

Star Trek: No Silver Lining

By Bob Francis

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Captain's Log: Stardate 401.4. The Farragut has just entered the Tycho star system. One of the Federation's early Starsailer probes flew through forty-five years ago, reporting back planet four was class M -- with a nitrogen oxygen atmosphere. We will be confirming the probe data and conducting a detailed mapping expedition of the entire system with the primary focus on planet four.

Captain Thomas Garrovick switched off the data recorder attached to his command chair and focused his attention on the main viewscreen. The ship was moving on impulse power, at a snail's pace compared to the time warp factors. But while the stars no longer seemed to jump out of the way, Garrovick felt a thrill as the dim speck in the center of the screen slowly grew into a tan disk. No one he knew would consider him to be anything more than a practical man, and Garrovick would be the first to agree, but this was one of those rare times when he could imagine being the noble leader in a poetic epic. This was one of those rare times when he truly felt like a part of his starship.

But time to return to practical matters. "E.T.A. to standard orbit?" Helmsman Matt Johnson, a serious young man only a few years out of the academy, made a quick check of his instruments.

"We're on final approach now, sir," he replied. "Sixty seconds." Now the center screen was filled with patches of brown and white, appearing to slowly slide down the screen as the Farragut circled the planet 200 kilometers above the surface. Garrovick allowed himself another thirty seconds of relaxation before returning to the role of master of his ship.

Commander Maria Lopez was already hard at work at the science station. Her dark hair kept threatening to fall in her face as she leaned over the sensor scope. The readout reflecting blue in her large brown eyes. Garrovick quickly suppressed his emotional responses and strode over to her station in a businesslike manner. "Anything to report, Commander?" he asked quietly, not wishing to disturb her too much.

"Odd..."

"What's odd?"

Lopez stood up to face him, brushing her hair back automatically with a flick of her hand. Normally Garrovick could expect a small smile, at least a flash in her eyes, but she returned his cool demeanor with pure professionalism though mixed with some concern. "There's no animal life down there."

"Was there supposed to be?"

"According to the Starsailer probe data there should be." She punched a few buttons and an image appeared on the monitor above them.

Garrovick took a closer look. "Is that the same planet?" he asked finally. Lopez nodded. The picture showed a textbook example of a class M world; a small sphere splashed liberally with the blues and greens of life.

Garrovick tried to read the data listed on the side of the screen, but could only make out the total biosphere readings. From what he remembered from his biology courses a quarter century ago, the readings seemed to be rather high. He turned to look at the main screen at the center of the bridge. The planet was mostly brown and tan with a small sampling of gray and white.

Maria leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "Tom, you're stroking your beard again." Garrovick flashed her a look of irritation, but mumbled a thank you and forced his hand back to his side. It was back to business. Maria's tone became very sober, "There was a flourishing biosphere down there less than fifty years ago and now I can't pick up anything." The rest of the bridge crew were still manning their posts and doing their jobs as efficiently as ever. But the normal background chatter had ceased. Garrovick tried to comprehend the information and its implications and found he couldn't. Not really. The scope was just too big.

"Have you checked the sensors?" he asked without much hope. Lopez nodded again.

"Everything's working perfectly," she responded, returning to her hooded viewer. "I might be missing bacteria, maybe a few plants here and there. But our sensors are a lot more sophisticated than the ones on the Starsailer probe and they picked up life from much farther away."

Time to ask the big question. "What could have caused such a tremendous loss of life?"

"Two things come to my mind right away," Lopez replied. "Some kind of solar activity could have changed the climate, or a large meteor impact similar to the K-T event on Earth." Garrovick found himself idly stroking his beard again and

switched to rubbing his eyes. This so-called typical mapping mission was beginning to give him a headache.

"Keep scanning at maximum resolution," he ordered. "I'll be in my cabin. Let me know if you find anything."

He had less than fifteen minutes to himself before his door chimed. The lanky frame of ship's exec Michael Gallagher stood in the doorway, a flask in one hand, glasses in the other. If it had been anyone else, Garrovick would have asked them to leave, but he had served with Gallagher for almost twenty years; known him even longer. Garrovick motioned him to enter. Gallagher strode in with his characteristic almost dancing style and sat down at the chair opposite Garrovick wearing his customary smile. He set the flask down on the desk and poured himself a drink.

Garrovick eyed him and the bottle with a suspicious eye. "Ship's business, Mike?" Gallagher tilted his head back and laughed then poured a second drink for the captain.

"It appears we have a mystery on our hands," observed Gallagher. Garrovick took the glass and gripped it tightly.

"I don't like mysteries," he murmured.

Gallagher took a sip and twirled back and forth in his seat a bit. "Oh, I don't know. It seems like that's the reason we're out here." Garrovick shook his head.

"No, they always lead to longer and longer missions with more questions than answers," he replied bitterly. "And it's just not worth it." Gallagher frowned a bit, the first frown he'd had in a long time. A year ago, Garrovick would have used those same reasons to justify being out this far. Gallagher downed the rest of his drink and looked at the pictures resting on the shelf behind him. Danielle Garrovick's radiant smile reflected back at him from the

hologram, exactly as he remembered her. Gallagher poured himself another drink and noticed how much his friend had aged since their last deep space mission. Not so much physically; they both sported a little gray at the temples. But Garrovick seemed so much older now; his eyes especially, haunted by what might have been. What should have been.

Eleven months ago the Farragut had ventured beyond the limits of Federation space to check out some old space legends; stories of a race that had seeded humanoids across the galaxy. It was a common myth, but Starfleet had high hopes of finding some archaeological evidence this time. After three months of searching, the Farragut had found traces of a civilization, but they were too faint to be measured. Added to the disappointment of the mission was the news Danielle Garrovick had succumbed to one of those viruses from the Third World War that still cropped up from time to time. It had struck so quickly, no medication could save her. Captain Garrovick had taken it very hard, learning his wife had died months before. Gallagher knocked back the entire shot. Garrovick stirred from his brooding thoughts and followed his friend's eyes.

"Actually I wasn't thinking about her," he said. "I was wondering what to say to my son."

"Tommy? What is he now --"

"He's eleven," answered Garrovick. "I wish he could be out here with me, but a starship is no place for children." It's not all that great for fathers either.

"He took it pretty hard," stated Gallagher and immediately regretted it. But Garrovick only nodded slowly, sadly.

"No, he's getting over it. Living with his grandparents... that's good." He put his glass down and

fumbled at some hard copy he had in the corner of his desk. "I've been trying to write him every day and send him a little something from all the places we've been." Garrovick laughed a little to himself. Six weeks ago, he had sent back a Baralax Pod Plant, a large egg shaped plant about a meter tall. A few days later, he found out that was just the seed of a Baralax Pod Plant; the adult tree could grow to a kilometer high. He was still getting messages from some perturbed officials in Terran customs. Garrovick chuckled again.

Gallagher relaxed. "Well, I'm glad to see you smiling again. You've been kind of down lately, even around Maria - -" Garrovick sat up so fast he almost fell out of his chair. He had been trying very hard to keep his romance with Maria a secret; at least not generally known.

Garrovick surrendered. "I suppose I should know better than to try and hide anything from the ship's exec."

"I thought it was a matter of public record," said Mike. "I mean, meeting in the observation lounge, the rec deck, the dinner she cooked for the two of you out of ship's stores... not exactly a private affair." The captain sank lower and lower into his chair; finally putting his head down on the desktop.

"So, do the Klingons know yet?" he asked.

Mike laughed loudly, "I'll take that as a compliment, I think." He poured himself a little more. "So, what are your intentions with our first officer?" Garrovick moaned a little. "I knew it was too soon. Maria has helped me out a lot the past few months, but..." Garrovick trailed off, ashamed to say aloud how he felt, like he was cheating on Danielle. He had logged more than fifteen years in

space, had visited more than a hundred planets and he had never even looked at another woman. Until now.

"What do I tell my son?" he asked taking a drink from his glass. His guilt burned away as the coarse liquid etched a path down his throat. He coughed and tears filled his eyes. "What is this stuff?" he wheezed. "Reactor coolant?"

"Orion whiskey," smiled Gallagher. "The Best."

"I knew there was a reason we didn't let Orion join the Federation," muttered Garrovick.

Gallagher wouldn't allow him to change the subject. "Tommy's a smart kid," he pointed out. "He'll be a Starfleet Cadet in a few years. Just tell him the truth. He'll understand."

Garrovick looked skeptical. "And what if he doesn't understand?"

"Then he'll hate you." Gallagher finished his drink. "But don't worry," he added, "kids hate their parents at that age anyway." He pointed a finger at the remnants of Garrovick's glass. "You finished?" Garrovick nodded and watched in mixed amazement and disgust as his friend reached over and drained it.

Gallagher stared back and hiccuped. "The Best is also expensive," he explained. Standing up a trifle unsteadily, Gallagher walked to the door.

"I'm afraid the time for this session is up," he said walking out. "Finish your letter. If you need to talk any more..." He paused, checking his internal operation. "I think I'll be in sickbay getting my stomach pumped." The door slid closed and Garrovick laughed and realized that Mike had saved him once again from his own worst enemy.

"Have to buy him some of that Orion Whiskey," thought Garrovick aloud as he composed a new letter to his son.

Yeoman Mikhail Chernekov lay on his bunk and tried to feign sleep. But deep down, he knew it was no use. And then we walked down into their village --

Lieutenant James Kirk paced about the cramped cabin, telling the story with his hands as much as his voice. "And then we walked down into their village. I tell you, Mikhail, it was... it was..." He searched for the right word.

