STAR TREK

THE FORBIDDEN PLANET



FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE CITY BEYOND FOREVER

DAVID MOSS

A STAR TREK FAN FICTION NOVEL

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THE FORBIDDEN PLANET

A Novel

DAVID MOSS

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Star Trek: The Forbidden Planet
First Edition

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I came to *Forbidden Planet* the long way around. I was a Trekkie first. Then one day I watched a film from 1956 and sat there about four minutes into it recognizing things.

A saucer, crewed by a service rather than an expedition. A commander, a ship's doctor, a chief engineer. Uniforms. A landing party. A machine that keeps house. This was Star Trek, ten years early. Years after that I read how directly the film had worked on Gene Roddenberry, and that settled it. I had to bring the two of them together, and tell the rest of the story while I was there.

And of course *Forbidden Planet* has parents of its own. It is *The Tempest*, more or less openly: the exiled scholar on his island, his daughter who has never seen another man, the servant who does the work, the sailors who come ashore and set everything moving. Shakespeare had a monster too.

I wanted to go back to that island. What I did not want was a retelling. The film is a fine piece of work and does not need me to improve it. What I wanted was the part it left out.

Three things in particular.

The first is Julia Morbius. In the film the wife is a line of dialogue. She died, we are told, in the first year, and the story moves on. That always struck me as a waste, because a man like Edward Morbius does not become what he becomes without somebody standing next to him telling him what is happening to him and being ignored. So I gave her six years, and a voice, and a good many of the best lines in this book.

The second is Robby. In the film the robot is a marvel and a mascot. He hands out drinks, he makes dresses, he short circuits rather than do harm, and everybody finds him charming, including me. But nobody in

that film ever asks him anything. Nobody asks him what he wants, or what he remembers, or whether he agrees. I decided to let somebody ask.

The third is Altaira. The film gives her a father, a tiger, and a romance. I wanted to know what nineteen years alone with one man and one machine actually does to a person, and what it would take for her to open a door.

The Star Trek side was its own pleasure. Once you decide the Krell seeded other worlds, Exo III is sitting right there waiting, and so is Flint, and so is the question of what a Starfleet captain does when his orders and his conscience point in different directions. Kirk has been answering that question since 1966. I thought he should answer it on the planet where it all started.

This book is fan fiction and nothing else. It is not authorized, it is not for sale, and it is not endorsed by anybody. *Star Trek* belongs to CBS Studios and Paramount, and *Forbidden Planet* belongs to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and I am grateful to the people who made both, who are the only reason this exists. If anything in here sends you back to the originals, that is the best outcome I could hope for.

David Moss
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

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Chapter One

THE LAST DAYS OF ALTAIR IV

ALTAIR IV FILLED THE MAIN VIEWSCREEN.

From orbit the planet had been beautiful in a way that never looked altogether real, its atmosphere scattering the light of Altair into shades of emerald that deepened toward the horizon. Kirk had thought so the first time he saw it, five days ago, before he knew what lay underneath it. Bands of light moved under the cloud cover where no light should have been, spreading through the crust faster than any natural process could have carried them.

No one on the bridge spoke.

Kirk stood beside the command chair. Altaira was a few feet away at the railing. McCoy had suggested she wait below, and she had refused. The doctor had argued with her only once. After that he had stayed close enough to reach her if she needed him and far enough away that she would not feel watched. Kirk was grateful for it, and said nothing.

At the science station, Spock bent over his hooded viewer,

the familiar blue light washing across his face as his hands moved from one control to the next. "The destabilization has reached the mantle, Captain. Structural failure is accelerating."

Kirk heard him and kept his eyes on the screen.

A white fracture appeared across the southern continent. At first it was scarcely visible, a hairline on the face of the world. Then it widened, racing across the surface with impossible speed. A second line opened farther north, then a third. The planet was not being torn apart. It was pulling itself apart from the inside, as though something very deep in it had let go.

Altaira's fingers tightened on the railing.

Sulu glanced down at his board. "Shock wave approaching, sir. Recommend we withdraw to a safer distance."

Kirk looked at Altaira. Her eyes had not left the screen. At a safer distance Altair IV would be one more bright point among the stars, and she would lose the last of her world from too far off to watch it go. The Enterprise could take a shock wave.

"Hold position, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu hesitated only a fraction of a second. "Holding."

The bridge lighting dimmed as the viewscreen flared, and for an instant Altair IV became a sphere of white-green fire. The Enterprise shuddered under the first wave of energy. It was not enough to throw anyone off a station. It was enough to remind everyone on the bridge that they were not watching an image. It was happening, and it was close.

"Compensators holding," Sulu said.

Spock had not lifted his eyes from the viewer. "Major fragments are separating from the planetary mass. Gravitational

cohesion is failing. At the present rate of disintegration…"

"Spock," McCoy said.

The Vulcan looked up.

"Not now."

Kirk understood a moment before Spock did. The next sentence would have been a figure: minutes, perhaps seconds, a precise accounting of how long the young woman at the railing had left to look at her home. Something passed across Spock's face, so slight that Kirk might have missed it had he not known him so well. The Vulcan's eyes went briefly to Altaira, then back to McCoy.

"Understood, Doctor."

He touched a control, and the data he had been about to speak aloud appeared instead on the small monitor at Kirk's elbow. Kirk did not need to read it.

On the screen, a continent broke apart.

Altaira stepped forward. "My house was there."

Kirk barely heard her. She lifted one hand toward the viewscreen, not pointing at any place in particular, reaching instead for a geography that no longer existed.

"The garden was on the western side. From my room you could see the ridge after sunset."

Another section of the planet went to incandescent dust, and her hand came slowly down.

"And the lake."

That word cost her more than the others.

Kirk watched the last recognizable curve of Altair IV disappear. Mountains, seas, the house and its gardens, the vast

underground world beneath them: all of it was fragments now, spreading into the dark. Where the planet had been there was only debris, lit by the distant light of its sun.

For several seconds nobody on the bridge moved.

Kirk had stood on this bridge through losses that were his to answer for, and he had learned how to carry them. This was not his, and he could not have stopped it. It settled on him anyway, the way such things always did, because he was the captain and she was aboard his ship.

He turned to her, and she looked up at him.

There was nothing he could say that would give back what she had lost. He knew that before he opened his mouth. But there were words that belonged to a moment like this one, and he found, to his own surprise, that he had them.

"Alta, a long time from now, longer than either of us can imagine, humanity will climb to where the Krell once stood, at the height of everything they achieved and everything they lost."

She did not look away.

"And when that day comes, your father's name will shine again like a beacon in the galaxy."

Her eyes held his.

"It will remind us of what the Krell forgot," he said, more quietly. "That no matter how high we climb, we are not gods."

Altaira turned back to the screen without answering.

He had not seen Uhura leave her station. She crossed the bridge and stopped beside Altaira, close but not touching.

"Alta. Would you like to come with me?"

For a moment Altaira could not pull herself away from what

was left of the planet. Then she nodded. Uhura did not take her arm. She simply waited until Altaira was ready to move, then walked beside her to the turbolift.

The doors closed behind them.

Kirk returned to the command chair. Around him the bridge was coming back to life: the chirp of instruments, Sulu and Chekov trading navigational figures in low voices, Spock resuming the work that still had to be done. That was what officers did, Kirk thought, when there was nothing left to do about what had already happened. They did the next thing.

"Mr. Sulu, take us out of the system. One-quarter impulse until we're clear of the debris field."

"Aye, Captain."

"Once we're clear, lay in a course for Starbase Eleven."

The Enterprise came slowly about, and the debris wheeled off the edge of the screen.

McCoy rested a hand on the back of Kirk's chair. "You all right?"

Kirk looked up at him.

McCoy sighed. "Fine. Stupid question."

Spock came down from the science station with a data slate full of sensor readings. "Captain, Starfleet Command will require a complete record of the destruction and of the events that preceded it. The scientific analysis alone will be extensive."

"They'll get it."

"And naturally," McCoy said, "you're going to sit up all night writing it."

Kirk's eyes stayed on the screen. "Not all of it."

Spock waited.

"But there's one part I'm not handing to anyone else."

"The command report," Spock said.

"The whole story. As well as I can tell it."

McCoy looked from Kirk to the receding field of debris. "That's a hell of a story to fit into a report."

"I know."

Kirk rose. "Mr. Spock, you have the conn."

"Yes, Captain." Spock hesitated, which was rare enough that Kirk stopped. "The scientific appendices will be complete before you require them. You need not wait on them tonight."

It was, Kirk understood, the closest Spock would ever come to telling him to rest. "Thank you, Mr. Spock."

He started for the turbolift, then paused. "Bones? Coming?"

McCoy shook his head. "Later. I want to look in on Alta once Uhura's had some time with her."

Kirk nodded. That was McCoy all over: he knew when to be there and, rarer in a doctor, when to wait.

Kirk stepped into the turbolift alone. "Deck five."

◆

For the first two decks, neither of them spoke.

Altaira stood with her hands clasped in front of her, so tightly that the knuckles had gone pale. Uhura let the hum of the lift fill the space between them. She had spent enough years listening, at her board and away from it, to know when a silence

should be left alone.

"Do people always know?" Altaira asked at last.

"Know what?"

"When they've seen their home for the last time." Her eyes stayed on the doors. "I didn't."

Uhura said nothing.

"I thought I was leaving for a few hours. A day, perhaps." Altaira swallowed. "I left a book open on the table. There was a dress over the back of my chair. One of my father's instruments was out in the study, and I told him I would put it away later."

Her voice faltered.

"There is no later."

Uhura reached past her and stopped the lift.

Altaira turned, startled.

"We don't have to get there yet," Uhura said.

"Is that permitted?"

"Probably not." Uhura considered the control panel. "Don't tell Mr. Spock."

The car hung motionless between decks. For a moment Altaira only stared at her. Then some of the tension went out of her shoulders.

"My father used to say I left every door in the house open."

Uhura smiled a little. "Did you?"

"Always."

"And did he complain?"

"Always." The memory nearly brought a smile to Altaira's face. It was gone almost as soon as it came, but Uhura saw it.

"He would follow me through the house, closing them. He said one day I would let the whole planet in."

She looked down.

"I was angry with him."

"You had reasons."

"I loved him."

"You had reasons for that, too."

Altaira's eyes filled. "I don't know which one I'm supposed to feel."

"You don't have to choose."

Altaira looked away, but the silence that followed was a different kind. It no longer felt empty.

"When Captain Kirk spoke to me on the bridge," she said, "I thought I understood what he meant." She hesitated. "I don't."

"You don't have to understand it tonight."

A small, unwilling laugh escaped her. "Everyone keeps telling me what I don't have to do."

"Maybe that's because you keep trying to do all of it at once."

This time the smile stayed a little longer. Uhura started the lift again.

When they reached Altaira's quarters, Altaira stopped outside the door.

"I have things from home in there."

"I know."

"If I go inside, that's all that's left."

Uhura considered that before she answered. "No. That's what you managed to bring with you. It isn't the same thing."

Altaira looked at her for a moment. "You believe that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Uhura looked down the empty corridor. "Because I've left places I thought I'd always be able to go back to."

"And could you?"

"Not always."

She did not soften it, and Altaira was grateful to her for that.

The door slid open. On a small table beside the viewport sat a narrow case holding the few belongings that had been beamed up from the house. Altaira opened it and took out a pale stone threaded with blue veins.

"I found this by the lake when I was little. My father said it was worthless."

"And you kept it."

"Because he said it was worthless."

Uhura smiled.

Altaira turned the stone over in her palm. "That sounds ridiculous now."

"No. It sounds like something that was yours."

Altaira set the stone on the table instead of putting it back in the case. "Will you stay for a while?"

Uhura sat down beside her. "Yes."

Neither of them spoke again for some time.

◆

The next evening, Kirk sat alone in his quarters with a recorder on the desk and the remains of Altair IV on the monitor.

The Enterprise had been under way for Starbase Eleven most of the day. Altaira had been given quarters, medical attention, and as much privacy as McCoy could defend against the debriefings waiting for her. She was not the only survivor of Altair IV aboard the Enterprise. She was only the one McCoy could do anything for. Kirk had spent the day on the bridge, in engineering, in sickbay, almost anywhere but here.

Against the bulkhead stood four research cases that no one had yet had the heart to unpack.

Now the recorder was waiting.

He switched it on. "Captain's log, supplemental. The Enterprise is proceeding to Starbase Eleven with survivors from Altair IV aboard."

He stopped. The sentence was accurate and entirely useless.

He erased it and began again. "Captain's log, supplemental. Altair IV was destroyed yesterday, following events that began when the Enterprise entered the system five days ago."

He stopped again.

The intercom whistled. Kirk reached over and thumbed it. "Kirk here."

McCoy's voice came through against the murmur of the recreation room. "Most people come down here when they're trying to relax."

"I'll remember that."

"I'm serious, Jim."

"So am I."

"You've been sitting over that report for hours."

Kirk glanced at the chronometer. "Twenty-three minutes."

"You've been writing it in your head since yesterday."

Kirk smiled in spite of himself. "Is that a medical diagnosis?"

"It is when you skip dinner."

"I ate."

"Coffee isn't food."

Kirk leaned back. "How's Alta?"

"Asleep. Uhura sat with her until about an hour ago. I finally talked Alta into taking something mild."

"Good."

"She's got a long road ahead of her, Jim."

"I know."

McCoy was quiet a moment. "No. You know what happened. That's not the same thing."

Kirk looked at the monitor. The debris field had spread farther. In another day, two at most, even the largest fragments would be hard to tell from the stars.

"Come down here," McCoy said.

"In a while."

"You said that yesterday."

"And I came."

"For twelve minutes."

"It was a very restful twelve minutes."

McCoy snorted. "Half an hour. Then I'm coming up there."

"Are you threatening your commanding officer, Doctor?"

"I'm the ship's surgeon. It's one of the privileges."

The channel closed.

Kirk looked at the recorder again. The trouble was not the report. He could write the report. The trouble was the beginning, because every place he tried to start felt like the wrong one.

He turned from the blank log and called up the mission archive. Files scrolled past on the monitor until he stopped on one.

BELLEROPHON
COMMANDING OFFICER: CAPTAIN J. J. ADAMS
STATUS: LOST WITH ALL HANDS
ALTAIR IV

He opened it, and J. J. Adams looked out at him from the screen.

The image was twenty years old. Adams wore the uniform of another era and the face of a captain at the start of a mission whose ending he could not have begun to imagine. Kirk knew that expression. He had worn it himself.

He watched the man a while. Then he switched the recorder back on.

"The official report will say that the Enterprise was ordered to Altair IV to investigate the loss of the Bellerophon. That's accurate." He looked at Adams. "It just isn't where the story begins."

He touched the playback control, and the old captain came to life.

Kirk lowered his voice.

"It began with the Bellerophon."

Chapter Two

THE BELLEROPHON

A note on what follows, for whoever reads this after me.
This is not a log. A log is what a captain knows at the time, and if I set it down that way the whole of it would be four days of a man guessing wrong. This is the account afterward: what we knew going in, what we learned on that planet, and what I have since put together out of twenty-year-old logs, recordings, and the testimony of people who were there.
A word about the parts nobody lived to report. The Bellerophon's flight recorder was found, and the installation beneath that plateau kept a record of its own which Mr. Spock recovered and which runs to some eleven thousand hours. Between the two of them I have the bridge of that ship down to the last four minutes, and I have more of Edward Morbius than any man should have of another. Where I have had to put a sentence in somebody's mouth to join two things I know, I have done it, and I am telling you so here rather than pretending otherwise. The facts are theirs. The

joining is mine.
Where I knew a thing at the time, it will be plain. Where I did not, that will be plain too, because most of what matters here I did not know until it was far too late to be of use to anybody.
It begins on the eighty-sixth day of the Bellerophon's survey, in a ship that had eleven weeks left.

◆

Twenty years earlier

"Captain's log, J. J. Adams recording. Stardate 827.4. The Bellerophon has completed its eighty-sixth day of survey operations in the Altair system. Surface teams have finished preliminary mapping of the northern continent and have begun geological work along the southern plateau. Atmospheric conditions remain stable, mineral deposits are extensive, and so far we have found nothing to suggest that Altair IV has ever supported intelligent life."

Adams paused and looked out through the narrow port beside his desk. From orbit, Altair IV was beautiful enough to make that last sentence feel premature. Its atmosphere bent the light of its sun into shades of green, deepest along the rim of the planet, where the curve burned against the dark. Eighty-six days, and he had not grown used to it, and he was not sure he trusted it. He had been in Starfleet longer than some of his crew had been alive, long enough to have become a careful man, and in his experience a world this peaceful was usually keeping something

to itself.

He turned back to the recorder.

"Doctor Morbius continues to object to the phrase 'nothing to suggest.' He believes the geological anomalies near Survey Area Twelve warrant further investigation. I have reminded him that a xenolinguist finding meaning in rocks is an occupational hazard." Adams allowed himself a smile. "I expect his formal objection before dinner."

The comm panel chimed before he could close the entry. Adams regarded it for a moment. "Apparently sooner." He shut off the recorder and keyed the panel. "Adams."

Jerry Farman's voice came through under a wash of wind. "Captain, Survey Twelve. Nobody's hurt."

Adams sat back. Farman had been his security chief long enough that leading with that told him everything. It meant something had happened.

"That wasn't what I asked."

"No, sir." A pause, filled with wind. "Morbius found something."

"What kind of something?"

A longer pause. "You should come down."

Farman was not a dramatic man. He reported what he saw in as few words as the regulations allowed, and Adams had come to trust that economy almost as much as his instruments. When Farman declined to describe a thing, it was because he had no words for it yet.

"On my way."

He added a line to the log noting that he had been called to

the surface, and stepped into the corridor.

The Bellerophon was smaller and older than the Constitution-class starships just coming into service, and she showed it. Her corridors were narrow, her bulkheads exposed in places, and after nearly three months in orbit every sound and smell aboard her had become as familiar to Adams as his own quarters. He could tell which environmental recycler was overdue for maintenance by the pitch of the ventilation. He could tell, from halfway down the deck, when Cookie was making lunch.

"Captain."

Cookie leaned out of the galley with a ladle in one hand. On the crew roster he was chief steward, a title no one aboard had used since the first week out.

"What did they find?"

"Who?"

"Morbius."

Adams stopped. "You've been listening to surface communications."

"I cook for forty-two people, Captain. Information comes to me."

"Food comes from you. Information travels through command channels."

Cookie thought about that longer than it deserved. "Then that would explain why command channels are always hungry, sir, and I say that with affection."

Adams walked on. Cookie came with him, ladle and all.

"Is it ruins?"

"I don't know."

"A ship?"

"I don't know."

"Treasure?"

Adams stopped again. "If it's treasure, I will personally see that you receive the first gold-plated potato."

Cookie beamed at him, and then looked faintly embarrassed about having beamed. "I'll hold you to that, sir. I don't mean to, but I will."

Farman had already sent coordinates and environmental clearance by the time Adams reached the transporter room. The transporter chief entered them into the old console, checked them twice, and looked up. "Surface team reports clear, Captain."

Adams stepped onto the platform. "Energize."

The ship dissolved around him, and a moment later he stood beneath a green sky.

Even now the planet could surprise him. The plateau spread out under a bowl of emerald light, broken by red-brown ridges and shallow valleys the wind had cut over ages. Thin cloud drifted high overhead, the edges burning where the sunlight caught them. The air was warm and dry and smelled of stone.

Farman waited beside the survey marker, a phase pistol on his hip and dust across the knees of his uniform.

"You weren't exaggerating," Adams said.

"I didn't tell you anything."

"Which is what concerned me, Mr. Farman."

Farman nodded toward an excavation several hundred me-

ters off. “Morbius is over there. He’s already told two engineers that safety regulations are philosophical suggestions.”

“That sounds like him.”

Edward Morbius was kneeling at the edge of a shallow trench when they arrived. His wife stood a few paces behind him with a geological scanner tucked under one arm. Julia was four months along and had taken to wearing her field jacket open, a development she regarded with far less alarm than the ship’s surgeon did. The surgeon had cleared her for limited surface duty and reviewed that clearance every week, in writing, with a thoroughness Adams suspected was aimed at him rather than at her. Adams had signed the order, and had wondered more than once since whether he should have.

Morbius barely glanced up. “Look.”

Adams climbed down into the trench.

At first he saw only the red stone of the plateau. Then the light shifted, and something black showed beneath it, a surface so smooth that it swallowed the light instead of returning it. It was not polished stone. It was not any metal Adams knew. It emerged from beneath several meters of compacted sediment and ran on into the wall of the excavation without a visible seam.

“How far does it go?” he asked.

Julia handed him the scanner. “We lose definition at four hundred meters.”

“The structure ends there?”

“No,” she said gently. “The scanner does.”

Adams looked at Morbius. “Artificial?”

Morbius hesitated, and the hesitation was the answer.

Adams had never known him to pause over anything he could classify.

Farman climbed down beside them, brushed loose soil from the black surface with a gloved hand, and exposed a narrow groove running across it, perfectly straight. A second groove crossed the first at a precise angle.

"Still geological, Doctor?"

"No," said Morbius.

It was the quickest answer Adams had ever heard him give to a scientific question.

They widened the excavation through the afternoon, and every meter showed the same thing: no joints, no fasteners, no sign that separate pieces had ever been fitted together. It seemed less built than grown. Adams stood at the lip of the trench a long time watching it come out of the ground, with a feeling he could not name. It was not fear. It was nearer to walking into a room and understanding, a moment too late, that it was occupied.

Near sunset, one of the technicians uncovered a depression in the black material, and Julia knelt beside it.

It might have been meant for a hand. If so, the hand had been nothing like a human one. The recess was too long and too narrow, and it branched in ways Adams could make nothing of. Whatever had pressed itself there had not been shaped like a man.

Morbius studied it with open fascination. "An interface."

Farman stepped between him and the wall without appearing to hurry. "No."

Morbius looked up at him. "I have not touched it."

"You were thinking about it."

"That is not generally prohibited."

"In your case it ought to be."

Julia laughed, and even Morbius's mouth tightened into something that might, in a different man, have been the beginning of a smile.

Adams crouched beside the recess. "Nobody touches anything until engineering has had a look."

"Captain, if this is an access mechanism, we may be standing outside an intact structure built by a civilization that existed before human history began."

"Which is precisely why I don't want you sticking your hand into it."

Farman nodded once. "I knew there was a reason he was captain."

Remote probes came down from the Bellerophon before nightfall. The first found no radiation. The second found no biological hazard. The third registered a faint energy field behind the black surface, and Morbius made the technician run it again. The reading held.

Julia stared at the display. "After all this time?"

Morbius did not answer at once. His eyes had gone to the wall and stayed there. "There is still power."

Farman looked at Adams. "That would be the point where sensible people go back to the ship."

"We have just confirmed that an ancient artificial structure remains operational," said Morbius.

"Yes."

"And you wish to leave."

"Because it remains operational."

Adams ended it before it could become an argument. "Regulations require a full engineering survey before personnel enter any powered alien structure, Doctor. On this occasion I find myself in complete agreement with the regulations." The probes would stay in place overnight. Engineering would come down at first light. No one would activate anything until he gave the order. Morbius disliked the decision and began to say so, and Julia stopped him by laying a hand on his arm.

"Edward. It has waited this long. I think it can manage until morning."

He looked at the structure one last time before he let Farman lead them back to the transporter marker.

Cookie was waiting outside the transporter room when they materialized. Farman saw him and groaned.

"Well?" said Cookie.

"It's a wall," Adams said, and kept walking.

"You were down there six hours looking at a wall?"

"A very old wall."

Cookie turned to Farman, who said, "There is no treasure," before he could ask.

"That's exactly what a man hiding treasure would say."

By dinner, half the ship believed Morbius had found an underground city. By midnight, Cookie had furnished it with an alien king, a vault of jewels, and a machine capable of manufacturing bourbon. Adams made the mistake of asking where that last detail had come from.

Cookie looked wounded. "Scientific speculation, sir."

◆

The next morning, the truth proved stranger.

Engineering had mapped the outline of an enormous doorway around the recess. The opening stood nearly five meters high and was shaped for no human proportion Adams could think of, narrow at its base and widening as it rose. Its edges had been invisible until the computer plotted microscopic variations in the material.

The team withdrew behind a portable force screen while an engineer set a remote actuator against the recess. Farman checked the charge on his phase pistol. Morbius noticed.

"You intend to shoot the door?"

"I intend to have the option."

Adams nodded to the engineer, and the actuator pressed into the recess.

Nothing happened.

Then a line of pale light traced itself around the doorway, and Julia took an involuntary step toward it. The black panel withdrew into the surrounding wall without a sound. There was no grinding of ancient machinery, no rush of trapped air. One moment the surface was solid. The next, an opening stood before them, and beyond it ran a corridor lit with a soft blue-white glow.

Farman regarded it for a while. "For the record, I preferred the wall."

They tested the atmosphere twice before Adams let anyone through. He went first, with Farman at his shoulder. Morbius

and Julia followed, then two engineers carrying portable scanners. The light brightened ahead of them as they advanced.

One of the engineers stopped. "Captain."

Adams turned. The corridor behind them had gone dim again.

Farman looked up at the glowing walls. "It knows where we are."

"The lighting responds to proximity," Morbius said, adjusting his scanner. "That does not indicate awareness."

Farman kept walking. "Put that in the report."

The corridor opened into a chamber so vast that their hand lamps could not find the ceiling. Rows of machinery marched away into the dark. Some structures rose several stories above the floor; others were no larger than a console. Lines of light moved beneath transparent sections of flooring and vanished into walls that seemed to go on far beyond the reach of their scanners. There was no dust anywhere. There was no corrosion. Whoever had built this place had vanished so long ago that human civilization would have been hard to imagine.

Its machines had not noticed.

Adams stood very still. He had seen a good deal in his years in Starfleet and very little of it had made him feel small. This did. He thought of the forty-two people aboard the Bellerophon and how little any of them, himself included, understood about where they were standing.

Morbius moved slowly into the chamber.

"Edward," Julia whispered.

He turned toward her with an expression Adams had never

seen on him before, and it took a moment to recognize it as wonder.

For the next several hours they measured, scanned, recorded, and understood almost nothing.

The second chamber was smaller. Farman went in first, and his light crossed the far wall and stopped.

"Captain."

Adams heard the change in his voice and was beside him in three steps.

A figure stood against the wall. For one bad second Adams thought they had found one of the builders. It was humanoid, taller than a man, in what looked like a close-fitting gray suit. Its arms hung at its sides and its eyes were closed.

Farman drew his phase pistol. Morbius pushed past him. "Wait."

"I can wait with this in my hand."

Julia raised her scanner and approached more carefully. "No respiration. No circulation."

Morbius studied the face without touching it. "Artificial."

"An android?" one of the engineers asked.

"I believe so."

Adams looked at the silent figure. It did not look broken, and it did not look abandoned. It looked as though it were waiting.

Farman nodded toward a recessed control beside it. "Can we turn it on?"

Morbius looked at Adams, and the eagerness in his face said everything he had not.

"No," said Adams.

"Captain..."

"We've been inside this place less than four hours. We are not activating anything that can stand up and walk."

"If it was built by the people who constructed this facility, it could answer every question we have."

"And tomorrow it still can."

Julia had not moved. She stood directly in front of the figure, studying its face with the kind of attention Adams had seen her give to rock strata and very little else.

"Something wrong?" Farman asked.

"No." She smiled faintly. "He needs a name."

Morbius turned from the control. "Julia, it is an archaeological artifact."

"It has waited a very long time for someone to find it, Edward. Anything that waits that long deserves a name." She looked back at the still face. "Robby."

Morbius stared at her. "Robby?"

"It suits him."

"You cannot possibly know that."

"Then he can object when he wakes up."

Farman holstered his pistol and studied the motionless figure. "Robby," he said, trying it out. "I've heard worse."

Morbius looked to Adams, hoping, perhaps, that the captain would restore some scientific dignity to the proceedings. Adams looked at the android instead, at the closed eyes and the patient stillness, and found that the name suited it, though he could not have said why.

"Robby it is."

Julia smiled.

◆

They left the facility at dusk.

At the mouth of the corridor, Adams paused and looked back. All day the lights had followed them, brightening where they walked and dying behind them, section by section, as each place was left empty. They were going out now, one after another, down the long throat of the passage.

All but one.

Far down the corridor, where the second chamber opened, a soft glow remained. It lit the room where no one stood but Robby.

Adams watched it for some time. It did not go out.

That night he sat at his desk with the recorder and the green curve of Altair IV in the port beside him.

"Captain's log, supplemental. Survey teams have gained access to an extensive subterranean facility of unknown origin beneath Survey Area Twelve. Portions of it remain powered. We have also located what appears to be an intact android. Doctor Morbius has asked that his earlier objection be entered into the record as vindicated. So entered."

He stopped the recorder. After a moment he started it again.

