from the room, one behind the other. Scotty looked them over.

‘Well, what happened down here?’ He snapped.

As Samuels began to reply, Uhura’s voice came over the ships P.A.

‘Mr Scott to the bridge.’

Irritated, he crossed to the nearest Comm and thumped the button angrily.

‘What is it lassie, I’m rather busy down here.’

‘Sir, we have intruders on the bridge, Mr Sulu is injured. I think you should be up here.’

Although Uhura’s voice sounded calm, Scotty knew her well enough to detect an undercurrent of panic in her voice.

‘I’m on my way.’

Scotty sighed, more in annoyance than anything and turned to his staff.

‘Samuels, you come with me and fill me in on what happened on the way.

McAndrews get Linney to sickbay and let me know if anything changes down here.’

With that he turned and strode to the turbo lift with Samuels nearly trotting to keep up. Once inside and the lift began to move, Kate Samuels managed to catch her breath. Being just five feet tall she was used to having to run to keep up with people.

‘What happened down there lassie?’ Scott asked.

She shook her blonde hair and looked up at the Chief Engineer’s face.

‘I don’t really know Mr Scott.’

She swallowed hard and looked at the floor, intimidated by the expression on her boss’s face. She quickly composed herself and continued.

‘All was quiet, everything registering, as it should. Linney was monitoring the main board when he suddenly cried out and seemed to be thrown across the room. I turned to see what had happened and saw three balls of golden light hovering over the board.’

She stopped, not really knowing what else to say.

‘There was no sound, no warning?’ Scotty asked.

‘No Sir, nothing. One minute they weren’t there, next moment they were. That’s when the alarm went off. I seem to remember hearing a voice telling us to move away from the controls and we wouldn’t be hurt. So we did, and then you arrived Sir.’

Scotty grimaced, what was going on? He sincerely wished that the Captain were aboard. The doors of the lift sighed open to reveal the bridge crew in much the same state Scotty had found the engineering staff.

When Mr Scott had left the bridge, Sulu chose to stay at the helm position. He had been left in charge many times, but had never felt it necessary to leave his own familiar seat. One day he hoped for a command of his own, but for now he enjoyed his job, his friends aboard Enterprise and his occasional bouts of command. Unlike Scotty, Sulu relished the extra responsibility, but when real trouble came along he was more than glad when Kirk re-took control. He had learnt so much from the Captain and enjoyed watching his unusual approach to command. If he ever had his own ship, he decided he hoped to command in the same way. On this ship, you could always say what you thought and get a fair hearing, even if the Captain didn’t agree with you, you were always given the chance to express your opinion. Sulu liked that. Kirk was tough, but fair, a man easily respected and liked. Sulu wanted respect too, but he

knew that it had to be earned, just as Kirk had earned it when he first came aboard Enterprise.

Sulu checked the instruments before him; everything was as it should be. He wondered what was happening in Engineering when he was physically lifted out of his chair and thrown backwards. He was so taken by surprise that he had no time to make a sound. Then all thought left him as his head hit the rail behind his console and his world went dark.

Scotty stared in disbelief at the bridge without leaving the turbo lift. Mr Sulu was lying on the floor being tended by Adams; in his seat was a ball of golden light. Samuels grabbed the Chief Engineer's arm.

'That's it sir,' she whispered, pointing at the light. 'That's what was in the Engine Room.'

Before Scotty could reply a voice boomed around the bridge.

'Do not interfere and you will not be harmed. We need your ship for a short time, and then we will leave. Do nothing to stop us and it will be returned to you.'

'Uhura, where did that voice come from?'

'I don't know Mr Scott,' she replied after a quick look at her monitor.

Sulu groaned and tried to sit up.

'What happened?'

'Don't try to move yet,' Adams said, laying a hand on Sulu's arm. 'You were knocked out.'

Sulu looked surprised.

'Who knocked me out?'

Scotty's face loomed over Adams' shoulder.

'Are you alright laddie?'

Sulu took the chance to check his body and except for a massive headache he felt in good shape.

‘I think so Sir.’

A buzzing sound filled the bridge coming from Adams’ chair as a second golden ball took the seat. Now the consoles of both helm and navigation were being operated.

‘What’s going on here?’ Scotty growled and moved towards the helm position. He didn’t get closer than five feet before he hit a force field. He was thrown backwards into Samuels, whose misfortune it was to be directly behind him. They both crashed to the floor with the heavier, Mr Scott, landing on top. Uhura moved forward to help untangle them, both seeming reasonably unscathed. Scotty scowled at the entities and decided to regroup before taking further action.

‘Right, Sulu, Adams, Uhura and you, Samuels, come with me.’

He turned to Giotto, now the most senior on the bridge.

‘We’ll be in Briefing Room 2. Just monitor the situation, don’t interfere, but let me know if anything changes up here.’

Giotto gulped and looked decidedly uneasy, but managed to give a quick ‘aye, aye’, with some confidence. Scotty whirled on his heel and marched to the turbo lift, the others following in his wake.

Juliette Adams was the last to leave the bridge and enter the lift. The tension was almost palpable. For a newcomer on her first space mission it all seemed confusing, and very scary. All the simulations at the Academy couldn’t come close to approximating the things she had experienced in the last two days. She marvelled at how the crew kept going. Uhura had been attacked, but was now back on duty. Sulu recently hurt, but able to do his job. With a pang of horror she remembered that Carella was dead. She still couldn’t quite believe that, death had not really touched

her before. At the Academy you learnt about incidents that occurred on other starships, about the history of other worlds and cultures. All of the lessons should tell you that working on a starship is a dangerous life, but you never really understand just how dangerous until you experience it for yourself. Although she hadn't really known Carella, she had spoken to him and liked him. Now he was gone and any one of them could be next. She shivered, funny, she thought; she had never thought that the Enterprise was cold before.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Scotty sat himself at the head of the briefing table with some reluctance. The safety of the Enterprise and its crew was firmly in his hands until the Captain was back aboard, which Scotty fervently hoped would be very soon. He marshalled his thoughts into some sort of clear order. He pressed the intercom button.

‘Scott to Engineering.’

‘McAndrews here sir.’

‘Any change down there?’

‘Two of the light beings have left Engineering, but one is still here and a force-field has been established around the main board.’

‘Keep me posted of any change. Scott out.’

Damnation! Scotty thought, no access to the control room seriously limited his options. He pressed the button a second time.