"Incredible," mumbled Chernekov under his breath. This was the thirtieth time he had heard about this particular village.

"Incredible!" exclaimed Kirk. "The people -- did I mention the girl who played the flute?" Chernekov wished for a hand laser, though he wasn't sure whether he'd use it on Kirk or himself. Mercifully, they were interrupted by the chime of their door and a familiar shock of brown hair peeked in.

"Am I disturbing anything?" asked Lieutenant Gary Mitchell.

Mikhail was already standing up and smoothing down the wrinkles in his tunic. "Sorry, Jim, I've got to get back on duty." In four hours. "If you'll excuse me." Mikhail pushed past his confused bunkmate and Mitchell turned to watch him literally run down the hallway.

"Don't tell me," he said. "The flute story, right?" Kirk looked down, trying to hide his embarrassment. Mitchell slapped his friend on the back. "You've got to get

some better stories, Jimmy my boy. Commanding the latest landing party just isn't everyone's idea of a good time."

Kirk smiled and sat down on his bunk, giving his friend a look of pity. "Jealousy, pure and simple." He tsked and shook his head. "If only you'd take your duties a little more seriously then maybe you could go down on planetary surveys as well."

Mitchell laughed again, "Oh, Jim, you are definitely on track to become Starfleet's youngest captain." He added, "But someday I'll be Starfleet's happiest one." Kirk forced a smile. He knew he pushed himself too hard sometimes, but making jokes about it rubbed him the wrong way.

Mitchell smacked him lightly, bringing Kirk out of his fog. "Hey, lighten up," he said. "You've got to live life a little. Enjoy it..." Mitchell paused a moment. "Better yet, enjoy it with Ensign Schmidt from Botany." Kirk felt his face getting hot. He shuffled his feet like the Iowa farmboy he had once been.

"You know how I am about that sort of thing," Kirk mumbled. Mitchell just looked at him.

"No, I don't," he replied soberly. "You hardly do anything outside of your duty anymore. Is this still about Carol?" Kirk flinched at the sound of her name. Carol Marcus. Memories of his shore leave last year; his few final months on Earth while he was between assignments. Gary had introduced them. She was a technician in a nearby lab. For three months they had been like a single person; living their lives together. And then -- suddenly -- it was over. Kirk was stationed on the Farragut and Carol stayed behind on Earth. They promised to meet on Deneva, but she had never shown up. No excuses, no explanations, she wouldn't even acknowledge his subspace messages anymore.

"You can't hold a candle for her forever," said Mitchell as if he'd been reading his mind. "You've got to get on with your life." As much as he hated to admit it, maybe Mitchell had a point.

"I've been trying too hard," Kirk thought aloud. "Trying to become Captain Kirk, and not seeing anything else."

Mitchell rolled his eyes. "Isn't that what I've been trying to tell you?"

Kirk laughed -- a genuine laugh this time. "Maybe I'll talk to Ensign Schmidt." She does have very pretty eyes. The intercom on the cabin wall beeped once and the image of Ensign Schmidt's eyes vanished.

"Lieutenant Kirk," announced the bridge communications officer, "please report to briefing room two immediately." Kirk acknowledged the call and broke the connection. He pulled out a fresh tunic from his side of the closet; standard gold velour of the command section.

"I'll have to start my new life later," promised Kirk on his way out the door. Gary smiled and threw his hands up in defeat, letting the doors slide shut before cursing under his breath.

"I was this close to turning him around," he grumbled to himself. "So close..."

The senior staff was already there when Kirk arrived, taking up all the chairs around the central table. Rank hath its privileges, he thought as he found a nice bulkhead to lean against. The other landing party leaders were not so lucky and were forced to stand without any support at all. He listened intently as each of the officers made their reports, and Kirk also watched how Captain Garrovick

presided over the meeting; keeping it in control, yet letting everyone have their say before he made the final decision.

Commander Lopez was arguing when Kirk came in, pounding on the table to accent her points, eyes blazing with intensity. "A recent dieback -- no matter what the cause -- would be a valuable scientific study." Dr. Samsilezi peered over his antique eyewear, quiet, but no less determined to make his point.

He shook his head. "But if the catastrophe was caused by a disease organism, we could be exposing crewmen to a bacteria or virus or something else we can't cope with."

"We've been beaming down atmospheric probes for the last few hours," said Lopez quickly, cutting him off. "The air is completely sterile. The only odd thing I've found is traces of dikironium --"

"Dikironium?" The captain sat up in his chair. "That's not a naturally occurring substance, is it?"

"No," she replied, "it's a very rare gas that we've only been able to manufacture in laboratories. Which makes it more imperative that we beam down at once. There may be natural processes at work down there we've never seen before."

"Which is exactly my point," interrupted Samsilezi. He looked down at the table in brief apology. "I advise caution." Lopez relaxed visibly. The survey was almost assured. But Garrovick remained unconvinced.

"Doctor," he asked, "what are the effects of exposure to dikironium? Is there any danger?" Samsilezi took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "No one has ever been exposed to dikironium in field conditions. However,

computer projections say that in high concentrations, dikironium could be absorbed by the blood -- like carbon monoxide -- and cause unconsciousness or even death."

Lopez waved that off. "That's in high concentrations. I'm only picking up minute traces of dikironium." She looked at Garrovick directly, "To be absolutely safe, we can stay away from caves and so on where the gas might have a chance to collect." Garrovick's expression didn't change. He slowly eyed the table to see if there were any other arguments to be made, idly stroking his beard in concentration. Finally he nodded to himself.

"Form up landing parties," he ordered, "commander, science personnel and a standard security contingent." Lopez allowed herself a small smile and made her way out of the rising crowd. Dr. Samsilezi stood to leave as well, but Garrovick stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Doctor, I'd like you to stay on duty as long as the landing parties are down on the surface as a precaution."

Samsilezi nodded gravely. "Of course, sir. I'll prepare sickbay to take care of any possible emergencies." Garrovick released him and allowed himself to relax for the first time. It was always gratifying to please everyone in these discussions, doubly pleasing when he knew he had all the bases covered.

The first thing Captain Garrovick noticed after materialization was how empty the planet seemed. The second thing he noticed was Gallagher's smile.

"Magnificent desolation," he cried. The sound died quickly in the still air.

"I wouldn't have thought of you as a poet," quipped Garrovick quietly. For some reason, it seemed proper to speak in low tones. The ground was a dusty brown color. Garrovick took a couple of steps, kicking some dust into the dry air. It was very flat almost to the horizon though some low rocks lay in the distance. Garrovick couldn't tell how far away they were. The sky was a light pinkish color that brightened to an almost pure white overhead. There were no clouds at all. Gallagher stood a few feet away with his hands on his hips, inspecting the area with obvious pleasure.

"It's not poetry," he replied. "History. That's how the second man on Luna described his surroundings." Garrovick raised a skeptical eyebrow. It was hard to believe anyone could describe Luna as anything but a suburb of Earth; with its vast domes and globe circling maglevs. Maybe there were places in the lunar sanctuaries that resembled this, but Garrovick didn't think they had the feel of this place; the complete and utter -- lack of feeling. A low wind began to moan from the direction of sunset, an alien atonal sound. Garrovick shivered under his field jacket.

"Spread out," commanded Garrovick quietly. "We've got a lot of work to do."

Lieutenant Kirk's first impressions of the planet were almost the same. When he was eight years old, he had fled into the fields beyond his house. He knew there were never any people out there except to fix broken machines. Kirk remembered longing for a place to run away to where no one could see him or hear him or find him. But he'd never found a place like that -- until this moment.

Kirk flipped open his communicator to make contact with the ship. "Kirk to Farragut. Confirm materialization." A curt confirmation buzzed from the small speaker and he closed the connection again. His party of seven found themselves standing on a low ridge overlooking a dry riverbed. Kellerman and Wong were holding the portable scanner, already looking for a place to set it up. The two security guards stood with impassive faces; lasers obvious in the belt loops under their open jackets. Kirk motioned the guards to fan out and set up a patrol area. It was the only thing they could do on a planet devoid of life.

"Form a perimeter and then..." Lopez trailed off, unable to think of anything more. However, her two security men seemed to understand and moved off in opposite directions. Lopez looked up at the near wall of the canyon they had beamed down in, looking for changes in strata that would mark different geological ages. There weren't any obvious signs. The pervasive beige rock seemed to go back millions of years with little or no changes.

She motioned to one of the young scientists on her team; a petite geologist named Ensign Murphy. "You and Ramirez set up the scanner on that wall. I want to check for cosmic ray signatures in the rock."

"Aye, sir." Murphy inspected the wall and finally pointed to an area a few hundred meters downrange from the touchdown site. Ramirez pulled out a roll of sensor webbing from his field backpack and began tacking it up to the rock face. Lopez walked up to the wall and put a hand to it; hoping to glean information from the stone with just a touch. But the rock was as cold and silent as the rest of the planet.

Ramirez plugged the sensor web into the back of the survey scanner and it hummed into life, creating an odd harmony with the endless low breeze undulating through the canyon. Ensign Murphy brushed back a lock of hair that had blown in her face. "Commander, we're getting some readings now." Lopez turned away from the cliff face to look at the monitor screen. "It should be relatively easy to date the strata; the radiation levels look like they were pretty even." Damn. Lopez thought the dieback was probably caused by a jump in solar flare activity; Tycho Major was a star high in the F range.