"The facility's lighting appears to respond to the presence of personnel. On our departure this evening, the lights in one chamber did not respond as expected." He hesitated. "Probably a malfunction. We'll examine it in the morning."

He switched off the recorder and sat on at the port, watching the green light of Altair IV burn against the dark.

Chapter Three

THE FORBIDDEN FILE

Kirk let the last of Adams's logs run out, and for a time he sat with the screen dark in front of him.

The Bellerophon was where it began. For twenty years it had also been where it ended: a lost ship, a sealed file, a planet no one would go near. Someone had needed to open that file again.

He switched the recorder back on. "Twenty years after the Bellerophon was lost," he said, "a Vulcan scholar asked the Federation to go back to Altair IV. It took him six years to be heard."

◆

Ostrow found Altair IV while looking for a civilization that had been dead for six thousand years.

He was twenty-two, a graduate student at the Federation Institute of Xenoarchaeology in Paris, and he had spent that morning on the burial chambers of Deneb IV. The work was

respectable and it was useful, and it had become increasingly difficult to pretend he cared about it.

By midafternoon he had followed a citation from a Denebian paper into an old comparative index of abandoned Federation archaeological sites. Most of the entries were what he expected: settlements destroyed by tectonic activity, structures later proved natural, survey teams that had simply run out of time or funding. One entry held only a handful of words.

ALTAIR IV
BELLEROPHON EXPEDITION
ACCESS RESTRICTED

He opened it, and the terminal refused him.

He tried again through the Institute's historical research authorization. The screen paused, then asked him to state an academic justification. Ostrow considered the question with some care before he typed: Comparative analysis of abandoned extraterrestrial archaeological investigations.

It was technically true. The file opened, and he forgot about Deneb IV.

The first documents were ordinary Starfleet records, fourteen years old: crew manifests, mission orders, geological surveys, atmospheric studies, the captain's logs of J. J. Adams, commanding officer of the Bellerophon. Ostrow moved through them quickly. Then he reached the last archaeological transmission from the planet, and he stopped.

Four pages.

The symbols resembled no written language he had ever studied. At first glance they looked almost decorative, geometric

forms gathered in irregular clusters. The longer he looked, the less random they became. Certain forms recurred, and they changed according to what stood around them, as though what mattered was not the symbols but the relationships among them.

He enlarged the third page. The transmission included scans of the expedition's field notes, and someone had annotated the margin by hand. Most of the annotations were questions. One had been set beside a figure that appeared several times throughout the four pages.

Containment?

Ostrow checked the notation against the expedition records. Doctor Edward Morbius, senior xenolinguist.

He opened Morbius's personnel file, then Adams's logs again, then the final communications from Altair IV. There was not much. The Bellerophon's last transmission recommended that no vessel attempt a landing. After that, there was nothing at all.

When the archive announced that the reading room would close in fifteen minutes, Ostrow had not moved except to request a second screen.

A librarian stopped at his table. "Mr. Ostrow? We're closing."

He glanced at the chronometer and found that six hours had gone. Beyond the tall windows the rain that had been falling on the gray roofs of Paris when he sat down had stopped, and the streetlights had come on. He had noticed neither. "I require another twenty-seven minutes."

The librarian smiled. "Tomorrow."

Ostrow looked back at the four pages. "That is inefficient."

"So is sleeping in the archive."

He considered pointing out that he had no intention of sleeping. Instead, he saved his notes.

The next morning he was waiting when the doors opened.

◆

Within a week, his adviser noticed.

Professor T'Pran stood behind him in the laboratory while the four enlarged pages hovered above his desk. "Your thesis concerns Deneb IV."

"Yes."

"This is not Deneb IV."

"No."

T'Pran waited. Ostrow knew the technique. Vulcan instructors learn early that silence works better than interrogation, and Vulcan students learn to outlast it. He went on working.

She stepped closer to the display. "You have spent eleven days on this material."

"Nine days, fourteen hours."

"That correction does not strengthen your position."

Ostrow turned from the desk. "The symbols possess internal structure."

"So do many things that are not language."

"I did not say they were language."

One of T'Pran's eyebrows moved a fraction.

He indicated several sequences. "These figures do not recur

independently. Their position changes according to the symbols around them. Meaning may be relational rather than lexical."

"You cannot establish meaning from four pages."

"I can establish that the pages are not random."

"To what purpose?"

"I do not yet know."

T'Pran folded her hands behind her back. "Then complete the work you were assigned."

Ostrow glanced once more at the Bellerophon pages. "I will."

He did. His Deneb paper was submitted three days early. Then he went back to Altair IV.

◆

The problem followed him home to Vulcan.

In ShiKahr the heat of the day stayed long after sunset. His parents ate with the courtyard doors open to it, as they always had, and the air that came in was thin and dry and smelled of hot stone, and above the city the sky went to rust. His father listened over dinner while Ostrow described the structure he believed he had found. Sorel had spent most of his life on pre-Reform settlements and had the patience of a historian used to rebuilding civilizations out of damaged foundations and contradictory records. When Ostrow had finished, Sorel asked, "How many pages survived?"

"Four."

"And the civilization that produced them?"

"Unknown."

"The structures?"

"Inaccessible."

"The expedition?"

"Lost."

Sorel picked up his tea. "You have selected an unusually cooperative research subject."

Ostrow recognized the criticism. His mother did not look up from her plate.

"Has he established that the question is invalid?"

Sorel glanced at her. "No."

"Then it remains a question."

T'Lara had spent thirty years on Vulcan cognition and the limits of mental discipline. She had begun teaching her son techniques of concentration when he was seven, and Ostrow had long suspected she regarded his whole academic career as an extended experiment in the results.

Sorel regarded them both. "I appear to be outnumbered."

"There are three of us," Ostrow said.

"Yes. I had calculated that."

The matter should have ended there. It did not.

◆

Months became years, and the four pages became a permanent part of Ostrow's life. He built relationships among the symbols, rejected them, rebuilt them, rejected them again. He ran their structure against thousands of known languages and symbolic

systems. He tried mathematical models, harmonic relationships, spatial logic, and at last a form of cognitive mapping out of his mother's research.

It was T'Lara who found him one evening during a visit home, seated in the meditation alcove of the family house with the four pages spread across the floor in front of him and his eyes closed.

She studied him from the doorway. "You are not meditating."

"I am holding the patterns in mind."

"You are staring at them with your eyes closed." She paused. "It is not the same discipline."

He opened his eyes. "Is there a difference in result?"

"Yes," said his mother. "One of them permits you to stop."

Nothing he tried translated the pages. The patterns persisted, and so did Morbius's single word. Ostrow had long since stopped treating it as a translation. Morbius might have been wrong. The figure might mean storage, limitation, isolation, protection, or nothing any human or Vulcan concept could hold. What mattered was that Morbius had seen something in the same recurring structure Ostrow had found for himself.

It was evidence. It was not enough. It was never enough.

He went back to the Bellerophon records, and to what had come after them. Three search missions had been sent to Altair IV once the Bellerophon fell silent. The first found no survivors. The second met severe interference. The third detected nothing at all. None of them landed.

That fact began to trouble him more than any other. One

night he wrote it across the wall display above his desk, in letters large enough to read from the door.

NO ONE WENT BACK DOWN.

The Tellarite epigrapher from the office next door found him staring at it at two in the morning. She kept his hours and treated every conversation as an opening position.

"You know," she said, "most people decorate with landscapes."

Ostrow stayed facing the wall. "This is more useful."

"That's debatable."

"It is not."

"Everything is debatable." She came in and squinted at the wall. "Still Altair?"

"Altair IV."

"There are other planets."

"Yes."

She waited for him to defend his position. He did not. After a while she made a disgusted noise, the sound of a Tellarite denied a perfectly good argument, and left him to it.

◆

His doctoral dissertation was meant to concern comparative xenoarchaeological syntax. Altair IV consumed nearly half of it. The committee was not enthusiastic. One member called his conclusions provocative; another chose speculative. Ostrow regarded both as acceptable, since neither meant incorrect.

He defended the dissertation for four hours, and it passed.

Three weeks later he petitioned the Vulcan Science Academy. The first petition was denied. So was the second. The third was granted a hearing.

Seven academicians sat before him in a chamber whose every surface seemed designed to discourage unnecessary emotion. Ostrow approved of it, and put up the four pages.

The senior academician examined them without visible reaction. "You are asking this Academy to recommend that the Federation Council lift a planetary interdiction imposed at the request of a commanding officer who died there."

"Yes."

"On the basis of four pages you cannot translate."

"No."

That produced the first reaction in the room. Ostrow changed the display, and Captain Adams's image appeared beside the fragments.

"I am asking because an expedition discovered an artificial complex of unknown scale and was lost. Three missions followed. None conducted a surface investigation."

The academician did not look at the image. "The first of those missions found no survivors. The second encountered severe interference. The third detected nothing at all. Starfleet concluded that nothing remained on Altair IV worth the risk of finding out. That conclusion appears reasonable."

"It was reasonable," said Ostrow. "At the time."

The academician considered him. "And now?"

"Now twenty years have passed."

"Time does not alter evidence."

"No. But it alters our ability to evaluate it."

He brought up current sensor capabilities beside the specifications of the original search vessels. The gap between them filled the screen.

"We can detect energy signatures they could not. We can map subsurface structures they could not. We can place automated probes on the surface without exposing a crew. If Captain Adams's warning remains justified, we are better equipped to determine why."

Another academician spoke. "And if it is not?"

"Then the Federation has maintained an interdiction around an empty planet for twenty years while ignoring the remains of a civilization whose technology exceeds anything in our records."

The room was quiet. The senior academician's gaze went to Morbius's note. "You believe this word is significant."

"I believe Morbius believed it was significant."

"That distinction is careful."

"It is necessary."

"And what do you believe was being contained?"

"I do not know."

The academician leaned back. "You have spent six years on this."

"Yes."

"You have built your academic career on material you cannot translate, from a world you have never seen."

"Yes."

"Do you consider that obsession?"

Ostrow considered the question longer than any of the others. "I consider it a possible source of bias."

"That was not my question."

"No."

A few heads shifted. Ostrow went on. "Obsession implies persistence without sufficient reason. I have sufficient reason."

The hearing lasted another two hours. Eleven days later, the Vulcan Science Academy formally recommended that Altair IV be reopened for a single controlled investigation. The Federation Council debated the matter for three days. Then Starfleet issued the order.

Ostrow read it alone. For years he had imagined what success would feel like, satisfaction perhaps, or vindication. He stared at the authorization for nearly a minute and then sat down. His hands were perfectly steady, and that disturbed him more than shaking would have.

The mission had been assigned to a Constitution-class starship operating within range of the Altair system. USS Enterprise. Captain James T. Kirk.

Ostrow read the name twice. Then he began to pack. He took one case of clothing. The Bellerophon material required four.

◆

Two days later he stood in a transporter room at Starbase Eleven while Kirk looked over the cases.

The captain was younger than Ostrow had expected and

more at ease. He walked the length of the research cases once and then looked at the single piece of luggage beside them. "Six years?"

"More."

"All of that for four pages."

"The four pages were sufficient to begin."

Kirk's mouth twitched. He glanced at the officer beside him. Spock raised his hand in the Vulcan salute, and Ostrow returned it.

"Doctor."

"Mr. Spock."

Ostrow knew Spock by reputation, as most Vulcan scientists did. Reputation is not acquaintance, and nothing in Spock's face suggested he intended to presume otherwise.

"Ostrow," Kirk said, trying the name. "I'd have guessed a lot of things, Doctor. Vulcan wouldn't have been one of them."

"It is a pre-Reform name, Captain," said Spock. "Few families still retain them."

"My father's family is one of the few," Ostrow said. "He is a historian. He considers it a form of fieldwork."

That drew a smile from Kirk, brief and genuine. Then it was gone, and Ostrow found himself being looked at the way he had seen engineers look at a structure they were deciding whether to trust.

"Doctor, you'd better understand something before you come aboard. If I decide that planet is unsafe, we leave."

"Of course."

"If I decide we don't land, we don't land."

"Agreed."

"Even after all these years?"

For six years Altair IV had been four pages, fragmentary logs, and questions nobody would answer. Now a starship was waiting to take him there. He had prepared his answer to this question a long time ago, and it was still true.

"Captain, I have wanted this mission long enough that I no longer consider my desire to reach the surface relevant."

Something shifted in Kirk's expression. "And if the evidence tells us to turn around?"

"Then we turn around." Ostrow paused. "But first I would like to see the evidence."

Kirk weighed him a moment. Then he smiled again. "Welcome aboard, Doctor."

Ostrow stepped onto the transporter platform. Six years ago, at two in the morning, he had written four words across a wall.

No one went back down.

Soon, someone would.

Chapter Four

THE WARNING

"The official report begins here," Kirk said to the recorder. "Five days out from Starbase Eleven, on approach to a planet that had been empty for twenty years."
He let that stand a moment before he went on.
"It was empty. Every instrument we had said so. Then Mr. Spock found the house."

◆

Five days earlier

Altair IV was still too distant to show detail when Spock found the house.

The Enterprise had been decelerating for an hour, dropping out of warp at the outer edge of the system while the planet ahead brightened on the main viewscreen. At first it was one more point of light among thousands. Then the computer resolved

a disk, green at its edges, broad red-brown land masses turning under thin bands of cloud.

Ostrow had been on the bridge since they entered the system and in all that time had said almost nothing. He stood behind Spock at the science station with one hand on the rail, watching the data move across the secondary display. Kirk had read his file on the way out from the starbase, and found himself watching the hand rather than the screen. It was perfectly steady.

Spock adjusted the sensor resolution. "Current orbital conditions are consistent with those recorded by the final search mission. Atmospheric composition unchanged within measurable tolerances. No artificial emissions. No active communications."

Kirk sat with one elbow on the arm of the command chair. "Life?"

"Insufficient resolution at this distance."

McCoy had come up to the bridge rail, ostensibly to look at the planet. "That's got to be disappointing," he said to Ostrow.

Ostrow did not turn. "What?"

"Six years of work to get here, and so far the place is doing absolutely nothing."

"That is preferable to several of the alternatives."

McCoy considered this. "You're going to get along with Spock just fine."

Spock ignored him. Ostrow almost managed to.

Sulu glanced back from the helm. "Forty-seven minutes to standard orbit, Captain."

"Maintain approach speed."

Kirk looked at the viewscreen again. The planet did not look

forbidden, and that bothered him more than he had expected.

Starfleet had hung that designation on a handful of worlds, and most of them announced their reasons from millions of kilometers out: radiation, atmospheric instability, hostile installations, biological contamination. Altair IV showed none of it. It turned peacefully under its green atmosphere, a world that had swallowed a survey expedition and then spent twenty years behaving as though nothing had happened.

Spock straightened slightly. "Captain."

Kirk heard the change in his voice and was on his feet before he had decided to be. "What have you got?"

"I am comparing our scans with those of the third search vessel."

Ostrow moved closer to the science console.

Spock enlarged a section of the southern hemisphere. The image sharpened in stages until a plateau came up, bordered by ridges and broken ground. Near the edge of it sat a small geometric shape that the terrain had no business producing.

"A structure?" Kirk said.

"Yes."

"From the Bellerophon?"

"No."

Spock brought the archived scan up beside the current one. The older record showed the same plateau, the same ridges, the same shadows. Nothing stood on it.

Kirk came down from the command level. "You're certain that's the same ground?"

"The coordinates are identical."

Ostrow leaned over the display, and his attention became absolute. "Increase magnification."

Spock did. The structure came clearer, low and angular, wings spreading from a central section. Whatever else it was, no weather and no geology had made it.

McCoy came closer and looked at it for a while. "It looks like a house."

"That," said Spock, "is a reasonable description."

Kirk looked from one image to the other. "When was the older scan taken?"

"Seventeen years ago."

"And nothing was there."

"Correct."

Ostrow had come as close to the console as the station allowed. "Captain, Starfleet authorized a surface research settlement on this planet eleven weeks before the Bellerophon was lost. The expedition carried prefabricated housing, and the authorization is in the file. What is not in the file is any confirmation of what was completed, or where it stood."

"And the search missions?"

"I have examined every scan the three of them returned, individually, more than once. There is no structure on that plateau in any of them." Ostrow did not take his eyes off the screen. "Either that residence was never finished, or it was finished and three Starfleet vessels flew over it without seeing it. I would not care to say which."

Spock shifted the scan angle. "The structure appears to be constructed of conventional materials."

"Human?"

"Possibly. I cannot yet determine that."

McCoy folded his arms. "So somebody built himself a house on a planet where nobody survived."

"That's one interpretation," Kirk said.

"You got another?"

"Not yet."

Spock widened the scan. "There are no additional structures of comparable size within sensor range."

That interested Kirk more than the house did. One residence. No settlement around it, no roads running anywhere, no power grid, no city, nothing but empty plateau in every direction as far as the sensors reached. Somebody down there had built a home and had never needed a neighbor.

He went back to the command chair. "Uhura."

She was already working. "I've been transmitting standard identification since we crossed into the system, Captain. No response."

"Try again. Directional, aimed at the structure."

"Aye, sir." Uhura adjusted her board and leaned into the call. "Altair IV, this is the USS Enterprise, Federation starship approaching under the authority of Starfleet Command. Any station receiving, please acknowledge."

The bridge listened to its own instruments. Uhura repeated the call, and the instruments went on talking to themselves.

Ostrow's eyes had not left the house.

Kirk watched him a moment longer, then looked toward the science station. "Any sign that thing is occupied?"

"Not yet."

"Power?"

"Minimal. There are localized readings, but the interference is considerable."

"The same interference the search missions reported?"

"In part."

Ostrow turned his head. "In part?"

Spock bent to the viewer again. "There are readings below the plateau that I cannot resolve."

Ostrow reacted, and it was not dramatic. He did not lean forward and he did not raise his voice. His attention simply left the house, as though it had stopped mattering.

"Subsurface," Ostrow said.

"Yes."

"Depth?"

"Indeterminate."

McCoy looked from one of them to the other. "Meaning?"

"Meaning we don't know what's down there," Kirk said.

"Precisely," said Spock.

Uhura's hand went to her receiver, and every head on the bridge turned toward her.

"Captain. I have something."

"A transmission?"

"Yes, sir." She listened another moment. "From the surface."

Ostrow went perfectly still.

Kirk stood. "Put it through."

Static filled the bridge, low and uneven, a signal that had come a long way through something unfriendly. Then a man's

voice came out of it, distant and clear.

"Starship approaching Altair IV. Identify yourself."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise."

A pause followed, longer than the distance accounted for.

"Doctor Edward Morbius."

Kirk was watching Ostrow when the name came through, and for a second the years went off him. What stood at the rail was not the scholar who had argued his way through the Vulcan Science Academy. It was a young man who had found a stranger's handwriting in the margin of four pages and built the rest of his life around it.

Kirk gave him no time to speak. "Doctor Morbius, we're very glad to find you alive."

The static went on under the silence.

"Captain, I warn you. Do not come down here."

There was nothing casual in it. The voice was controlled and almost courteous, and under the courtesy it was immovable.

Kirk glanced at Spock, whose expression had not changed, and at Ostrow, whose had.

"Doctor, Starfleet's records show the Bellerophon expedition lost with all hands twenty years ago. Finding you alive changes our understanding of what happened here."

"It need not."

"We were sent to investigate that loss."

"I am aware of why you have come."

"Then you understand why we need to speak with you."

"There is no need for you to come down here."

Kirk's eyes narrowed a fraction. "Doctor, if there's a danger to my ship or my crew, tell me what it is."

Another pause. "You must accept my warning."

"That's difficult to do without knowing what I'm being warned about."

This answer came faster. "You are in danger if you come down here."

McCoy looked at Kirk. Ostrow had not moved.

Kirk rested a hand on the back of the command chair. "What kind of danger?"

"I cannot explain it to you over this channel."

Kirk let the silence run. "Then we'll come down, and you can explain it in person."

"No."

That one word carried more force than everything Morbius had said before it.

"Doctor, we've come a long way."

"I strongly advise you to reverse course and leave this system."

Kirk was reaching for the arm of his chair when the voice came back, and there was something different in it. Not courtesy, and not warning. For the first time, Morbius wanted something.

"Captain. Before you go further. How were you able to see the house?"

Kirk stopped.

"There is a defensive field over this installation," Morbius said, "and a screen that renders it invisible to instruments of the kind your vessel carries. Both have functioned without interrup-

tion for a very long time. You should not have been able to detect that structure at all. I want to know how you did."

Kirk looked at Spock, who stayed over his hood a moment, and when he came up his face gave nothing to the open channel.

"There is no field," Spock said, quietly. "We are reading the structure on standard sensors at this range, Captain, in the visible spectrum and in four others. It is unshielded. If a screen of the kind the doctor describes were operating, I would register it. I register nothing whatever." His voice dropped further. "It would, however, account for the search missions. A screen of that description would explain why three vessels passed over that plateau and recorded bare ground. It does not explain why we are looking at a house."

"Captain?" said the voice from the surface. "I asked you a question."

Kirk let it lie where it was. "I have one of my own, Doctor. This field of yours. How far out does it reach, when it's working?"

The pause that followed was the longest of the conversation.

"Approximately two and a half kilometers from the house."

"Two and a half kilometers." Kirk looked at the viewscreen, where the planet had grown large enough to show weather. "Then we'll come down outside it. Well outside it. Whatever your field is or isn't doing, my people won't be standing in it."

"That is not the danger."

"Then tell me what is."

"Captain Kirk." The voice had gone flat and final. "If you come down here, I cannot be responsible for what happens to

you, or to your men."

Kirk had been spoken to in that tone before, by men who wanted the record to show they had said it. He looked at Uhura and moved two fingers, and she cut the channel.

For several seconds nobody on the bridge said anything. Then McCoy let out a slow breath. "Friendly fellow."

"He was told he had a shield," Kirk said. "He believes he still has one." He turned toward the science station. "Mr. Spock, keep a sensor on that house. If anything at all comes up around it, I want to know inside of a second."

"I have already assigned it, Captain."

"Then give me an assessment."

"Doctor Morbius appears sincere."

"That's not what I asked."

"It is nonetheless relevant." Spock straightened from the viewer. "He has survived on that planet for approximately twenty years. His warning is consistent with the recommendation Captain Adams transmitted before the Bellerophon was lost."

Ostrow spoke for the first time since the name had come over the channel. "Then we should treat it seriously."

McCoy turned on him. "You spent six years getting us here."

"That does not make the warning less credible."

"No," Kirk said. "But it doesn't make it complete, either."

He looked toward Spock. "Put the house back on the screen."

The two images came up side by side on the main viewer, blown large enough for the whole bridge to see: empty plateau

on the left, house on the right, the same ground seventeen years apart.

"Morbius survived," Kirk said.

Nobody answered him.

"He survived, and that house is standing on ground that three separate search missions recorded as bare. And when a Federation starship finally comes back, the first thing he does is tell us to leave."

"He may have reason," Ostrow said.

"I'm sure he does. I intend to hear it."

McCoy came down beside the command chair and lowered his voice, which with McCoy meant he was serious. "Jim, Adams told Starfleet not to land. Now Morbius is telling us the same thing. At some point two warnings start sounding like a pattern."

"They do."

"And?"

"And forty-two people disappeared down there."

"Forty-one," Spock said quietly.

Kirk looked at him.

"If Doctor Morbius survived."

The correction hung there. Twenty years of Starfleet records, and one voice out of the static had made them wrong.

"Forty-one," Kirk agreed.

Ostrow turned from the display. "Captain."

Kirk waited.

"I asked for this mission because no one ever went back to the surface. I still believe that was an error." He paused. "But if

you judge the risk unacceptable, I will not argue with you."

Six years of work, a world he had never seen now filling the viewscreen, and the man was prepared to stop within sight of it if the evidence said so. It was the least self-interested thing Kirk had heard all day, and it made him trust the Vulcan's wish to go down there more rather than less.

"Spock. Can we determine whether that house is occupied?"

"Not at this range. From orbit, possibly."

"Weapons signatures?"

"None."

"Anything at all threatening this ship?"

"Nothing detectable."

Kirk looked at the planet a moment longer. Adams had been a careful man and had died anyway, and the safest thing available was to log the contact, transmit it to Starfleet, and take his ship home. Forty-one people had gone down to that plateau and never come back, and one man was alive on it who would not say why.

"Uhura, reopen the channel."

Morbius answered almost at once. "Captain?"

"Doctor, I've considered your warning."

"I hope you intend to act on it."

"I do."

A pause. "Then you are leaving."

"No."

McCoy briefly closed his eyes.

"We're taking up orbit," Kirk said. "I'm bringing down a small party. We won't interfere with anything we don't have to,

but we are coming down."

The voice from the surface turned cold. "Captain Kirk, you do not understand what you are doing."

"That's why I want to talk to you."

"You are taking a grave risk."

"Understood."

The silence stretched out several seconds. When Morbius spoke again, it was with great reluctance. "If you are determined to come down, I will send coordinates. Beyond the perimeter, as you asked. You will have to be met and brought in."

"We'll expect your man," Kirk said, and wondered, as he said it, what kind of man that would turn out to be.

"I advise you once more to reconsider."

"I'll keep it in mind."

The channel closed. A moment later Uhura's board chirped. "Coordinates received, Captain."

"Feed them to navigation."

"Aye, sir."

Sulu looked back from the helm. "Coming up on orbital insertion."

Kirk sat down in the command chair. "Take us in."

The Enterprise came gently about toward the planet, and Altair IV spread across the viewscreen until its atmosphere burned green along the rim against the stars.

Behind him, Ostrow had gone back to the science station and said nothing at all.

For six years Edward Morbius had been a name on an old crew manifest and one word written in a margin. Now he was

alive, there was a house standing on a world that was supposed to be empty, and the first thing the man had done was tell them not to come down.

Chapter Five

THE AWAKENING

Kirk found the next entries in the Bellerophon's science log rather than the captain's.

Adams had recorded his part of it plainly, the way a careful man records something he does not understand and expects to be questioned about later. Reading it, Kirk kept thinking of a line from his own Academy days, about how the first casualty of a discovery is usually the caution of the people who make it.

What happened on the second morning was not Adams's doing. Starfleet had the raw log, transmitted the day it was written, and never made anything of it. It appears nowhere in the board of inquiry that followed, because by the time anyone thought to read it there was no one left to ask about it.

◆

Twenty years earlier

The light was still on when they came back.

Adams saw it before the black panel had finished withdrawing into the wall. Beyond the opening the corridor lay dark, and far down its length, exactly where they had left the artificial man the night before, a pale blue glow burned steadily in the dark.

Farman had seen it too. "That stayed on all night."

"So the surface monitors indicate," said Morbius, who sounded as though someone had handed him a gift.

Farman rested a hand near the phase pistol on his hip. "And that doesn't bother you."

"On the contrary."

"I knew you were going to say that."

Adams stepped through the doorway, and the corridor brightened ahead of him.

Yesterday that had been an interesting feature, the sort of thing that fills a paragraph in a survey report. This morning he watched it. The light did not switch on where they walked. It went ahead of them, four or five meters out, and the passage behind dimmed at the same rate, so that the party moved through the mountain inside a travelling pocket of light that arrived before they did.

The facility knew where they were. It had known yesterday, and Morbius had explained it in a sentence and gone on to more interesting things. Adams was not a scientist and could not argue with the explanation. He noticed only that it had made him no less uneasy.

He had brought fewer people down this time. Farman for security, Morbius and Julia for the science team, and Lieutenant

Quinn out of engineering, who carried three portable instruments and the expression of a man who had already decided against any machinery he could not take apart.

They reached the second chamber.

Robby had not moved. He stood against the wall in his close-fitting gray, arms at his sides, eyes closed, exactly as they had left him. The light above the alcove was brighter than any other light in the room.

Julia stopped a few paces short of the force screen Farman had insisted on setting up before anyone else came through.

"Good morning, Robby."

Farman's eyes went to her. "He can't hear you."

"You don't know that."

"Neither do you."

"That," said Julia, "is why I said good morning."

Morbius was already at the recessed control beside the alcove. "There has been a change."

Adams came up beside him. "What kind?"

Morbius pointed. A thin line of light had come up around the edge of the recess, so faint that Adams had walked past it without seeing it. It had not been there the night before.

Quinn set his cases down and began taking readings, and his eyebrows drew together. "Energy level's higher than yesterday, Captain."

"How much higher?"

"Couldn't tell you. Or I could, but it'd be three different numbers and I'd be lying about two of them. My instruments don't agree with each other about what they're measuring, and

that's a first in eleven years, and before you ask, yes, I calibrated them this morning, and yes, I did it twice." He moved the scanner along the wall. "The strange part, and this is the part I'd want somebody else to look at, is that I can't find a source."

Morbius kept his eyes on the work. "The facility itself."

"That's not an answer, Doctor."

"It is the obvious answer."