‘Scotty to Sickbay.’

Sickbay. Doctor M’Benga here.’

‘Doctor, how is Linney?’

‘He has a slight concussion and some bruising, but he’s fine and ready to resume duty Mr Scott.’

‘That’s good Doctor. Scott out.’

He glared at the others seated around him.

‘I would welcome your opinions as to whom has taken control of our ship and why.’

There was no immediate response. Sulu glanced around the table and seeing that the others were not keen to say anything decided he should go first.

‘I think they are Alcany Sir.’

Scotty nodded.

‘I tend to agree. From what we know there are only two distinct life forms that would be interested in taking over the Enterprise. The Alcany were the ones to request us to come here after years of isolation whereas the other race has made no effort to make contact with us. I never did believe their only reason was to get information out of the Captain.’

Sulu was quick to agree.

‘Mr Spock also believed that there was a hidden agenda here. We talked about it briefly when we were on the planet’s surface.’

‘What do they want with the ship, is the next question.’

Scotty said somewhat relieved that Spock might well agree with them.

‘That, Sir, I have no idea.’

Sulu shook his head as he spoke.

‘They don’t seem to want to leave Alcany; anyway they don’t need our ship to do that. Perhaps Mr Spock might have a few ideas.’

‘Uhura, I don’t want to use the bridge whilst they are there. Can you use the auxiliary control board to contact the landing party?’

‘That’s no problem at all Mr Scott.’ She replied with a smile.

‘Aye well, I think we should all go down to the auxiliary control room and see what they’re up to.’

‘Yes Sir.’ Sulu said. ‘From there we should get some idea of what systems they are using. We don’t seem to have left standard orbit yet.’

Scotty rubbed his head; he had the beginnings of a huge headache.

‘I have a feeling we will soon know what they want from the Enterprise. Okay. Let’s go down to auxiliary control and get some work done.’

For the second time they followed Mr Scott into the turbo lift.

The auxiliary control room was a mixture of bridge and engineering section. It was theoretically possible to control the ship from here. The terminal for self-destruct and a console for raising and lowering the shields were here too. Scotty was first into the room and was relieved to find no Alcanii here. He crossed to the main monitor board and saw at a glance that the power was being used to activate the Enterprise’s weapons systems.

‘Sulu look at this.’

Sulu took a quick glance and gasped.

‘The weapons, but why? Who are they going to use them against?’

‘Maybe they’re going to use them against the dark side.’ Adams offered.

‘Yes lassie, I think you’re right.’

‘But why?’ Sulu insisted. ‘They’ve got their shield, they don’t need weapons.’

‘They may very well have their shield laddie, but they are definitely powering up the phaser banks. Look!’

Scotty pointed at the control board and they all saw the dials register a shot from the phasers, directed at the planet below.

‘We’ve got to stop this Uhura.’

He turned to the communications officer who was trying to contact the landing party.

‘Have you managed to get through to the Captain yet?’

‘No sir, I can’t get anything but static.’

‘Keep trying lassie.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Right.’

Scotty clapped his hands together.

‘Adams, use the board to find out what they are firing at. Sulu try to disrupt the weapons from here, turn everything off. I know it won’t stop them for long, but it will give me time to get to the weapons systems. I can shut down the photon torpedoes easily enough. For the phasers, we’ll have to do some climbing. You ready for some climbing practice Lieutenant?’

He turned to Samuels who returned his smile and Scotty was struck by how young she looked: just like a teenager.

‘I’m ready Mr Scott.’

Fighting the impulse to pat her on the head he said.

‘Right, let’s get what we need and throw a few spanners in the works.’

Kate Samuels was twenty-five, but looked a lot younger, which she thought had held her back from advancement. Promotion might come more quickly, she felt, if she looked less like a teenager. She always got the impression that her superiors didn’t take her seriously. Now she had a chance to show exactly what she could do as she ran behind Mr Scott to Level Thirteen. She had thought that she knew the interior layout of the Enterprise inside out, but she had no idea what Mr Scott now had in mind. Normally, they would not be trying to find a way of stopping the weapons from firing. Quite the opposite, in fact, in the past they had done their best in Engineering to give the Captain even more power to the weapons when called for. This is a whole new ball game, she thought, and very exciting.

Scotty stopped at a door, which bore the legend, 'Photon Torpedo Control'. So far the intruders had not fired these devastating weapons, but Scotty was taking no chances and they were easier to disable. This door was opened by Scotty entering a security code which Samuels had not the clearance for, but Scotty knew it by heart. As soon as he had completed the number sequence, the doors slid open. Samuels entered behind Scotty with great interest, she had never had cause to enter this section before and she looked around curiously. There were five technicians working in the room and Samuels pursed her lips as she realised that these men and women were virtually locked in during alerts. She shuddered as she thought about that. Although these people were amongst the most highly trained, and paid, she made a mental note not to ask for a transfer to weapons control. Rather them than me, she thought.

Adams was absorbed at her console; she had never worked on the auxiliary controls before, but had found them to be merely a smaller version of those found on the bridge. She made the computer plot the track of the phasers, and then reported the information to Sulu. They worked well together, seeming to instinctively take turns on their overlapping functions. She was surprised at how well she had integrated with the bridge personnel, being very much a new girl. Sulu had been more than nice to her, helping all he could, never thinking her stupid if she did not know what to do. Her confidence had grown under his tutelage and she now felt well able to do what was asked of her for both Captain and Starfleet. She had discovered a new determination to be a credit to her first ship and her new friends, firmly believing that she would not let them down. She paused in her work to wipe the sweat from her forehead. The ships orbit was being changed and she was trying to second guess where it would be when the manoeuvres were complete.

‘How is it coming Juliette?’ Sulu asked.

She looked up at him and was both relieved and a little pleased to see a film of sweat on his face too.

‘I think the next target is nine degrees northeast of the city. Roughly the area in which the landing party were beamed down.’

Sulu swiftly checked the calculations.

‘I think you are right. How long before we are in a position to fire on the settlement?’

Adams began another quick set of calculations, taking a deep breath. Try to keep calm; she told herself, you can’t calculate properly if you are in a cold panic. To Adams, her calculations seemed to take hours; in fact, she had the answer in seconds.