One theory down, two to go. "Well, after you've finished that, scan the fossil record for lines of iridium." She sighed, "Maybe this planet has a history of impacts."

Something's not quite right here, thought Lieutenant Hayes. It was too empty. He fingered his laser pistol; making sure it was still there. Early in his patrol, Hayes had tried whistling to counteract the feeling of utter isolation. But it hadn't worked. His song had been swallowed by the dry air leaving him feeling more alone than ever. Now, three hours later, he marched silently back and forth -- one hundred steps, a turn and one hundred steps back. The sound of dirt crunching under his boots was so regular, Hayes could feel his breathing and even his heartbeat following in time. The only interruption was the wind. It would die down to just a whisper for a long while until Hayes almost forgot about it then suddenly blow back to life with a cry that would make him jump.

"Paranoid," Hayes cursed aloud. There was nothing here, nothing on this whole planet from what he'd heard. His security training was making him jump at shadows. Nothing to worry about here except one of the geologists

falling down a hole or something. Hayes eyed the area for cracks big enough to look threatening, but none appeared.

Ninety-nine, one hundred. Hayes turned on his heel and began walking back into the gully. Small rocks worn smooth proved that water had once flowed here, but when? And where had the water gone? Hayes grinned uncontrollably at his sudden insight. Now I'm thinking like a scientist; maybe I can get a transfer. But then there weren't as many promotions available in the science division, not like security. But then in security, there were a lot more things that could get you out of the way for the other guy to get his promotion.

Hayes stopped. There was something different here. He had walked through this area only a few minutes before. His footprints were still unmolested by the wind. Hayes moved into a defensive position and looked around, unsure, and felt for his laser, still there. The shadows were different from the movement of the sun, was that it? No. Hayes took a deep breath and realized it was the wind that was different. It was carrying a sweet smell, like flowers or honey. And it was getting more pronounced. Hayes felt his stomach rumbling. He pulled his laser and climbed over a low pile of rocks in the direction of the wind. If there was still some kind of life on this planet, he'd get a commendation at least. But there were no bees or flowers on the other side, just a small valley. Hayes put his laser away and climbed back down disappointed. The wind was picking up again and a low fog bank was moving in, matching his mood almost perfectly. It wasn't until the fog was on top of him that Hayes realized it was moving against the wind. But by then it was too late.

Garrovick peered up at the clear pink sky, trying to estimate the local time by the sun's position. Fifteen, maybe sixteen hundred hours, he guessed. The tricorder came up with fifteen fifty. Not bad. His communicator beeped twice and he flipped open the array, "Garrovick here."

"Sir?" It was Yeoman Shinobi, but there was an uncharacteristic tremor in her voice. "We've picked up a signal to go to yellow alert... it's Federation wide." Garrovick heard one of the security people swallow hard. There were only a few things that could push the entire Federation to alert status and none of them were good.

Garrovick maintained his composure though his insides were churning. "Any reason given to why we're at yellow alert?" he asked.

"Aye, sir," replied Shinobi. "But it's Captain's Eyes Only." Garrovick closed his eyes as a headache threatened to form behind his temples.

"All right, beam me up immediately and have the rest of the landing parties prepare to return to the ship within fifteen minutes." Shinobi confirmed his orders and Garrovick felt the planet dissolve underneath him. The alert klaxon was already whooping when Garrovick reformed in the materializer chamber onboard the Farragut. He ignored the transport team and rushed into the hallway, mixing with the rest of his crew as they rushed to their assigned stations. The doors to his cabin slid open, Garrovick threw off his heavy landing jacket and threw it on his bed. The small screen on his desk was flashing. Garrovick punched in his private command code and the image of Admiral Styles came into focus.

"Sixteen hours ago, Starfleet Command received a message from U.S.S. Lexington in the Donatu star system.

Captain Robert Wesley indicated their sensors had registered a Klingon ship in the area. They were going to investigate. Since then, there have been no follow up messages from the Lexington despite efforts to hail her. Starfleet Command has ordered U.S.S. Enterprise and U.S.S. Hood to the area. They will arrive in less than forty eight hours. Meanwhile, the Klingon ambassador to the Federation has denied any Klingon involvement in the incident, but continues to argue his empire's contention the area is under their sphere of influence and the Lexington's presence may be seen as a prelude to invasion. Long range sensor readings indicate the Klingons are moving their fleet towards the Federation border. While we are holding back for the moment, we are putting out a Federation-wide yellow alert. All ships must be prepared to move out from their regular assignments within two hours. Styles out." Garrovick sat stunned. War. The Federation hadn't fought an all-out war in almost a hundred years. It was something no one liked to talk about, no one liked to think about. But Garrovick knew Fleet Command regarded war with the Klingons as an eventual certainty. The build-up of Starfleet reflected that thinking. While the Farragut's primary mission was exploration, Garrovick was uncomfortably aware of the destructive capability of his ship's new phasers and photon torpedo banks.

The communications panel chimed. The bridge was calling. Garrovick took a moment to slip his reserve into place then answered the hail.

"Garrovick here."

"Sir, all of the landing parties are ready to return to the ship, but Commander Lopez would like to speak to you."

"Pipe it through." There was a brief snatch of static and the screen went dark. Garrovick could hear the alien wind in the background.

"Captain, request permission to remain on the planet's surface to continue our tests."

"Denied."

"Tom," Lopez started, then started again, "Captain, the wind is picking up and could contaminate our samples with dust. We could have some answers soon, but I need --"

Garrovick took a breath. "Commander, I appreciate the fact you want to perform your duty, but we are on yellow alert. Return to the ship immediately."

"Yellow alert? What's going on?"

Garrovick paused, trying to think of a way to explain the seriousness of the alert on a public channel. "I'll explain it... later. Return to the ship immediately, Commander."

There was a long pause on the other end and Garrovick thought he could hear a tiny sigh. "Understood, sir. Lopez out." Garrovick didn't believe that surrender for a moment. If it was one thing he had learned working with her for so many years, was she took her duty very seriously.

The comm panel beeped again. What now? "Garrovick here."

"Sir, Lieutenant Donovan's party reports a casualty. Lieutenant Hayes."

"Have a medical team standing by in the materializer room, I'll meet them there."

Donovan's team was forming on the dais when Garrovick arrived. Their patterns were still grainy and unresolved,

but he could already tell something was wrong. One of the men was materializing horizontally. The pervasive hum of the machinery faded away and Lieutenant Donovan dropped to his knees to check on the fallen security guard as the medical team went into action. The man's face was light gray, almost white. His lips were slightly blue and his hands were wrapped around his throat. Dr. Samsilezi kneeled to examine the body and looked up in surprise.

"He's cold," noted the doctor. "How long was he missing?"

Donovan shrugged. "Not too long. He reported in half an hour before we found him." The orderly ran a medical scanner over the body, shook his head and solemnly covered it with a sheet.

Garrovick asked, "Could he have died from exposure to dikironium?"

"Don't know," replied the doctor, defeated. "I'll have to do an autopsy."

"Keep me informed, doctor." An obvious statement, thought Garrovick to himself, but sometimes necessary to get people to focus on their jobs again. Doctor Samsilezi acknowledged him and helped the orderly carry the stretcher out.

Behind him, the materializer hummed into life again. Garrovick turned to watch the last landing party transform from random sparkles to seven complete human beings. Maria's party. Garrovick thought about escaping, but it was already too late. The second she was fully formed, Lopez gave him an earful.

"... better be a damn good reason --"

"Commander," he tried. No avail.

"We were this close to figuring it out," she cried. "You've got to let us go back down there."

"Commander, we are on yellow alert, preparing for mobilization," explained Garrovick. "We could be going to war with the Klingons at any moment." Lopez narrowed her eyes.

"We've been 'going to war with the Klingons at any moment' for the last thirty years," she scoffed. "Tom, are you telling me a few hours would make any difference at all?"

Garrovick stiffened. "Commander," he began formally. "Would you come with me?" That stopped her. Lopez followed him to the turbolift where he turned with real anger.

"I'll appreciate you not questioning my orders in front of the crew again," he stated quietly.

Lopez was taken aback. "What?"

"I won't stand that from you or any member of this crew."

"Captain," she started menacingly. "I think you are aware that I was giving you viable alternatives as your science officer in the face of this --" She held her tongue until she had a little more control over her emotions. "--war scare." Garrovick hardly blinked at the tirade, his bearded profile unflinching.

Garrovick shook his head. "We may go to war, we may not go to war. That's not the point." He put the turbolift into motion. "I have my orders and you have your orders. It's not up to me anymore."

Lopez moved closer to him. "Tom," she whispered, "what if it was up to you?" The turbolift stopped and Garrovick got out without a word. The doors whooshed shut and Lopez

fell back against the turbolift wall, feeling the car vibrate from deck to deck. She counted seven decks then reversed its direction.

"Materializer room," she ordered. A few hours wouldn't matter. She was sure of it. In any case, with a little luck, she'd be back before anyone realized she was gone.

"Got any more of that Orion whiskey?" Gallagher ran to his door and helped Garrovick into his cabin.

"I think you've had enough," he chided. Garrovick shook his head.

"I haven't had enough," he intoned. "I haven't had near enough." He took the glass offered by Gallagher and sat down hard in the oddly shaped chair in the corner of the room. His stomach was twisting inside his gut, leaving his throat dry and a funny taste in his mouth. It was bound to happen sooner or later, he thought to himself. The two women in my life: Maria and my ship.