"No, sir, and I'll tell you why that's not an answer. The facility is several million cubic meters of machinery nobody understands, agreed. But power comes from somewhere. It is generated, it is stored, or it is transmitted. Those are the three. I have never in my life found a fourth and I have gone looking."

"Perhaps not in a form your instruments are built to recognize."

Quinn gave him the flat patient look of an engineer being told that physics was negotiable, and Adams stepped in before it could develop.

"Mr. Quinn. Can you tell me whether anyone activated this chamber after we left it?"

"No external access, sir. No signal from the ship. No surface party came back inside. I checked the transporter log twice before we beamed down."

"Then why is the power rising?"

Nobody had an answer, and the silence that followed was very complete. Sound did not carry in that place the way it should have. Adams had put it out of his mind yesterday. It came back now: their voices stopped a short way from their mouths, as though the room were listening instead of echoing.

Julia had moved closer to the alcove. "Captain."

Adams joined her. "What is it?"

"His eyes."

At first Adams saw nothing. Then one eyelid moved. Not opened. Moved, the way a sleeper's does when the dream turns.

Farman drew his pistol, and Morbius turned on him sharply. "Do not fire."

"I wasn't planning to."

"You drew the weapon."

"That's what it's for, Doctor."

Robby's right hand moved. One finger flexed, then a second, then the thumb, slowly enough to be uncomfortable to watch, as though whatever governed the hand had mislaid the order of operations and was working it out again joint by joint.

Julia took a step nearer the screen. "Robby?"

His head moved a fraction, and stopped.

Morbius checked the readings, and for once there was nothing satisfied in his voice. "We did nothing."

"That," said Quinn, "is the problem." He turned his scanner toward the wall. "Power's building all through the chamber, Captain."

"From where?"

"I have told you that twice now, and it has not improved with saying. I do not know."

Light came up beneath the floor. Lines of it spread out from Robby's alcove, running under the transparent sections in slow pulses and going away into the machinery beyond, and Adams understood what had been at him since the corridor.

Yesterday the facility had responded to them.

Today it had been waiting for them.

"Everyone behind the screen," he said. "Now."

Nobody argued, which told him something about how the others felt. They withdrew, Morbius last and closest to the barrier.

"Captain, if a reactivation sequence has begun, interrupting it could damage him."

"You've decided it's a him."

Morbius glanced at his wife. "That designation appears to have become unavoidable."

Behind the force screen, in the alcove, Robby's head came up.

This time his eyes opened.

They were dark, and for several seconds they did not move. Then they focused, and the hair came up on Adams's arms, because they did not focus on Morbius, who stood nearest, or on himself, who had spoken last.

They focused on Julia.

She drew a slow breath. "Hello."

Robby's mouth opened and no sound came. His jaw moved, stopped, moved again, and the first noise out of him was low and rough, machinery attempting an unfamiliar imitation. Then it steadied, and the sounds became words.

Adams assumed they were words. The language was fluid and dense, shifting in pitch across each phrase, full of consonants made in places a human mouth does not readily use. Robby spoke for perhaps ten seconds and stopped, waiting for a reply

he plainly had every right to expect.

Morbius was already recording. "Again," he said, to no one who could understand him.

Farman kept his eyes on the alcove. "He doesn't speak English."

"No."

"Does he understand us?"

"I have no idea." Morbius said it with something close to joy.

Robby tried to move. His left foot came forward, the knee buckled, and Julia was at the edge of the screen before Adams could put a hand out. "Robby."

He caught himself against the wall. The recovery was slow and complete, and what struck Adams was not the clumsiness but the quality of it. Nothing about the movement was weak. Each one simply had to be calculated before it could be made, like a man doing arithmetic before every step down a staircase.

Robby looked at his own hand. He flexed the fingers, turned the palm upward, studied it, and spoke again in the same impossible language.

Morbius listened with a concentration Adams found faintly disturbing.

"Can you identify it?" Adams asked.

"No."

"Anything familiar in it at all?"

"No."

"You sound pleased about that."

"I am, Captain."

Farman shook his head slowly.

Robby took another step, and this one was better. Then another, better still. He reached the edge of the illuminated area and stopped, as neatly as a man stopping at a curb.

The room changed around him.

Light spread across a ceiling their lamps had never found. Consoles that had stood dark through the whole of the day before woke in sequence, bank after bank, running away into the chamber beyond until the far wall showed itself for the first time, impossibly distant.

Quinn's voice had gone quiet. "Captain."

"What now?"

"Energy levels are rising outside this chamber."

"How far outside?"

Quinn checked a second instrument, and then a third, which was how Adams knew he did not want to say it. "Everywhere I can measure, sir."

Morbius turned. "The facility is waking."

"No," Adams said. "It started waking before he did."

Morbius said nothing, because there was nothing to say to it, and the distinction stayed in the chamber with them.

They had not activated the android. They had not restored power to anything. They had not repaired so much as a panel. They had come in, walked through, touched almost nothing, and gone home to dinner.

And then the place had made its own decision.

Adams looked out past the alcove at the ranks of machinery, lit now along their whole length, going away under a ceiling he still could not see.

"Maybe it was never abandoned."
Farman followed his gaze. "Then what's it been doing?"
Adams watched Robby gather himself for another step.
"Waiting."

Chapter Six

GOOD AFTERNOON, CAPTAIN

Twenty years earlier

FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS, ROBBY LEARNED TO WALK.

That was how Julia put it. Morbius objected to the phrase, as she had known he would.

"He already possesses the ability."

"Then he is remembering it."

"Machines do not remember motor function in the biological sense."

Julia watched Robby cross the chamber, uneven but no longer halting, and turn at the far wall to come back. "He seems to."

Morbius had no answer for that, and Adams enjoyed it privately. In nearly three months of survey he had seen Edward

Morbius lose exactly two arguments, and his wife had won both.

Robby stayed below. Adams would not have him aboard the Bellerophon until they knew a great deal more, and Robby showed no sign of wanting to go anywhere. He walked the chamber. He examined his hands. He stood for long periods in front of consoles nobody could read, and never touched one.

Communication was close to impossible. Morbius recorded hours of speech and found structure in it inside an afternoon, but structure is not meaning, and meaning did not come. Robby could make nothing of English either, and listened to it with what Adams was prepared to swear was patience.

It was Julia who thought of objects.

She stood in the middle of the chamber, well inside the screen now, Adams having given up pretending she would stay behind it, and touched her own chest.

"Julia."

Then her husband. "Edward."

Then Adams. "Captain Adams."

Robby watched her, motionless.

She put her hand flat against the wall. "Wall." Then the floor at her feet. "Floor." Then, after a pause, she pointed at him.

"Robby."

For the first time, he answered at once. It was a short sequence of sounds, four or five of them, rising and then falling away.

Julia's face lit. "I think he just told me his real name."

Morbius looked up from his recorder. "Or identified his construction series."

"Edward."

"It is equally possible."

She turned back. "Robby."

He regarded her for several seconds. Then he repeated the unfamiliar sequence, exactly as before.

"Robby," Julia said again, and waited.

The pause went on long enough that Farman shifted his weight by the doorway.

Then Robby raised one hand and touched his own chest, the way she had touched hers.

"Robby."

The pronunciation was imperfect and the second syllable came out almost as a hum. It was the name, in a voice that had been silent longer than anyone in the room could calculate.

Farman lowered his scanner. "Well."

Julia looked as though someone had handed her the planet. Morbius looked, Adams thought, faintly offended at how pleased he was.

◆

The first intrusion aboard the Bellerophon happened eighteen hours later, at 0214 ship time, and the computer logged it as an internal diagnostic error.

The second reached the navigational records. The third opened the medical database. By the end of the day engineering had reported unauthorized access in thirteen systems, and Adams stood in the computer room at midnight watching

Quinn work the logs with the air of a man performing an autopsy on a patient who was still talking.

"Damage?"

"None, sir."

"Data altered?"

"Not a character."

"Command systems? Helm, weapons, life support?"

"Untouched. It didn't even look at them."

Adams frowned at the screen. "Then what did it do?"

Quinn turned one of the monitors toward him. "Read."

"Read what?"

"Everything it could reach."

The list ran down the screen and kept going. Personnel files. Mission logs. Federation history from the founding forward. Ship schematics. Medical texts. Language databases, all of them, in the order they were stored. Star charts. Agricultural surveys. Educational material for the two children the expedition families had brought as far as the last starbase. Recorded entertainment, including, Adams noticed, four hundred hours of music.

Farman had come in behind them and was reading over Adams's shoulder. "Somebody aboard?"

"No," said Quinn.

"Transmission, then."

Quinn hesitated a moment too long. "Yes."

"From where?"

He brought up a planetary map, and a single point flashed steadily beneath Survey Area Twelve.

Nobody said anything for a while. It was Farman who finally said it.

"Robby."

Adams kept his eyes on the screen. "Can he reach this ship from down there?"

"He already has, Captain."

"How?"

"I would give a year's pay to know."

Adams opened a channel. "Adams to Morbius."

The reply came up from the surface without delay. "Morbius here."

"Doctor, is Robby doing anything unusual?"

A pause. "That question has limited usefulness, Captain."

"Is he connected to any machinery?"

"No."

"Touching a control of any kind?"

"No."

"Speaking?"

"Not at present."

Adams exchanged a look with Quinn. "Then what is he doing?"

Morbius sounded, for the first time since the survey began, genuinely puzzled.

"Looking upward."

◆

The intrusions went on through the night.

Adams considered shutting down the data link between ship and surface, and sat with the order half formed the better part of an hour before he decided against it. Nothing had been damaged. Nothing had been altered. Nothing that could hurt anybody had been touched. Whoever was moving through the Bellerophon's memory behaved less like an intruder than like a student who had found the library door unlocked after closing and had no intention of disturbing the shelves.

He put it in the log that way, and sat looking at what he had written, aware of having made a decision he could not have said what rested on.

By morning, Robby had been through the entire English archive. By noon he had started on history.

That afternoon Adams went down with Farman and Julia.

Robby was standing in the center of the chamber, and Adams knew before anyone spoke that something had changed. The sluggishness was gone. He no longer held himself like a man doing arithmetic. When his head came around toward the doorway it came smoothly, and his eyes found each of them in turn without hurry.

Julia smiled. "Hello, Robby."

He looked at her. Then at Farman. Then at Adams.

His mouth opened.

"Good afternoon, Captain Adams."

Nobody moved. The voice was careful and exactly formed, the vowels a shade too even, as though each had been assembled from a sample and set in place by hand. It was entirely fluent.

Farman stared at him. Adams turned toward Julia, who was

smiling as though she had expected nothing else. Morbius stood beside one of the consoles looking a great deal less surprised than anybody had a right to be.

Adams found his voice. "You speak English."

"Yes, Captain."

"How?"

Robby appeared to consider the question, and the consideration itself was new. "I learned."

Farman let out a short breath. "From the Bellerophon."

"Yes."

"You broke into our computer."

Robby's face did not change. "I accessed available information."

Farman looked at Adams. "I like 'broke into' better."

Adams ignored him. "You read our files."

"Yes."

"All of them?"

Robby paused. "No."

Adams felt an entirely unreasonable relief, and it lasted until Robby finished the thought.

"I have not yet completed them."

Julia laughed first. Farman went next, and then Adams found that he could not help himself either, and the sound of it went out into that enormous room and stopped a few meters away, the way every other sound did.

Robby looked from one face to another, and for the first time since they had found him standing in the dark he did not look like a machine that had waited in an ancient chamber for something

to happen. He looked like a man who had walked into a room full of strangers and was trying, very seriously, to understand the joke.

Far beneath them, under the floor and the plateau and however many kilometers of stone no instrument they owned could measure, machinery that had waited out ages went on waking.

Chapter Seven

THE HOUSE ON ALTAIR IV

"Starfleet has asked me more than once why I went down there myself," Kirk said to the recorder, "with a science officer and a surgeon and a civilian, and no security detail worth the name." He thought about that for a while before he answered it. "Because a man who has been alone for twenty years does not talk to armed strangers. I would make the same decision again. I want that in the record, whatever else goes into it."

◆

The transporter set them down on red-brown stone under a sky that burned green.

For several seconds Kirk did nothing but look. From orbit the planet had looked peaceful. On the surface it looked more peaceful and a good deal less comforting. Low mountains stood off beyond the plateau, softened by distance and by the color of the light. Wind moved through sparse growth rooted in the

seams between shelves of stone. No roads. No utility lines. No cut timber, no foundations, no rubbish tip, nothing to say that forty-two human beings had ever come here to work.

Spock had his tricorder open before the transporter effect had finished letting go of him.

McCoy's eyes went to him. "We just got here."

"That is generally when one begins to examine an unfamiliar environment."

"I thought we might look around first."

"I am looking around."

Ostrow had already walked several meters from the beam-down coordinates. He stopped himself, came back, and looked mildly irritated that anybody had seen him do it. Kirk understood the impulse better than the Vulcan would have liked. Six years of records and four pages of symbols, and now the man was standing on the thing itself, with the dust of it on his boots.

"Anything?" Kirk asked.

"Atmosphere within expected parameters," Spock said. "No harmful radiation. The interference we detected from orbit is still present, though less pronounced at this location." He turned a slow half circle with the tricorder. "We are three point one kilometers from the structure, Captain. Six hundred meters outside the perimeter Doctor Morbius described."

"And still nothing there to be outside of."

"Nothing whatever."

So they stood where a defensive field would have ended, if one had existed, waiting to be collected like freight. Kirk had

asked for it himself and would ask for it again, and it still left four men standing in the open with three kilometers of another man's plateau between them and the only door on the planet.

"The house?"

Spock pointed across the plateau, and Kirk found it at once.

It sat half hidden behind a low rise, larger than the orbital scan had made it, and unmistakably human in its proportions. Broad roofline. Straight walls. After the ridges and the wind-cut stone it looked less like a building than like an argument.

McCoy followed his gaze. "Somebody went to a lot of trouble."

Before Kirk could answer, a sound came across the plateau behind them. Not machinery, exactly. Tires on stone.

Something was coming from the direction of the house.

Kirk put one hand near his phaser and waited. Whatever was coming had been sent by a man who had spent an hour trying to keep them off this planet, and there was nothing to be gained by meeting it with a weapon already out.

The vehicle came over the rise and slowed. The figure at its controls was humanoid and very tall. Gray clothing. A broad, almost immobile face.

Something turned over in Kirk's memory.

The vehicle stopped ten meters off, and the figure stepped out, and for a moment Kirk was not on Altair IV at all. He was in a corridor cut through rock on a frozen world a long way from here, watching something step out of the dark that had been standing there since before there were cities on Earth.

The resemblance was not exact. This face was different, the

build finer, the proportions altered. It was there in the way the thing moved, an economy so complete that nothing was wasted and nothing hurried, and in the stillness when it stopped, a stillness no living body ever manages.

McCoy had been watching him instead of the android. "Jim?"

Kirk said nothing.

The android came toward them and stopped at a courteous distance. "Captain James Kirk?"

The English was flawless.

"Yes."

"I am Robby. Doctor Morbius has asked me to bring you to the residence."

Beside him, Kirk felt rather than saw Ostrow go completely motionless.

Spock had his tricorder aimed at their host. Robby turned his head and looked at it, and then at Spock.

"Your instrument will not damage me."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "That was not my intention."

"I know."

McCoy looked from one of them to the other. "Well. That's reassuring."

Robby turned his head toward him and said nothing at all.

"Does it know who we are?" McCoy asked.

"I know the captain," Robby said. "I was present when he spoke with Doctor Morbius. The rest of you I do not know."

"Well, I'm Doctor McCoy, and that's more manners than I got from the last three star bases."

Robby appeared to accept this without comment.

Ostrow had not taken his eyes off him, and Kirk understood why. There was one line in Adams's last transmissions about an intact android recovered on this planet, and a recording of a voice learning to say good afternoon, and six years of a Vulcan's life had been built on less. The thing in the recording was standing on the plateau in front of him, wearing gray, waiting with its hands at its sides. Kirk had watched this man argue with the Vulcan Science Academy, face down an academician who had called his life's work an obsession, and answer a starship captain's challenge without a flicker. Now he stood on the plateau of Altair IV and appeared, for the first time since Kirk had known him, entirely unable to speak.

Robby waited. He seemed prepared to wait a long time.

"You are the android of the Bellerophon transmissions," Ostrow said at last.

"I do not know what was transmitted."

"Captain Adams reported recovering you. There is a recording of you speaking, made twenty years ago. I have listened to it several hundred times." Ostrow's voice was perfectly level, which Kirk had learned to recognize as the Vulcan equivalent of a shout. "Of what manufacture are you?"

"I do not understand the question as you intend it."

Ostrow took a step closer. "Who constructed you?"

The smallest pause came before the answer, no longer than a breath, and Kirk would have missed it entirely if he had not been listening for exactly that kind of thing.

"I was constructed here."

"By whom?"

Robby looked toward the house. "Doctor Morbius is waiting."

Kirk noted the answer that had not been given, and from the set of Ostrow's shoulders, so had Ostrow. Robby turned back to the vehicle as though the conversation had reached its natural end, which in a sense it had.

McCoy fell in beside Kirk on the way across. "You want to tell me what that was about? You went somewhere just now."

"Later, Bones."

The vehicle took them across the plateau without hurrying, Robby driving with the same economy he brought to everything else. Kirk sat behind him and watched the set of those shoulders and told himself what he would have told any officer who brought it to him: that resemblance proves nothing, that people find patterns because they go looking for them, that Spock had said as much to him in almost those words inside the last year.

It did not help as much as it should have.

The house grew as they came up on it. It was not elegant the way alien architecture is often called elegant, which is usually a trick of unfamiliar purpose. It was human. Broad windows facing the view. A long terrace. Low walls laid out to make a courtyard of the ground in front. Even the entrance had been set to take the prevailing wind on its shoulder instead of its face, the way a man builds when he means to be there through a great many winters.

"This is the structure we detected from orbit," Spock said.

Robby brought the vehicle onto a smooth approach. "Yes."

"When was it constructed?"

"The residence was established after the Bellerophon's arrival."

Spock glanced at Kirk. It was an answer. It was not enough of one, and Robby gave no sign of intending to improve it.

Morbius was waiting for them outside.

Kirk knew the voice before he was sure of the man. Edward Morbius was older than the personnel image in the Starfleet file, white at the temples, the face thinner and a good deal more severe, and he wore dark clothing that belonged to no service and no fashion Kirk could place. He stood at the head of his own steps the way men stand when they have decided in advance how much of themselves they intend to give away.

"Captain."

"Doctor Morbius."

They shook hands. The grip was firm and brief. Morbius acknowledged Spock and McCoy in turn, correctly and without warmth, and then his eyes went to Ostrow and stayed there.

"Doctor Ostrow."

Ostrow inclined his head. "Doctor Morbius."

Something moved behind the older man's face. "You are the archaeologist."

"Xenoarchaeologist."

"Yes," Morbius said. "Of course."

Kirk filed that with the rest. Nobody had told Morbius a xenoarchaeologist was coming. Nobody had told him anything except that a starship had entered his system, and he had not asked for a crew list. He had looked down four strangers on

his own steps and gone straight to the only one whose presence needed explaining.

"You have come a long way," Morbius said, in the voice of a man observing that it would rain later. "Come inside."

He stood aside from his own doorway, and Kirk went up the steps past him and into the house that should not have been there.

Chapter Eight

THE COLONY

Kirk had Adams's logs, and the science officer's records, and hours of Edward Morbius's own recordings, which the man had made meticulously for twenty years and never once erased.

Some of what follows is not in any of them. It was told to me afterward, by people who were there, and I have set it down the way they gave it to me. A court of inquiry would call that hearsay. I would call it the only account there is.

◆

Twenty years earlier

Three days after Robby learned to speak English, Captain Adams called Starfleet.

The transmission took most of a day to assemble. There was too much to send in one burst and too much that Adams did not trust to summary, so it went out whole: the first scans

of the complex, engineering's estimate of its scale, samples of the symbols Morbius could not translate, and every second of recorded contact with the android, including the parts where the android had been more articulate than the officers questioning him.

He added his own recommendation last, and it took him longer to write than everything else together.

FURTHER INVESTIGATION WARRANTED.
PERMANENT SCIENTIFIC PRESENCE MAY BE JUSTIFIED.

He read it twice before he sent it.

Farman read it once, over his shoulder. "Permanent."

"If Starfleet agrees."

"They'll agree."

Adams looked around at him. "You sound very certain of that."

"Captain, we found a working installation under a dead world, and an android who taught himself English in a day and a half by reading our library from thirty kilometers away without being invited." Farman folded his arms. "They're going to send us a parade."

Starfleet did not send a parade.

It sent an answer eleven hours later, marked PRIORITY SCIENTIFIC, and when the Bellerophon's small communications screen resolved there were three admirals on it, two civilian research directors and a representative of the Federation Science Council, all talking at once through a relay circuit designed for one man giving one order.

Adams had expected caution. He had prepared for caution.

What came out of the screen was appetite.

"Captain, your preliminary material has already gone to the Archaeological Directorate and to the Daystrom Institute," Admiral Komack said. "If your findings hold up, this is the most significant technological discovery in the history of the Federation. I do not say that lightly."

Through the glass partition Adams could see Morbius waiting in the corridor with Julia beside him. Morbius had heard enough to know what was coming, and the look on his face made Adams wish, briefly and uselessly, that Starfleet had discovered caution after all.

"Your survey authority is expanded as of this transmission," Komack went on. "You are authorized to establish a long-duration research settlement on Altair IV, subject to your own continuing judgment as to the safety of your people."

"How long a duration, Admiral?"

"Indefinite."

Behind him, Farman mouthed the word at the bulkhead.

The woman from the Science Council came in next, brisk and pleasant. "Captain, the Bellerophon carries prefabricated expedition housing, does she not?"

"Six residential units, two laboratories, and support modules," Adams said. "They were loaded for Phase Two, if the geological survey justified a surface presence."

"We believe Phase Two has arrived."

Adams took a moment with that. "You are describing a colony."

"A scientific colony to begin with. Additional personnel can

be assigned once you have established that surface operations are safe."

"Families?"

"Eventually."

Out in the corridor, Julia rested one hand against the curve of her abdomen, the way she did a hundred times a day now without noticing she did it.

Morbius was smiling.

Adams found that he was not.

Within two days the plateau began to change.

The first residence went up on high ground west of Survey Area Twelve, near enough the underground entrance for working access and far enough off to satisfy Adams, who had said in three separate meetings that nobody under his command was going to sleep on top of machinery nobody understood. The remaining units stayed sealed in their cargo frames while Starfleet decided how large this was going to become.

The first house had been designed for a six-man crew to assemble in four days.

With Robby, it took most of one.

He carried wall sections rated for a cargo lifter, holding each one upright in one hand while Quinn's people ran in the locking braces. He set foundation anchors into stone with a patience that made the power tools look like an argument. When a gust came off the ridges and took an entire roof frame out of alignment, Robby caught it before anyone on the ground had drawn breath to shout, and stood holding several hundred kilograms over his head, unhurried, waiting to be told when the crew had it secured.

Farman stood looking up at him. "Remind me never to arm-wrestle him."

Julia, sitting in the shade of the cargo frames with one hand on her stomach, said, "I don't think he'd understand why you'd want to."

Robby turned his head. "I understand arm wrestling."

"Of course you do," said Farman.

Julia laughed, and Robby watched her for a moment longer than the joke required.

He did that often now.

With everyone else he stayed careful. He knew where Farman's pistol was at every moment and made no secret of knowing. He tolerated Quinn's scanners the way a large dog tolerates a small one, and could have told anybody who asked exactly where each was pointed. When crewmen he had not met came down into the facility, Robby arranged himself, without seeming to arrange anything, in the one place from which he could watch both the newcomers and the way out.

None of that happened with Julia.

She had been doing something different since the first morning, and it was neither scientific nor strategic. She was not studying him and she was not interviewing him. She was including him.

When the others said "the android," Julia used his name. When an engineer asked Robby to lift something, Julia thanked him afterward, which the engineer did not. When her husband questioned him for four hours about power distribution in the lower chambers, Julia came in with a meal Robby did not need

and a conversation Morbius considered irrelevant, and stayed until the questions had stopped.

Robby understood the distinction some while before Morbius did.

One evening, with the western wall of the house still open to a green sunset, Julia found him standing at the cargo frames looking at a shipping crate. She had written his name on it in grease pencil under the inventory code, weeks ago, when they had needed somewhere to put the things they had begun leaving for him.

ROBBY

He touched the letters. "You named me before I spoke."

"Yes."

"Why?"

She considered a graceful answer and decided he would rather have the true one. "Because we didn't know what you were called."

"You could have called me android."

"That's what you are. It isn't who you are."

He looked at the word a while longer. "Was it intended to identify me?"

"It was intended to give you something to object to when you woke up."

Robby turned toward her. "I did not object."

"No."

"Would you have changed it if I had?"

"Of course."

He was quiet for a moment. "Why?"

Julia smiled. "Because it's your name."

◆

The naming of the child took the colony rather less time than the naming of the android, and a great deal more argument.

It began at the mess table, as everything aboard the Bellerophon began at the mess table, when Cookie set down a tray and announced that in his professional opinion the first human being born on this planet ought to have a name with some weight to it.

"Nobody asked your professional opinion," said Farman.

"Nobody ever does. It doesn't stop it being professional."

The ship's surgeon, who had come down that morning to look over Julia and had stayed for the food, said that in her professional opinion the parents generally handled this part.

"The parents," said Cookie, "have been underground for six weeks, and I love the both of them, and somebody has got to think about that child."

He had a list. Of course he had a list. It ran to eleven names, four of which were the names of ships, one of which was the name of his mother, and one of which, he admitted under questioning, was the name of a bourbon.

Quinn proposed calling the child after the planet and was told that Altair IV was a terrible name for a girl.

"Not Altair Four," said Quinn, wounded. "Altair. Something out of Altair."

That one stayed on the table after the others had been cleared

away.

By the end of the week it had been through the engineering shift, the survey teams and the galley, and had come back as Altaira, and nobody afterward could say with certainty who had first put it in that shape. Farman claimed it. So did Cookie. Adams, who had heard both of them claim it, entered neither claim in the log.

Julia was presented with it formally, at dinner, by a delegation of four.

She listened to the whole presentation with her hands folded, and asked one question, which was whether they intended to go on like this for eighteen years.

"Yes," said Cookie.

"Then she had better have something short as well." Julia considered. "Alta."

"Alta," said Farman, trying it out, the way he had tried out Robby.

Robby was standing at the end of the table, where he generally stood. "Altaira," he said. "Alta."

"You get a vote too," Julia told him.

"I do not require one. I agree with the others."

"That's not the same as having a vote."

"No," said Robby. "It is not."

Adams, watching from the far end of the table, made a note in his log that night about crew morale, and sat looking at what he had written, because it was the first entry in weeks with nothing in it about the thing under the plateau.

◆

Morbius heard about that conversation later, and said nothing about it at all.

But that night he began asking Robby a different kind of question. Not what a machine did. What he remembered.

The early answers came in fragments. Corridors. Instructions with no context attached. Faces he could describe to a geometric precision and could not name. Long intervals of nothing, broken by moments of being. Morbius recorded all of it and sent copies up to the ship, and Adams read them at night and found he did not much like reading them alone.

Then Robby began declining to answer certain questions when other people were in the room.

It happened by degrees. Adams never saw it at all, and Edward Morbius saw every instance of it and wrote none of them down.

◆

They went below again after the day's construction had finished, the three of them, along a passage past the second chamber where the walls drew in and the light behaved differently, following the corridor rather than leading it. Julia tired quickly now. After half an hour she sat down on a low black ledge that was exactly the wrong height for a woman five months along and was still, somehow, the most comfortable thing on the planet, and let her husband go on ahead with Robby.

She could hear them stop before she could see why.

Morbius had come up short, almost walking into the android's back. "What is it?"

"I know this place," Robby said.

Julia lifted her head.

Morbius looked at the featureless wall in front of them, a sealed junction that looked like every other stretch of that corridor. "From before you were made inactive?"

"Yes."

Robby put one hand flat against the black surface. He was not operating anything. He was confirming something.

"There were others."

"Others like you?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"Inactive."

"Here?"

"Some."

The single word changed the temperature of the passage. Julia got up and came toward them, one hand against the wall for balance, and heard her husband's voice do the thing it did when he had stopped being a person and become an instrument.

"And the rest?"

Robby looked at him. "Elsewhere."

"Who deactivated you?"

Robby said nothing.

"Robby." Julia came up beside them. When his eyes moved to her she said, "You don't have to tell us."

Morbius turned. "Julia."

"He doesn't."

"He may be describing the end of an entire civilization."

"And he still doesn't have to tell us."

Robby looked from one of them to the other, and it seemed to Julia that he was not weighing an answer but a choice, not at all the same thing, and she would think about that for a long time afterward.

Then he said, "The Krell."

Whatever Morbius had been about to say went out of him entirely. "The builders."

"Yes."

"Why did they shut you down?" Julia asked.