‘Approximately nine minutes to reach the target area, if our heading is correct.’ She stole a glance at the slightly built oriental man she had come to look on as her friend, but was also her superior officer, and was relieved to see he agreed with her figures.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘I’ll let Mr Scott know.’

He turned in his seat to look at another console.

‘Any luck Uhura?’

Uhura threw down her earpiece in disgust.

‘No, Hikaru, I can’t get anything.’

Sulu gave her a conciliatory grin then as he was about to press the comm button Mr Scott called him.

Scotty turned to his left upon entering the room, moving to the weapons console.

‘Pederson.’

‘Ja Sir,’ came the response and a tall blonde man entered from the storage area.

‘We have intruders aboard the Enterprise firing the phasers. I want the photon torpedoes disabled.’ Scotty ordered.

‘I will programme the computers to disconnect immediately.’

He turned to his console and began typing rapidly the instructions. After a short pause, he looked up.

‘It is done Mr Scott.’

For a second, Pederson’s heavy Norwegian accent defeated the Chief Engineer, but the message sank in and Scotty smiled grimly.

‘Aye laddie, but computers can be re-programmed and these folk are mighty clever.’

Scotty opened a small box he had taken from the Captains quarters on the way down to Level Thirteen. Inside was a gold key, about five inches long. It was square in shape and would not fit any door aboard the Enterprise. Samuels was fascinated, she had no idea what this key did. She hadn’t even known that such a key existed. Scotty opened a panel on the arming console and fitted the key into the slot it had revealed. He gave the key two turns to the right, then one turn to the left. A micro-board slid soundlessly from the console. He took the board and placed it in the box he had taken the key from, then he removed the key and put it back in its box. He straightened up and turned to Pedersen.

‘That will stop them using the torpedoes, now all I have to do is stop them using the phasers.’

Pederson grimaced at the thought; knowing as well as Scotty did that that was a much harder task to accomplish. Scotty moved to the wall communicator.

‘Scott to Engine Room.’

‘McAndrews here sir.’

‘Any change down there?’

‘No sir, we are still unable to reach the control console.’

Scotty muttered a Gaelic obscenity under his breath, and then smiled ruefully at Samuels.

‘Let me know if you get in there.’

‘Aye sir. McAndrews out.’

Scotty pushed the comm again.

‘Scott to Sulu.’

‘Sulu here.’

‘Report on the phasers please Mr Sulu.’

‘They have fired the phasers at five different locations at this time. All the targets lay outside the Alcany shield. We are now being manoeuvred to other targets.’

‘Damn.’ Scotty muttered under his breath before speaking aloud again. ‘Has Uhura made contact with any of the landing party?’

‘No Sir, still only static.’

‘Keep trying.’

‘Aye sir.’

‘Sulu, I’ve disabled the photon torpedoes. I’m now going to try and disable the phasers from Level Twelve. Keep me informed on the situation on the bridge and tell me when they are preparing to fire again.’

‘Yes sir. Sulu out.’

Scotty stood for a moment, leaning heavily on the wall, taking a few minutes to think of his next course of action. He turned and smiled into the bright eyes of Lieutenant Samuels.

‘Okay lassie. Let’s go and pull out a few plugs and spoil their fun.’

‘I’m ready Mr Scott.’ She smiled in replying.

‘I wish I was.’ Scotty sighed.

He picked up a tool kit and with Samuels on his heels, left the torpedo room. A few minutes later, Scotty was in the final stages of removing a panel to give him access to the Jefferies tubes when Sulu interrupted him.

‘Yes Sulu.’ He said, making a superhuman effort to keep the irritation from his voice.

‘The ship is now seven minutes from its new firing position.’

Scotty swore under his breath.

‘Right laddie, we’ll do our best to stop them. Scotty out.’

With a final heave Scotty removed the panel to reveal behind it a steel ladder passed up and down a cylindrical steel tube. Clipping a small tool kit to his belt he began to climb with Samuels’s right behind him. Samuels was breathing hard, her hands slipping on the steel rungs as she climbed behind Scotty. All she could hear was the heavy pounding of her heart and her laboured breathing as up and up they climbed. Are we ever going to reach a crossover point? She thought, so that Mr Scott can start throwing his spanners. She was beginning to flag when Scotty stopped, moved to a side ledge and beckoned for her to join him. It was lucky that she was so small because, even so, it was a tight fit.

‘Here we are lassie.’ Scotty said between breaths.

She was relieved to see that he was more out of breath than she was. He handed her the toolbox so that she could hold it open for him. He grinned at her before removing protective goggles and gloves which he quickly put on. Once suitably protected, he

began to disconnect the phaser power coupling from the side array. He looked across at Samuels.

‘You’d better look away; there may be a few sparks when this comes loose.’

Seeing the look on her face he gave a big grin as he was starting to enjoy himself; he always did when given an engineering challenge. Samuels looked down and wished she hadn’t. The Jefferies tube fell away below her causing a momentary vertiginous feeling. To stop the waves of dizziness she tried to work out what Mr Scott was up to. She knew he was trying to disable the phasers, but had no idea how he was going to achieve this. Above her she could hear crackling and the tube was lit up with bright flashes of earthing power. Some flashes were so bright that even when she closed her eyes she could still see them.

‘All done lassie.’ Scotty said.

Samuels looked up to see that Scotty had by-passed a number of relays. Scotty dropped the gloves and goggles into the tool kit and snapped it shut.

‘Right, let’s get out of here.’

Once they had reached the deck again, Scotty punched the comm button on the nearest comm unit.

‘Sulu?’

‘Aye sir.’

‘I’ve by-passed the phasers main power conduit. In effect, the power is now going round and round the circuit, going nowhere. I think that might do the job. We’re on our way back to Auxiliary Control. Scott out.’

Samuels grinned at the Chief Engineer as she would never have thought of doing that.

Sulu looked questioningly at Uhura.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve had any joy getting the Captain?’

Uhura sighed.

‘Not really. I think I got a carrier wave, but it sounded like there was a battle going on down there. I suppose it was just static interference.’

Even Sulu’s usual grin had now vanished at that as he wondered what was going on down there. With no contact with the landing party and strange goings on here he had a feeling this job wasn’t going to be a picnic. The ship had changed its orbit and sensors showed a number of settlements as they neared there target. Here it comes, he thought, the moment of truth. Will Scotty’s tampering work? The bridge ordered the phasers to fire and nothing happened. The doors to Auxiliary Control swept open to admit Scotty and Samuels. Sulu turned and grinned broadly at the engineer.