Gallagher cleared his throat. "So are you going to drink that or just strangle it?" Garrovick looked down at the glass he was gripping white knuckled and swallowed the contents in one gulp. The liquid tore down his throat, filling the hollow inside him with an acid warmth.

Gallagher sat down on his bunk and threw back a glass himself. "So, the world has ended, eh?"

"What do you hear?" asked Garrovick, curious.

"I've heard everything from a war with the Klingons to Romulans raping our women back on Earth," he replied nonchalantly. "Care to add a fact or two to all the rumors?" Garrovick shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "It may still be nothing."

"So why were you in such desperate need for a drink?" Garrovick said nothing, just looked down at his empty glass.

Gallagher asked gently, "Maria?" Garrovick grumbled something unintelligible. "So what did she do?"

"Nothing really," Garrovick shrugged. "I suppose I overreacted, but..." He struggled for words. "She really wanted to stay down there and I thought she was using our personal relationship to get her way."

"Was she?"

"I don't know," admitted Garrovick, "but that's what it felt like." No, it felt like a dagger buried deep in the pit of his stomach. He took another drink from Gallagher and sipped at it slowly.

"So, what do you want to do about it?" asked Gallagher quietly. Garrovick thought for a minute. What did he want? Should he end it here? Part of him said it would be the best (and easiest thing) to do. No shipboard romances, no problems with Tommy, no nothing.

No nothing. "Apologize," he muttered. "I guess that's what I have to do."

"Why don't you give it a few minutes," Gallagher suggested, putting a hand on the captain's shoulder. "She may have some things she has to work out too."

Gallagher had put a frame around the comm panel on the wall and when it whistled a general call, he couldn't find it. "Captain Garrovick, please report to sickbay." Gallagher pointed it out to him with mock flair. Garrovick smiled ruefully and put down his drink.

"Garrovick here."

"Sir?" It was Samsilezi. "I've finished my preliminary autopsy on Hayes."

"On my way. Garrovick out."

The lights in sickbay were dimmed like the rest of the ship during night shift. The two patients were already asleep and though Garrovick was in a hurry, he stepped lightly around them to avoid waking them up. Samsilezi's office was at the end of the room; the light panels left a long, harsh shadow behind Garrovick as he stepped through the door. The doctor was changing; folding his blue gray smock carefully before depositing it into the ship's laundry facility. Garrovick could tell he was exhausted. Samsilezi's shoulders, normally broad and straight, were slumped.

"So what have you found out?"

Samsilezi took a long moment to respond. "It's not as much what I found as what I didn't find." Garrovick looked at the doctor, surprised at the play on words. But Samsilezi gave no indication he was joking. "Hayes didn't die from asphyxiation as I originally thought."

"Then what about his color?"

The doctor nodded along with understanding. "The color, yes. That's what I thought too. I ran some tests to see if I could find any traces of dikironium in his bloodstream."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing at all." Samsilezi ushered the captain into the autopsy room; a dark hole in the ship bereft of any extra touches to make it look like more than what it really was: storage. Hayes lay on a steel table under a harsh blue light. Garrovick's nose tickled from the chemical smells,

formaldehyde and something like -- flowers? Samsilezi rolled a tray of surgical instruments over. "He's only been dead for five or six hours, and I've had him in stasis for most of that time to halt the deterioration of the body." The doctor took one of the security man's arms; blue-white under the light and made a quick incision. Garrovick peered at it closely.

"There's no blood."

Samsilezi nodded with a grim smile.

Garrovick touched the area, leaving a small round dent in the skin. He drew his finger away and looked up at the doctor. "All clotted?"

Samsilezi shook his head. "No, all gone. There's not a single drop of blood left in his entire body."

"How is that possible?" asked Garrovick.

Samsilezi shifted his feet uncomfortably, finally answering, "I don't know."

"No cuts or wounds?"

Samsilezi's shoulders slumped even further. "Even the largest wound would leave some blood in the body. I can't find any blood at all; not in the heart, not in the brain."

Garrovick looked back at the body. "Have you ever heard of anything that could do something like this?" Samsilezi shuddered. His great grandmother had been a cultural archaeologist with a collection of ancient visual media that not only lacked depth, but color as well. Despite their primitive presentation, young Stephen Samsilezi had been entranced by the stories on the screen. He could still remember the man in black who had sucked the blood out of his victims as they slept. The image had stayed with him for months afterwards, haunting him in the

middle of the night and making him long for his own personal deflector shield.

"No," replied Samsilezi. "Nothing."

Garrovick was nonplused. "I need a recommendation, doctor. Can we afford to send anyone back down to the planet's surface?"

"I don't know what did this, Captain," he responded, "so I can't tell you how to stop it from happening again except by not beaming down at all." Garrovick nodded, stroking his beard. That's what he thought as well. Maria is going to go nuts.

He walked back into Samsilezi's office, resigned to telling her now and getting it over with. "Garrovick to Lopez, come in."

No answer.

Garrovick tried again. "Commander Lopez, please respond to Sickbay." Again no response. Garrovick switched channels.

Yeoman Shinobi responded immediately. "Bridge."

"Is Commander Lopez up there?"

"Negative, Captain," Shinobi replied. "I don't think she's returned yet." Garrovick felt his stomach drop. Samsilezi looked at the Captain and backed off from the fire in his eyes.

"Returned from where?" Garrovick asked the question slowly, deliberately, like recording damaging information for an impending court martial.

"The planet's surface, sir. She beamed down some time ago."

"I see," said Garrovick. "Thank you, bridge. Garrovick out." Somehow, he closed the connection without pounding the comm unit through the table. Samsilezi didn't say a word, just forced himself to check on his patients so thoroughly that he didn't notice Captain Garrovick as he stalked out of Sickbay and headed for the turbolift.

"Captain?" Garrovick didn't notice until Kirk said it twice. "Captain?" Kirk called breathlessly as he caught up with Garrovick at the turbolift doors.

"Come with me, Lieutenant," he said in a voice so low that Kirk forgot what he was supposed to relay. There were several long seconds of awkward silence in the turbolift; to Kirk they seemed like weeks. Finally Garrovick brought himself under control and was able to sound less angry. "You had something to report?"

"Yes," Kirk explained uneasily. "We're receiving a transmission from Starfleet Command. It's Captain's Eyes Only." That didn't sound particularly good, but first things first. Garrovick stepped off the turbolift and burst into the materializer room with Kirk half a meter behind him.

"Contact Commander Lopez," he ordered. The materializer team both went for the comm panel at the same time. The chief got there first. Kirk stood to one side, trying to stay out of the way until the captain remembered to dismiss him.

"She's not answering her hail, sir," reported the chief.

"Then beam her up now."

"Without her communicator to lock on to, it'll take a moment to get her exact coordinates." The Captain did not

look like he was in a mood to wait. "Aye, sir," said the chief. The materializer hummed into life; the sound of power rising in pitch until the air above the pads began to sparkle.

Kirk noticed the problem first. "Better call sickbay," he suggested.

Garrovick was a second behind him, "Emergency!" The shimmering form was stretched across the front three pads. The final power boost kicked in and Maria Lopez lay semi-conscious on the darkened platform. Garrovick was there in a second, his anger completely gone. He touched her face. Cold. Her skin, normally a dark compliment to her brown hair was now the color of chalk. Her lips were a bit darker, almost gray. Garrovick noticed a mixture of sweet smells, familiar, but he couldn't place them. And it wasn't like Maria to wear perfume on duty. Lopez opened her eyes in horror, her body going rigid. Garrovick held her head in his lap as she tried to scream; mouth open, but with no sound.

She fell back. "Thing... in my head..." she managed to croak. Garrovick rubbed her arms and shoulders, trying to stave off shock.

"Hang on, Maria, the emergency team will be here in a moment."

"Tom... so cold here..." She shivered once and went limp in his arms. Dr. Samsilezi was there now with a med tech and a crash cart. He shouldered the captain aside, his hypospray hissing into her arm as he kneeled by her side. No reaction. Garrovick found himself watching helplessly as the med technician lifted her onto the stretcher and wheeled her out.

There was so much he needed to know, but the captain in him took control automatically. There would be no answers yet. He knew there would be no answers yet and he forced himself not to ask for any.

Garrovick grabbed the doctor's elbow as he was about to walk out. "Keep me advised. I'll be in the briefing room."

The briefing room was cool and almost totally black. Kirk could barely make out the silhouette of the captain sitting in his customary seat at the end of the table. "Sir?" he called from the open doorway. There was some movement which he gathered was an invitation. Kirk stepped in and let the door shut behind him.

"Something to report, Lieutenant?" asked the captain.

"Yes, sir," Kirk replied. "You still have a priority message from Starfleet Command." Garrovick muttered an oath. It had completely slipped his mind. Kirk placed an encoded data chip on the table and mercifully stepped back out of the room leaving him alone again. Garrovick tried to clear his mind with a mental slap. There was more at stake than just Maria now, he had four hundred other lives to worry about. The chip was rather ordinary. He held it in his hand and felt it grow warm. Ironic that such a small, insignificant thing could have such importance. Garrovick flexed his hand and felt the chip bend slightly from the pressure. It would be so easy to snap it in half; the war everyone said was unavoidable could be sidestepped for another hour or so.

No. It was his duty. He had given his oath to follow Starfleet Command to the edge of the galaxy or to the precipice of total war. Ten seconds later the face of Admiral Styles lit up the room from the screen in the center of the briefing room table.