Robby's eyes stayed on her. "Fear."

"Of you?"

"Of what we could become."

Morbius came a step closer. "Why?"

"There was another world."

"What world?"

"A Krell colony," Robby said. "Exo III."

Julia saw her husband's face change, and knew that somewhere behind it the theories had already begun assembling themselves.

"The artificial beings there were ordered terminated," Robby said.

"Why?" said Julia.

"I do not know."

"And they obeyed?"

"No."

Morbius said, very quietly, "What happened?"

"They destroyed those who came to terminate them."

"The Krell."

"Yes."

Nobody said anything. The corridor went on being warm and dry and perfectly lit, and Julia was aware of standing several hundred meters inside a mountain beside a machine that had just used the word destroyed about the people who made it.

"The androids destroyed their masters," Morbius said.

"On Exo III."

"And word of it reached this world."

"Yes."

"What happened here?"

"All independent artificial life was ordered inactive."

Morbius looked at the sealed junction. "Because of Exo III."

"Yes."

Julia folded her arms across herself. "How long ago?"

"I do not know it in your measurement."

"But you remember being shut down."

"Yes."

"What did they tell you?" Morbius asked.

Robby looked up at him. "Nothing."

That stopped even Morbius. "No explanation."

"No."

"No assurance that you would be restored."

"No."

"They simply ended you."

Robby appeared to examine the phrase and find it inexact. "They made me stop."

Julia reached out and put her hand on his arm. Robby looked down at it. He did not move away and he did not acknowledge it, and after a moment she took her hand back.

When she looked up, her husband was watching the two of them with an expression she could not read at all, and did not like.

They came up after dark.

The skeleton of the house stood under work lights with its windows not yet in, and Adams was inside it with Quinn and a stack of construction schedules, doing the arithmetic of a settlement that had been a survey four days earlier.

"Anything useful?" he asked.

Morbius took off his field jacket. "Nothing conclusive."

Julia looked up at her husband.

It was not a dramatic lie. He did not change color and he did not hesitate and he did not embroider it, and that was what made it worse.

Adams accepted it with a tired nod and went back to the schedules, and Morbius crossed the room without looking at his wife, and Robby stood in the open doorway where he could see everyone in the room at once.

Julia waited until the others were busy. Then, quietly: "Edward."

He stopped.

"You lied to him."

"I withheld an interpretation."

"You withheld the name of the people who built this place."

Morbius turned to face her at last. "Until we understand what that name means, giving it to Starfleet accomplishes nothing."

"It gives them the truth."

"It gives them a word."

Robby was still watching from the doorway. Morbius lowered his voice.

"If Adams sends that up tonight, they will send ten more ships, fifty committees and two hundred people who will go through this place like weather, and every one of them will touch something before anybody understands what he is touching."

Julia looked at her husband for a while.

"That isn't your decision to make."

"No," Morbius said.

He said it correctly, the way a man says a thing he accepts. Something underneath the word had already begun to argue, and Julia heard it, and said nothing more that night.

Outside, the work lights burned white against the green dark, and the crews were sealing the roof to have it weather-tight by morning. Inside a week there would be bedrooms in it, and a kitchen, and laboratory space, and broad windows looking west across a view no human being had ever been born to.

Starfleet was calling it the beginning of a colony.

Adams called it a research station.

Julia had already begun to call it the house.

And below all of it, in a corridor lit by machines that had been running since before there were cities on Earth, Robby had

given Edward Morbius the name of the civilization that built this world.

For the first time, Morbius kept something for himself.

Chapter Nine

THE HOUSEHOLD

THE HOUSE MADE KIRK'S QUESTIONS WORSE.

It was a home. That was the thing. Not a survival shelter, not a field station kept tidy by a disciplined man, but a house somebody lived in. Books stood along one wall, real ones, bound and worn at the spines. The furniture had been set for comfort and for conversation, angled toward the long windows and the plateau beyond. There were carvings on the shelves, and instruments, and a bowl of dried seed heads put there because somebody liked the shape of them. Nothing in the room looked thrown together and then endured. Everything in it had been chosen, and kept, and dusted, for a very long time.

Edward Morbius had not merely survived Altair IV. He had settled it.

They sat at a broad table near the windows. Morbius poured something out of a stoneware jug into glasses that did not match, and did it without asking, which Kirk took for habit rather than

hospitality: a man performing a sequence he had performed several thousand times for guests who had been dead twenty years. The drink was cold and faintly bitter and very good.

Robby stayed near the far wall, inside the room and outside the conversation, motionless in a way nobody else there could have managed for that long.

McCoy kept looking at him.

Eventually Robby looked back. "Is there something you require, Doctor?"

"I'm trying to decide."

"About what?"

"You."

Robby appeared to give this its full consideration. "I am here," he said.

"So I noticed."

McCoy laughed at that, alone. Morbius did not, and Kirk watched him decline to, and let the moment go by.

Then he said, "Tell me about Robby."

"There is very little to tell. He maintains the house and the grounds. He does the work that would otherwise occupy my hands, and leaves my hands free for better things."

"That's what he does. It isn't what he is."

"He is my household, Captain."

"Doctor." Kirk set his glass down. "I have read Captain Adams's logs. I know an android was recovered on this planet, because Adams said so in a transmission eleven weeks before he died, and I know your expedition had contact with him, because Adams sent Starfleet a recording of it. A machine that walks and

talks and drives three kilometers across open country to collect four strangers is not a household. What is he?"

Morbius did not answer at once, and in the pause Spock spoke, politely, in the voice he used when he intended to close a door quietly and then stand in front of it.

"If I may. I scanned your servant on the plateau, Doctor, with your permission and his. The alloys of his outer casing correspond to no material in Federation records. His internal power source does not correspond to any principle of generation with which I am familiar, and I was unable to determine its output within four orders of magnitude. The workmanship is not recent." Spock folded his hands. "I mention this because any account that begins with human manufacture will be difficult for me to accept, and I would prefer not to be placed in the position of contradicting my host at his own table."

The room went quiet enough that Kirk could hear the clock at the back of the house.

He watched the older man work it out. He had seen the same arithmetic done by men at courts of inquiry, the moment a witness understands that the thing he has decided not to say has already been measured by somebody else's instrument.

"He was here before we were," Morbius said at last.

Nobody moved. Beside Kirk, Ostrow had gone so still that he might have been part of the furniture.

"He was on this planet when the Bellerophon made orbit. He was inactive when we found him. He is not human technology, and I did not build him, and if your instruments have told you that much, Mr. Spock, then they have told you as much as I

intend to."

"How long was he inactive?" Kirk asked.

"Long."

"How long is long?"

"Captain, I have answered a question I was not obliged to answer at all."

"You've answered one, Doctor, and opened about nine." Kirk sat forward. "Where did you find him?"

"On this planet."

"Where on this planet?"

Morbius said nothing.

"Was he alone?"

Nothing.

"Was he intact when you found him, or did somebody put him back together?"

"He required no repair."

"Then he was in working order, switched off, sitting somewhere on a world with no cities, no roads and no ruins that three Starfleet search missions could find." Kirk let that stand. "Doctor, you can see the difficulty."

"I can see that you are a persistent man."

"I'm a thorough one. It's less charming and it lasts longer."

It was Spock who found the crack, and he did it without appearing to look for it. "Doctor Morbius. I have read the Bellerophon's transmissions in their entirety, twice. Captain Adams reported the discovery of the android, as the captain says. He reported the first contact, and the language work, and a great deal else besides." Spock paused precisely long enough. "Then

he stopped. In the final eleven weeks of that expedition, in some two hundred separate transmissions, your android is not mentioned once."

The silence went on long enough to become an answer.

"Captain Adams reported what he judged it proper to report."

"Doctor, he judged it proper for three weeks and then judged otherwise," Kirk said. "Something changed. Either he learned something about that machine that he decided Starfleet should not have, or somebody persuaded him of it."

"You are constructing a narrative."

"I'm reading a gap. They're different, but they're both evidence." Kirk let that sit. "What did Adams learn?"

"You would have to ask Captain Adams."

The words landed on the table and stayed there. Nobody moved, and Kirk, who had been given some remarkably cold answers in his career, made a private note of that one.

"How many others are there?" he asked.

"There is one android on this planet."

Spock's head came around a fraction of an inch, and Kirk knew that he had heard the same thing: not there was only ever one, not I found only one, but a statement about the present tense, carefully cut to fit.

"Doctor," Spock said, "how was he reactivated?"

"He was not reactivated."

"Clarify."

"He restored himself." Morbius said it flatly, and under the flatness was something Kirk recognized, because he had felt it

himself two or three times and had never enjoyed it. "Nobody switched him on, Mr. Spock. Nothing was repaired, nothing was connected, no power was supplied. He came back on his own, and everything around him came on with him, and there is not a man living who can tell you why."

"Then there is a functioning power source on this planet," Spock said, "of sufficient scale to sustain both him and whatever it is that came on with him. And it has been operating continuously for at least twenty years."

"You are drawing conclusions."

"I am stating the necessary conditions for the event you have just described."

"Then state them to Starfleet, and let Starfleet draw the conclusions, and leave me out of both."

"Doctor," Kirk said, "you are the conclusion."

McCoy had been looking at Robby through the whole of it. Now he looked at Morbius, and when he spoke it was in the mild voice that Kirk had learned, over several years, to regard as a warning.

"I've got a different question, Doctor. Not how. Why."

"I beg your pardon."

"A man alone on a planet builds a shelter, because he needs one. He builds a still, generally, for the same reason. What I want to know is what a man alone wants with a machine that's shaped like a person, and answers to a name, and stands in the corner of his sitting room all evening." McCoy tilted his head. "Somebody gave that machine a name. It doesn't sound like a name a scientist picks."

For the first time since they had come through his door, Edward Morbius had no answer ready. It lasted perhaps a second and a half, and Kirk, who had been waiting for it, was careful not to look pleased.

"You are a physician," Morbius said. "Not a philosopher."

"I'm both. It's a small ship."

Ostrow chose that moment to speak, quietly and disastrously. "Doctor Morbius. Whose design principles?"

And the wall came back up, exactly as high as before. "That is not a question I am prepared to discuss."

"It is the only question that matters."

"It is not a question I am prepared to discuss."

Kirk let it go, and filed it with the rest.

What Morbius did next surprised him, and on an hour's acquaintance Kirk had believed himself past being surprised by the man.

"You are all being very careful," Morbius said, "and you are wondering the same thing, and none of you will ask it, so I will save you the trouble." He turned in his chair. "Captain, may I borrow your sidearm?"

"No."

"Then I will ask you to hold it, and to listen." Morbius did not wait for agreement. "Robby."

The android came away from the wall. "Doctor."

"Take the captain's weapon."

Kirk's hand went to the phaser and stopped, because Robby had already crossed half the room, unhurried, and was standing in front of him with one hand open and empty, waiting, making

no attempt to take anything.

"Captain," said Robby, "may I have your weapon?"

Kirk looked past him at Morbius, who was watching with an expression of absolute calm, and made a decision he was not entirely sure of, which was becoming the pattern of the afternoon. He drew the phaser and put it in the android's hand.

"Thank you."

"Now," said Morbius, "aim it at Mr. Spock."

Robby turned. The movement was smooth and exact, and the phaser came up to the level of Spock's chest and stopped there, and the muzzle did not waver by so much as the width of a hair. Spock stayed where he was. McCoy came half out of his chair and Kirk put a hand on his arm.

"Fire," said Morbius.

Nothing happened.

It was not a refusal. That was the part Kirk remembered afterward. Robby did not lower the weapon, or protest, or look to anybody for instruction. He stopped, with the phaser level and his finger where a finger should be, as fixed as a figure cast in bronze, and every second after that made the room colder.

"Fire," Morbius said again.

Robby did not move at all.

"Enough. Return the captain's weapon."

The android came out of it between one instant and the next, reversed the phaser, and offered it back grip first. Kirk took it. The casing was exactly as warm as his own hand had left it.

"He is incapable of harming a living, thinking being," Morbius said, "under any order, including mine. The prohibition is

not a rule I have imposed. It is in the construction, and it cannot be argued with, and I have never found the end of it." He turned his glass a quarter turn on the table. "You will want that in your report. Put it in. It is the only assurance I can give you, and it happens to be the only one worth having."

"It's a hell of a demonstration, Doctor," McCoy said.

"It is a demonstration you would have insisted upon eventually."

"No," said McCoy. "I wouldn't have."

Kirk holstered the phaser and looked at the android standing quietly in the middle of the room, at the closed patient face of a machine that had just been ordered by the only person on its planet to kill a man, and had not.

"Robby," he said. "Did Doctor Morbius build you?"

Robby looked back at him. "Doctor Morbius is my responsibility."

It was not an answer, and Kirk let the silence say so.

Chapter Ten

THE MAN WHO STAYED

KIRK LET THE SUBJECT OF THE ANDROID REST WHERE IT LAY, AND PUT THE CONVERSATION WHERE IT HAD TO GO.

"Doctor Morbius. Starfleet's file says that Captain Adams reported attacks on his people, and that his last transmission recommended no vessel come down here. That's where our records stop. What happened after that?"

Morbius looked out the window. "The attacks continued."

"From what?"

"I do not know."

"You've had twenty years."

"I am aware of the passage of time, Captain."

Kirk let that pass. There was no profit in it, and he had the impression Morbius had been waiting for him to take the bait.

"And the Bellerophon?"

Morbius was quiet several seconds. Somewhere at the back of the house a clock ticked, which struck Kirk as an extraordinary

thing to hear on a dead world.

"When Captain Adams decided at last to abandon the planet," Morbius said, "they attempted to take the ship out of orbit."

Beside Kirk, Ostrow leaned forward a little.

"They never escaped."

"What happened?"

"The Bellerophon began to descend."

"Engine failure?"

"No."

"Navigational?"

"No." Morbius turned from the window and looked at him directly for the first time since they had sat down. "The ship was pulled down."

For a moment Kirk was certain he had misheard. "Pulled."

"Out of orbit. Against full power."

Spock's attention came up off the table like a hand closing. "By what mechanism?"

"If I knew that, Mr. Spock, I should have spent the last twenty years very differently."

"What was the magnitude of the force?"

"Large enough. I have no better figure and I decline to invent one for your record."

Morbius's voice had gone quieter, and Kirk understood that he was no longer being difficult. He was describing something.

"She fought it. Adams did everything a man could do with the ship he had. It made no difference at all. She was dragged down through the atmosphere and broken on the surface."

McCoy stared at him. "And you survived that."

"I was not aboard."

The words were perfectly simple and they made the room no easier to sit in. Kirk let the silence stand and watched the man who had made it. Morbius had told this story before, he thought, though there had been nobody on the planet to tell it to. He had told it to himself, and worn it smooth.

Kirk was still deciding how hard to push when Spock, who suffered from no such hesitation, went straight at it.

"You remained on the surface while the expedition evacuated."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I believed the danger would pass."

"Did it?"

Morbius offered nothing, and the silence he left was the most informative thing he had said.

Ostrow had spoken almost not at all since they had come through the door. Now he reached into his field case and brought out a data slate, and Morbius saw it before the screen had even come alive. Something went across the older man's face, quick and involuntary, and Kirk, who had been watching for it, still could not have named it. Recognition, certainly. Under that, something nearer alarm.

The four pages came up on the slate.

Morbius looked at them for a long moment. "You have those."

"They were transmitted before the expedition was lost," Os-

trow said. "They are the only archaeological material that survived it."

Morbius rose from the table, and did not appear to notice that he had.

Ostrow enlarged the third page, and there it was, the handwriting in the margin beside the recurring figure, the question that had eaten six years of a Vulcan's life.

Containment?

"I have spent six years on these pages," Ostrow said.

"Why?"

"Because no one knew what they meant."

"And you do?"

"No."

Kirk saw that the answer surprised Morbius, and that the surprise was not entirely unwelcome to him. A man alone for twenty years, he thought, learns to expect other people to arrive with their conclusions already formed.

"But I know that you believed this symbol signified containment," Ostrow said.

Morbius's eyes stayed on the screen. "I believed a great many things twenty years ago."

"Was that one of them?"

"Yes."

"What was being contained?"

Morbius turned from the display, and for the first time his control let irritation through. "You are assuming the word was correct."

"I am asking whether you still believe it was."

"You have four pages, Doctor, from an investigation that ran for months and was never completed. You cannot reconstruct what we found from fragments."

"No," Ostrow said. "That is why I came."

Nobody said anything. Kirk came close to smiling, and kept it off his face with some effort, because for the first time since they had beamed down, somebody had gotten through.

Morbius looked at the Vulcan, then went to the window and stood with his back to the room. Past the terrace the plateau ran away to the ridges, red and empty under the green sky, and somewhere under all of it lay whatever the Bellerophon had found.

Kirk let him stand. In his experience a man on the edge of deciding something should not be crowded.

When Morbius turned around, his voice had changed. "You have all come a very long way to satisfy your curiosity."

"No," Kirk said. "We came because forty-one people died here."

Morbius's eyes moved to him.

"And because whatever killed them was strong enough to pull a starship out of orbit and put it in the ground. That is not a local matter, Doctor. If it is still here, every ship that enters this system is at risk, and so is every world within reach of it. I am not prepared to file a report that says a man on the surface told me to go away and I went."

That landed. Kirk watched him take it in, and watched him decide against it.

"Then file your report," Morbius said. "Write that Edward Morbius survived. That he is in excellent health. That he re-

quires nothing from Starfleet and asks only to be left in peace. That is a complete account, and it has the advantage of being true."

"It isn't complete and you know it."

"It is complete as far as I am prepared to take it."

"Doctor." Kirk kept his voice level. "My orders are to determine what happened to that expedition. Those orders were written twenty years after the fact by people who believed every soul aboard the Bellerophon was dead. One of them is standing in front of me. That changes the situation, and it changes it beyond anything I'm authorized to decide on my own."

Morbius said nothing.

"So tonight I'll transmit a full report to Starfleet Command and request instructions. What they send back will decide a great deal about how the rest of this goes. It may be a survey mandate. It may be an order to take you off this planet and seal the system for another twenty years. I don't know, and I won't pretend to." Kirk paused. "I'd rather go into that conversation able to tell them what you've told me."

"You will not do it with my help."

"Then I'll do it without."

For the first time Morbius looked as though Kirk had said something that genuinely interested him. "And how do you propose to proceed?"

"The way we would on any uncharted world. Survey parties. Instruments. A great deal of tedious work, most of which my first officer enjoys more than I do." Kirk let some of the edge show. "We have a starship in orbit, Doctor, with sensors that can

map most of this hemisphere in a day and a half. I'd prefer to spend that time listening to you instead. But I'll spend it either way."

He took out his communicator and opened it, there at the man's own table, and did not look away from him while he did it.

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here, Captain."

"Mr. Scott, I want you on the surface in the morning with an engineering detail and a full geological survey package. Subsurface sounding gear, everything we've got. There are readings under this plateau nobody can resolve and I want them resolved."

The pause that followed was the kind Kirk had learned to read as a chief engineer looking at a duty roster and deciding which of his people were about to lose a rest period.

"Aye, sir. How deep are we soundin'?"

"I don't know. That's the problem."

"Then I'll bring the heavy set."

"Do that. Kirk out."

He closed the communicator and put it back on his belt, and only then looked up.

Something crossed the older man's face that Kirk could not read.

Spock chose that moment to speak, in the tone he used when he was being scrupulously polite to someone he had already stopped believing. "Doctor Morbius. Our instruments register readings below this plateau that we cannot resolve. They extend to a depth our sensors are unable to measure."

"Interference," said Morbius. "This planet is full of it."

"That is one explanation."

"It is the one I have."

Ostrow had not moved from his place at the table, and the four pages still glowed on the slate in front of him. "Doctor. One question, and I will not ask another today. Does that symbol recur elsewhere in the material you recovered?"

Morbius looked at him for a considerable time.

"There is no material," he said.

It was a flat and entirely uncomplicated lie, and it was delivered so simply that nobody in the room found it worth challenging. Kirk had been lied to by experts, and the interesting thing about this one was that Morbius did not appear to expect it to be believed. He seemed to be putting up a wall and inviting them to notice its height.

Chapter Eleven

THE MIND'S EYE

Twenty years earlier

THE HOUSE HAD WALLS NOW.

Not all of them, and not yet in the places Julia would have chosen, but enough that a person could stand inside and see what it was going to be. Quinn's people had sealed the western section first. Two bedrooms faced the ridge, with a smaller room between them that Julia had claimed for the child within about four minutes of the roof going on. Morbius had observed that an infant did not require a room of its own. Julia had replied that this was exactly the observation of a man who had never been woken six times in one night, and that she intended to see him corrected on the point.

Adams approved the layout and declined to involve himself further, which Julia thought showed good sense in a captain.

Robby built most of it.

He worked without hurry and almost without sound. Wall sections rated for four men and a lifter went up easily in his hands. He could hold a beam motionless while Quinn measured it twice and then a third time, purely because Quinn disliked being made unnecessary, and he never once remarked on it.

He also never stopped watching.

Julia had the pattern by now. When Adams came onto the site Robby knew where he was without appearing to look. When Farman came, his eyes went to the phase pistol once and then away. Engineers could work beside him for hours, but if one of them moved unexpectedly behind him he had turned before the man finished his second step.

He did none of that with her.

Lately he did almost none of it with Edward, either, and Julia had not yet decided what she thought about that.

That morning her husband found the android waiting beside the eastern foundation while two engineers argued about a support brace.

"Robby."

He turned at once.

"I would like to go below. There is a section I want to examine."

One of the engineers glanced over at that. Robby did not answer immediately. He looked toward the shade canopy, where Julia was sitting on a cargo case with a stack of geological records and one boot up on another crate.

Morbius looked up. "You needn't ask her permission."

"I did not."

Julia looked up. "He was checking whether I was coming."

"Yes," said Robby.

Her husband exhaled through his nose, which was as close as he came to losing an argument in public. Julia closed the record tablet and reached for her jacket.

"Then I suppose I am."

They went down a little after noon, and Robby took them farther than he ever had.

The chambers Julia knew gave way to passages Morbius had seen only as gaps in incomplete scans. The architecture changed as they went, though it took her a while to see how. The walls, everywhere else smooth to the point of blankness, carried patterns here: lines so fine that at first she took them for scratches, until she moved her head and the whole surface reorganized itself into something else.

Morbius stopped twice to record them. Robby waited without comment.

"Edward."

"One moment."

"You said that ten minutes ago."

"They are not decorative."

"I didn't say they were."

"They change according to the position of the observer."

"So does your mood," said Julia, and went on past him.

Robby went with her. Behind them her husband stood a moment longer with his recorder, and then, she was pleased to hear, hurried to catch up.

The passage ended in a chamber no bigger than the Bellerophon's transporter room, and almost entirely empty.

At the center of it stood a chair.

Human was the first word that came to her, and it was wrong, and she knew it was wrong while she was thinking it. The proportions were not right. The back rose too high. The seat was broader than any body needed. From behind, a curved arm came up and over and ended in a translucent plate set exactly where the forehead of whoever sat there would rest.

Morbius stopped in the doorway. "What is this?"

Robby did not answer immediately, and that by itself changed the room.

Julia studied him. "You know what it is."

"Yes."

Her husband stepped toward the chair, and Robby moved.

There was nothing threatening in it. He did not block the way and he did not raise a hand. He came to occupy the space between the man and the machine, the way a wall occupies space, and Morbius stopped walking.

"What does it do?"

Robby looked past him at the thing. "The Krell called it an educator."

"An educational device."

"The word is approximate."

"Then give me the accurate one."

"There is no accurate equivalent in your language."

"There usually isn't," Julia said.

Her husband did not acknowledge that she had spoken. "Describe its function."

Robby appeared to look for a way in. "You possess images that do not come from your eyes."

"Memory."

"More than memory."

Julia had it first, and was sorry she did. "Imagination."

Robby turned to her. "Partly." He raised one hand and touched two fingers to his own forehead, lightly, the way a man indicates a place that aches. "The mind sees what the eyes do not. Objects. Places. Events that have not occurred. Things that cannot exist except within thought."

"The mind's eye," Julia said.

"Yes."

Morbius was looking at the chair again. "And this machine?"

"It permits the mind's eye to act through the system."

"Act how?"

"I do not know how to explain that with the concepts available to you."

"Try."

Robby said nothing at all, which Julia was coming to understand was his way of declining rather than his way of failing.

Her husband went around him to the educator. The plate above the chair was clear, and inside it lay structures too fine for the eye to follow, layer behind layer, like light frozen partway through happening.

He reached for it.

Julia caught his wrist.

"No."

Morbius looked down at her hand, and then at her face. "I am examining it."

"With your fingers."

"It is an instrument."

"It connects to your forehead."

"According to Robby."

"According to the only one in this room who knows what it is."

"I am not a person," Robby said.

Julia did not let go of her husband. "We'll argue about that later."

Robby considered that, and said nothing.

Morbius withdrew his hand, and she released him, and neither of them said anything about it.

"How was it used?"

Robby indicated the chair. "The operator sits. The interface makes contact here." Again the two fingers, at the center of his own forehead. "Then the machine opens."

"Opens what?"

"The operator."

Julia did not like that answer, and liked less how long it took her husband to ask the obvious question, so she asked it. "Opens him to what?"

Robby's eyes stayed on Morbius. "To himself."

Her husband stood perfectly still.

Julia knew that stillness. She had seen it the day the black surface came up out of the trench, and the day the door opened,

and the morning Robby first said good afternoon to a room full of people who had been certain he could not speak. It was not curiosity. Curiosity has a stopping point, somewhere past interest and short of danger. Whatever this was in him had none, and she had known that about Edward Morbius since about three weeks after she married him.

"Has a human being ever used it?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you know what it would do to one?"

"No."

"Do you know what it did to the Krell?"

"Yes."

Her husband came around fast. "How?"

"They used it routinely."

"And survived."

"Yes."

"They were not human," Julia said.

Morbius considered her. "No. They were not."

"That's the important part."

"It is one important part."

"It is the only part that matters before a man puts that thing against his head."

"Julia, we came to this planet to learn."

"We came to this planet to study."

"There is a difference between those only if you are afraid of the answer."

She took her hand off his arm and stepped back from him. "No. There's a difference if you want to be alive tomorrow."

Robby watched the two of them and offered nothing.

Morbius turned back to the machine. "What did the Krell use it for?"

"Development."

"Of the mind."

"Yes."

"To learn more quickly."

Robby hesitated. "That is not what it was for."

"Then what was it for?"

"To make what was inside available."

"Available to whom?"

"To the Krell who used it."

"And nothing else? No transfer of knowledge? No library, no record, no instruction?"

"The machine did not give them knowledge."

Julia was watching her husband's face when that answer landed, and she saw that of everything the android had said in the last twenty minutes, this was the one that mattered to him.

"It brought forward what was already there," Morbius said.

Robby inclined his head. "Closer."

Julia stepped between her husband and the chair. "That's enough."

He stared at her.

"For today," she said.

"I have no intention of using it."

"Good."

"I said I have no intention."

"And I said good."

They argued the whole way up, in the lowered voices of two people who have learned to fight quietly in confined spaces, and by the time they reached the surface they had stopped speaking altogether, which with Edward always came next.

By evening the eastern wall of the house was standing.

Adams came by after dinner, walked the framing with Quinn, and signed off on the schedule. Quinn said they would have power and water in four days and was probably telling the truth. Julia stood in the unroofed bedroom and decided where the bed would go. Her husband objected to the placement on the grounds that the morning light would fall directly across his face.

Julia informed him that this was the entire purpose of morning.

He almost smiled. For a few hours that evening, everything was ordinary.

That was the part she remembered afterward. Not the chamber, not the chair. The ordinary hours.

The temporary quarters were cramped, the bunk was tolerable, and the night came down cool off the ridges. Julia went to sleep listening to the wind work at the unfinished wall panels, woke once when the child shifted hard enough to make her catch her breath, and kept a hand there until it settled.

Edward was asleep beside her.

At least she believed he was.

When she woke again, the light coming through the temporary window covering had gone pale green, and the other side of the bunk was empty.

She put her hand on the sheet.

It was cold.

"Edward."

Nothing. She checked the washroom, and it was empty, and his field clothes were gone from the hook, and so was his recorder from the shelf where he put it every night of his life.

Julia closed her eyes a moment.

She did not need to search the site, and she did not need to wake Adams. There was one place on that planet her husband would have gone in the dark without telling her, and she had stood in it eleven hours earlier with her hand around his wrist.

Robby was outside, carrying a sealed equipment case toward the laboratory frame.

"Robby."

He stopped. Whatever was in her voice made him set the case down on the stone, carefully, and turn around.

"Where is Edward?"

"I do not know."

"Did you see him leave?"

"No."

"How long have you been out here?"

"Thirty-seven minutes."

She was already moving. "Come with me."