‘It worked Mr Scott.’

‘Aye laddie, but for how long? I don’t think it will take them too long to work out what I’ve done and how to correct it. I’ll just have to think of something else.’

With that silence fell as each were lost in their own thoughts.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It was growing hot in the auxiliary control room and Adams was beginning to find the place mildly claustrophobic. Her neck and shoulders ached from the tension of the last hour and she was finding it hard to believe that so much had happened in such a short time. A thoughtful silence reigned in the room as they went about their tasks; a silence that was suddenly broken.

‘Kirk to Enterprise.’

All in the room jumped in surprise at finally hearing the Captain’s voice. Uhura, thanks to her experience, reacted first.

‘Enterprise here sir.’

‘Uhura why has my ship been firing phasers at this planet?’

Scotty moved quickly behind Uhura.

‘Scott here Captain. We have intruders aboard. They have control of the bridge and the weapons systems.’

‘Can you beam us aboard?’

‘Aye Captain, that we can.’

‘Good, Mr Scott beam us up and do whatever’s necessary to stop the phasers from firing.’

Scotty hesitated, knowing full well what the Captain meant as he had given Scotty carte blanche to destroy certain parts of the ship if nothing else would work. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

‘Aye Captain. I understand. I’ll have you on board in a moment.’

He broke the connection with the surface and contacted the transporter room.

‘Mr Leslie, beam up the landing party right away.’

‘Yes sir.’ Came the reply.

Scotty leaned on the console next to Uhura, his face a picture of woe.

‘It won’t happen Scotty,’ she whispered, patting his hand.

‘I hope not.’

‘I expect the Captain has some trick up his sleeve.’ She smiled. ‘He usually does.’

Scotty nodded as it was true, Kirk was exceptionally tricky and an unpredictable opponent for anyone to go up against. He thanked the stars that he was on Kirk’s side.

‘Yes I expect you’re right Uhura. I’d better come up with another way to disable the phasers if it’s needed.’

He turned to Samuels.

‘Are you ready to give me a hand again engineer?’

She nodded as this was turning out to be a very exciting day indeed.

‘Okay, let’s go.’ Scotty said.

Scotty and Samuels left the room and Adams turned to Sulu puzzled, unsure of what she had missed, but certain she had missed something.

‘What did the Captain mean?’ She asked.

‘The Captain gave Mr Scott the option to destroy the phaser banks if that was what it took to stop them from firing again but it won’t happen,’ he added quickly. ‘I am sure that once the Captain is aboard he’ll have a few ideas on how to stop this without taking such drastic action.’

Sulu smiled reassuringly and turned back to his console. Adams wished she had as much faith in the Captain as everyone else seemed to have. She couldn’t see how even Captain Kirk could stop these Alcanii doing just what they pleased. They could move

around the ship at will and force didn't seem to work against them and this was making her feel very venerable.

Behind Adams the doors swept open to admit Kirk, McCoy, Spock and the Alcanii, Celestine. Sulu turned round and leapt to his feet.

'Mr Sulu, report on ship status.' Kirk said.

'Bridge under Alcanii control sir, as is Engineering. Mr Scott is on his way to disable the phasers if the Alcanii correct the fault he has already created.'

Kirk frowned.

'I've had enough of this nonsense.'

He made a circuit of the room then obviously came to a decision.

'Okay. Let's get to the bridge and get this mess sorted out.'

Kirk whirled round and everyone scabbled for the door to keep up with him.

Since the Alcanii had taken control, nothing much had happened on the bridge. Lieutenant Giotto, at the Science Station, kept a wary eye on the two shimmering lights that now commanded the ship. They seemed to keep humming at each other, but thankfully ignored the remaining bridge personnel as long as they stayed clear of the Navigation and Helm positions. The turbo lift doors opened and Kirk strode onto the bridge.

'Baylon. Enough of this madness.' Kirk snapped.

The golden ball at the Helm shimmered and changed into his human form. Celestine gave a gasp of horror as she saw the leader of the Eight.

'It didn't work this time Baylon. I'm still here.' Kirk said levelly, slowly moving to behind the Command chair.

Baylon stared at him in disbelief as Celestine moved to Kirk's side.

‘Kirk what are you saying?’

Kirk never took his eyes off Baylon.

‘It’s over. The forces of the dark couldn’t finish what you started. I’m alive Baylon.’

Kirk walked forward to confront the Alcanii.

‘Ashata and I are still here.’

Celestine understood none of this.

‘Baylon?’ She asked weakly. ‘Why are you here?’

‘He had to die Celestine.’

Baylon at last found his voice.

‘Don’t you see that? Ashata had to die before he killed us with his foolish ideas.’

She looked despairingly at Kirk who spoke softly.

‘Ashata didn’t die from any virus, he was murdered by Baylon. Murdered to stop him from continuing his visits to other planets in an effort to help them.’

Baylon’s face changed to a mask of total anger.

‘He would have brought disaster to us all. We were attacked on Earth, but he wanted to go back and carry on his work. It was madness, but nothing would stop him. I tried to reason with him, but nothing would sway him. The others were content to follow his lead, so he had to die.’

Celestine gasped in horror at what she was hearing.

‘But to murder him?’ she whispered. ‘It is against all that we hold dear, all that we believe in.’

‘Don’t be so naive Celestine.’ Baylon snapped. ‘We have been safe for five hundred years because we have protected ourselves. We used our shield to stop anyone attacking us.’

‘Oh yes,’ Kirk interrupted. ‘You’re safe, but what good has it done you? You’ve stagnated. You have no purpose, no challenges. It’s not a life; it’s a prison sentence. From having a shield to keep enemies out, it has become a prison wall that keeps you in. All life exists to learn, to experience other lives, to help them. That is why we are given life, but what do you do? You sit behind your barrier afraid to dare anything while on your own planet there is pain and poverty; a whole race of people crying out for help and enlightenment. What have you done? You, so called, enlightened people? You ignore pain and hide your heads in the sand. I’m disappointed in you all. I’m glad I died before I could witness your cowardly behaviour.’

The anger dropped from his voice as he turned to Celestine.

‘My love, I am so glad to see you once again.’

‘Ashata,’ Celestine whispered almost overcome with emotion. ‘Is it really you?’