"Captain, Starfleet Command has just received a message from Captain Pike, Starship Enterprise. Apparently both the U.S.S. Lexington and the IFP Kahless were caught in an energy field and unable to free themselves. The U.S.S. Enterprise along with the U.S.S. Hood have rendered assistance to the two craft and their crews. Both ships suffered severe damage and many casualties, but not at each other's hand. Captain Korg of the Kahless has asked his government to turn their fleet around except for a single vessel, which they have done. To prevent any further 'misunderstandings', our ships en-route to the area have also turned around. The U.S.S. Hood will be warping out of the area to return to its standard patrol area within an hour and the U.S.S. Enterprise will stay in the area overseeing the repairs of the Lexington..." Garrovick allowed himself a smile, though it almost hurt creeping up his face. It had been close this time. He wondered what would have happened if the Enterprise had arrived and found only scattered debris. Garrovick shuddered, best not to think about that.

The door chime buzzed. Probably Gallagher and his whiskey coming to celebrate already. "Come in." The door slid open revealing Lieutenant Kirk again. Surprised, Garrovick motioned him to have a seat.

Kirk started, "Report from sickbay. Commander Lopez has lost a lot of blood, Dr. Samsilezi is giving her transfusions as fast as he can, but it will be touch and go for awhile."

Garrovick sighed. He expected as much. "Thank you, Lieutenant." Kirk sat up like he was ready to leave again then changed his mind.

"Sir? I can't help wonder about what attacked her," Kirk said.

Garrovick rubbed his beard, "Why would you think Commander Lopez was attacked?"

"When she was in the materializer room, right before she fell unconscious, she said something about a thing in her head." Garrovick nodded. He remembered it as Kirk spoke aloud. He had been so preoccupied by how cold she had felt and her skin so dry like an autumn leaf. He unclenched his hands with an effort .

"There should be nothing down there that could attack the Commander or Ensign Hayes," said Garrovick slowly, watching Kirk think out the problem. "What could have done that to them?"

Kirk furrowed his brow. "Some kind of life form that doesn't register on regular sensors... perhaps based on silicon instead of carbon..." Or dikironium, thought Garrovick to himself.

"Lieutenant, I want you to check out two hand lasers and two mineralogical tricorders and meet me in the materializer room in fifteen minutes."

For a second Kirk's face lit in a smile, but he removed it quickly and managed a yes sir before leaving Garrovick alone again. The ship felt cold and empty to him; just an inanimate object. He hadn't felt this detached from the ship in a long time, not since Danielle's death. Garrovick found himself clenching his fists again. No. This time, it would be different.

Nightfall. The stars were spread thin in this part of the galaxy and Tycho IV didn't have enough stuff in orbit to

constitute a real moon. Kirk shivered in the cool dry air. We should have brought flashlights.

Garrovick stumbled up a short hill, kicking down dirt and small pebbles. Their sounds were swallowed quickly in the darkness, but Garrovick cursed himself. Any animal native to this planet would probably be miles away after hearing all the racket they were making. That is, unless it was a hunter. "Lieutenant, set your laser to maximum."

Kirk swallowed. He had never walked around with a laser set on lethal force before. He carefully spun the aperture, squinting in the darkness trying to make the settings out. The aperture locked into place and Kirk carefully put the gun back into its holster. That was all he needed, evaporating himself by accident. His night vision was improving and Kirk could make out the canyon walls on the horizon by the way they cut off the sky. Captain Garrovick was more than a hundred meters ahead and only visible by his movement. The wind began to moan again. Kirk whipped out his laser almost instinctively then laughed silently at himself and put it back. What kind of animal could live here? It was his suggestion that led them down here; he should have thought it through: flashlights, a complete landing party, tie in the ship's sensors. That would have given this search a chance for success instead of turning it into another hunt for a snark. Kirk remembered a time when he had been sent on a search back at the academy. It was Finnegan's doing. Finnegan; a tall, strapping upperclassman who apparently had nothing better to do in his final weeks at Starfleet Academy than torture young Cadet Kirk with one practical joke after another. The ultimate had been the hunting of the snark. Kirk had returned to his room to find a message apparently encoded by a Professor Donnelley of the zoology department asking him to help find

an escaped specimen; a snark. Cadets were the gofers of Starfleet, so Kirk never considered it might be fake. Besides, he was late. The time to meet the search parties had already come and gone by the time Kirk got the note, so he ran out to the coordinates to help in the search alone. For hours he wandered through the rough brush country with his student tricorder looking for the beast. Which of course didn't exist. Kirk dragged himself back to his room caked with sweat and dirt and found most of the dormitory up waiting for him. Finnegan was in the middle laughing like a loon though Kirk had failed to see the humor of the situation. Not then, branded a dunsel by forty of his fellow classmates. Not the next day, when he finally found the snark in a poem by Lewis Carroll in the Starfleet Archives. And not now, standing on a planet thousands of light years away in the middle of local night.

"Lieutenant," whispered Garrovick. "Do you smell something?" Kirk took a deep breath and voiced a quiet affirmative. The wind carried a thin tang of something indefinably sweet. It reminded Kirk of apple blossoms.

"I thought the sensors reported no life forms," muttered Kirk. Of course, that's why they were down here now checking it out in person. Kirk checked the readings on his tricorder. Still no life forms save the captain and himself, but there were some strange things in the atmosphere; fluctuating noble gases and a trace of dikironium. He looked up at the captain standing ahead of him and noticed the stars. Or rather... noticed they were gone. A lone cloud bank lay directly above the captain, deep gray in the darkness. Kirk felt the wind brush his cheek and realized the cloud was not moving. He dropped his tricorder to his side and pulled out his laser, calling out a warning.

"Captain!" That was all he got out. The cloud dropped onto Garrovick like a pile of dirty snow. Garrovick stood for a moment frozen in the fog then fell to his knees as a blue glow enveloped him. Kirk took aim with his laser, but there was no way to shoot the cloud without hitting the captain. He dropped the useless pistol and fumbled for his communicator in the darkness.

"Kirk to Farragut." The communicator whistled harshly. Wrong frequency. He tried again and felt a strange numbing of his fingers and toes. His arms were aglow in the cloud's interior. He tried to move back, but his legs would no longer move. Kirk collapsed, dropping the communicator. He reached out and managed to grab it again, but it took nearly all his strength.

"Farragut here, respond." Kirk closed his eyes and tried to remember how to move his mouth. He was so tired, so tired.

"Beam... up..." Kirk tried to say more, but his lips felt swollen. The glow was all over him now; he couldn't make out the captain any longer. His visual perception was shrinking; stretching down an ever deepening tunnel until everything outside him was reduced to a deep purple point of light.

Don't resist.

What? Kirk fought to stay awake. There was a presence in his mind; gentle, but firm. It reminded Kirk of his mother's voice. He fell back into the sandy ground and let the world dissolve around him.

And then it was light, misty gray through his closed eyelids. The materializer room. Kirk could hear voices; shouts, but couldn't make them out. There was a door

opening and a -- scream? Kirk wondered about that, but couldn't hang on any longer. Darkness swallowed him.

Then it was light again, but not as bright as before; more voices and the smell of disinfectant. "... have given him 2cc's of cordrazine. I don't think his system could handle any more than that." Kirk tried to move his hand, and apparently succeeded.

"Lieutenant, can you hear me?" Kirk pushed and got his eyes open. Everything was hazy and painted in shades of gray, but he could make out the concerned face of Dr. Samsilezi peering over him with Commander Gallagher standing behind him in the shadows.

"Captain Garrovick," Kirk croaked. The two men looked at each other.

"The captain's dead," replied Gallagher. "Apparently killed by whatever beamed aboard with you." Kirk tried to sit up, but moving made him dizzy. Samsilezi caught him before he could fall off the gurney.

"Easy now. You've lost a lot of blood and we haven't had a chance to replace it all yet."

Kirk asked, "How long have I been unconscious?"

"About twelve hours," replied Gallagher. "Do you remember being on the planet? You sent a distress signal." Kirk nodded.

"The creature..." he murmured.

"Creature?" Gallagher and Samsilezi looked at each other. "You mean the cloud?" Kirk nodded.

"It attacked us. I tried to fire, but I couldn't. The captain was in the way. I called the ship and then it was

on me too..." Kirk shivered. "It wanted me to surrender. Not to fight the inevitable."

"It spoke with you somehow?" asked Gallagher quietly.

"I don't know, sir," replied Kirk. "I'm not really sure, but I thought I heard or thought something." Even now the details were fading from his mind like a bad dream, leaving only feelings of guilt. "I could have destroyed it."

Gallagher leaned in, "How?"

"I saw the thing over the captain. I didn't realize it was alive until it dropped on him... and then it was too late. He was inside it."

Gallagher sighed. "How could have you acted differently, Lieutenant?"

Kirk paused, "I -- I should have fired, sir. Then Captain Garrovick would still be alive." The effort to put that into words. The horrible feelings it dredged up almost pushed Kirk back under. Gallagher looked down at his feet.

"Lieutenant, there was no way that you could have known the cloud was dangerous. Under the circumstances, you acted in the most responsible way: call the ship for an emergency beam out." Gallagher continued, "It wasn't your fault."

Kirk looked at him. "You weren't there, sir," he protested, as close to tears as Gallagher had ever seen a man. Gallagher's heart went out to the young officer, but his face betrayed nothing.