They crossed the plateau a good deal faster than a woman five months along had any business crossing it, and Robby shortened his stride twice to stay beside her, unasked, and said nothing about it.

At the entrance he said, "You should not hurry."

"Then keep up."

"I am keeping up."

"Good."

They went down. The corridors lit ahead of them, obliging as ever, and Julia thought, with a clarity that frightened her later, that the place had been waiting all night for somebody to come back.

The child moved again. She put a hand against her side and did not slow down.

The door of the chamber stood open.

Edward was on the floor.

For one moment she saw only the shape of him and the dark shape of the chair behind him, and that moment went on a long time, and then she was across the room and down on her knees on the black floor beside him.

"Edward."

His eyes were closed. There was blood under his nose, dried at one corner of his mouth. At the center of his forehead the skin was reddened in a clean oval, the exact size and shape of the plate that hung above the chair.

She put two fingers against his throat and found nothing at all.

She moved them, and pressed, and said his name again, and there was nothing.

Robby was beside her. "Move him," she said.

He hesitated.

"Now."

Robby lifted him as though he weighed nothing at all, and

Julia got her hand flat on her husband's chest and went looking again, and found it.

Faint. Uneven. There.

She let her eyes close for less than a second, which was all she permitted herself.

"Get him to the surface."

Robby turned toward the corridor with Morbius in his arms.

Julia looked back once at the educator. The plate above the empty chair was still glowing, softly, the way a lamp glows in a room where somebody has just gone out.

Then she went after them.

Chapter Twelve

ALTAIRA

The light had gone long and low across the plateau while they talked, and the room had taken the color of the sky outside, which was the color of deep water with a lamp held under it. Morbius had not moved to turn anything on. Kirk had the impression the man could have found every object in the house blindfolded, and probably had.

He waited until Morbius had come back from the window and sat down again. Then he put the last of it on the table.

"There's one more thing my report has to account for," Kirk said. "The manifest. Forty-two names went into the Altair system aboard the Bellerophon, and Starfleet has carried all forty-two as dead for twenty years. You are one of them. I have to say something about the other forty-one, and about anyone else who is on this planet."

"There is no one else on this planet."

It came a fraction too quickly, and Morbius heard it himself,

and Kirk watched him hear it.

Spock had already opened the file on his tricorder, and he read from it in the flat, courteous voice that made the thing worse rather than better. "The Bellerophon's manifest lists Julia Morbius, planetary geologist. The expedition's medical records, transmitted in the ordinary way before the loss, show her under the care of the ship's surgeon and pregnant, in her fourth month at the date of the last medical report Starfleet holds. That report predates the loss by some months."

Nobody at the table moved.

"My wife is dead," Morbius said.

"I'm sorry," said Kirk, and meant it.

"She lived six years after the ship." He turned his glass a quarter turn on the table, and stopped, as though he had caught himself doing something undignified. "The child was born eleven days after it fell. On this planet, in that room, with no physician within twenty light years and no help of any kind except what I could provide myself. She lived. She is nineteen years old."

McCoy had his elbows on the table. When he spoke he was no longer sparring with anybody. "Doctor. What did your wife die of?"

"Natural causes."

"That's not a diagnosis. That's a phrase people use at funerals."

"It is the phrase I have," Morbius said. "There was no physician. There was no laboratory worth the name, and the instruments I had were built to read rock. She was well, and then she was tired, and then she was ill, and it took less than a season, and

at the end of it I could not have told you what I was treating." He looked at McCoy without any hostility at all, and that was harder to answer. "You would like a better answer. So would I. I have had nineteen years to want one."

"Was she in pain?"

"At the end. Yes."

"I'm sorry," McCoy said.

"So am I." Morbius turned his glass back to where it had been. "It was not the planet, Doctor, if that is your next question. Nothing came out of the dark and took her. She died the way people have always died, which is the one part of this world that turned out to be entirely ordinary."

McCoy let out a breath. "Doctor, she's been alone out here her whole life."

"She has not been alone. She has had me." Morbius stood. "And since you will otherwise report that I am concealing her, which would be inaccurate and inconvenient, you had better meet her. Robby."

The android had already turned toward the inner door.

She came in a few moments later, and Kirk, who had been prepared for a great many things, found that he had not been prepared for this.

She was perhaps twenty, fair-haired, in something light and plainly made by hand. She came to the end of the table and stopped, and looked at the four of them one after another with a directness that had nothing of shyness in it and nothing of flirtation either. It was not the way a young woman looks at strangers. It was the way a serious person looks at an exhibit

described to her all her life that has now, unaccountably, turned up in her father's house.

"My daughter," Morbius said. "Altaira."

"Miss Morbius," Kirk said, and stood. The others stood with him, and she watched them do it with open interest, as though she had read about the custom somewhere and was pleased to find it accurate.

"You are the captain," she said. "I have heard your voice. It was different through the speaker."

"Most voices are. This is Mr. Spock, my first officer. Doctor McCoy, my chief surgeon. Doctor Ostrow."

"My daughter has had the advantage of a somewhat concentrated education," Morbius said. "She has read every book in this house."

"That's a good many books," McCoy said.

"Four thousand and eleven," said Altaira. "Six of them are in languages my father does not read, so I taught myself, and two of those are only poetry, which I think was a waste of the shelf. I also have the ship's technical library, the whole of the Federation cultural archive to the year the Bellerophon left, and hours of recordings." She said all of it the way another young woman might have given the time of day. "I have never had a conversation with anyone but my father and Robby."

Spock's eyebrow rose a considerable distance. "Doctor Morbius, that is a remarkable body of study for one person."

"She had no competing demands upon her attention," said Morbius.

McCoy's jaw tightened, and Kirk put a hand flat on the table,

a small movement that meant not here and not now, and McCoy let it go.

She considered each of them in turn, and her eyes rested on Spock a moment longer than on the others, and then on Ostrow. She did not ask. Kirk watched her decide not to, and thought that whatever else Edward Morbius had failed to give this girl, he had given her a formidable amount of self-command.

"You came down in the open," she said, "three kilometers out, and rode in with Robby. I watched you from the terrace."

"We did."

"Why?"

"Because those were the coordinates your father sent us."

She turned her head toward her father, and something passed between them that Kirk could not read, and she let that one go as well.

"I have seen men before," she said, to Kirk, quite calmly. "In my father's recordings. A great many of them. They were not standing where you are standing."

"No," Kirk said. "I don't imagine they were."

"Altaira." Morbius did not raise his voice. He did not have to. "The captain is leaving."

"Yes, Father." She inclined her head to the four of them with a formality that would have looked absurd on anyone else, and left the room the way she had come into it, without hurrying and without looking back.

Kirk let a moment go by. "Doctor. My report goes out tonight. We should have Starfleet's answer by this time tomorrow, and we'll begin the survey in the morning either way. I'd

like to come back, at whatever hour suits you."

Morbius's courtesy came down over everything like a lid closing. "You will do as you think best, Captain. You have made that clear."

Robby brought the vehicle around and drove them back across the plateau to the beam-down coordinates, and nobody said a great deal on the way. McCoy sat with his arms folded and his jaw set. Ostrow watched the ridges go by as though he could see through them.

Kirk looked back once. The house stood alone on the plateau with the last of the light on its windows, the ridges going up dark and empty behind it for kilometers in every direction, and somewhere under all of it, at a depth no instrument the Enterprise carried could reach, something had been waiting long enough to be patient about it.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Four to beam up."

◆

Altaira waited until the sound of the vehicle had gone out of hearing before she came back into the room.

Her father stood where they had left him, at the window, with the four glasses still on the table behind him and one of them untouched. She had counted. She counted most things. There was not a great deal else to do with the hours.

"Father."

"They are gone," he said, without turning.

"Two of them were not like the others."

Now he did turn.

"The tall one, and the one with the case," she said. "Their ears. Their eyebrows. The tall one did not move his face when the doctor made a joke, and the other one did not move his face at all. And the color of them, under the skin, was not the color of yours."

"You observed a great deal in four minutes."

"I have had nineteen years to practice on you, and you are only one man." She said it without any malice whatever. "Are they ill?"

"No."

"Then what are they?"

Morbius was quiet long enough that she thought, as she often did, that he might not answer at all. Then he said, "Do you remember what I have told you about the galaxy? That it is not empty. That there are a great many worlds, and that a good many of them have brought forth life, and that some of that life thinks, and builds, and asks questions."

"You have told me since I was small."

"Then you have the answer already. They are not human. They are Vulcans, from a world called Vulcan, which is a very old and very disciplined civilization, and they are as much people as you or I. More than some." He said the last of it as though it had escaped from him, and there was no one in the room to hear it but his daughter, who noticed everything.

Altaira absorbed this. "They command their feelings."

"They set them aside. It is not the same thing, and I would not recommend it to you."

"The captain does not set anything aside."

Her father looked at her a while.

"No," he said. "He does not."

She went to the table and began collecting the glasses, and took her time about it, and thought about a man's voice coming out of a speaker and then, later, out of a man.

"They are coming back tomorrow," she said.

"So the captain informs me."

"Good," said Altaira, and carried the glasses out.

Chapter Thirteen

EXO III

"There is a question every captain learns to ask early, and it has nothing to do with science," Kirk said to the recorder. "Not what is it. Who benefits."

He let the recorder run a moment.

"Forty of them were dead by the end of it. One more died later, of something ordinary, which I was told at the time was the only ordinary thing that ever happened on Altair IV. I had one man's word for all of it, and it was four days before I understood how much of that word was worth having. I set it down here the way it was given to me, because that is how I had it when I made my decisions."

◆

The briefing room was empty except for the three of them, and the planet turned slowly on the screen at the end of the table, green and unhurried, with the terminator creeping up on the

plateau where the house stood.

Kirk had not eaten. He had gone from the transporter room to the bridge and from the bridge to here, and had spent most of the trip up thinking about a phaser held perfectly level at Spock's chest.

"All right, Bones. You asked me on the plateau." He looked at McCoy. "Exo III."

McCoy sat back. "I read the report."

"You read my report. There were about four things in it I couldn't put in a way that would survive a records clerk." Kirk turned his cup a half turn and did not drink from it. "There was an android down there called Ruk. Eight feet of him, roughly. He had been running under that ice longer than anybody could calculate, maintaining machinery for a civilization that was not there anymore. Spock will give you the figures. I only know how he sounded."

"Approximately five hundred thousand years," Spock said.

"Ruk told me what happened to the people who built him." Kirk looked up. "They made the androids. The androids got better at everything than the people were. And at some point the people worked out where that was going, and moved to shut them down."

McCoy was very still.

"They didn't get it done," Kirk said. "Ruk put it to me as an equation. The Old Ones had to be destroyed because survival cancels out programming. He had forgotten it for half a million years, and I watched him remember it standing two meters in front of me."

Nobody said anything for a moment. On the screen the terminator reached the plateau and the house went into the dark.

"You are describing Exo III," Spock said. "This is not Exo III."

"No. It's a dead civilization nobody has heard of, with an intact machine standing in a man's sitting room, and forty people in the ground." Kirk let that sit. "Doctor Morbius says something on that planet killed his expedition and he does not know what it was. He also says there is a machine down there that was on this world before anyone from Earth ever saw it, and that nobody woke it up, and that it came back on by itself." He looked from one of them to the other. "I'd like somebody to tell me why I shouldn't put those two sentences next to each other."

"Because they do not fit," Spock said.

"Then make them not fit, Mr. Spock. I'd be glad of it."

Spock folded his hands. He had, Kirk noticed, brought no notes with him, which meant he had done the work in advance and was not going to enjoy delivering it.

"I have compared the sensor record of Robby with the Exo III material. There are similarities of principle. The power system is of a kind we have encountered nowhere else, and the two are not identical, but they are not unrelated either. Convergent engineering is possible. Two species facing the same problem may arrive at the same solution, as unrelated creatures on unrelated worlds arrive independently at the eye."

"And?"

"And that is the most I can say. The alternative explanations are a good deal less comfortable, and I have no evidence for any

of them."

"Then let me put the part I can't get past," Kirk said. "On Exo III the machines killed the people who made them. Ruk told me that himself, and he was proud of it in whatever way a thing like Ruk is proud of anything. On this planet the machine stands in the corner of a man's sitting room and will not lift a hand against anybody, and looks after the man who found it, and drives his guests in from the beam-down point because the walk would tire them." He looked at the screen. "The same kind of technology. The opposite outcome. Either something happened here that did not happen there, or somebody made very sure of it."

"That is a useful formulation," Spock said, "and it rests on two examples. Two points establish a line only in geometry."

"I know what it rests on. I want it written down anyway, because if we find out which of those two it is, we'll have most of this."

McCoy had been quiet a while. "There's a third thing neither of you has said, so I will. A machine that protects one man isn't safe. It's loyal." He turned his cup slowly. "Loyalty has a subject, Jim. Ours happens not to be it."

Nobody had an answer for that.

"There is a further question," Spock said, "which I have been unable to set aside since the surface. Doctor Morbius states that the android was inactive when the Bellerophon arrived, that nothing was repaired, nothing connected and no power supplied, and that he restored himself."

"That's what he said."

"Consider what a shutdown is. It is an order, given by whoever is doing the shutting down. If the builders of that facility deactivated their artificial population because they had become afraid of it, they had no reason whatever to provide a means by which it might resume. One does not fit a lock and then hand over the key."

Kirk sat forward. "Go on."

"Then either something was left attached to that order, a condition of some kind, or the shutdown was less complete than it appeared, or that android was not shut down in the manner of the others. I can see no fourth possibility." Spock paused. "There is one precedent. On Exo III the machines lay dormant for approximately five hundred thousand years, and Ruk did not wake on a schedule. He woke when human beings arrived."

The room was very quiet.

"So the question isn't only who built him," Kirk said slowly. "It's who let him wake. And what the condition was."

"Yes."

"And if the condition was somebody arriving, then the Bellerophon started this the moment she made orbit." Kirk looked at the planet, dark now on the screen. "Eleven weeks before she came out of the sky."

"That is suggestive," Spock said. "It is not proof."

"No. Put it in the file anyway."

McCoy shifted in his chair. "Jim, that machine had a phaser on Spock's chest at a range of two meters and was ordered to fire. Twice."

"I know. I was there."

"It didn't fire."

"It didn't fire in Morbius's house," Kirk said, "on Morbius's furniture, in a demonstration Morbius arranged, for an audience Morbius selected. Bones, I'm not saying it was staged. I'm saying I've been handed a safety certificate by the only man on the planet who knows what the machine can do, and he handed it to me before I asked for it."

"That is a fair observation," said Spock.

"Thank you."

"It is also not evidence."

"I know that too." Kirk got up and went to the screen, where the planet had gone almost entirely into night. "Spock. When you asked him how many others there were, what exactly did he say?"

"He said, there is one android on this planet."

"Is."

"Yes."

"Not there was one. Not we found one." Kirk turned around. "He's a precise man. Twenty years alone with nobody to correct him and he still builds a sentence like a lawyer. He answered the question he wanted instead of the one you asked."

McCoy rubbed his eyes. "All right. Suppose you're right. Suppose that thing killed forty of them. Why is Morbius alive? Why is his daughter alive? He's had twenty years down there sleeping under the same roof as it, and it does the dishes."

"That," Kirk said, "is the part that keeps me up."

"There is a further difficulty," said Spock. "On Exo III, the androids destroyed their makers and then continued. They

maintained the installation and waited. Here, if the same thing occurred, we would expect to find a functioning civilization of machines. We find one android, a man, a young woman, and a house."

"So either it didn't happen here," Kirk said, "or something stopped it."

"Or something else occurred entirely, of which we presently know nothing."

McCoy looked between them. "You two realize you're sitting here calmly discussing whether a fellow who spent the afternoon serving us cold cider is living with the thing that killed his friends."

"Yes," said Spock.

"Just checking."

Kirk went back to the table and sat down, and for a while nobody said anything at all.

"There's one more thing," he said at last, "and I like it least. Adams reported the android the week he found him. Scans, contact recordings, all of it, and then for eleven weeks the reports go on coming and the android is never in them again. Not a line. A Starfleet captain sends home the most significant discovery of his career and then simply stops mentioning it, and eleven weeks after that his ship comes out of orbit and hits the ground." He looked up. "Somebody down there decided what Starfleet was going to be told. I don't know yet which one of them it was."

◆

He wrote the report himself, and it took him three hours, which was two and a half hours longer than Starfleet allowed for such things and about a tenth of what the subject deserved.

He put in all of it. The house no search mission had seen, and Morbius's claim of a screen that was not operating. The android, the three facts Morbius had conceded, and the many he had not. The demonstration with the phaser, exactly as it happened, including his own doubts about it. Adams's silence. The subsurface readings and the depth at which the sensors gave up. The young woman born on that planet who had never had a conversation with anyone but her father and a machine.

He read it over once and added a last paragraph recommending a full scientific mission under starship escort, and then sat looking at that paragraph a long while before he decided to leave it in.

Uhura sent it at 0140 ship time.

The answer came back at 0655, priority, over Starfleet Command's own authentication, and Kirk read it standing up in the middle of his quarters with his uniform half on.

The Federation Council had been convened during the night. Doctor Edward Morbius was, as of that transmission, the surviving member of a lost Starfleet expedition and a material witness to the loss of a starship with forty hands. He was to be brought aboard the Enterprise at the earliest practicable opportunity and returned to Earth. His daughter, being a Federation citizen born of Federation nationals, was to accompany him.

The artificial being designated Robby was not to be brought aboard the Enterprise under any circumstances.

Kirk read that line three times.

No exception for observation. No exception for study. All examination of the android was to be conducted on the surface under the direction of the vessel's chief engineer, with security present, and no component, sample or recording of its internal systems was to be carried aboard. If the object could not be examined on the planet, it was not to be examined at all.

He put the message down and finished dressing.

Spock was waiting outside the briefing room with the overnight sensor summaries, and Kirk handed him the flimsy without a word and watched him read.

"Command has been thorough," Spock said.

"Command has been frightened. That's a different thing, and it's usually faster."

"The prohibition is not unreasonable, Captain."

"It isn't unreasonable at all. It's the order I would have written." Kirk took the flimsy back. "That's what bothers me about it. Somebody at Starfleet Command read the same page I did and arrived at Exo III without ever being told about it."

McCoy came around the corner with a coffee in each hand, which was as near to an apology as he came before seven in the morning. Kirk gave him the message and waited.

McCoy read it twice, and Kirk saw him get to the second paragraph, and saw his face change.

"They want him off the planet."

"They want him off the planet."

"Jim, that man has been on that world for twenty years. He buried his wife in it. Everything he's built, everything he's

learned, whatever it is he's been protecting so hard he'd rather lie to a starship captain at his own table than talk about it, all of it is down there." McCoy set his cup down. "And you're going to walk into his house this morning and tell him he's leaving."

"Yes."

"How do you think that's going to go?"

"Badly," Kirk said. "The daughter's the part I can't work out. She's nineteen years old and she's never spoken to another living soul. Starfleet has just ordered me to put her on a starship and take her to Earth, and God knows I think she ought to see it." He looked at the door. "I also think there is exactly one person on that planet who is entitled to make that decision, and it isn't Starfleet Command and it isn't Edward Morbius."

"It's her."

"It's her."

McCoy said nothing for a moment. When he did, it was quieter than the rest of it had been. "We've seen this before, you know. One brilliant man, a long way from anybody, and a girl he keeps at home and decides what she's allowed to know."

Kirk looked up. "Where?"

And McCoy stopped.

Kirk watched him stop. It was not a man losing his thread. It was a man arriving somewhere and putting a foot down before he got there, and Kirk had known Leonard McCoy long enough to see the difference.

Spock said nothing whatever. He did not look at McCoy, and he did not look at Kirk, and the not-looking was so precise that Kirk felt it go by him like a draft from a door he had not

known was there.

"Bones."

"It doesn't matter." McCoy picked his cup back up. "An old case. It came out badly and there's nothing in it that helps her."

There was something in the room that Kirk could not put a name to, and no reason at all to pursue it, and he had a landing party to brief. He let it go.

Behind him, his first officer and his surgeon exchanged one look, and neither of them put a word of it in a log.

Spock had gone back to the sensor summaries. "Captain. Mr. Scott's detail is standing by in the transporter room."

"Then let's not keep him." Kirk finished the coffee. It was terrible. He set the cup down on the nearest console for somebody else to deal with. "Bones, you're with me. Mr. Spock, you have the ship."

"Sir." Spock's voice stopped him in the doorway. "If the prohibition is correct, and the android is what Starfleet fears it may be, then this morning we will be removing from that planet the only two people it has not harmed in twenty years."

Kirk stood there a moment.

"I'd thought of that," he said, and went to get his party.

◆

The doors closed behind him, and the two officers he had left in the corridor did not immediately move.

"You know what I nearly said in there," McCoy said.

"I do."

"Say it, then. I'd like to hear somebody say it out loud."

"Flint," said Spock.

McCoy let out a breath. "Flint."

"The parallel is imperfect."

"The parallel is close enough to put me off my food." McCoy leaned back against the bulkhead. "One brilliant man, immortal or near enough, sitting on a private planet with a library and a laboratory and no company he did not design. He built himself a daughter. Taught her everything worth knowing and a good deal that wasn't. Seventeen fields, he said, and she could play Brahms better than Brahms, and she had never once in her existence walked out of a door he had not opened for her."

"Rayna Kapec," Spock said.

"And when the day came that she had to choose for herself, between him and something else, she could not survive the choosing. It killed her. Not him. The choice." McCoy looked up. "Now tell me what I watched this afternoon."

"You watched a nineteen-year-old woman recite the contents of her father's library."

"I watched a girl who counts things because there is nothing else to count, in a house with one door and one man and one machine in it. And I'll tell you the part that's worse, Spock. Flint had to build his. This one was handed a living daughter and made the same thing out of her anyway."

Spock was silent a while, in the particular way he had when he was not disagreeing.

"There is a distinction," he said at last. "Rayna Kapec was an artifact. Altaira Morbius is not."

"Is that a distinction, or is it just materials?"

"It is the distinction upon which everything else depends, Doctor, and you know that as well as I do. It is also, I would suggest, not the useful comparison. The useful comparison is not between the daughters. It is between the fathers."

McCoy said nothing for a while. Somewhere aft, the ship went on making the small sounds it made at that hour.

"He doesn't remember her," he said finally. "Does he."

"No."

"Was that mercy?"

"It was necessary."

"That isn't what I asked."

Spock looked down the empty corridor, at nothing at all. "No," he said. "It is not."

McCoy pushed himself off the bulkhead and picked up the cup he had set down. "Then I'll tell you what I want out of this one, and you can file it wherever you file the things I say. That girl is going to be asked to choose, sooner than anybody down there is ready for. I have seen this man's work before, and I have seen how it ends." He started for the turbolift. "When it comes, I want us to be better at it than we were last time."

Spock stood where he was until the corridor was quiet again.

Then he went to the bridge, and made no entry in any log concerning the conversation.

Chapter Fourteen

THE KRELL

THE SECOND TIME KIRK CAME DOWN TO ALTAIR IV, MORBIUS WAS WAITING FOR HIM.

There was no vehicle. Robby stood at the edge of the terrace with his hands at his sides, and Morbius stood several paces in front of him with his own clasped behind his back, and out among the low trees to the west Altaira stood with one hand resting on the neck of an animal large enough to stop McCoy in the middle of a sentence.

It was a tiger, or near enough that the difference did not improve the situation. It stood shoulder-high to the girl, striped gold and black, the head broad, the forelegs heavy with muscle, and when the transporter let them go it turned and watched four men finish arriving on its planet. Its tail moved once through the grass.

"Jim," McCoy said.

"I see it."

"Good. I was beginning to think I was having another bad morning."

Ostrow had dismissed the animal altogether. He was looking past the house at the ridges, and at the ground in front of the ridges, like a man for whom the whole planet had turned transparent overnight.

Scott had not dismissed anything. "Captain. That lass is pettin' it."

Altaira heard him from thirty meters away. "He likes to be scratched here," she said, and put her fingers up under the animal's jaw, and the tiger lifted its head and closed its eyes.

"Of course he does," said McCoy.

Nothing in Morbius's face suggested that any part of this required comment.

"Captain."

"Doctor."

Kirk had decided on the way down that there was no graceful way to say it, and that Edward Morbius was not a man who would reward the attempt.

"Starfleet answered my report."

"I assumed it would."

"They want you aboard the Enterprise. You are to return to Earth with us."

Out among the trees, Altaira's hand stopped under the tiger's jaw.

Morbius did not move at all. "No."

It was not shock and it was not defiance. It was a refusal that had existed in the man before the order did, waiting for

something to attach itself to.

"Doctor, this isn't a request."

"Then Starfleet has mistaken distance for authority."

"You're a Federation citizen and the surviving member of a lost expedition."

"I was a Federation citizen when Starfleet left this world alone for twenty years."

"After Captain Adams told them not to come back."

Something tightened in the older man's face. "And you believe yourself wiser than Adams."

"No. I believe I have information he didn't."

"You have questions."

"I have forty dead people, a starship pulled out of orbit, an artificial being nobody can explain, and an installation under this plateau you have spent two decades declining to discuss." Kirk let that stand. "That's past questions, Doctor."

The tiger's head came down. Altaira kept one hand on its neck, but she was no longer looking at the animal.

"And my daughter?" Morbius said.

Kirk had known it was coming and had been unable to think of a way to blunt it. "Starfleet's order includes her."

Altaira drew breath. Her father answered before she could use it.

"She will not."

"That's her decision."

Morbius turned his head, the smallest movement he had made since they materialized and by some distance the most revealing. "Captain. My daughter has no conception of what

your world is."

"Then perhaps she should be allowed to find out."

"By being taken from the only home she has ever had."

"By being asked."

Out among the trees, Altaira's fingers tightened in the tiger's fur, and Morbius saw it. For a moment his whole attention went to her, and Kirk understood, watching him, that whatever else was or was not true about Edward Morbius, the fear was real and it was not for himself.

Then Morbius came back to him. "You came here to investigate Altair IV."

"Yes."

"And you propose to remove me before you have the faintest idea what you have found."

"I propose to follow my orders."

"Then have the intelligence to know what those orders are taking you away from."

Ostrow's head came around.

Morbius noticed, because Morbius noticed everything about Ostrow. "Doctor Ostrow has spent six years asking what lies beneath this plateau. You have been on this world two days and have already concluded that the answer will keep."

Beside Kirk, McCoy shifted his weight.

"I didn't say that."

"You did not have to."

Then, for the first time that morning, Morbius stepped aside. Behind him, at the house, Robby was standing beside a pair of doors that had been closed the day before and were open now.

"Come with me," Morbius said.

"Where?"

"To the answer to one of your questions."

"Which one?"

Morbius's eyes went to Ostrow. "Who built this world."

◆

Scott left two of his security detail at the house and came with them as far as the opening in the ridge. Robby stayed behind with the others, which Kirk noticed and did not remark on. Altaira came, and the tiger came with her, moving at her hip with the loose unbothered stride of an animal that had never in its life learned to be careful of a human being.

At the black doorway McCoy stopped. "That thing is coming underground with us."

Altaira put her palm flat on the animal's shoulder. "He always does."

"Naturally," said McCoy, and the tiger went past him without interest.

The corridor brightened ahead of Morbius as he entered it.

Kirk had read about the effect in a twenty-year-old log at two in the morning. Having it happen around his own boots was a different proposition. The light did not switch on. It arrived, pale and even, four or five meters ahead, and went out behind them at the same rate, so that the party moved through the rock inside a travelling pocket of light that got where they were going slightly before they did.

Scott ran his tricorder along the wall as he walked. "Captain."

"Mr. Scott."

"I've six materials analyses here and they disagree with one another."

"Which one is right?"

"None of them, sir. That's what I'm tellin' you."

Morbius kept walking.

They went down farther than Kirk had expected. The first turn became a ramp, and the ramp became a corridor, and the corridor ended at a rail cut into the rock, and beyond the rail there was no more rock.

Ostrow stopped walking, and said nothing at all, and Kirk had seen that happen to men before, though rarely to Vulcans.

Below them lay a city under the planet.

Not a city as a human being would build one. No streets, no windows, nothing made to suit a body walking from one place to another. There were geometric masses set on levels that fell away into dark, and spans crossing gulfs too wide for the eye to price, and shafts of moving light going down out of sight, and machinery on a scale Kirk's mind kept trying to convert into architecture, because architecture was the only category he had for anything that size. The far wall was not visible. There may not have been one.

Scott said something in Gaelic, quietly.

"That good?" said McCoy.

"No, Doctor. That's me runnin' out of engineering."

Morbius went to the rail. "This is one peripheral installa-

tion."

Kirk turned to look at him. "Peripheral."

"Yes."

Ostrow found his voice at last. "How large is the entire complex?"

"I have no idea."

"You have lived here twenty years."

"I have lived here twenty years and I have no idea, Doctor, and if that satisfies you then you are a worse scientist than your file suggests."