‘Yes my love, a part of me is still here, inside Kirk. My experiences and his, together with all our other existences, will always be here. You can kill the body, but the spirit is indestructible.’

They touched and, this time, Kirk suffered no ill effects and McCoy found all this very moving. Spock merely retook his station from the bewildered Lieutenant Giotto as the second golden ball changed form to a red haired female.

‘Rissa.’ Celestine breathed. ‘You too? I can’t believe this.’

‘I am sorry Celestine.’ Rissa said, having the grace to look ashamed. ‘I truly believed that what we were doing was right. I swear I didn’t know that Baylon had killed Ashata, or that he tried to kill Kirk.’

‘Captain?’ Uhura broke in. ‘We are being hailed from the planet.’

‘On screen Lieutenant.’

Kirk faced the screen.

The screen fought off a burst of static to reveal a human face.

‘Starship, I am Naren, leader of the Forgotten.’

‘I am Captain James T Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise, how can we assist you?’

Naren’s face looked filled with sorrow.

‘We humbly beg you to cease fire on our settlements. We surrender unconditionally.’

His voice broke, being close to tears.

‘Please stop killing us.’

Kirk was forced to swallow the lump in his throat at the Forgotten One’s words. He looked at Baylon, his eyes full of anger.

‘Naren believe me, you will not be attacked again. We need to talk to you urgently, are you willing to come aboard my ship?’

The figure on the screen shrugged, his whole body language showed defeat and dejection.

‘What choice do we have? We have many dead and more injured. Our villages are burning or destroyed. We cannot fight you.’

The figure wiped his face tiredly; his sleeve ragged and blood stained and McCoy whispered in the Captains ear.

‘Jim, for God’s sake, let me take some medical personnel down there. It will, if nothing else shows our good intentions.’

‘I’ll let you go if you take a Security detachment with you. They may not all be happy to see us.’ Kirk said.

‘It’s a deal.’ McCoy nodded.

Kirk turned back to the screen.

‘Naren, would you permit some of our medical people to beam down and treat your casualties?’

Kirk saw the spark of hope shine in Naren’s eyes at his words.

‘Yes. If they can save one life I would let them come.’

‘I’m on my way Naren,’ McCoy said and left the bridge.

‘Naren, our teams will be with you shortly. Are you and your people’s representatives ready to come here for talks?’

Naren looked over his shoulder and three more Forgotten joined him.

‘We are ready.’

‘Stand by Naren. Kirk out.’

Chapter Twenty-Five

Preparations for the delegates of both groups on Alcany were complete in the VIP lounge. Engineering was back under the capable control of Mr Scott and the last Alcany invader had left for the planet as soon as Kirk had returned to the bridge. All that Mr Scott and the erstwhile Samuels had to do was reverse the adjustments they had made to the phaser bank power supply.

Kirk and Spock waited in the transporter room to meet Naren. The sparkling transporter beams materialised the four human figures. They looked around at their surroundings in awe as Kirk moved forward to greet them. He bowed and smiled.

‘Gentlemen, welcome to the Starship Enterprise.’

Naren recovered himself; he stepped forward fanning confidence he didn’t really feel, like he boarded Starships every day. Kirk indicated the Vulcan.

‘May I introduce my first officer, Mr Spock.’

Naren’s eyes opened even wider as he took a long look at his first Vulcan.

‘Live long and prosper Naren,’ Spock intoned.

Naren walked to stand in front of Kirk where he solemnly took his propulsion weapon from his belt. For a brief moment Kirk was worried he had misjudged the man, but Naren offered the grip to Kirk.

‘Captain, on behalf of my people, I surrender to you.’

Kirk was taken aback by this gesture.

‘Naren, I think we should go up to the VIP lounge and discuss this whole situation. In the meantime, I trust you and your men will behave as civilised people? I don’t think it necessary to take your weapons, do you?’

He raised his eyebrows in question.

Naren was confused; as this whole turn of events was not what he was expecting at all, but he was pleased at how things were going.

‘No Captain,’ he said. ‘You have no need to feel any concern that we will use our weapons on you.’

‘Good. If you’ll follow me we’ll go and meet our other guests.’

The group left the transporter room, en-route to the VIP lounge which was probably, the most luxurious room aboard the Enterprise. It was only used by visiting dignitaries, or high-ranking Starfleet personnel. For this reason it was meant to look impressive with its fine furnishings, works of art and refinements not found anywhere else on board. Kirk also felt that it was a total waste of space aboard his functional Starship, but for once he was glad it was there. If he was going to be forced to bang heads together and come away with an acceptable solution to both parties, the grandeur of this room might just show the Alcanii what the Federation could do. After all, he thought, first impressions are the most important, the things we remember most clearly. He entered the room to find all seven of the Alcanii Council waiting for them. Once Naren saw them he stopped so quickly that two of his colleagues bumped into him.

‘It’s alright Naren. They have something to explain to you. If you are all going to live on this planet you must learn to talk to each other.’

Naren shifted his eyes from the other Alcanii to look at Kirk.

‘I suppose we have no choice but to talk, Captain.’

‘You always have choices Naren. I think this is the best one for you and your people at this moment.’ Kirk said.

After a brief hesitation Naren shrugged and entered the room.

Led by Kirk, the Forgotten walked into the dining area, which had been set out as a conference room. Seated on the far side of the large table were the Alcany Council, waiting for Naren's people to sit opposite them. Once seated, Kirk and Spock took their seats at the head of the table. Kirk gave them a moment to settle before he leaned forward and began to speak.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to lay out a few ground rules before we get started. My role here is as arbitrator between you. I am on no-one's side. I am here as a representative of the United Federation of Planets, which would like Alcany to join its ranks. But, that could never take place with the way things are here. Peace, progress and co-operation are what the Federation promotes gentlemen. Not war.' He looked around the table, hoping that they were all getting the message.

'We are prepared to assist in any way we can to enable Alcany to become a united planet, not two separate worlds, one light, one dark.'

Kirk was interrupted by a large human of Naren's people, who rose up and spoke angrily.

'You talk of peace, yet it was your ship that fired on our homes and families. How can we trust what you say when you can kill us from the safety of space?'

'I quite agree with you.' Kirk said quietly.

The man's face registered shock at Kirk's words.

'I think Baylon has something he needs to tell you.'