"Lieutenant, we are in a critical situation," he stated gruffly. "We must get the cloud off the ship before we lose more lives." Then it dawned on Kirk what had seemed so strange. He was in sickbay, but still on a gurney. Twelve hours? The lights were dim, but Kirk rolled his head around

to get a blurry view of the rest of the room. Bodies were strapped in all of the beds, lying on gurneys in the aisles, on stretchers and lying on the floor without anything underneath. The only universal symptom was their pale complexions and the tired medical staff passing transfusion units back and forth among the patients worst off.

"How many?" Kirk asked.

"We have twenty six in here with a chance of survival," replied Dr. Samsilezi. "With at least a hundred and sixty more unaccounted for."

Kirk looked at Gallagher, feeling a little more in control of himself. "Unaccounted for?"

"We have no way to scan the inside of the ship," replied Gallagher. "At least not for whatever this cloud is. We don't know where it is. And we don't know where we're vulnerable." He turned to Samsilezi. "Doctor, there will be a briefing in an hour with the surviving department heads. I want you there and I need Lieutenant Kirk on his feet as well."

"I'll do what I can," Samsilezi replied in a voice fuzzy with fatigue. Gallagher nodded soberly and left the room, his feet dragging across the deck plates.

Walking down the corridor to the briefing room, Kirk was surprised how deserted the hallway was. Usually on alert status, people were rushing in every direction. Here, he and Dr. Samsilezi were the only ones; their footfalls echoing ahead and behind. The walls were bathed in a deep red light from the alert panels; the main light panels were all off. Kirk paused to examine a charred spot on one of the walls, but Dr. Samsilezi pulled him along at a brisk pace.

"We don't dare stay out in the corridors too long," replied the doctor to the unanswered question. "Lasers at low power don't seem to affect the cloud and we don't dare use them higher than force two or three or risk damaging the wall circuitry or perhaps blowing out a bulkhead." It was more serious than he thought. Kirk began watching the corners for traces of mist, sniffing for fresh scents of honey air in the otherwise stale atmosphere. The briefing room was standing room only, most of the officers on the ship were packed inside. A white haired lieutenant commander from the engineering staff was already explaining how they were dealing with the cloud.

"We don't have any way to scan the interior of the ship. The sensors were never designed for that..." He cleared his throat and bent his lips into a humorless smile. "Though I think all of us in engineering would recommend a design change if we get back to a starbase."

Gallagher didn't return the smile, forced as it was. "So we can't tell where it is. Even with tricorders?"

The old man shook his head wearily. "There's apparently too much interference from ship systems. The readings fluctuate; sometimes there doesn't seem to be any dikironium in the ship at all."

Someone else interrupted. Kirk recognized Matt Johnson, one of the bridge crew. "Can we filter out the dikironium? Pull it out of the air vents --"

"We tried to rig up filters on key air ducts in the ship --"

"Two engineers died," muttered the doctor. Even with spacesuits on. It got through their osmotic pumps." Silence filled the room for a long moment.

The engineer continued, "And the ones we did get installed apparently don't work. We're still getting readings of dikironium, even in areas we thought were safe." It sounded like a gruff apology.

Gallagher rubbed his eyes, wishing for the umpteenth time someone else could bear the burden of command. It felt like a week had passed since he slept. "And with what air we have in the ship, how long do we have?"

"Sixteen hours."

"Thank you, commander." Gallagher turned to Dr. Samsilezi. "And your report, doctor? How many have we lost?"

"One hundred and eighty one have either died or are missing on the closed parts of the primary hull," he replied. "Nineteen more are in sickbay receiving transfusions. We've been forced to --" Samsilezi gave an involuntary shudder, "-- bleed healthy members of the crew to augment our medical supplies." Gallagher slumped in his seat, looking shrunken in his wrinkled tunic, feeling much older than he was.

"So that's the situation. We put in a distress call while we still had control of the bridge, but after the Donatu crisis, there's no ship within two days of us. We're on our own and I need suggestions."

"Shuttle bay," Kirk found himself saying.

Gallagher sat up, "What?"

Kirk's mind was whirring; a plan was forming. "We can put the crew in the shuttle bay. The ducts to the rest of the ship can be completely closed off. Then we vent the air on the rest of the ship. When the cloud is gone, we restart life support and re-establish the atmosphere in the ship."

Samsilezi was nodding along, but Gallagher raised an objection. "Good idea, Lieutenant, except for one thing. The cloud is attracted to blood. So if we begin to file the crew into the shuttle bay, the cloud will follow."

"We can use some of the blood supplies we have left as bait," replied Kirk. "Keep the cloud busy in other areas of the ship while we put everyone in the shuttle bay. How long would it take to get everyone in there?"

The security chief answered, "We're at General Quarters right now. Say five minutes. Ten with stragglers and injured."

Samsilezi frowned, "My analysis shows the cloud can leach out the blood in a human body in less than a minute. We don't have enough supplies to keep it busy that long."

"And we can't dump the atmosphere from the shuttle bay. It can only be done from the bridge," added Gallagher.

Kirk swallowed and straightened, "Then I volunteer to stay on the bridge." Gallagher eyed him a moment.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Please return to sickbay." Kirk did a double take, thought about saying something then decided against it. "If there are no other suggestions..." There weren't. "Please return to your stations. I'll be making the decision shortly." The officers filed out of the briefing room slowly. Gallagher stood and stopped the doctor with a hand on his arm. When the doors had slid shut after the last man had left, Gallagher motioned him to take a seat again.

"What did you make of Lieutenant Kirk's idea?" he asked.

Samsilezi took off his glasses and wiped them clean with his tunic. "I would say they were remarkably well thought out considering the emergency."

Gallagher shook his head. "No. No. I mean volunteering for what essentially is a suicide job. Is that from feelings of guilt?"

"Well, I haven't had a chance to do much work with him other than patch him back together," sighed the doctor. "Common sense tells me he's probably suffering some misplaced feelings of guilt. He thinks he could have saved the captain and prevented all that's happened since."

"Suffering from 20/20 hindsight," finished Gallagher. "From his records, I would say Kirk is a fine young officer. That's what I'm going to put in my report. I don't think there was anything he could have done differently. I mean, Captain Garrovick probably would have court martialed him if he had shot at a cloud..." His voice trailed off into an uncomfortable silence. Gallagher sat with his memories for a moment. It was all he could do to stay in control of himself. "Would you recommend him for the job?"

Samsilezi shook his head. "As a doctor, I can't recommend anyone for a job which there is a good chance they won't be coming back." He sighed. "But if you are asking me if there is any reason why he shouldn't be able to do it, no. There's no medical reason why he shouldn't." Gallagher nodded. The decision was made.

A nervous ensign named Jameson along with a burly security guard appropriately named Samson helped Kirk into a standard spacesuit. Starfleet issue, Kirk thought to himself as they threatened to rip him in half getting him

into the legs, one size fits nobody. Jameson attached something to his back before zipping him inside.

"For what it's worth," he told Kirk. "A dikironium filter. Maybe it will buy you some time." Kirk nodded grimly and affixed the helmet himself. It twisted and locked into position. Samson gave it a tug which about wrenched Kirk off of his feet then gave his silent nod of approval. The world was silent save for the air hissing through his life support system. Kirk tried a couple of knee bends and then a few cautious steps. Jameson watched him carefully then called him from a nearby wall comm.

"Looks good. You work in a suit before?"

Kirk shook his head then realized they couldn't see it. "No. Just the emergency drills we did at the Academy."

Jameson smiled. "Well, I guess you're a natural. Most folks put one of these one and fall right on their face the first time they take a step." Kirk smiled and then laughed aloud, to compensate for not being seen through the polarized faceplate. The two turned him around and aimed him for the airlock. It looked like a regular door except for being red instead of the standard metallic blue. It slid open revealing another set of doors only a centimeter or so behind the first set. Jameson punched a button on the wall panel and that pair slid open as well revealing a small room with a circular hatch on the far wall. Kirk felt something hit him on the back and saw Dr. Samsilezi out of the corner of his eye. Jameson explained via wall comm.

"The doctor brought down some blood supplies in small bags --"

Samsilezi interrupted, standing in front of Kirk but sounding thin and far away through the suit's speaker. "Each one contains 200 milliliters of blood plasma. Just

lay it down somewhere and twist open the top." Samsilezi turned a small dial and the container's top blossomed open like an orange flower. He took a look around then sealed it back again. "The cloud seems to be drawn to plasma. We hope you can divert it for ten or fifteen minutes while we get everyone into the shuttle bay. We'll keep in constant contact with you." Kirk did an exaggerated nod, more like a bow to be seen outside the suit. Jameson returned to his view and handed him a tricorder with enlarged buttons he could work with gloved hands.

"We're draping a sensor web on the outside of the primary hull so you'll be able to track the dikironium with the tricorder." Jameson patted him on the shoulder. "Good luck, sir." Kirk stepped into the airlock and waited. Slowly his suit turned stiff and he could hear small crackling and popping sounds. I hope that's normal. Finally a green light flashed above the outer hatch. Kirk pressed a large button and watched as it slid open; the Farragut was in full sunlight. In a second the faceplate filters toned the light down and Kirk was able to see. He caught his breath. Tycho IV was straight ahead; up or down, Kirk couldn't exactly tell. He felt his stomach do a flip, but he forced it to calm down. He pulled himself out of the airlock and felt the gravity shift so he was now standing on an impossibly narrow hill. The primary hull was to his left and "down". He started to walk, but his feet wouldn't move. His instinct was screaming that he would tumble down like falling off a log into the black starless void beyond; forever and ever. Kirk gulped again for his stomach's sake and forced himself to take a step. Then another. Then another. After a few minutes, Kirk noticed a long straight-away, the edge of the secondary hull. Small figures were walking down towards him. One waved its hands.