Something in that answer reached Ostrow where nothing else had. Kirk watched him take it and put it away and go on standing there with his hands closed behind his back.

Morbius touched a control set into the rail, and a section of the dark below them came up bright, showing a suspended structure like an enormous lens hanging in nothing.

"The people who built this place called themselves the Krell."

Ostrow closed his eyes. It lasted no longer than a blink, and when he opened them again the scholar who had spent six years with four pages had been replaced, briefly, by someone a good deal younger.

"The Krell," he said.

"The word is in the material you showed me yesterday."

"Not as a word I could identify."

"No."

"You could have given it to Starfleet twenty years ago."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because a name is not understanding."

"No," said Ostrow. "It is the beginning of it."

Whatever passed between the two of them then had very little to do with Vulcan discipline or with human pride, and Kirk left it where it lay.

"How old?" he asked.

"The installation is upward of two hundred thousand years old."

McCoy was looking out across the chamber. "And it still runs."

"Much of it."

"Where are they?"

Morbius turned toward the dark. "Gone."

"How?"

"For twenty years," Morbius said, "I have tried to answer that question."

Kirk came up to the rail beside him. "And?"

"You will want me to tell you they were primitives who reached beyond themselves and were punished for it. They were not. By every measure I have been able to apply, the Krell had passed us so completely that comparison stops being useful. Their physics. Their energy systems. Their handling of matter. Their mathematics, which I cannot follow and Doctor Ostrow will not be able to follow either, and I say that without any pleasure at all." He looked down into his city. "We are children who have wandered into an abandoned laboratory and are picking up the tools."

Scott bristled on instinct. "Speak for yourself, Doctor."

"Mr. Scott, there is machinery beneath your boots whose waste output would drive your starship."

Scott opened his mouth, looked at his tricorder, and shut it again.

"They had solved problems we have not yet learned how to state," Morbius said. "They reshaped this planet. They reached other worlds. They made artificial life."

Kirk thought of a gray figure standing patiently beside a house.

"Then what happened to them?"

Morbius was quiet for a moment. "One night," he said. "They died."

McCoy's head came up. "All of them."

"All of them I have ever been able to account for."

"War?"

"There is no evidence of one."

"Plague?"

"No."

"Their world turning on them? Climate, atmosphere, anything?"

"No."

"So something killed an entire civilization in a single night," Kirk said, "and left the machines running."

"Yes."

"And you stayed."

Morbius turned and faced him. "Would you have left?"

Kirk did not answer at once, because the honest answer took a moment to find and was not comfortable when he found it.

If the Enterprise had come on this place intact, if Spock had brought him proof that a people had climbed this high and then gone out in a night, he knew exactly how hard it would have been to give the order to break orbit.

"Maybe," he said.

Morbius's smile was thin and entirely without warmth. "At least that is honest."

Kirk turned back to the rail and looked out at it a while, at the bridges and the shafts of moving light and the machinery going down into a dark his instruments could not price, and thought about the order folded in his pocket.

It had been a simple thing to carry down here. Twenty-eight words, authenticated, from men who had never seen this. Take the witness off the planet and bring him home.

It was not going to be a simple thing to carry back up.

Chapter Fifteen

WHAT CAME BACK

Morbius kept recordings of all of it, which is the single strangest fact in this entire account. A man who lied to me for two days about nearly everything had spent twenty years setting down, in detail and without flattery, the exact process by which he became what he became.

The rest of what follows is in the Bellerophon's medical log, in Lieutenant Quinn's engineering notes, and in one place I did not expect. The facility beneath that plateau kept its own record of what it did that night, and it kept it for twenty years, and nobody ever asked it.

◆

Twenty years earlier

Edward Morbius woke to the sound of two women arguing about him.

The voices had no meaning at first. They rose and fell somewhere past the light, one impatient and familiar, the other measured in the way physicians become measured when they would rather not admit to being worried.

He opened his eyes.

The ceiling belonged to the Bellerophon's medical bay. He knew that before he knew where his own hands were, before he understood the pressure around his arm or the cold weight of the band across his forehead.

He also knew that one of the ceiling panels had been installed incorrectly.

The thought arrived whole, the way a name arrives. The fastening points were set at sixteen-centimeter intervals. The third support brace had been seated two millimeters high on the starboard side, which altered the load across the panel by less than one percent and would make no difference under any ordinary condition. Under sustained lateral acceleration above seven gravities, the fastener nearest the ventilation duct would fail first, and the panel would come down at its outboard corner.

He had never examined that panel in his life. He had never worked on a starship ceiling in his life.

"Edward."

Julia came into the light above him. He turned his head toward her, and pain arrived from somewhere behind his eyes, sudden and very bright, and he shut them again.

"Don't do that," Julia said.

"Do what?"

"Whatever that was."

"I turned my head."

"You looked like you were trying to turn it through the bed."

"Good," said a second voice from his other side. "Irritable and literal. Both reassuring."

He opened his eyes more carefully. The ship's surgeon stood at the diagnostic console with her arms folded. She had come up from the surface and changed into medical white, and the shadows under her eyes said he had cost her a night's sleep and that she intended to mention it.

"How long?"

"Fourteen hours since Robby carried you into the settlement clinic. Nine since we brought you up here."

Morbius looked at his wife. "You should not have transported me."

Julia's expression did not alter by anything measurable.

"And there goes reassuring," the surgeon said.

He attempted to sit up. Both women stopped him, Julia with one hand and the surgeon with a word that had almost certainly been taught in medical school for this exact purpose.

"What happened?" he asked.

Julia stared at him, because it was not the question she had been braced for. "What do you remember?"

He closed his eyes.

The chamber. The chair. The plate coming down toward his forehead, and a pressure that had not been pressure at all, and then.

He reached for what came after and found something so large that his mind stepped back from it the way a man steps back

from an edge he had not seen. It was not memory. There was no other word he could put on it, so he tried space, and that was wrong too.

What he could feel were structures inside himself that had always been there and had somehow stood at a distance. Connections that should have cost him effort lay beside one another now like objects set out on a table. A word suggested a mathematics. The mathematics suggested a physical relationship. A fragment of Krell notation he had stared at for eleven days unfolded into three candidate grammars before he had finished considering its shape.

He opened his eyes.

"You used it," Julia said. It was not a question.

Morbius looked past her. "Doctor, would you give us a moment."

"No."

Julia came close to smiling.

The surgeon tapped the display. "You came in unconscious, with respiratory depression, cardiac irregularity, bleeding from the nose and the ears, and neural activity that made my instruments behave as though somebody had dropped them down a stairwell. You will stay where you are until I know whether it is going to happen again."

"I feel entirely well."

"I don't care."

"That is medically unsophisticated."

"It isn't."

Julia drew a chair over and sat down. The child had become

plainly visible in the last weeks, and Morbius looked at the curve of her, and something happened that he could not account for. He knew the approximate volume of amniotic fluid. He knew the probable mass of the child within a narrow range. He knew the statistical likelihood of four separate complications at this stage.

He knew all of it without having calculated any of it.

He looked away, and his wife saw him do it.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Edward."

"Nothing is wrong."

"I did not ask whether something was wrong."

The surgeon looked from one of them to the other, and then turned the diagnostic panel around. "I have spent nine hours trying to decide whether that machine did you permanent neurological harm."

"And?"

"And I do not know. Your blood chemistry is normal. Organ function is normal. No hemorrhage, no edema, no tissue damage I can find. Your reflexes are better than they were at your last physical, which should not happen to a man overnight." She stopped. "And your cortical activity is."

"Is what?"

"I have not got a word for it."

Morbius glanced at the figures, and understood them before he had consciously read them. The wave patterns were not merely elevated. They were coordinated across regions that did

not synchronize at that level outside of certain pathologies, and there was no corresponding loss of function anywhere.

The surgeon put one finger on a graph. "That should concern you."

"It does."

"You knew what it meant before I explained it."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"Edward," Julia said quietly. "Did you know what that machine would do before you sat down in it?"

"No."

The answer came out fractionally too fast, and he heard it himself, and so did she. The surgeon discovered a reason to examine a display on the far side of the room.

Julia waited. "Did Robby tell you not to use it?"

"He did not say that."

"Did I?"

He said nothing at all.

Julia sat back in the chair. There had been silences of this kind between them before, over risk, over work, over his standing conviction that understanding a danger conferred some protection against it. This one was a different animal, and they both knew it inside four seconds.

"You waited until I was asleep."

"I did not wish to argue."

"No. You did not wish to be stopped."

"Julia."

"You walked into that place alone, in the dark, and put an alien machine against your skull after telling me you weren't

going to use it."

"I said that I had no intention of using it at that time."

She looked at him. Even the surgeon looked over. Morbius heard the sentence after he had finished it and understood precisely what was wrong with it. It was true.

Julia stood. "That is the answer a man gives when he has already decided the promise does not count."

"That is not what I meant."

"I know exactly what you meant."

She went toward the door, and he said her name, and she stopped without turning around.

He wanted to explain. He had not been reckless. He had believed himself careful. That was not the same thing and had never once been the same thing. He had tested the chair with instruments first. He had reviewed everything Robby had said. He had reduced the contact interval to what he calculated as a third of the minimum. He had been entirely certain that he could stop.

All of it was true, and none of it answered her.

Julia looked back at him. "Did you know what it would do?"

"No."

"Would you have done it if you had?"

He opened his mouth.

Nothing came out of it.

His wife nodded once. It was worse than anger. Then she left.

The surgeon waited until the door had closed. "You are a very intelligent man, Doctor."

Morbius looked at the ceiling. "That is generally meant as a compliment."

"It wasn't."

◆

Adams came three hours later and brought Quinn, partly because Quinn had asked to come and mostly, Morbius suspected, because the captain did not trust himself in the room alone.

By then he had been permitted to sit up. The surgeon had raised the bed as a compromise and informed him that if his feet touched the deck she would sedate him where he sat.

Adams stopped at the foot of the bed. "You used the machine."

"Yes."

"Alone."

"Yes."

"After your wife asked you not to."

"Is that relevant to a command inquiry?"

"No," said Adams. "That part I'm asking as a married man."

Quinn coughed into his hand. Adams ignored him.

"I misjudged the risk," Morbius said.

"That's one way of putting it."

"The result does not justify the procedure."

Adams stared at him.

"What?"

"I said the result does not justify the procedure."

"I heard you."

"Then why are you looking at me in that manner?"

"Because that was almost an apology," Adams said.

"I was going to say the same thing," said Quinn.

Morbius looked between the two of them. "You came for a reason."

Adams put a data slate on the bed. "I came to tell you that you are finished below until medical clears you."

"No."

"Good talk."

"Captain, in two weeks we have learned more about Krell systems than the Federation has learned at any archaeological site in thirty years."

"Then it'll keep for a few days."

"The installation is responding to us."

"Which is the other reason you're not going back into it."

Morbius reached for the slate. Adams put a hand flat on it. "Don't."

Morbius read it anyway, upside down and at an angle, which he noticed later and thought about for some time.

It held the construction projections for the settlement. Power requirements, foundation loads, water recycling, six residences, two laboratories, storage, shelter. Quinn's current figures.

His eyes crossed the page once.

"Your western power run is wrong."

Quinn blinked. "It isn't."

"You have calculated peak demand using the standard coefficient for six independent residential units."

"Because there are six independent residential units."

"The first laboratory and the environmental plant share a thermal sink. Under sustained operation the demand curves overlap. Your figure is high by something under eighteen percent."

Quinn took the slate back and looked at it. "No, it isn't."

Morbius held out his hand. Quinn, after a moment, gave it to him. Morbius did not touch the calculation field. He put his finger on three separate numbers, on three separate pages.

"Here. Here. And here."

"Those aren't connected."

"They are."

"Not directly."

"No," Morbius agreed. "Not directly."

"Then how did you..."

Quinn stopped talking. He took out a stylus, sat down on the edge of the next bed without being invited, and began working the figures through by hand.

Adams did not watch Quinn. He watched Morbius, and Morbius knew he was being watched and found he had no attention to spare for it, because he was looking at the slate with an expression he would not have chosen. It was not triumph. It was nearer the feeling of finding a door in one's own house that one does not remember.

Two minutes went by. Then three.

The surgeon came back in with a scanner, saw three men gathered around a bed that contained her patient, and became visibly suspicious.

Quinn stopped writing. "He's right."

"How far off?" Adams asked.

"Seventeen point eight percent."

"Closer to seventeen point nine," Morbius said, "once you include transmission loss."

Quinn looked up at him. "You haven't seen these plans."

"I saw the preliminary version."

"That was four days ago. Half of these changed yesterday."

"Then yesterday you changed them incorrectly."

Quinn turned toward the captain. Adams did not look back at him.

"How did you do that?" Adams said.

Morbius kept his eyes on the page. "I do not know."

Nobody spoke. The surgeon crossed the room and took the slate out of his hands.

"Good. We're finished."

"I was reading that."

"You're not anymore." She ran the scanner across his forehead.

"What are you checking?" Adams asked.

"Everything."

"Helpful."

"It is, when everything is what changed."

Morbius looked at the empty air where the slate had been. There had been no calculation. That was the part he could not put down. He had not worked Quinn's arithmetic faster than Quinn. He had seen the relationship, the way a man sees that a room is cold.

The difference mattered. He was not yet certain why.

◆

Julia did not come back until evening, and when she did she brought two cups and gave one of them to the surgeon.

"Tea."

"You're my favorite Morbius," said the surgeon.

"I have always suspected it."

"I am in the room," said Morbius.

"That's the trouble," the surgeon said, and took her tea out with her.

Julia sat down where she had sat that morning. For a while neither of them said anything at all.

"The child is moving," Morbius said.

"She does that."

"More than yesterday."

Julia looked up. "How would you know that?"

He stopped, and she saw him stop.

"Edward."

"I do not know."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I can see the change and I cannot tell you how." He looked at the shape of her, and then away from it. "The way you are sitting. The muscles along your side. Your breathing altered before you put your hand there."

"Anyone might notice that."

"Yes."

"But you wouldn't have."

"No," he said. "I would not."

She took that in. "Does it frighten you?"

The old answer formed itself at once, the answer belonging to the man who had walked into that chamber in the dark, for whom fear had only ever been a name for insufficient information.

He stopped it on the way out.

"Yes."

Julia's face changed, a little. "Good."

"That is an odd response."

"It means you're still in there."

She reached across and took his hand. It was not forgiveness. It was something a good deal smaller, offered on account. He closed his fingers around hers.

"What did it feel like?" she asked.

He had been waiting for somebody to ask the right question, and had not known it until she did.

"I expected it to give me something."

"Knowledge."

"Perhaps. It did not."

"Then what did it do?"

He looked at the dark window of the medical bay, at the green curve of Altair IV beyond it, and went looking for words that did not yet exist in any human language.

"It moved walls," he said. "Things that were separate are not as separate. Ideas. Numbers. Shapes. I look at one thing now

and the relationships are already attached to it. I no longer have to go and fetch them."

"Do you know more than you did?"

"No."

"Are you cleverer?"

He began to object to the word. Then he thought about a stylus moving across a slate for three minutes to arrive where he had already been standing.

"I do not know."

Julia squeezed his hand once. "There is a sentence I would like preserved for the historical record."

He looked at her, and she smiled in spite of herself, and he came within a very short distance of doing the same.

Then the ship's alarm sounded. Not general quarters. Surface emergency.

The smile went off his wife's face, and Morbius was out of the bed before the surgeon got back through the door.

Chapter Sixteen

NOTHING WAS TAKEN

Twenty years earlier

NOTHING HAD BEEN STOLEN. THAT WAS THE FIRST THING.

The second was that something had very plainly been there.

The plateau went cold after sunset, the work lights threw hard white circles over the half-built settlement, and Farman met them at the eastern equipment shed twenty minutes later with a phase pistol on his hip and an expression Adams had learned to dislike.

"Doctor Morbius is supposed to be in medical."

"I am aware of where Doctor Morbius is supposed to be," said Adams.

"Good," said the surgeon, from behind him. "Somebody is."

Morbius went past all of them and inside.

The power regulator lay across the floor in pieces. Not broken. Disassembled. The outer casing had been lifted off and set

aside. The primary bus was disconnected. Thirty-two internal couplings had been separated and laid out in neat rows, arranged by size.

Quinn was standing over them. "Nobody does that by accident."

Adams crouched at the edge of it. "Could somebody have been repairing it?"

"Not unless his notion of repair is to reduce it to inventory."

"Damage?"

"None."

"Missing parts?"

"None."

"How long would it take?" Morbius asked.

"To do it like that? Two hours."

Farman said, "Shed was locked at 2300. I checked it myself. First engineering shift found it this way at 0515. No forced entry. Nothing in the access log."

Julia came in behind them. The surgeon had made an attempt to stop her, and Julia had explained that she was not the patient.

"Who had authorization?" Adams said.

"Myself. Quinn. You. Two engineering supervisors."

"And Robby," said Quinn, and regretted it immediately.

Farman did not. "Where is he?"

"Outside."

He was twenty meters off under the work lights, facing the shed, and had been facing it, Morbius realized, since before any of them arrived.

"Robby," Adams said. "Were you here last night?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

"Doing what?"

"Watching."

"Watching what?" said Morbius.

"The settlement."

"Did anyone go into that building?"

"No."

Farman's hand settled near his weapon. "You stood here all night and nobody went in."

"Correct."

"Then how did four hundred kilos of regulator come apart in a locked shed?"

"I do not know."

Farman looked at him for a long moment. "That's convenient."

"Jerry," said Julia.

"I'm asking questions."

"You're accusing him."

"I'm doing my job."

Robby's eyes went to Farman's hand, and then to the pistol beneath it, and stayed there.

Morbius saw it, and for the first time since he had woken in the medical bay every connection in his mind moved at once and in one direction. Exo III. Artificial life. An order of termination. The machines that had not obeyed it. Farman's hand. Robby's

attention on the hand. Julia standing between the two of them with a child in her. A dismantled machine in a locked room, nothing missing, nothing broken, no witness.

Too many relationships, arriving too quickly, and not one of them with anywhere to go.

"Take your hand away from the pistol," Morbius said.

Farman turned. "I beg your pardon?"

"You are requiring him to evaluate you as a threat. Do not do that."

"And you know that how?"

Morbius opened his mouth, and found that he did not know. Not exactly. Julia was watching him.

"Jerry," said Adams.

Farman lowered his hand, and after a moment the android's eyes moved away from it. Everybody on the plateau saw it happen. Nobody said anything about it.

Adams turned back toward the shed. "Nothing gets touched until the scene is recorded. Mr. Farman, double the night watch. Mr. Quinn, lock down every powered system that isn't life support." He looked across at the android. "Robby. Stay out of the construction area tonight."

"Captain," Julia said.

"It isn't a punishment. It's an instruction."

Robby considered it for perhaps a second. "I will remain outside the perimeter."

The group began to break up. Morbius stood still. He was looking at the ground at the corner of the shed, where windblown dust lay fine over hard stone.

Julia came and stood beside him. "What is it?"

He crouched. Boot prints crossed the dust. Farman's. Quinn's. Half a dozen others. He worked along them to the strip directly beneath the shed's one narrow window. It was too small for a man and too high for anything on four legs, it was locked from the inside, and there were no marks anywhere around its frame.

The dust beneath it was smooth.

He stood up. "Nothing."

Julia made no answer. She had heard the way he said the word, which was not the way he had said it a minute earlier, and she had been married to him for nine years.

◆

Adams left the settlement lights burning all night.

Farman posted two armed men at opposite ends of the construction area. Quinn sealed the equipment sheds himself. The Bellerophon held a continuous transporter lock on every member of the surface party.

Nothing happened.

At 0200 Farman walked the perimeter. At 0215 he walked it again. At 0230 one of his guards asked whether he intended to wear a trench into the plateau, and was told to watch his sector.

At 0247 Robby stood beyond the perimeter, precisely where he had been told to stand, and did not move.

Inside the unfinished house, Julia lay awake listening to the wind work at the panels. Her husband lay beside her, awake, and

neither of them said anything, and in a little while she slept.

At 0312, two hundred and forty meters beneath the plateau, a system that had not drawn power in something over two hundred thousand years drew power.

No alarm registered it. No instrument on the surface noticed. No living person heard it.

Robby turned his head and looked at the ridge, and stood absolutely still for eleven seconds.

Then the draw stopped, and the plateau was quiet, and he went back to watching the settlement.

At first light Farman found the inner door of Laboratory Two standing open. He had locked it himself six hours before. The seal was intact. The log showed no entry. Nothing inside had been touched and nothing had been taken.

There was simply an open door where a closed one had been.

Adams stood looking at it for some while. Then he turned around.

"You were watching."

"Yes," said Robby.

"What did you see?"

The android looked past him at the doorway. "Nothing."

Farman gave a short laugh with nothing in it. "That's becoming a habit."

Robby turned toward him. "No."

"No?"

"I saw nothing," said Robby.

The distinction came into the room and settled over all of them. Morbius understood it first, and wished for the rest of his

life that he had not.

The android was not telling them that he had failed to observe an event.

He was telling them that he had observed the absence of one.

Morbius looked past him at the open door, at the intact seal, at the smooth dust, and every new connection in his mind ran forward at enormous speed and arrived nowhere at all.

That frightened him more than any of them had.

Chapter Seventeen

I THINK IT IS LARGE

On the balcony above the Krell city, a hundred and eighty meters down and twenty years later, a sound came from behind them, and Kirk turned.

The tiger had left Altaira's side and gone to the edge of the balcony, where it stood with its head over the rail, looking down into the moving lights.

Ostrow watched it. "Is it native?"

"No," said Morbius.

McCoy turned around. "I'm sorry. No?"

"No."

"Doctor, I've been a country doctor and a ship's surgeon and I've seen a fair amount of livestock in between, and that is a Bengal tiger with about forty kilos of argument added to it. It did not walk here." McCoy waited exactly long enough to be polite. "So where did it come from?"

"It came from this planet."

"That isn't what I asked and you know it isn't."

"No," Morbius agreed, "it is not," and turned back to the rail, and that was the whole of the answer.

McCoy looked at Kirk. Kirk gave him the slight shake of the head that meant later, and McCoy took it with the expression of a man putting something in a drawer he fully intends to open again.

"He dislikes being discussed," Altaira said.

"That makes two of us."

She crouched beside the animal and put an arm loosely around its neck, and it leaned into her with enough weight to move her half a step sideways, and she braced against it without appearing to notice.

Kirk watched Morbius watch them, and there it was again. Not ownership. Not pride, exactly.

Fear. The particular fear of a man who has one thing left and has just noticed it turning its head toward a door.

Altaira looked over at him. "Are there animals on your ship, Captain?"

"Not as a rule."

"Why not?"

"Because we already have engineers," said McCoy.

Scott gave him a wounded look, and Alta laughed.

It was a short surprised sound. It went out across the balcony and was swallowed by the Krell city, and her father's expression changed at once. Not anger. Something tighter than anger and a good deal more private.

Kirk filed it with everything else he had filed since yesterday

afternoon.

Scott had not moved from the rail since they arrived on it. He was looking down at one of the shafts of light with an expression Kirk knew from the engine room at three in the morning.

"Mr. Scott."

"Sir, that shaft's carryin' power. I can't tell you what kind, and I can't tell you where it's goin', but I can tell you it hasn't stopped since we got here, and there's no' a man aboard my ship could switch it off if his life depended on it." He straightened. "That's the part I'd want in the log, Captain. Not how grand it is. That nobody down here has a hand on the tap."

Morbius said nothing whatever to that, which Kirk thought was the most informative thing the man had done all morning.

Ostrow had moved along the rail to a second control surface and stood over it with his hands deliberately behind him. Beneath a transparent layer, symbols drifted and rearranged themselves, the same forms he had been carrying in a case for six years.

"These are the same structures," he said.

"Some of them."

"The four pages."

"Fragments. Copied out of a system considerably larger."

Ostrow turned his head. "You can read them."

"Enough."

"How much is enough?"

"Enough to know that your word was wrong."

Ostrow's face did not change, which by now Kirk understood to be the loudest thing it did. "Containment."

"Yes."

"Then what does the symbol mean?"

Morbius hesitated, and Kirk, watching him closely, saw that it was not uncertainty. It was a decision being taken, and taken against them.

"Context alters it."

"That is not an answer."

"No. It is a refusal, and I would rather you recognized it as one than went on hoping."

Ostrow drew breath to go on, and Kirk stopped him with a look, and turned to Morbius.

"You brought us down here to show me why Starfleet shouldn't take you off this planet."

"I brought you down here so that when you file your report you will understand the scale of your own ignorance."

"Mine, or theirs?"

"Both."

Kirk put his hands on the rail. "Then reduce it."

Morbius looked out over the city. "There are levels below us I have never entered. Systems I do not understand. Records I have barely begun to translate. There are whole branches of their science for which no human language has the words. And under all of it there is a power system that has been running since before our species learned to write."

"The one that pulled down the Bellerophon?"

The older man's jaw set. "I do not know."

"Could it?"

The pause was longer this time. "Yes."

"That," said McCoy quietly, "is a hell of a thing to have left out yesterday."

"I told you the ship was pulled down."

"You left out that you're living on top of the only thing on this planet big enough to do it."

"I am living on top of a planet, Doctor. Planets contain a great many things."

"Most of them don't have machinery under the furniture."

Morbius turned away from him, which McCoy took, correctly, as a point.

Kirk let the silence go on a moment longer than was comfortable. Then he said, "The order hasn't changed."

He watched the shoulders go rigid.

"You wanted me to see this before I took you off this world. I've seen it. It changes what Starfleet needs to know, and it changes how many people they send, and it doesn't change the fact that you're coming with us."

"And the Krell?"

"We record what we can. Starfleet sends a proper scientific mission."

Morbius laughed once, without any humor in it at all. "A proper scientific mission."

"Yes."

"Men who will spend six months forming committees before anyone touches a control."

"That may be the most intelligent thing anybody does on this planet."

"Captain," said Ostrow.

Kirk turned. The Vulcan was still looking down at the drifting symbols.

"There is one respect in which Doctor Morbius is correct."

Morbius's head came around.

"To remove the only living person with substantial working knowledge of this installation, before any part of that knowledge has been transferred, would be scientifically indefensible. I am obliged to say so, and I will say so to Starfleet over my own name."

McCoy folded his arms. "You volunteering to send that message?"

"Yes."

"Thought you might."

Kirk considered it, and considered the man who had just been handed an argument by the one person on the balcony least likely to give him one out of sympathy. "How long would a transfer take?"

Ostrow did not answer at once. "I cannot estimate intelligently until I know what Doctor Morbius knows."

"And there," said Morbius, "is your difficulty."

Kirk almost admired the neatness of it.

Altaira had stood up. The tiger stayed pressed against her side.

"Father."

Morbius turned. She had not said one word through the whole of it.

"Captain Kirk said that I would be asked."

Kirk wished, suddenly and very much, that she had waited until they were back in the house.

"Altaira."

"You said I would not go."

"You will not."

"That is not the same as being asked."

The tiger's head came up. McCoy caught it in the same instant Kirk did, and neither of them moved. There was nothing in the animal's posture that suggested a threat. It suggested attention. It had heard the change in her voice and had come to see what the change was about.

Her father saw none of it. He saw only his daughter. "You do not know what you are asking for."

"I have not asked for anything."

"Good."

"I said that you have not asked me."

Below them the Krell city went on humming to itself, impossibly old, impossibly patient.

Morbius crossed to within an arm's length of her, and for a second Kirk thought he would take her by the shoulders. He stopped. "Everything I have done on this world has been to keep you safe."

Her face softened, which somehow made it worse. "I know that."

"You have no idea what is out there."

"No."

"There are dangers you cannot begin to imagine."

"Yes."

"You believe that because these men are courteous, the galaxy is kind."

"No, Father." That stopped him, and she put her hand down on the tiger's head, and finished it. "I think it is large."

Nobody spoke.

Then she turned from him and walked back toward the corridor, and the tiger went with her, and the light went with them both, arriving ahead and dying behind, all the way up the long slope until there was nothing left to see.

Morbius stayed where he was.

Far below, lights moved through the Krell machinery in long silent lines, going somewhere, the way they had been going somewhere for two hundred thousand years.

◆

On the way up, Morbius said almost nothing.

At the entrance the daylight came at them hard after the colorless illumination below, and Kirk stood blinking on the stone while his eyes caught up. Scott's two men were where he had left them. Robby stood beside the house, facing the ridge.

He was already looking at them before they came out.

Scott went straight to him. "Captain, with your permission, I'd like to begin."

Morbius started to say something. Kirk cut across it.

"Starfleet's order is explicit, Doctor. Surface only, nothing removed, nothing carried aboard. You are welcome to be present for every minute of it."

Scott brightened considerably. "I've no intention of takin' the gentleman apart."

"That," said McCoy, "is the most reassuring thing you have said all morning."

Robby inclined his head. "I will cooperate."

Morbius stared at him, and Kirk caught it before it was gone: not annoyance, not calculation.