Kirk looked to the leader of the Council, but Baylon remained silent. Kirk sighed, he had hoped that the Alcanii would have been able to admit their guilt, their mistake and try again, but this looked unlikely to happen. Celestine looked at Baylon and must have spoken telepathically because Baylon nodded and she rose to her feet.

‘I am Celestine. I must tell you Naren that it was not the Federation that fired on your homes. It was three of the Council who took control of their ship. They thought that if they destroyed you, our problems would go away.’

The members of the Forgotten began to shout abuse at the Alcanii and Celestine recoiled at the hatred. She had no experience of strong emotions; the Alcanii had risen above such things long ago.

Kirk jumped to his feet and bellowed at the delegates.

‘Gentlemen. Please.’

They all turned towards him.

‘I know you are angry and have many questions, as do we, as to why this happened, but we must have order.’

Naren controlled his group and nodded for Celestine to continue.

‘Why this happened goes back many hundreds of years. The Eight became spiritual beings together. We moved from the physical to the spiritual dimension, at least for a time. It took a great deal of effort and energy to maintain this existence, but over the centuries, we lost the need for our physical bodies. We no longer needed the shell to carry our spirits in. This meant we no longer needed to eat, drink, work or build. Spiritual work was all we required. This was good in one way, we were virtually immortal, but the process carried a heavy price too.’

Celestine paused to catch her breath; her eyes sought the face of Kirk, which seemed to give her the strength to carry on.

‘We lost our emotions, our sense of touch. We could no longer feel a loving embrace as we feel no pain or passion and we lost our ambition, our need to strive towards a goal, the ability to express ourselves. We have no challenges and lack the

feeling of excitement. I did not realise just how much we had lost until the Enterprise arrived and showed me what we no longer have ; mercy, compassion...and love.'

Her eyes filled with tears.

'We have no purpose, no reason to continue with such an empty existence.'

With tears rolling down her cheeks she turned to Kirk.

'Ashata, I'm sorry. We have lost our way without you to guide us. Help us now. Help us to find a new path and give us a reason to be.'

Spock had been observing the Alcanii as she was speaking. Her aura had been changing as she spoke, the colours changing from one to the other giving her aura a rainbow effect as her emotions rose to the surface. He found these spiritual beings most fascinating.

'Celestine,' Kirk said looking into her eyes. 'I know you have strayed away from your true path, but it is never too late to return to it. It just takes courage, determination and total commitment.'

He turned to Naren.

'Inside me, I carry the memories of Ashata, greatest of the Eight. When they first became travelling spirits they visited another planet, not too far from here. It is called Earth and it is my home world. They went there to help, to enlighten the people they found there, but the time wasn't right. The visitors were persecuted and driven out by a fearful people who were terrified of Ashata's ideas. Ashata wanted to go to other worlds and continue to spread the word of living a non-material way of life. Teaching them the way of respecting and honouring each other, but others who had been with him on Earth were scared. They decided that it would be better if they cut themselves off from the rest of the universe as this way was safe. To do this, they had to get rid of Ashata and to that end, Baylon killed him.'

Naren looked away from Kirk at the sullen Baylon.

‘You make it sound so.....’

Baylon jumped to his feet at Kirk’s words his voice full of anger. Kirk raised his hand to cut the Alcanii’s words off.

‘Sound like what Baylon? Calculated? Well it was, wasn’t it? You decided to stop me, and to do that you had to kill me. I think that’s what you calculated, and it worked too.’

Kirk’s calm face and measured tone caused Baylon to sag; his face blank, he slumped back into his chair. Spock looked at his Captain with growing respect. Kirk’s voice and body language had changed. None of the others in the room knew Kirk as well as Spock, so they hadn’t noticed. He was talking now, not as Kirk, but as Ashata. Kirk looked down at Baylon with terrible compassion.

‘I am not blaming you Baylon. I understand your fears, but I thought we were above such things. You are now almost immortal; more spirit than Alcanii, yet still you are hiding behind a shield. This is not right. Your knowledge is so vast, use it, and don’t covet it. Help Naren and his people to live a better life, free from despair and fear. You can do this, and you will grow as they grow. Now you are diminishing, decaying, as they are. The balance has to be maintained.

On Level Twelve, Scotty and Samuels were, once again, climbing steadily up the Jefferies tube. Samuels had decided to pace herself this time. I don’t want to get up there red faced and panting this time, she thought. She concentrated on each rung of the access ladder, counting as she went. Above her, Scotty was breathing heavily. It was quite a snug fit for him. Each time he climbed, he bumped his knees causing him to mutter something unintelligible under his breath. Samuels couldn’t hear the words,

but could guess his sentiment. Probably some choice Gaelic swear words, she decided. Samuels grinned to herself as a picture formed in her mind of the Chief Engineer as a large grumpy teddy bear, on a good day. More like a man eating Salut on a bad one.

At last they reached the section they needed. Once he stopped, she passed him the goggles and facemask. As he started work with a sonic spanner, she looked away. It took just a few minutes to reconnect the phaser relays.

‘There we are. All done.’

He smiled down at her and handed her the spanner. Samuels didn’t know what happened next. One second she was reaching for the spanner the next she was in great pain and falling, out of control, down the Jefferies tube.

In the VIP lounge refreshments were being served, mostly to give both parties time to talk about what had been said and digest the content. Spock and Kirk were keeping themselves separate from the others purposely to allow their guests to talk amongst themselves.

‘How do you feel it’s going Spock?’

‘Feel, Captain?’ Spock said, tilting his head at his Captain.

Kirk smiled. I must be pre-occupied, he thought, to use the word ‘feel’ in a question to Spock.

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Indeed, Captain. I think Ashata is doing very well.’

Kirk halted in mid sip of coffee and looked sideways at his first officer.

‘You noticed then?’

‘Yes Captain, but I am sure no-one else did.’

Kirk continued drinking and steered Spock further away from the talking Alcanii and Forgotten.

‘I don’t really understand what I am saying. I know Bones would say that that is nothing new, but it is disconcerting. Opening your mouth and hearing yourself saying things without knowing where the information is coming from.’

‘But you do know Captain. It is from your past life, from Ashata, if you prefer to call it that.’

‘You seem more at ease with this than I am Spock.’

Kirk watched the Vulcan assume a pose with which he was very familiar. Now, Kirk thought, I’m going to get a lecture in logic.

‘It is quite logical actually.’