"Lieutenant," he called over the suit comm, "you should never do a spacewalk alone. Even with full gravity like this."

"Sorry," mumbled Kirk. The figures numbered five and he watched as they walked stiffly up towards his position. The first reached him and Kirk read the nameplate on his chest. YATES. It was the engineer from the briefing room. Kirk could make out a shock of white hair despite the darkened faceplates between them.

"First time outside?"

"Yeah," said Kirk.

"Good job. That's why we were coming for you. Usually people see themselves hanging on the edge of a cliff and we have to carry them out kicking and screaming." Yates laughed, joined with the other engineers; their suits moving up and down at the torsos. Kirk laughed too. "So what do you think?"

Kirk took a look around. Now that there were other people around, it wasn't nearly as terrifying as before. He looked back the way he came; which was now "down". Below that hung one of the power nacelles stretching up to about level with him. Straight ahead was the huge flat disk of the primary hull bisected by the dorsal area.

"The ship seems an awful lot bigger on the outside," he finally replied.

"Not as cut up out here," said Yates. "People can take the turbolifts and go from the bridge to engineering in a minute and a half. You forget how fast a turbolift goes until you try to walk from engineering to the bridge out here. It would take you an hour."

"Where am I going back in?"

Yates pointed to an area on the primary hull about one third of the way out to the edge. "Photon torpedo launch tube. There's a service conduit that runs along there. You can get into Deck 10 from there." They began to walk, making good time until they got to the straight wall of the primary hull.

"Watch out," Yates called. "Gravity change." Kirk kind of guessed that; he hadn't brought his rappelling equipment. He put his hands on the hull and was surprised how they stuck. He pulled one foot off the dorsal and it attached to the wall which was now deck. He kicked off his other foot and found himself on his hands and knees on the primary hull. Not so bad. Kirk looked back the way he came and immediately wished he hadn't. The dorsal was now a thin wall holding up the tremendous bulk of the secondary hull delicately balanced over his head. Kirk felt his stomach do yet another flip and tore his eyes away from the spectacle. None of the others said a word during the transition and Kirk noticed none of them looked back either. Probably a wise idea. In a few more minutes, they arrived at the photon tube. A small dark hole perhaps a meter wide was all that was needed to launch one of the most powerful weapons ever devised

"Hope the tube's empty," deadpanned Yates. It took a minute for Kirk to realize he was joking. Kirk kneeled down and scooted inside. The tube walls were frictionless and Kirk let himself slide down to the end. It was an odd feeling. With the walls and their one hundred percent energy reflection, Kirk saw himself multiplied to infinity above and below by the light of his tricorder. The hatch opened outward; Kirk was afraid the movement would shoot him back out the way he came.

"Press the center of the hatch," called Yates. "That kicks in a magnetic field. It will play havoc with your communications, but it will hold you in place until the hatch is open and secure. Kirk did as he was told and felt the low thrumming of the field rumble through his bones. The hatch flipped open on a recessed spring activator and Kirk dragged himself inside. The rumbling cut off abruptly.

"Okay, I'm through." Kirk looked at the mass destruction bottled up all around him. Stacks of Mark II photon torpedoes; their glossy black covers making them look like ocean predators. Kirk practically tiptoed to the service conduit. More crawling, but at least there was light now.

"Just follow the conduit until you get to a vertical junction," instructed Yates. "Take the bottom one. It will open up into a Jeffries tube on Deck 10."

"Acknowledged." Kirk reached the junction and carefully maneuvered himself down the ladder. Luckily the Jeffries tube was at a forty-five degree angle which was much easier. Kirk slid down onto the deck plates and gasped.

Bodies littered the deck. Some slumped in grotesque positions, others were clawing at themselves. All of their faces were blanch white. Kirk shuffled down the hall as fast as he could without falling down in his suit. Or rather, as fast as he thought he could go. Somewhere Kirk made a misstep. He fell forward, his gloved hand slipping across the wall looking for purchase, but not finding any. He hit the deck and found himself on his side facing Ensign Schmidt. No. Her face betrayed widemouthed surprise, but no pain. Kirk trembled, but felt some relief. He clumsily closed her eyes with a glove.

"Gallagher to Lieutenant Kirk, come in please."

"Kirk here."

"Lieutenant, we're ready to begin the evacuation of the ship. Are you ready?"

Kirk stood up. "I'm ready." He pulled the field pack off his shoulders. The containers had withstood the trip through vacuum without incident. He cracked open the seal on one and placed it on the floor then thought better of it and put it down some distance from Ensign Schmidt's body. "That's one."

Dr. Samsilezi's voice cut in on the line. "Lieutenant, you only have twenty trauma packs. You'll have to use them sparingly. Perhaps one per deck."

"Right." Kirk looked at the tricorder. So far, nothing. He took the turbolift to the next deck, popped open another package and went on. The third one was the charm. His tricorder began to flash when Yates excited voice burst into life.

"Kirk! Dikironium readings on Deck 10 moving towards your bait!" Kirk watched the progress on the tricorder's tiny monitor. The readings kept fading in and out, but Kirk could tell it was moving fast.

"Kirk to Commander Gallagher --"

"Gallagher here," he responded. "We see it. We're already moving everyone into the shuttle bay. Good work." Kirk looked down again and noticed the cloud was already almost on top of his second drop off point. Hugging the wall with one hand, Kirk pushed himself to move a little faster. He set number four at the foot of the turbolift door then stepped inside. Mercifully the bridge was free of bodies. Kirk walked over to the environmental station

towards the front of the deck near the main viewscreen and engaged the emergency venting procedures.

Another idea flashed into his head. "Can someone control the turbolifts from remote control?"

"Yes and no," replied Yates after a moment's consultation. "We can punch in a destination, but cannot change it once it's in motion."

"That'll do," replied Kirk. "Stand by." The cloud was closing fast on his fourth pack. Kirk popped open number five and slid it into the turbolift. The doors opened, swallowed it and shut again. "Okay, run it someplace far from me, but make sure it goes past the cloud."

Yates whooped into the comm. "Great idea!" A few seconds later, "There it goes!" Good. Kirk turned his concentration back to the life support controls.

"Lieutenant, everyone is in the shuttle bay," Gallagher reported. "Stand by to vent the ship on my command." Kirk primed the airlocks; opening all the inner hatches in the ship. His hand stood poised over the button blinking red, waiting for the final command.

It was given. "Go," said Gallagher.

Kirk couldn't tell if it was working at first, but then he noticed a distant howl coming from the turbolift shaft. It reminded him of a tornado he had seen when he was a boy in Iowa. The huge sound of rushing wind grew louder and rose up from the bowels of the ship. Should have thought this through a little better. Kirk looked around for a place to hang on, finally wedging himself between the navigation station and the captain's chair, holding the field pack and the tricorder tight. The deck began to shake underneath him, rattling his teeth so hard, he clenched his

jaw to prevent them from falling out. The turbolift doors behind him began to whistle and the air turned to a strong wind which whipped at him for what seemed like hours. Then it faded away to silence. It was over. Kirk breathed a sigh of relief.

"Reading a total vacuum," reported someone; one of the engineers, guessed Kirk. "Inside and out."

"What a ride!" cried Yates. "I've never seen anything like that! Lieutenant, you should have seen it!"

"That's okay," Kirk replied dryly. "I think I saw enough as it is." Wait a minute.

"Kirk, you can restart life-support," said Gallagher. No answer.

"Lieutenant?" Kirk tried to brush away the sound and concentrate on what his eyes were telling him. His tricorder was scratched from the beating it took from the whipping wind. He keyed Yates.

"Can you check your tricorder readings? I think mine is broken."

"Just a moment." A moment later, Yates voice was back. The jubilation was gone. "Um, I'm still picking up traces of dikironium.

"Where?"

"Deck 8. Forward." Kirk confirmed it with his tricorder. Damn. Were there still air pockets? Airlocks that hadn't blown?

"This makes no sense," Yates complained. "The cloud should have dissipated. I saw the airlock on deck eight blow out." Kirk was only half-listening now. He grabbed his pack and walked to the turbolift doors, but they didn't open. The rush of air had pulled them off their track.

Kirk pulled with all his might until one door finally jerked free.

"After I'm out, I need you to move the turbolift back away from me," said Kirk.

"Why? Where are you going?"

"To the emergency bulkheads," Kirk shouted. "I'm going to bring down the bulkheads on deck ten and trap it in the primary hull."

"Are you crazy?" Yates exploded. He took a minute to calm down then tried to explain it as if talking to a child. "Lieutenant, you can't do that. Those bulkheads are meant to only come down if you want to separate the primary hull completely. You'll cripple the ship!"

The turbolift doors opened partway onto deck ten and Kirk squeezed out, pausing only a second to check the integrity of his suit. "They designed the saucer to separate, didn't they?"

"Well, yes," admitted Yates. "But it's never been done before."

"It's an awfully drastic move, sir," chimed in another engineer.

Kirk stopped and put down a plasma pack. "We've lost half the crew. Wouldn't you say drastic measures are now in order?" The engineers didn't answer.

"Commander, get your men back onto the secondary hull," ordered Gallagher. "Kirk? You'll be trapped onboard the primary hull when you cut it loose. There's no one to fire the controls on this side."