Surprise.

Then the older man's face closed, and he walked past them into his house.

Kirk stood a while longer looking at the ridge, and at the ordinary red stone lying over a city that had outlived its builders by two thousand centuries, and at the black opening where the light was still politely waiting for somebody to want it.

He had come down that morning to take Edward Morbius off this planet.

He understood now why the man had stayed. That was the easy part.

What he understood rather better, walking back toward the house, was that a man who would not leave a thing like that was a man who would do a great deal to keep it, and that Starfleet's order had just given him something to do it about.

Chapter Eighteen

THE ORDER

The answer to one of my questions was in a file Starfleet never attached to the Bellerophon record.

I found it afterward, when there was no longer an Altair IV to go back to: a sealed Science Council transcript, opened twenty years late because an admiral decided there was nothing left on that planet worth protecting.

It explains why Captain Adams stopped mentioning the android in his transmissions. It does not explain why Edward Morbius lied to me about him, and I want that distinction in the record, because the two are not the same failure and only one of them was made by a frightened man in a room full of his superiors.

◆

Twenty years earlier

Adams found Morbius standing over Quinn's workbench with

both hands behind his back, wearing the expression Quinn had already learned to hate.

The expression meant that Morbius understood something. Since the educator he wore it a good deal more often.

Quinn had the power distribution drawings spread across the bench of the temporary engineering laboratory and was trying to reconcile three systems that had declined to behave to Federation specification. Morbius had been in the room under four minutes.

"You have the converter backward," he said.

Quinn went on with what he was doing. "I do not."

"The third-stage field is opposing the return path."

"It can't."

"It is."

Quinn turned around. "It's a standard Mark Six."

"Yes."

"I've rebuilt more of them than you've seen."

"Then you have had a great deal of practice doing it incorrectly."

Adams came through the door in time to catch that. "Morning."

Quinn pointed at the xenolinguist. "Take him."

"I'm not sure I'm authorized."

"Then promote yourself, sir."

Morbius, ignoring both of them, reached toward the schematic, and Quinn slapped his hand away from it. The two men looked at one another, and for a moment Adams thought he was about to watch a chief engineer throw a civilian scientist

out of a laboratory by the collar.

Then Morbius smiled, and that was harder to stand than the argument had been.

"You changed the regulator yesterday," he said.

Quinn's face did something complicated. "How do you know that?"

"The harmonic distortion changed."

"You weren't here yesterday."

"No."

"The regulator's sealed."

"Yes."

"You can't hear harmonic distortion. Nobody can hear harmonic distortion."

Morbius tilted his head, listening to something that was not available to either of the other men in the room. "No," he said. "Apparently I can."

Adams stopped smiling.

There had been a dozen moments of that kind since Morbius came out of the medical bay, and the trouble with all of them was that no one of them would survive being written into a report. A structural figure corrected before Quinn had finished entering it. A medical question answered before the surgeon gave him the result. A block of Krell notation that had resisted six weeks of work reduced to a working grammar in an afternoon. One at a time, each was a clever man being clever. Together they had begun to keep Adams awake.

He shut the laboratory door behind him.

"Doctor. I sent Starfleet an update."

"I assumed that you would."

"I told them about the educator. I told them what it did to you."

"That is your obligation."

"Good. I'm glad we agree." Adams glanced at Quinn, who had started gathering his drawings with the air of a man who has recognized a conversation that is no longer about engineering. "Stay where you are, Mr. Quinn."

Quinn sighed and put them down again.

"I also told them about the changes," Adams said.

"What changes?"

"Don't."

Morbius's mouth tightened.

"You read Quinn's load figures upside down from two meters away and corrected them without doing any arithmetic. You found a fault in a sealed converter from across a room. Yesterday you translated forty-three lines of Krell notation before lunch."

"Forty-seven."

Quinn shut his eyes.

"Thank you," Adams said. "That's very helpful."

Morbius leaned back against the bench. "What is it you are actually asking?"

"I'm asking what that machine did to you."

"I have told you. It altered the availability of cognitive structures that were already present."

"That's a sentence, Doctor. It isn't an answer."

"It is also accurate."

"It doesn't tell me what you can do now."

Morbius considered it, and when he answered Adams believed him, and that was the part that stayed with him afterward.

"I do not yet know."

Quinn folded his arms. "What about Robby?"

"What about him?"

"You've been looking at him differently since you woke up."

Adams turned his head. "You noticed that as well."

"Captain, I notice when a man who spent six weeks asking an android questions all day long stops asking them."

Morbius said nothing at all.

Adams came a step closer. "Can you understand him now?"

"I understood him before."

"Not his words."

That landed somewhere. Morbius looked toward the closed door as though the android might be standing on the other side of it, which, Adams reflected, he might have been.

"He is extraordinarily sophisticated."

"That isn't what I asked."

"No," Morbius agreed. "It is not."

"Can you understand how he works?"

The silence went on long enough that Quinn stopped pretending to be interested in his drawings.

"Some of it," Morbius said.

"Some," Quinn repeated.

"His primary cognitive architecture is elegant. It is not incomprehensible. A great deal of what I found opaque before was opaque because I lacked the framework to hold it, not because the thing itself is beyond us."

Adams heard the change in the man's voice. It was not wonder. He had heard wonder from Morbius in the first chamber, and it had been the best thing he ever saw in him. This was certainty.

"How much of it can you understand?"

Morbius glanced at Quinn's converter, and then said it.

"Compared with what lies beneath this planet, Robby is very nearly child's play."

Nobody spoke. Morbius appeared to hear the sentence only after it had left him, which Adams noted, and which did not help.

Quinn was staring at him.

Adams was not. He was already composing the transmission in his head, and he had got as far as the second paragraph before he realized that he had stopped listening to either of them.

◆

The Federation Science Council convened nine hours later.

It was not a formal session. There was no chamber, no ceremonial record, and there would be no summary for the newsfeeds. Eight faces sat on eight screens in a secure room beneath Starfleet Command in San Francisco: one admiral, two civilian science directors, a cyberneticist from the Daystrom Institute, a Federation security representative, a legal adviser, a medical specialist, and a woman from the Archaeological Directorate who had not slept properly since the first Bellerophon transmission came in.

Captain J. J. Adams appeared on a ninth screen from a world twenty light years away.

The android designated Robby did not appear at all, and it did not occur to anybody in the room that this was in any way remarkable.

"We have reviewed your latest report, Captain," Komack said.

"Yes, sir."

"Doctor Morbius's condition is stable."

"The surgeon says so."

"And you are satisfied that the change in his cognitive capacity is genuine."

Adams disliked the word satisfied a great deal. "I'm satisfied that something changed."

The medical specialist leaned into her camera. "Can you quantify it?"

"No."

"Has he demonstrated knowledge he could not previously have possessed?"

"Not knowledge. Ability."

The cyberneticist spoke for the first time. "That distinction matters."

"I thought it might."

"What precisely did he say concerning the artificial entity?"

Adams read it off his notes in the flat voice he kept for reading things he wished he had not written down. "Quote. His primary cognitive architecture is elegant. It is not incomprehensible. End quote. And later, quote. Compared with what lies beneath this

planet, Robby is very nearly child's play. End quote."

Four of the screens went very quiet.

"Captain," the security representative said, "remind us what access the entity has demonstrated."

"Remote access to Bellerophon data systems."

"Without authorization."

"Yes."

"Without physical connection."

"Yes."

"Can you prevent it?"

"We believe so."

"Believe."

"He hasn't attempted it since the first night."

"That was not my question."

"No, sir. We cannot guarantee it."

"Has the entity shown hostility?" said the cyberneticist.

"No."

"Disobedience?"

Adams took his time. "Not in any sense I would call hostile."

"That is not the same answer."

"No, it isn't."

The legal adviser had the first contact file open. "The record indicates that the entity has declined to answer questions."

"It does."

"Has it refused instructions?"

"Not operational instructions."

"Captain, is it under Starfleet authority?"

Adams did not answer at once.

He was to think about that pause for the rest of his life, which was eleven weeks. It went into the record, and it was the most damaging thing he did that day, and he did it by saying nothing at all.

Komack let it sit, and then gathered it up. "So. We have an autonomous artificial intelligence of unknown age, unknown manufacture and unknown capability, operating within an alien installation whose systems exceed our own. And the one man now capable of understanding its construction has undergone an unexplained alteration of his mind, caused by a second device built by the same people."

"That's a fair summary, sir."

"Then I fail to understand," the security representative said, "why the machine is still running."

The archaeologist came in fast. "Because it is the only functioning cultural witness to the civilization we are here to study. It is a library that remembers being a person."

"That was the argument before Doctor Morbius's change. If Morbius can now read the android's architecture and reach the surrounding systems directly, it is no longer our only interface."

"Understanding an architecture," said the cyberneticist, "is not the same as replacing a mind."

"Nobody proposed destroying it."

The word went across the room and landed badly, and everybody in the room heard it land.

Adams said, "Then what is being proposed?"

"Temporary deactivation," said Komack.

"Sir."

"Until a controlled research team can be sent with proper containment and technical support."

"Admiral, there are forty-two people on this expedition. Not one of them has reported that machine as dangerous. He has hauled roof frames, he has taught himself English out of a library, and last week he carried Doctor Morbius out of a chamber and up four hundred meters of corridor to save his life. If he wanted this expedition dead, we would be dead."

"You have just told this council that you cannot guarantee he is unable to enter your ship's computer."

"He read a library, sir."

"He entered a Starfleet system from the surface of a planet, without permission."

"And changed nothing."

"Captain, you are arguing character."

"I'm reporting behavior. It's the only evidence any of us has ever had about anybody."

Komack's voice did not rise at all, which was, Adams thought, the trouble with the man. "And I am responsible for forty-two Federation citizens in orbit above a planet full of technology we do not understand."

Forty-two, Adams thought, and one more if Julia had her way of counting them.

He did not say it. He had a lifetime afterward to wonder what would have happened if he had.

"If the android is deactivated," the archaeologist said, "we may lose access to that civilization permanently. He is the last one. There is no second copy."

The cyberneticist turned to his camera. "Captain. Can Morbius shut it down without damage?"

"I don't know."

"Then ask him."

"And if he can?" said the security representative.

Nobody answered that for several seconds. Komack finally did.

"Then we remove one unknown from the situation."

Adams looked down at his own hands on the desk and knew precisely what was coming, and found that knowing did not help.

"Captain, pending formal review, Starfleet directs you to suspend operation of the artificial entity designated Robby. There will be no destructive action, no dismantling and no removal from the planet. If Doctor Morbius is able to place the machine in a reversible inactive state, you will do so."

"And if he can't, sir?"

"Then you will isolate it from your expedition and await further instruction."

"Admiral," the archaeologist said.

Komack looked at her screen.

"We are discussing the deliberate shutting off of a being that may be sentient."

The legal adviser answered before the admiral could. "Federation law has established no such status for it."

"Because Federation law has never met him."

"We are not trying a citizenship case," the security representative said. "We are reducing a risk."

Adams heard Julia's voice in his head saying something considerably less parliamentary, and did not enjoy the experience.

Komack looked directly into his camera. "You have your order, Captain."

Adams sat there a moment.

"Yes, sir," he said.

◆

Julia knew what it was before he had finished the first sentence.

"No."

They were in the unfinished house, because Adams had decided that the conversation would not happen aboard his ship and would not happen in any room that Robby might walk into halfway through. Morbius stood at the western window with his back to both of them. Julia stood at the table. Adams stayed by the door, which he was aware was a coward's position and took anyway.

"It's an order, Julia."

"I heard you."

"Then you understand my problem."

"I understand theirs. They're frightened of him."

"Yes."

"Has he hurt anyone?"

"No."

"Threatened anyone?"

"No."

"Damaged anything at all?"

"No."

"Then what exactly are they switching off?"

Adams rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Something that can reach my ship from thirty kilometers away without a cable."

"He read."

"He entered restricted systems."

"He read them. And changed nothing, and told us he had done it the moment we asked, which is more than I can say for most of your crew about the galley stores."

"I know."

"Then say no."

"I'm the captain of a survey vessel," Adams said. "Not the president of the Federation."

"That is very convenient."

"Yes," said Adams. "It is. I've noticed that about it."

Morbius turned from the window. "Enough."

Julia turned to her husband. "You agree with this."

"No."

"But you will do it."

He let the question stand, and she stood there and let the silence make the answer for him, and Adams watched a marriage take another quiet piece of damage in front of him and could think of nothing to do about it.

"Can you?" Adams asked.

Morbius looked at the ridge through the window. "Yes."

Julia's face changed, and then closed over.

"You know how," she said.

"I believe so."

"Since when?"

"Since the educator."

She came a step toward him. "You have been inside his systems."

"No."

"You have studied them."

"Of course I have studied them."

"Without telling him."

Morbius turned around. "Julia. He is not a patient."

"No," she said. "He's your friend."

The word appeared to offend him and to wound him in the same instant, and Adams, who had been married a long time, understood that only one of those was about the android.

"That is sentimental."

"Yes," said Julia. "It is."

Adams said, "How does it work?"

Morbius looked away from his wife, which was easier. "There is a maintenance layer beneath the autonomous functions. It was built to allow diagnostic suspension without disassembly. The Krell did not intend their machines to be taken apart every time something required examination."

"Can he reach it himself?"

"I do not believe so."

"Will it damage him?"

"No."

"Will he remember?"

Morbius paused. "Up to the moment of suspension."

Julia closed her eyes, and Adams knew what she was going to ask before she opened them.

"Are you going to tell him?"

Morbius made no answer.

"Edward."

"If I tell him, I cannot predict how he will respond."

"He'll respond like anyone responds when he's told he's about to be switched off."

"Precisely."

"That is why you don't want to tell him."

"Doctor," Adams said quietly, "can he resist it?"

"I do not know."

"Could resisting hurt him?"

"Possibly."

And that decided it, and Adams hated that it decided it, because it was a perfectly good reason and he could see straight through it to the reason underneath, which was that none of them wanted to stand in front of that machine and say the words out loud.

"Then we don't tell him until the procedure has started."

Julia stared at him. "Captain."

"I'm not asking you to like it."

"No. You're asking me to stand in that room while you do it."

"I'm asking you to stay out of the room."

He knew how it sounded while he was saying it, and he said it anyway.

She looked at her husband. "You already knew that was what he was going to say."

Morbius did not deny it.

Julia walked out.

Adams listened to her go down the unfinished corridor, and turned to the man at the window.

"You had better be right about that maintenance layer."

Morbius looked at the empty doorway where his wife had been.

"So had all of us," he said.

Chapter Nineteen

I DID NOT OBJECT

Twenty years earlier

ROBBY CAME WILLINGLY.

That was the part Julia never forgave, and she was right not to, and it took Adams a number of years to understand that she had not been angry about the order. She had been angry that it was so easy.

Morbius told the android there was a discrepancy in his power regulation and that the safest way to examine it was through the original service interface, in the chamber where they had found him.

Every word of that was true. Adams stood two meters away while it was said and could not have identified a single false statement in it, and he thought about those sentences for eleven weeks afterward, which was all the time he had.

Robby followed him below.

Adams went because it was his order. Farman went because Adams told him to. Julia went because there was nobody on that planet, her husband and the captain of the ship included, prepared to stand in the corridor and stop her.

The chamber looked exactly as it had on the first morning. The same black walls. The same pale patient light. The same recessed station where a machine had stood without moving for longer than there had been cities anywhere on Earth.

Morbius went to the console. Robby watched him do it.

"You understand this system now."

"Part of it."

"You did not before."

"No."

"Did the educator alter you?"

Morbius's hands stopped over the controls. Adams watched the back of his head and could not see his face, and was glad of it.

"Yes."

Robby considered that. "Are you well?"

Julia looked away. Her husband did not.

"I believe so."

"That is good," said Robby, and stepped up onto the recessed platform, and Adams felt something turn over in his chest. "What do you require?"

Morbius indicated the wall. "Place your hand there."

Robby placed his hand there.

The surface changed under his palm. Lines of light came up around his fingers and ran out into the wall in a pattern that was not quite symmetrical and was very beautiful, and Adams, who

had seen a number of strange things in three months on that planet, found this was the first one that made him want to stop a procedure before he understood why.

"Doctor."

Morbius kept his back to the room. "I am working."

"Talk me through it."

"The interface is recognizing him."

"And then?"

"Then I isolate the executive system from the active power lattice."

Robby turned his head.

"That is not a diagnostic function," he said.

Morbius's hand stopped.

Nobody in the chamber moved. The lights went on spreading up the android's wrist, unhurried, the way everything in that place did everything.

"Edward," Robby said.

Julia closed her eyes.

"Remain still," said Morbius.

"Why?"

Adams stepped forward, because it was his order and because he had been a captain for nineteen years and there was a limit to how much of this he was prepared to let another man carry.

"Robby."

The android looked at him.

"This is a Starfleet order."

"An order to do what?"

Adams made himself say it plainly. There was no version of it that was not plain. "To deactivate you."

Robby looked back at Morbius. The light had reached his forearm.

"You knew."

"Yes."

"Before we came down."

"Yes."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"Because I could not predict your response."

Robby looked at him a while. Then he looked at Julia, who was crying and did not appear to be aware of it.

"You knew also."

"Not until this afternoon."

"Did you agree?"

"No," she said.

He turned back to Morbius. The light had reached his shoulder.

"Do I agree?"

Nobody answered him.

"That was not asked," Robby said, and lowered his eyes slightly, and Adams found that he had to look at the floor of the chamber for a moment.

Julia moved. "No."

Farman's hand came up toward her arm and stopped short of touching her.

"Julia," said Morbius.

"Stop it."

"I cannot."

"Stop it, Edward."

"If I interrupt the suspension now I may damage him."

"You should have thought of that before you began."

Robby's free hand moved.

Farman's hand went to his pistol. It was not a decision. It was twenty-two years of training in a man who had never once been slow, and it was the most honest thing that happened in that room, because it was what all of them felt and only one of them was armed.

Robby's hand stopped where it was.

For a second nobody breathed.

Then the android lowered his hand again, and looked at Farman, and said, "I will not harm you."

Farman's hand came away from the weapon very slowly.

Morbius's fingers moved across the control. The light brightened along the android's body.

"What will happen?" Robby asked.

"You will become inactive."

"For how long?"

Morbius gave him nothing, and Robby waited the correct interval for an answer, and then understood.

"Do the Krell require this?"

"No."

"Do you?"

Morbius hesitated. "No."

"Then why?"

"Because I was ordered to," Adams said.

Robby turned his head. "And you obey."

"Yes."

The android considered it with what Adams would have called patience in anything else. Then he looked back at Morbius.

"You also obey."

Morbius's jaw set. "For now."

Julia's head came up sharply. Adams heard the two words and put them away somewhere, and took them out again a good many times before the end.

Robby's eyes stayed on Morbius, and something in the set of him altered. It was not fear. Adams had seen fear on that face exactly once, and it had been on the second morning, and it had not been for himself.

It was recognition.

"You understand more of me now."

"Yes."

"Can you restore me?"

Morbius looked at the pattern under his hands. "Yes."

"Will you?"

The pause went on.

"If circumstances require it," Morbius said.

It was, Adams thought, exactly the kind of answer Julia had spent nine years learning to hate, and the first time he had heard the man use one on anybody but his wife.

Robby appeared to turn the sentence over and examine both sides of it.

"I understand," he said.

"No," Julia whispered. "You don't."

His eyes went to her. "Perhaps not."

The light reached his throat and his voice changed. Not mechanically. It was more as though each word had to be decided on separately now before it could be spent.

"Julia."

She went to him. Her husband said her name and she ignored it entirely, and she stood directly in front of the android so that he did not have to move his head.

His eyes found hers.

"You named me."

"Yes."

"That was before I could speak."

"Yes."

"You said that you would have changed it if I had objected."

"I remember."

"I did not object," said Robby.

Her mouth trembled. "I know."

The light reached his face.

He looked at her one second longer. Then he looked past her at Morbius.

"Edward."

Morbius met his eyes.

"You made me stop before."

Morbius went absolutely still.

Adams turned. "What? Doctor, what does that mean?"

But the android was already slowing. The words came farther apart, the spaces between them lengthening, and his eyes

had gone to the black wall behind Morbius as though there were something written on it.

"I remember," Robby said.

The chamber was entirely silent.

"Nothing."

Morbius stared at him.

"After."

The light crossed his eyes and they went dark.

His hand stayed against the wall for another second. Then the interface let him go, and Morbius put out an arm to catch him.

Robby did not fall. He simply stood, exactly as he had stood on the morning they found him, arms at his sides, eyes closed, in the attitude of a thing waiting for something that was not in any hurry to arrive.

Nobody moved at all.

Julia spoke first. "You lied to him."

Morbius looked up at her. "I did what was necessary."

"No." She wiped at her face with the back of her hand, angrily, as though the tears were equipment that had failed. "You did what was easier."

She walked out. Farman gave it a moment and followed her, which Adams thought was the best thing Jerry Farman did on Altair IV.

Adams stayed.

Morbius remained beside the inactive android with one hand still resting on the platform, and neither man said anything for some while.

"You heard him," Adams said at last.

"Yes."

"You made me stop before."

"I heard him, Captain."

"What did he mean?"

Morbius looked at the closed face in front of him, at the eyes that had been open four minutes earlier.

"I do not know."

Adams waited. He had spent nineteen years learning when a silence would fill itself in and had become good at it.

This one did not. After a while Morbius turned back to the console, and that was the end of the conversation.

◆

Adams recorded the next transmission himself, in his own quarters, with the door shut.

"Captain's log, supplemental. Pursuant to Starfleet directive, the artificial entity recovered beneath Survey Area Twelve has been placed in inactive status. The procedure was completed without physical damage and without incident."

He stopped.

The last three words sat there in front of him. Without incident.

He erased them.

"The procedure was completed without physical damage. Doctor Morbius states that the condition is reversible."

He stopped again, and thought about a machine saying I did

not object, and about a woman wiping her face with the back of her hand.

Then he added one line more.

"Until otherwise directed, no further study of the android will be conducted."

He sent it, and afterward sat a while in a small room aboard a small ship in orbit around a planet nobody had ever heard of, and did not turn on the light.

After that night, Robby disappeared from the Bellerophon's transmissions.

There was nothing further to report. He stood in the chamber where they had found him, in the dark, while the colony went up above his head. The house was finished. The laboratories opened. The garden went in on the western side, because Julia said a settlement without one was a camp. The child grew.

Morbius went deeper into the Krell records than anyone had gone, and found things there that he put into his own notes and no longer into anybody's transmissions.

And at night, things began to move through the settlement that no guard could see.

Doors opened. Machinery came apart and was laid out in neat rows. Prints appeared in dust where nothing had walked.

Captain Adams wrote all of it down, every incident, in detail, and sent every word of it home.

He never mentioned Robby again.

◆

Much later, after the Bellerophon came down out of the sky and the expedition was reduced to two survivors, Edward Morbius went back underground.

The chamber was dark when he entered it, and stayed dark until the light noticed him and came up, obliging as ever, a few meters ahead of where he stood.

Robby was exactly where they had left him.

Morbius crossed the floor to the control station. There was no Starfleet captain left on the planet to give him an order. There was no science council waiting on a report, and no ship in orbit, and no committee, and no legal adviser, and no admiral with a fair summary.

There was Julia, up in the house, with a child that was going to be born in about six weeks with nobody to attend it but the two of them.

There was a dead settlement on the plateau above.

And there was this.

Morbius put his hand on the interface, and the wall recognized him, and the light moved.

For the first time since the order, Edward Morbius smiled.

"Robby," he said.

The android's eyes opened.

Chapter Twenty

ROBBY AND MR. SCOTT

SCOTT BEGAN BY ASKING ROBBY WHETHER HE MINDED BEING EXAMINED.

The question stayed with Kirk for a long while afterward, because twenty years earlier nobody had thought to ask it.

They had set up on the terrace behind the house, where the afternoon came low across the plateau and made the ridges look nearer than they were. Scott had established what he called a proper work area: two open engineering cases, three scanners, a portable diagnostic unit and a quantity of cable that suggested no confidence whatever in wireless telemetry where anything important was concerned.

Robby stood in the middle of it. Morbius stood several meters off, and had not left, and gave no sign of intending to.

"Do I mind," Robby said.

"Aye."

"I do not experience inconvenience in the manner that you

do."

"That's not what I asked you."

Robby looked at him briefly, and Scott waited him out, and Kirk watched Morbius's face while it happened. Something moved there and was put away again.

"No, Mr. Scott," Robby said. "I do not mind."

"Good." Scott opened the first scanner. "Then we'll start with whatever I can see without openin' anything."

"You will open nothing," said Morbius.

"That'll be why I just said it."

McCoy had settled on the low wall at the edge of the terrace with one ankle across the other knee, enjoying himself a great deal more than he had any intention of admitting. Ostrow had given up all pretense of being an observer and stood well inside Scott's working space, having been told twice not to lean over the equipment.

Altaira had gone into the house after the business underground and had not come out. Spock was aboard the ship. Kirk found, standing on that terrace in the late light, that he wished his first officer were down here and that Starfleet had asked somebody's opinion before writing its order.

Scott passed the scanner slowly across Robby's chest.

Nothing happened. He frowned and did it again. Nothing happened again.

"Bad?" said McCoy.

Scott ignored him, changed a setting, and got a single short tone out of the instrument. He stopped.

"Well."

Kirk knew that word. "What?"

"He's no' shielded."

"Of course he is not," said Morbius.

"I wasn't askin' you, Doctor." Scott went back to the android. "Internal power source."

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"I do not know the terminology you would use."

"Try me. I've a fair vocabulary."

Robby considered it with the seriousness he brought to everything. "It does not consume fuel."

"Conversion?"

"No."

"Stored energy?"

"No."

"External induction. Beamed, broadcast, anything of the sort."

"No."

"Then what in the name of all that's holy does it do?"

"It maintains a difference."

Scott's head came up. "A difference between what?"

"I do not know how to express the answer in English."

"Physics will do."

"I do not know how to express the answer in your physics."

That pleased Scott enormously, in the way that being told a mountain was unclimbable pleased him. "Now we're gettin' somewhere."

McCoy looked over at Kirk. "They're going to be here all night."

"Probably."

"You're enjoying this."

"A little."

Scott worked the scanner down the android's left arm. "Your outer material's no alloy I've ever met."

"It is not an alloy."

Scott stopped. "Mr. Spock said it was."

"Mr. Spock's instrument reported the nearest available classification. That is not the same statement."

"Then what is it?"

"Constructed matter."

"All matter's constructed."

"Not deliberately," said Robby.

Ostrow got there a half second before Scott did. "Matter assembled at the atomic level."

Robby turned his head toward him. "Below it."

Nobody on the terrace said anything at all for a moment.

Scott lowered the scanner very slowly, in the manner of a man setting down something that has turned out to be worth more than he was told. "Subatomic engineering."

"That description is closer."

"Closer," said McCoy, and unfolded his arms.

Scott looked at his scanner as though it had personally let him down. "You're tellin' me that suit of yours isn't clothing."

"No."

"Skin?"

"No."

"Armor."

"No."

"Then what is it, man?"

Robby looked down at himself with something that in a human being would have been mild surprise at the question. "My exterior."

"There," said McCoy. "There's your answer."

Scott walked a slow circle around the android, and Kirk watched what was happening to his chief engineer. He had come out here expecting an extraordinary machine, and with every answer the category itself got less useful, the way a ruler gets less useful when you take it out to measure the sea.

"Can you repair yourself?"

"Within limits."

"What limits?"

"Loss of structural integrity beyond a threshold. Destruction of central processing regions. Failure of the energy system beyond autonomous correction."

"Can you replace parts?"

"If material is available."

"What material?"

"Most matter."

Scott stopped again. "Most."

"Yes."

"You're tellin' me you can take raw stock, whatever's lyin' about, and manufacture your own components out of it."

"Yes."

"Using what?"

Robby looked toward the house.

"That is enough," said Morbius.

Scott turned. So did Kirk. The older man had gone rigid where he stood.

"Doctor?"

"I agreed to an examination of the android, Captain. Not to a guided excavation of Krell technology."

Scott shut the scanner with a snap. "Captain, I've learned more in a quarter of an hour on this terrace than I did in six hours under that hill."

"Keep going," said Kirk.

"You are exceeding Starfleet's instruction."

"No. Starfleet told me not to take him aboard, not to dismantle him, and not to carry off samples or internal recordings. Mr. Scott isn't doing any of those things."

"He is interrogating him."

Kirk looked at the android. "Does this feel like an interrogation?"

"No," said Robby.

"He does not understand the significance of what he is revealing," said Morbius.

Robby turned toward him. "I understand the questions."

"That is not what I said."

"No," Robby agreed. "It is not."

Morbius stared at him, and Kirk felt the shape of the afternoon shift by about a degree. McCoy felt it and came down off

the wall. Scott, who had the single-mindedness of his profession, did not notice at all.