‘Oh, I suppose you wouldn’t like to explain it to me, would you?’

‘Certainly Captain. It has been accepted that we have lived many lives. Therefore, it would be illogical to have had all these experiences and learning opportunities for no purpose, for purpose they must have. Everything in the universe is there for a reason. Each of us carries in our soul an imprint, an indestructible record of all we have learnt on our travels. Much of the information is irrelevant, naturally, to our present life, but some of it will be useful to our progress. At this time of your life, as Captain James T Kirk, memories of another life, that of Ashata is very relevant indeed. The crystal chamber has thrown a switch in your supra-consciousness enabling you to gain access to those memories. You are, in some respects, reliving life as Ashata on one level, subconsciously, while still being James T Kirk. In effect, you have two computer banks running simultaneously instead of the usual one.’

Kirk wasn’t sure if this was a good or bad thing. He was about to question Spock about schizophrenia when he was interrupted by Uhura calling from the bridge.

‘Yes Uhura.’

‘Captain, I have a message from Doctor McCoy on the planet.’

‘Pipe it through Lieutenant. Yes Bones, how is it going down there?’

The table-mounted monitor showed a very dirty McCoy.

‘It’s a real mess down here Jim with lot of dead. Nothing I can do for them of course, but I have five serious cases that I may be able to save if I can get them aboard the Enterprise.’

‘Go ahead Bones. Use whatever personnel and equipment you need.’

‘Thank you Jim. Can you patch through to the transporter room, then I can get them aboard.’

‘Right away. Report to me when you can.’

‘Will do Jim. McCoy out.’

Once he had put McCoy through to the transporter chief, he moved back into the main room.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, shall we return to the table?’ He said.

Once everyone was seated Kirk turned to Naren, but before he could speak the doors to the room swept open. Standing in the threshold was Scotty carrying the lifeless body of Ensign Samuels. Kirk leapt from his chair to meet the distraught engineer.

‘Scotty! What happened?’

He could see that Samuels’ face was covered in blood. Scotty looked blankly at the Captain and held the young broken body out in front of him.

‘The poor wee lassie.’

Scotty was close to tears.

‘The spanner fell from my hand and hit her and she fell the entire length of the Jefferies tube.’

Spock effortlessly took her from the engineer and laid her on a nearby couch. They were quickly surrounded by the Alcanii. Kirk swiftly began to check for life signs.

‘She’s still alive, just. Let’s get her to Sickbay.’

‘Captain, Sickbay is virtually un-manned except for a nurse monitoring Green.

The rest are on the planet’s surface helping McCoy.’

Celestine stepped forward.

‘Let us help. Let me take her to our healing rooms. Please Captain, let me do this for you.’

She looked so serene and beautiful that, at that moment, Kirk could have denied her nothing. He found it impossible to take his eyes off her.

‘You think you can save her?’

‘Yes we can if you let us.’

‘Very well. Let’s get her to Alcany.’

Kirk stooped to pick up the body, but was pushed gently aside by Spock, who scooped the girl into his arms.

‘I think Captain, that your presence is needed here. I will take Samuels to the planet.’

Kirk had forgotten the other delegates and smiled sheepishly at Spock.

‘Yes Mr Spock, once again I think you are right.’

Spock moved away followed by Celestine and a deeply upset Mr Scott.

One they had left the delegates returned to the table and Baylon asked if he could address the meeting. Kirk nodded his acquiescence.

‘It is true what Kirk has told you. We are deeply ashamed by our actions, but I have more to confess. Last night, two of us met with Ged’lek to tell him of Kirk going into the crystal chamber and relive Ashata’s memories. It will be clear to you

now why I could not allow this to happen. He would discover that it was I who killed Ashata, and he did. It was I who helped Ged'lek get through the shield and attack the chamber but again, I failed. This time I am happy I did, now I can see how fear has polluted our minds and actions and we have become useless and unproductive. We ask your forgiveness, Naren.'

Baylon turned and bowed to the bewildered leader of the Forgotten. He needed time for these revelations to sink in as he had come aboard Enterprise expecting to be disarmed and humiliated. Instead he was being treated as an honoured guest and the light were asking his forgiveness. After a short pause he gathered his racing thoughts and began to reply.

'I think we can understand why you felt you needed protection from us. We know well what it is like to live in fear. What I don't understand is why you felt you needed to destroy us with the weapons aboard this ship.'

Kirk understood why.

'I think I can tell you that.'

Naren looked at him questioningly.

'If I was killed on Alcany, as planned, then they would not have had the information they needed to stop the shield from failing. Once that happened they felt that you would overrun them. They have no weapons or any physical way of stopping you. So, they took advantage of the fight on the planet to take over the Enterprise. With her they could destroy your homes and your people while they had the chance.'

Baylon nodded.

'That is what we decided we would have to do. Your ship and crew would not have been harmed Captain.'

‘No, just the innocent people you were using our weapons against.’ Kirk quietly said.

A heavy silence fell around the table as each pondered on what had been disclosed.

‘Well then where do you go from here gentlemen?’ Kirk asked.

‘We have no choice Captain, but to live together, here on Alcany.’ Naren said.

‘Then I don’t think you need me any more,’ Kirk said, rising to his feet. ‘Please feel free to use this room for as long as you need it. Before you leave though, decide on just where you will go from here and how you will act upon what has been said.’

Kirk exited the room and left the delegates to sort out the way that life on Alcany would be from now on. It is all up to them, Kirk thought, thankful that his part was over.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Captains Log: We have spent the last five days orbiting Alcany while the Enterprise has been used as neutral ground for both parties on the planet to carry out their negotiations and now an agreement has been reached acceptable to both groups. The shield will now only be used as a planetary defence system, to benefit the whole planet. I have been able to give them the missing information I had from Ashata to strengthen it. Engineering has been able to offer help in rebuilding the settlements that were destroyed by the phaser attack and I would like to offer commendations for the following officers. Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott, Lieutenant McAndrews and Lieutenant Ericson. Medical services have excelled themselves in treating over two hundred Alcanii casualties. Commendations to Doctor Leonard McCoy, Doctor George M'Benga, Nurses Chapel and Grace.

Naren and Baylon have reached an agreement on an overall planetary system of government and spiritual affairs. I am more than pleased with the progress they have made and I am confident that Alcany can be offered membership in the Federation once the situation is fully established. A Federation diplomat, to be based permanently on Alcany, might help this process along. We are coming to the end of our usefulness here and will be departing for Star Base 12 at noon today. This is Captain James T Kirk, commanding officer, Starship Enterprise reporting.