"I know that, sir," replied Kirk. "I've got enough blood to keep the cloud occupied while the secondary hull

fills up with air. Beam me out when you can." There was a long pause and a noise which sounded like a laugh. Kirk couldn't be sure.

"It seems like you've really thought this out," said Gallagher finally. "When did you have the time?"

"I'm not really sure. It just came to me," Kirk replied. The bulkhead controls were just ahead. Kirk climbed up into the Jeffries tube, his heart pumping hard enough he could hear it in his ears. He slowed his breathing with a few deep breaths then started the sequence. There were three long levers. Kirk threw the first one. The lights flickered then returned; albeit much dimmer. He threw the second one and he could hear the dull thud of metal on metal through the tube walls. The bulkheads were coming down. Kirk pulled the final lever and the world rose up crazily. Gravity failed then returned then failed again. Kirk bounced out of the Jeffries tube and down the hall, flopping like a marionette. Gravity recovered yet again and Kirk hit the floor with a thud that knocked all the air out of him. He lay there for what seemed like several minutes listening detachedly to the voices calling his name.

"Kirk, get moving. The cloud is moving towards your position!" Kirk sat up. His field pack was still in the Jeffries tube and he had to backtrack to get it. The tricorder was flashing down a series of numbers: distance and angle of approach. The cloud was behind him and above him. Kirk made his way down the hall to the next turbolift.

"How much time before you can beam me out?" he asked.

"Atmosphere is coming back. We'll have breathable air in fifteen minutes."

"That's a long time," observed Kirk.

Yates jumped in. "We're coming in. We can be there in five."

"Okay," said Kirk. "I can hold out for five." I hope. The turbolift opened on deck seven. Now the cloud was two decks away, but already on top of his bait. Kirk put down another trauma pack. Why did I volunteer for this? The deck rumbled and Kirk fell to his knees.

"Is something hitting me?" he asked.

"Hold on a moment, Lieutenant." Easy for him to say. "Solar activity is up and it's raised the atmosphere. You're skipping on it. Can you tie into your hull temperature readings?"

"Not from here."

"Well, the temperature will probably rise quickly. You don't have much in the way of thermal shielding. Stay away from the outer decks."

"Hang on, Kirk, we'll be there in five minutes," cried Yates.

Despite everything, Kirk smiled. "You said it would be five minutes before."

"Did I?" Kirk laughed out loud. Looking down at his tricorder, much of his light mood drained away. The sensor web on the outside of the hull was beginning to be affected by the heat. Readings were interrupted by bursts of static and spurious readings. Kirk played with the fine tuning and got more of an idea of where the cloud was -- still behind him but closing -- and set out again. This was turning into a three dimensional chess game. He dropped another triage pack and set it beside a hallway junction. Kirk walked a few meters down one way, set another one down then ran back down the other hall. Beads of sweat were forming on his

lips and dripping down in his eyes. He checked the tricorder; temperature almost forty degrees centigrade. No wonder he was sweating. The cloud had taken the bait and now seemed to be moving down the other hallway, but they would meet up again soon. Kirk located a service ladder and climbed up to the next deck.

"How much longer?" he called. His communications were beginning to break down.

"The blowout damaged a few things," reported Yates between crackles. "We're working on it as fast as we can." Kirk fell against a wall to catch his breath then checked the tricorder again. The cloud was moving back towards his position. Kirk popped another pack and set it down near one of the main turboshafts. The ship's batteries were struggling to keep shields up against the tremendous heat of re-entry. The lights flickered off then returned albeit very dim. Deep shadows filled the hallways. Another shudder rocked the saucer as gravity struggled to reassert itself. Kirk pried open the turbolift doors and looked down into the open shaft. A burst of hot air greeted him as he popped open another packet of blood and tossed it down. Hopefully the same trick would work again.

The tricorder readings were almost completely scrambled now. Something was moving towards his position, but there were only spurious traces of dikironium. For a moment Kirk had a flash of memory; a horror story he had read as a boy. Dead crew coming back to life. Kirk shrugged it off, but shivered despite the heat.

"We're set here, Lieutenant," called Yates. "But you're going to have to stand still for at least thirty seconds so we can get a lock on you. Your readings are being distorted by the hull ionization."

"Right." Kirk peered at the tricorder, trying to make some sense of it. The cloud was nearing the turboshaft, passed it, and kept on going. "Damn."

"What's that?"

"Just track me as best you can. I'll try to hold it off long enough for you to beam me up." The hull gave a long low creak and the lights failed again. Kirk continued down the hallway using his tricorder to lead the way. In the darkness he found another Jeffries tube. He pulled out another pack and threw it back down the hall the way he came. The batteries were almost gone. Every few seconds the lights would return, but they would only flash for a second or two. Kirk maneuvered his way down the hall which seemed to be slanting in several different directions at once. Finally he was forced on all fours to keep his balance. The creature was still pursuing him instead of the blood plasma. Kirk stopped his train of thought. Creature? He nodded to himself. Yes. He had known all along, but had been persuaded by the others that this was just a cloud. But it couldn't be. It had survived a vacuum and now it was hunting him down. Kirk felt cold inside. The hull gave a lurch to the left and gravity disappeared altogether. Without that extra drain, now the lights returned deep amber in color, bathing everything in blood. Kirk found himself hanging in the middle of the hall with no way to secure a hold on anything, no way to propel himself forward. He checked his plasma supply; only two bags left. He cracked open one and tossed it back down the way he came; watched as it tumbled out of sight trailing tiny globes of orangish plasma in its wake.

"We're getting a lock on you, Lieutenant, stand by." Kirk swallowed hard as the hallway behind flashed into a

pale ghostly brilliance for a moment. Kirk was still in his suit surrounded by vacuum, but he could almost smell the sickly sweet honey scent.

"Stand by."

Kirk palmed the last remaining pack, popped it and threw it back the same way. This time, the bioluminescence was closer. Kirk flailed his arms in an attempt to grab the wall, but to no avail. He was too far away. The motion set him into a slow tumble end over end down the middle of the hallway.

"Gentlemen, you can beam me aboard now..." As he rolled over, he noticed the deck plates were beginning to warp and twist. The ceiling panels were separating, revealing shiny sheaths of microcircuitry. The last thing he saw as he came around were the first probing tendrils of the cloud creature as it rounded the hallway. Kirk closed his eyes as the world faded out...

... and opened them in the materializer room. He was lying on his stomach across the front three pads. Before he had time to sit up on his own, several sets of hands were thumping him on the back and shoulders. Someone pried off his helmet and Kirk's ears popped in the thin air.

Yates was standing at the materializer console; a big grin on his face. "I told you we'd get you out of there. All you had to do was stand still." Kirk managed a smile and stood up albeit a little shaky. The comm unit on the top of the materializer flashed into life with Commander Gallagher's voice pouring out of the tiny speaker.

"Yates, the primary hull has just broken up. Did you get Kirk off in time?" Yates looked at Kirk who took the honors.

"Kirk here, sir," he replied. "I'm fine."

There was a relieved laugh on the other end of the line. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. Full atmosphere will be restored in five minutes. Meet me in my quarters and we'll have a drink to calm our respective nerves."

"Aye, sir, Kirk out." He closed the channel.

"'Calm our nerves' indeed," Yates scoffed, "I told you thirty seconds and I pulled you out in fifteen." Kirk raised an eyebrow. Fifteen seconds? It had seemed a lot longer than that to him. With the help of the other engineers he pulled himself out of the sticky spacesuit and walked out the door.

Yates remained behind to shut down the equipment. The pads went dark and he mumbled to himself, "Hell, it wasn't even close enough to be exciting."

Ship's Log: Stardate 434.1. Commander Michael Gallagher temporarily in command. The final toll was one hundred and eighty three dead including Captain Garrovick. Eighteen others -- including first officer Maria Lopez -- have been transferred to the medical facilities at Starbase Three. The remaining crew have three weeks of shore leave while repair crews fix the most critical damage. Afterwards, the Farragut will be returning to the Starfleet Orbital Shipyards over San Francisco to undergo a refit to the new Constitution Class specs.

Gary Mitchell lay on his side in the makeshift bunk in the center of the room, trying to get comfortable and failing.

"I'll be glad when we get back to Earth," he complained. "I'm sick of this doubling up." His new roommate looked back from the mirror where he had been admiring the new stripe on the sleeves of his tunic.

"Oh, you're just mad the ranking officer gets the good bed," Kirk laughed. Mitchell stood up and gave a mock salute.

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander." He walked over to inspect his friend's new clothes, polishing the gold braid with thumb and forefinger. "Not too bad. You're still on track to make Captain by the time you're thirty. Too bad you're still haven't tasted life."

Kirk frowned, still looking in the mirror. "How do you know I haven't?" Mitchell turned him around.

"I know for a fact you haven't made any plans after we get back to Earth. I even know you've stopped sending your weekly love poems back to Carol." Kirk frowned even deeper at the mention of her name and Mitchell tried a small smile to cheer his friend up. The door chimed and Mitchell walked over to answer.

"Remember my advice," he said and opened the door. The figure standing there was dressed in the standard tunic and slacks of a starbase lieutenant, but to Mitchell she was a goddess sent from wherever goddesses come from. She gazed up into his eyes and smiled and for a moment Gary thought the fates had finally smiled upon him. For a moment.

"I think you're right," Kirk piped up, pushing his friend gently out of the way. "I think I will begin to live life a little." The lieutenant's smile grew as Kirk took her arm in his and they walked down the hall together, closing the doors on a stunned Gary Mitchell who for once had nothing else to say.

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2:25 pm