‘Uhura send that to Starfleet immediately.’

Kirk ordered then sank gratefully into his chair as he had hardly had time to sit down in the last five days and he now needed that shore leave more than ever. So far he had

been diplomat, construction foreman, liaison and general sounding board and had been back and forth to the planet so often, he was sure that some of his molecules were still in transit. But it had been worth it and he really believed that they could all work together down there and make Alcany a place worth living in for all its inhabitants, not just a privileged few.

The door to the bridge opened and Spock entered, followed by McCoy. Kirk suddenly realised he hadn't seen either of them much for the last few days. Spock went to his station, but McCoy came and stood by Kirk.

'Well Doctor, how are all your patients?'

Kirk looked at McCoy and saw that the doctor looked better than he had in weeks. Perhaps, Kirk thought, all this excitement agrees with him.

'The last one was beamed back this morning Jim. They should be able to cope now and Green is on the mead too.'

McCoy looked very pleased with himself.

'Good work Bones.'

Kirk turned to Uhura.

'Are all ship's personnel back aboard?'

'Transporter room reports two more parties to beam back, then all personnel will be back aboard Captain.'

'Let me know as soon as they are aboard.'

He turned to McCoy.

'I heard the good news from Scotty this morning Bones.'

McCoy looked blank.

'Lieutenant Samuels. Fully recovered and back on duty.'

‘Yes. Quite remarkable.’ McCoy beamed. ‘Those healing rooms are so advanced. I’d love to spend some time learning about them.’

‘I’m just glad to have a fine officer back in one piece.’

McCoy had to agree as it was hard to lose any member of the crew and he knew how hard the Captain took such things. It was the Captain’s place to write a letter to the lost crewmember’s family as he had had to do for Carella. No matter how it was put, it was always such a painful duty.

‘Sir?’ Uhura called. ‘I have a message from the transporter room. All the crew are now aboard.’

‘Thank you Lieutenant. Ensign Adams, plot a course for Star Base 12.’

‘Already plotted sir.’

Adams smiled and Kirk acknowledged her smile with one of his own. She had certainly been thrown in at the deep end for her first mission, but she had coped very well. McCoy leaned toward Kirk and whispered in his ear.

‘Do you think they are all looking forward to shore leave Jim?’

‘Not as much as I am Bones, believe me.’

Spock had moved to join them.

‘Captain, I have been monitoring preparations for the planetary shield.’

‘And no doubt sticking your oar in too,’ McCoy muttered.

‘Doctor, an oar is a propulsion device for a small boat. I have neither boat nor oar.’

Kirk grinned; life was getting back to normal. Spock turned to Kirk.

‘Once we are out of orbit, it will be activated. I have set us a special communications frequency with Rissa and will report its effectiveness before departing for Star Base 12.’

‘Thank you Mr Spock.’ Kirk said wearily.

All he wanted was some sleep. He sat in his chair and gazed at the planet on the screen and it slipped past. It looked as lovely as it did when they first saw it, but he knew that looks could be deceptive. He had nearly died twice on that planet. He was also trying to get used to his new memories.

‘A message from the planet Captain.’ Uhura said.

‘On screen Lieutenant.’

The screen flickered as it changed from planet view to the view of the new Alcany Council. The original council of seven had now been swollen by Naren and three of his people.

‘Captain.’ Naren said. ‘We would like to thank you and your crew for all that you have done.’

‘It was our pleasure.’ Kirk smiled. ‘We wish you good luck for your combined futures. I hope that your membership to the Federation is soon promulgated and we can visit you again.’

‘We would welcome such a visit.’ Baylon said. ‘We look forward to receiving the Federation envoy.’

Kirk looked at the people on the screen and was disappointed not to see Celestine. He would have liked to have said goodbye to her in private, but it looked like it was not to be. He was aware that Baylon had not finished speaking.

‘We wish you goodbye and safe travels to you all. Alcany out.

The screen faded to black.

A moment of silence permeated the bridge before Kirk stirred.

‘Mr Sulu take us out of orbit. Make for Star Base 12, Warp factor four.’

‘Aye Sir.’

‘Mr Spock, you have the con. Check the shield as we leave. I’ll be in my quarters if you need me.’

Spock nodded; he read the words that Kirk had not said. Don’t need me.

‘Want some company Jim?’ McCoy asked.

‘No Bones. I’m going to get some sleep.’

Tiredly, Kirk left the bridge as the Enterprise moved majestically away from the planet.

Kirk settled at his desk and reached for his personal log to say a few final words on this episode of his life.

‘Captains Personal Log:’ He paused, collecting his thoughts. ‘We are now on our way to Star Base 12. I hope we make it this time. My feelings are very mixed. In one way I am comforted by what I have learned about my previous lives and the knowledge I now have limited access to. In another I wonder just who James T Kirk really is. My glimpse into the past has answered many questions. Why I love the sea. Why I have an inner rage against injustice to the weak and defenceless. I was there once, in despair, vulnerable. Something I wouldn’t want to face again. I suppose all of this has had an effect on who I am now. I have learned that we are here to learn lessons, then what we learn in one life affects where we go for our next and the conditions we have to cope with. We choose our parents before we return to the physical world. I wonder why I chose mine as I had such problems with my father. Or, maybe, that’s why I chose him, to learn from those problems. I’ll never know for sure.’

Kirk yawned and stretched.

‘Footnote. I would have liked to have said a personal goodbye to Celestine. Over the last few days we have often talked about her life with Ashata, but later, about life, as we know it now. I grew....fond....of her and will miss the bond we have. Both the old ones and the new.’

He turned off his recorder and sat back in his chair reflecting on how different life could be.

He smelled her first, or did he just imagine it? He shook his head, I must be dreaming, he thought. He closed his eyes and heard a soft tinkling sound that slowly penetrated his consciousness. He sat up, fully awake and she was there before him.

‘I came to say goodbye, James.’

She moved towards him and gently took his face in her hands.

He could now clearly smell her perfume and he looked deep into her eyes. She leaned forward and kissed him deeply.

‘Goodbye my love,’ she whispered and then she was gone.

Kirk touched his lips and, still feeling her caress, smiled and fell into a deep sleep.