"What do you use to make the parts?"

"A matter conversion system."

Scott's entire face changed. "Where?"

"In the lower facility."

"How big?"

"There are several."

"How big is the smallest?"

"Approximately the volume of this room," said Robby, indicating the terrace and the space above it with one hand.

Scott let out a breath. "That's no' small."

"No."

"What'll it make?"

"Anything for which a complete structural pattern exists."

A pause went through the room of the kind that happens when several people understand something at different speeds.

"Anything," Scott said carefully.

"Within the capacity of the system."

"Metal."

"Yes."

"Glass."

"Yes."

"Electronic components."

"Yes."

"Food."

Robby paused fractionally. "Yes."

"Now," said McCoy, sitting up, "we're talking."

"Living tissue?" said Scott.

That one took longer. "Not living."

"Organic."

"Yes."

"Could it make a steak?"

"Scotty," said McCoy.

"I'm establishing parameters, Doctor."

"Yes," said Robby.

McCoy looked at the house, and then at the ridges, and then at the sky. "I am beginning to reconsider my position on this planet."

But Scott had gone somewhere well beyond steaks, and Kirk could watch him going. "You said it needs a complete structural pattern."

"Yes."

"Can it scan an object and reproduce it?"

"Yes."

"How accurately?"

"At the level required."

Scott gave him a look. "Required by whom?"

"By the object."

For possibly the first time in his professional life, Montgomery Scott had nothing to say.

Ostrow did. "The system determines the necessary fidelity from the function of the thing."

"Yes."

Scott looked from one of them to the other. "I liked him better before the Vulcan started translatin'."

Ostrow did not appear to take offense, which Kirk suspected was itself a form of Vulcan humor.

Scott opened the second case. "What powers your converter?"

"The system that powers the facility."

"The planetary system."

"Yes."

"Could one of these be built small enough to go aboard a starship?"

"No," said Morbius.

"Yes," said Robby.

Nobody moved.

Morbius turned toward him very slowly. Robby looked back at him without any discernible expression at all, and Scott's eyebrows went up about a centimeter, and Kirk felt the afternoon change again, further this time.

"You do not know that," Morbius said.

"I do."

"Nothing of that scale was ever constructed."

"That was not Mr. Scott's question. He asked whether it could be done. It could."

Scott looked delighted. Morbius did not.

"Mr. Scott," he said, "the Krell possessed an industrial infrastructure covering an entire world. Extracting one technique from it and imagining it installed on a Federation vessel is meaningless."

"No, Doctor. Difficult isn't the same word as meaningless. I've been told a thing was impossible about four hundred times,

and about four hundred times I've had to do it before the end of the watch."

"You do not even understand the energy source."

"Not yet," said Scott.

Morbius laughed, short and with nothing in it, and Kirk saw his chief engineer's face close like a hatch. He had seen that expression perhaps a dozen times in five years, always at somebody who had just told the man the Enterprise could not do something, and it had never once ended cheaply.

"Robby," Scott said. "Could you show me one?"

"Absolutely not," said Morbius.

Robby kept his eyes elsewhere. "Yes."

Morbius stepped directly between them. "This examination is finished."

Kirk came away from the wall. "No, Doctor. It isn't."

"You have your orders."

"And you have an arrangement. You wanted time to transfer what you know before Starfleet takes you off this planet. This is what a transfer looks like."

"Captain."

"Unless what you meant," Kirk said, more quietly, "was that Starfleet gets whatever portion of it you decide it deserves."

Morbius said nothing for a moment. Then he turned to the android.

"Stay here."

Robby said nothing at all.

"Robby."

"I heard you."

Scott looked down at his equipment and became extremely interested in a perfectly ordinary connector. McCoy stopped smiling.

"Then obey me," Morbius said.

Robby turned his head a fraction. "Mr. Scott asked whether I would show him the system."

"And I have told you that you will not."

"Yes," said Robby.

The single word made more silence than an argument would have.

Kirk watched the man, and watched the machine, and was working out what he would do if this went further when Morbius did the one thing he had not anticipated.

He walked away.

Not into the house. Away from it, across the terrace and down the western path, at the pace of a man going somewhere on business. Altaira's tiger came out from the trees and watched him go by, its head turning the whole way, and Morbius never saw it.

McCoy let out a long breath. "Well."

Scott looked at the android. "Did I just start a family argument?"

"No."

"You'll want to study humans a while longer," said McCoy.

Robby looked down the path where Morbius had gone. "I have been studying Doctor Morbius for twenty years."

That put an end to the humor.

"Robby," Kirk said, and the android turned. "Do you want to show Mr. Scott the converter?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Scott looked faintly insulted by the question. Robby took it seriously, as he took everything.

"Because he wishes to understand it."

"So does Doctor Morbius."

"Yes."

"Then what's the difference?"

Robby looked at Scott, who had a scanner in one hand and grease on the other and had asked an alien machine's permission before touching it.

"Mr. Scott asks what it can do," he said. "Doctor Morbius asks what he can do with it."

McCoy stared at him. Ostrow lowered his eyes, which for a Vulcan is a considerable statement.

Kirk stood a while with that in his hands, turning it over, and found that it fit a great many things he had seen in two days.

"Show him," he said.

Chapter Twenty-One

SIXTY GALLONS

THE ENTRANCE ROBBY USED WAS NOT THE ONE MORBIUS HAD SHOWN THEM.

It lay behind the house, past the garden, in a shallow depression that looked like nothing but twenty thousand years of weather until the android put a hand against the rock, and the rock opened.

McCoy stopped dead. "How many doors does that man have?"

"That one isn't his," Kirk said.

Robby went first. Scott followed with one engineering case, then Kirk, then McCoy and Ostrow. The passage went down only a short way before it opened into a chamber Kirk had not seen, small by Krell standards, which meant that it was roughly the size of the Enterprise briefing room.

At the center of the floor stood a circular platform. There was nothing else in the room at all.

Scott turned around once. "This is it?"

"Yes."

"I expected more machinery."

"The machinery is elsewhere."

"Of course it is," said Scott.

Robby went to the platform. "What would you like?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What would you like the system to produce?"

Scott looked at Kirk. Kirk was unable to keep it entirely off his face. "You wanted a demonstration, Mr. Scott."

"Aye. I did."

"Make something useful," said McCoy.

Scott ignored this on principle. "What can it scan?"

Robby indicated a recess in the rim of the platform, and Scott reached into his case and came out with a hyperspanner, which he held up between two fingers like a man showing a card to an audience.

"This."

Robby set it into the recess. A light went over it once.

The hyperspanner disappeared.

"What have you done?" Scott said, in a tone that would have brought an entire engineering deck to attention.

"Scanned it."

"You've vaporized my spanner."

"No."

"It's gone."

"Temporarily."

Scott looked a moment as though he intended to hold an entire two-hundred-thousand-year-old civilization personally to account. Then the platform brightened.

A hyperspanner appeared in the center of it.

Then a second one appeared beside it.

Then the original came back in the recess, exactly where it had been.

Scott did not move for several seconds. Then he picked up the first copy, and the second, and the original, and weighed all three in his hands like a man at a market who suspects the scales. He examined them. He opened one, and then the other, and looked inside both.

"Captain."

Kirk knew that tone as well. "What is it?"

"They're identical."

Ostrow had taken one and was turning it under the light. "Identical to what level?"

"Beyond anything I've got in this case, Doctor, and I'll thank you not to enjoy that."

"The differences," said Robby, "are below the functional threshold."

Scott looked up. "There are differences."

"Yes."

"How small?"

"Quantum state."

Scott sat down.

He did not need to sit down. There was nothing in the chamber to sit on, so he sat on the floor, like a man whose knees

have taken a decision without consulting him.

"I think we've broken him," McCoy said.

Scott was not listening. "You can do this with anything."

"With a sufficient pattern."

"Could you copy me?"

"Don't encourage it," said McCoy.

"The system could reproduce your physical structure," Robby said.

Scott looked up from the floor. "Would it be me?"

"No."

The answer came with no pause at all, and the speed of it put the hair up on the back of Kirk's neck.

Ostrow's head came around. "Why not?"

"Because a structural pattern is not continuity."

Nobody said anything. McCoy was looking at the android in a way he had not looked at him before, and Kirk found he was doing much the same.

Scott got up off the floor. "That's a rather important distinction."

"Yes."

"Did the Krell understand it?"

Robby's expression did not change in any way that a human being could have measured. "They believed they did."

Kirk heard the tense and had opened his mouth to go after it when his chief engineer picked up one of the duplicated hyperspanners and turned it over, and the mood in the chamber changed, because there was a brightness in Scott's eye that Kirk had learned over five years to treat as a weather warning.

"All right," said Scott.

"What," said Kirk.

Scott turned to the android. "This machine makes food."

"Yes."

"And liquids."

"Yes."

"Any liquid at all."

"Within chemical constraints."

Scott smiled. McCoy put his face in his hand.

"Robby," Scott said, "do you know what Scotch whisky is?"

"Yes."

"Of course you do. You read the whole library."

"Mr. Scott," said Kirk.

"Scientific inquiry, Captain."

"Naturally."

Scott went into his case and came out with a small flat metal flask, and held it up, and McCoy's head came out of his hand.

"You carry whisky in your engineering kit."

"Emergency supplies."

"You are the emergency."

Scott unscrewed the flask, considered it with the air of a man about to do something historic, and handed it to Robby. "Can it copy that?"

Robby examined it. "Yes."

"Exactly?"

"Yes."

"How much would you like?" Scott said to himself, and then, to Robby, in a voice that had become entirely businesslike:

"Specify quantity, you said."

"Yes."

Scott's grin was a thing of beauty. "Sixty gallons."

"No," said Kirk.

"Captain."

"Absolutely not."

"For calibration purposes."

"Mr. Scott."

"Twenty."

"No."

"Ten."

"One bottle."

Scott looked wounded in a place doctors cannot reach. "One bottle's hardly enough to establish repeatability."

"Give him two," said McCoy. "One for science and one for grief."

Kirk sighed. "Two."

Scott turned to the android in triumph. "Two bottles."

Robby placed the flask in the recess. The light went over it, and two dark glass bottles stood on the platform, labels and all, with the seals unbroken.

Scott picked one up as though it were an infant. He examined the seal. He opened it. He smelled it. His expression became, briefly, religious.

McCoy held out a hand. Scott moved the bottle out of reach.

"You're on duty," said Scott.

"So are you."

"I'm engineering."

"That is not an exemption."

Scott took the smallest sip ever taken by a Scotsman, closed his eyes, and stood there with the whole Krell civilization arranged beneath his feet.

When he opened them again he looked at Robby with a respect Kirk had rarely seen him extend to anything that was not the Enterprise.

"Perfect."

"There are minor molecular variations," said Robby.

Scott's eyes came open the rest of the way. "Where?"

"They are not perceptible to human taste."

"Then why in God's name would you tell me?"

"You asked for accuracy."

McCoy laughed until he had to sit down on the edge of the platform, and Kirk gave up entirely, and even Scott, after a moment of wrestling with his dignity, surrendered it.

Ostrow did not laugh. He was looking at the platform.

"Robby."

"Yes, Doctor."

"If the Krell could reproduce any nonliving object at will, why did they retain conventional manufacturing at all?"

The room went quiet again. It did that quickly, Kirk had noticed, in Krell rooms.

"At first they did," Robby said.

"At first."

"Later, most production became responsive."

"Responsive to what?"

Robby said nothing.

The silence ran a beat too long. Ostrow had spent six years learning to read silences of exactly that shape.

"To thought," Ostrow said.

Robby looked up at him. "Yes."

The word came out very softly, and Scott lowered the bottle.

Kirk thought about a man on a balcony describing a civilization that had abolished labor, and about machines running under a plateau for two thousand centuries with nobody to run them, and about a corridor that turned its lights on four meters ahead of wherever you were going.

"You think of something," he said, "and the system makes it."

"Eventually."

"Eventually?"

Robby's eyes went to the floor. "The final systems required less instruction."

Ostrow came a step closer. "How much less?"

Robby said nothing to that either.

Kirk stood in the middle of the small bright room and felt a shape begin to assemble itself at the back of his mind, not enough to see, only enough to know there was one, and that he was not going to like it when the light came on.

"Let's not ask a machine to finish that sentence," McCoy said, "until we're sure we want the answer."

For once nobody argued with him.

Scott put the bottle down. "Robby. One more question."

"Yes."

"Why did Doctor Morbius never show me this?"

The android looked toward the entrance, up the short passage, in the direction of the house. He took long enough that Kirk began to think he would let it go by.

"Because he believes that understanding gives possession."

Kirk looked at Ostrow, and found Ostrow already looking back at him, and neither of them said anything, and Kirk knew he would not be forgetting that sentence.

◆

When they came up, Altaira was sitting on the terrace with the tiger stretched out beside her, and her father was nowhere in sight.

She looked at Scott's case. "What did Robby show you?"

Scott, who had lost a hyperspanner and two bottles of whisky to the Starfleet chain of command in the last four minutes and was still in a remarkably good humor, said, "Miss, your planet has the finest manufacturing system I have ever seen, and I include Utopia Planitia in that."

"And did Father approve?"

Nobody answered her.

Alta nodded. "I didn't think so."

Kirk sat down on the wall beside her. "You know about the converter."

"Robby used to make things for the house."

"What things?"

"Parts. Glass, when I broke it, which was often. Sometimes food, when the stores ran low."

McCoy stopped in the middle of putting away his own case. "Your father told us you survived out here on what he could provide."

"He did provide it," said Alta, entirely without irony.

Kirk looked at the house.

There it was again. Not a lie, exactly. A sentence cut back until only the useful part was left standing, a thing Edward Morbius did as naturally as other men breathe, and it was beginning to tell Kirk a good deal more about him than any of the answers had.

Alta scratched the tiger behind one ear. "My father doesn't like the machine."

Scott looked up. "Doesn't like it?"

"He likes what it can do." She said it without any particular emphasis, the way she said everything. "He doesn't like that it doesn't need him."

Kirk said nothing to that. There did not seem to be anything to add.

"When I was small," Alta said, "I thought everything came from him. Food. Books. Clothes. The parts for the house. He never once said so. I simply thought it."

"When did you find out?"

"When Robby showed me."

"And what did your father do?"

"He told Robby not to show me anything again without asking him first."

Kirk looked at the android, who had come up the path behind them and was standing at the edge of the terrace with a

duplicated hyperspanner in one hand and two bottles of whisky in the other.

"Did you?"

"For several years," said Robby.

"And then?"

Robby looked at Alta. "She asked me."

Altaira smiled. It was very small, and it did not last, but Kirk saw it, and so did McCoy, and Kirk understood that the two of them had just been handed the first piece of evidence anybody had produced all day about what actually went on in that house.

Scott had begun packing his instruments. One of the duplicated hyperspanners was still in his hand.

Kirk pointed at it. "That stays here."

Scott looked stricken. "Captain."

"Starfleet's order. Nothing produced by Krell systems goes aboard my ship."

"It's my hyperspanner."

"It's another one of your hyperspanner."

Scott appealed to the android, which Kirk thought showed poor tactical judgment.

"The captain is correct," said Robby.

Scott said something in Gaelic.

"And the Scotch," said McCoy, pleasantly.

Scott went very still.

"The Scotch too, Mr. Scott."

"Captain, that was produced from my own private property."

"On a Krell machine."

"It's Scotch."

"It's Krell Scotch."

"There is no such thing as Krell Scotch."

"There is now," said Kirk, "and it's staying on Altair IV."

Scott looked at the bottles the way a man looks at a shore he is being carried off from. Robby took them from him, along with the spanner.

"I will keep them safe."

"Particularly that one."

"I understand."

"No, I mean particularly."

"Mr. Scott."

"Aye?"

"I understand."

Scott turned to Kirk. "Captain, he's mockin' me."

"He's learning," said McCoy.

And Kirk, watching the android carry two bottles of counterfeit whisky into a house built out of a dead starship's cargo, thought McCoy was probably right, and that he had no idea whether it was good news.

Then the communicator on his belt sounded.

He had it open before the second tone. "Kirk here."

Uhura's voice came through under a wash of static that had no business being there at this range. "Captain, we have been trying to reach you for three minutes."

Kirk was already on his feet. "What's wrong?"

"Interference, sir. It came up all at once. Mr. Spock asks me to inform you that we are losing surface telemetry."

He looked at the ridge. "Cause?"

"Unknown."

The signal broke. Came back. Broke again.

"Captain, there is something else."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

A longer burst, and when her voice came back it was thinner. "We are receiving a transmission."

"From where?"

"That is the difficulty, sir."

"Uhura."

Every person on the terrace had turned toward him.

"The signal originates below your position."

In the doorway of the house, Edward Morbius had appeared, and he had heard enough of it.

For the first time since Kirk had met the man, he looked frightened.

And a long way under their feet, in the dark, something had begun to call the Enterprise.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE VOTE

Twenty years earlier

THE FIRST MAN DIED EIGHTEEN DAYS AFTER ROBBY WAS SHUT DOWN.

Until then Adams had been able to tell himself, in the privacy of his own quarters and nowhere else, that whatever was loose on Altair IV was dangerous without being murderous. It was a distinction he had defended for weeks and it had cost him something every time.

Equipment had moved. Doors had opened. A power regulator had come apart in a locked shed and been laid out across the floor in perfect order, every washer beside its own bolt. A portable generator had been found thirty meters from the plate that held it, the mounting holes undamaged and the concrete unmarked. Two people had reported footsteps behind them in corridors where nobody was walking. Farman had found prints

in the dust of an empty storeroom that began in the middle of the floor and ended at a wall.

Each of them had been impossible in a slightly different way, and that had given everyone room to invent a slightly different explanation.

Then Harris.

Lieutenant Daniel Harris was aboard the Bellerophon when he died, and that was the part Adams could not make fit. The ship was in orbit. Whatever walked in the dust two hundred kilometers below had no business on his deck plates.

Harris had been working in the secondary communications compartment with two technicians when the bulkhead behind him folded inward.

Not ruptured. Not blown outward by pressure. Folded, the way a man folds a sheet of paper, the metal bending around something that was not there.

One technician lived because she had crossed to the next console for a diagnostic probe. The other was thrown against the far wall and broke an arm. Harris was caught between the bulkhead and the communications rack, and by the time they cut him free there was nothing the surgeon could do but confirm what everyone in the compartment already knew.

Adams stood in sickbay looking at the sheet while the surgeon washed her hands.

"Explosive residue?"

"None."

"Pressure differential?"

"None."

"Structural failure?"

"Quinn says the frame was sound. He says it three times, which is how you know it bothers him."

Adams looked through the partition at the corridor beyond, where two crewmen went past carrying a cable spool and did not look in.

"Internal sensors?"

"Nothing."

"External?"

"Nothing, Captain. I have given you every no I have."

She dried her hands and put the towel down with more care than it needed.

"I am going to say something you will not enjoy."

"I have had that kind of day."

"We should leave."

Adams did not answer at once.

"I know."

"No. I do not think you do."

"I said I know."

She stopped, and he heard how it had come out, and he made himself say the rest of it more quietly.

"I am sorry."

"So am I."

She looked at the covered shape on the table, a man she had inoculated six months ago in a corridor on Earth while he complained about the needle.

"Whatever this is," she said, "it has stopped being interesting."

◆

Morbius used the educator that night.

Julia found him because he was missing, which had become the ordinary way of finding him. She had begun counting his absences without deciding to. A meal he forgot. An hour below when he had said ten minutes. A night when she woke and put a hand across the bed and found it cold.

The house was dark except for the library. His coat was gone. She stood a while with both hands flat on the table, and the child turned under her ribs, and she said, "Yes. I know," to nobody at all, and went below.

He was already in the chair when she reached the chamber. The oval plate had begun its descent.

"Edward."

His eyes opened. He did not sit up.

"You promised me."

"I promised I would not use it again until I understood more. I understand vastly more."

"You were unconscious for fourteen hours."

"I survived."

"That is not a scientific standard."

He almost smiled at that, and it would have been easier if he had argued.

She came forward until she was close enough to touch the frame of the machine.

"Harris is dead."

Morbius's expression changed. He had not known, and for

one moment she saw her husband in his face, the man who had wept at his mother's funeral and been embarrassed about it for a year.

"When?"

"Two hours ago. Something crushed a bulkhead aboard the ship."

"Aboard the ship."

"Yes."

Then she watched the scientist in him take possession of the grief before the man had finished feeling it.

"Was there a field reading? Radiation? Did Quinn record the deformation pattern?"

"A man is dead."

"I heard you."

"No. You heard data."

That reached him. He stood, and for one moment she believed she had him, and then he looked back at the chair.

"If it can reach the Bellerophon, then the phenomenon is not confined to the settlement."

"Which means we leave."

"It means our understanding is incomplete."

"Our understanding has been incomplete since the day we landed."

"And that," said Morbius, "is precisely why I must continue."

There it was, laid bare and not even hidden. Not because men were dying. Because he did not know.

"Edward. Every time you learn more, this gets worse."

"That is superstition."

"The incidents began after you used that machine."

"They began after we woke a complex we do not understand."

"They got worse when you began to understand it."

"Correlation is not causation."

"No," Julia said. "But it is a reason to keep your head out of that chair."

He sat down in it.

She did not leave. She had thought she would. She stood against the wall with her arms folded over the child and watched the plate come down, and she was still standing there forty-three seconds later when he began to scream.

He screamed at thirty-one seconds. Her hand was on the cutoff at thirty-three. Then his arm came up off the rest and he shouted one word, no, and she froze, and the light went white, and his back arched off the chair.

Then the machine let him go.

She caught him before he came out of the chair. There was blood under his nose. His eyes took several seconds to find her.

"How long?"

"Less than a minute."

"Good," said Morbius, and stood up too quickly, and crossed the chamber without noticing that she had hold of his arm.

He put out his hand toward a panel.

It lit before he touched it.

Julia saw it happen. So did he. He stopped with his fingers

still short of the surface and looked at them, and then he moved his hand toward a second panel, and that one lit as well, and a field of Krell notation unfolded across the wall of the chamber like something coming awake.

"What does it say?"

He read the first line aloud. Then the second. Then the third.

Julia listened to her husband read a dead language he could not have read the previous morning.

"Edward."

"I know."

"You could not do that yesterday."

"No," he said, and there was blood on his collar and his face was gray, and his eyes were brighter than she had seen them in a year. "I can now."

◆

The second death was aboard the ship, eleven days later.

The third was on the surface. A security officer went off the eastern perimeter at 0214 and Farman found him forty meters out in open ground. No prints led to him and none led away.

The fourth was Quinn's assistant, in a maintenance console that came apart around him.

The fifth was a laboratory technician who died when a pressure door closed on a corridor the computer insisted was open, and went on insisting afterward.

By then nobody in the settlement used the word accident.

Adams called Morbius to the command shelter. Farman was already there. So was Julia, and Morbius stopped inside the door when he saw the three of them together.

"This is an intervention."

"No," said Adams. "It is unusual."

He put a data slate on the table.

"Five dead. Nine injured. Three incidents aboard my ship. The subspace radio dropped out twice this morning and Quinn cannot tell me why."

"I was not informed."

"You are being informed now. You stop using the educator."

Morbius looked at Julia. Julia looked back at him and did not apologize.

"No," he said.

"That was not a request."

"You have no authority over what I do with my own mind."

"I have authority over this expedition."

"Then exercise it over your expedition. I am a civilian specialist."

"You are also standing on a Federation survey site while people die around you."

"You cannot demonstrate that my work is causing these deaths."

"No."

"Then this is fear."

"This," said Adams, "is command."

Farman had not spoken. He spoke now, from the side of the room, without raising his voice.

"You want a scientific observation, Doctor? Before you put your head in that thing, nobody was dead."

"That proves nothing."

"It proves Harris was alive."

Adams stood up.

"You are finished with the educator."

And Adams, who had commanded men for nineteen years and been shouted at by experts, found himself looking at something in Morbius's face he had not expected and did not like. Not violence. Not even anger, at first.

Insult. Deep and personal and absolute, as though the order were not merely wrong but an intrusion into something that belonged to him and to nobody else alive.

"You are stopping me," Morbius said, "at the point where I might finally understand the danger."

"I am stopping you because five people are dead."

"And if stopping me kills the rest?"

"Then I will live with it."

Morbius looked at him for a long moment.

"No," he said quietly. "You will not."

Every light in the settlement went out.

Farman had his weapon clear of the holster before the dark had finished arriving. Then the emergency lamps came up amber along the walls, and Adams was looking at Morbius, and Morbius looked genuinely startled.

That mattered. It did not help.

The communicator on Adams's belt shrieked.

"Bellerophon to ground command."

"Adams."

The voice from the bridge came through under alarms.

"Captain, we have lost subspace. The main array is gone."

"Gone how?"

A pause that went on two seconds too long.

"Sir, it has been torn off the ship."

◆

They watched her come over on the next pass from the western terrace, through a portable telescope set up on the wall.

The Bellerophon crossed the sky every ninety-three minutes. She was a bright moving point until the viewer found her, and then she was a ship, and half the ventral engineering hull was wrong.

The subspace array had not been burned away. It had not been blown off. It was simply absent, and the plating around the mounts was folded outward, petals of metal opened toward space.

Quinn came through on short range.

"We have got no long-range transmission capability. Whatever did it pulled the array straight out through its mountings."

"Can you rebuild it?"

"Not properly."

"Improperly."

A pause. "Maybe."

"That will do."

"For what?"

"One message," said Adams.

Morbius, beside him at the telescope, turned his head.

"You intend to warn them away."

"Yes."

Julia was watching her husband's mouth. So was Adams. Neither of them liked what they saw there.

◆

That evening Adams called the expedition together in the command shelter, everyone who could leave a station in person and the rest through short-range links from the ship, and told them the truth with the dead man's empty chair against the wall behind him.

Five dead. Nine hurt. A force that had acted on the surface and aboard the ship. No long-range communications. A discovery beyond anything humanity had expected to find in this quadrant or any other.

And no way of knowing whether staying another day would kill more of them.

Then he did something captains do not ordinarily do. He called for a vote.

Not on command. That remained his, and he said so twice. On whether the expedition should go on.

Morbius objected before the ballots were distributed.

"This is absurd. Scientific work is not decided by plebiscite."

"People deciding whether to go on risking their lives is not scientific work."

"They knew this expedition carried risk."

"Not this risk."

"Because we do not understand it."

"That," said Adams, "is the point."

Morbius came forward through the room, and people made way for him, and he did not appear to notice them doing it.

"Captain. If you end this mission now you may destroy the only opportunity we will ever have to understand what is happening here."

"And if I do not, I may destroy what is left of my expedition."

"You cannot know that."

"No." Adams looked around the room at the thirty-six faces still in it. "Neither can you."

The vote took eleven minutes.

Thirty-two to return to Earth. Three to remain. One abstention.

Morbius did not take a ballot when they were offered to him. Julia took hers, and marked it where he could see her do it, and put it in the box.

Adams read the result aloud once.

"The expedition is over. We begin packing the settlement at first light."

Morbius said nothing.

"Edward."

"You are making a mistake."

"Probably."

"You will never be permitted to return. You understand that. They will quarantine this system and bury everything we have

found under committees and prohibitions until every man who understood the first thing about it is dead."

"Probably that too."

"And you accept it."

Adams looked around the shelter, at the places along the wall where five people were not standing.

"Yes."

Something moved across Morbius's face and did not entirely leave it. Adams saw anger. Julia, who had known him eleven years, saw something worse. She saw betrayal.

What Morbius felt was simpler than either, and he never once said it aloud, and afterward it would not have mattered if he had.

They were taking it away from him.

Two and a half kilometers beneath the shelter, in a lattice of control older than the human species, a pattern was recognized that the lattice had been built to recognize. Not language. Not instruction. Not conscious intention at all.

Want.

The machine listened.

Chapter Twenty-Three

THE SIGNAL BELOW

THE SIGNAL WAS NOT A VOICE.

Uhura had established that much before Kirk got across the terrace.

He came the length of it with the communicator at his ear and static washing over half her words, while behind him Scott packed up in ninety seconds the work area he had spent an hour arranging, and McCoy stood between Ostrow and the western path like a man heading off a horse.

"Say again, Lieutenant."

"No modulation consistent with speech, sir. No carrier structure I recognize. It repeats, but not at regular intervals."

Morbius had come out into the doorway. Whatever Kirk had seen on his face when the transmission was first reported had been put away, and what was there now was the controlled courteous face he had worn since the Enterprise arrived. Kirk had begun to distrust that face a good deal more than he would

have distrusted anger.

"Doctor. What is transmitting under your house?"

"Nothing that I have activated."

"That isn't what I asked you."

"Then I cannot answer you."

Kirk raised the communicator again. "Can you localize it?"

Interference nearly ate the reply. "Within two hundred meters horizontally. Depth uncertain. Mr. Spock says the source is moving."

That reached Morbius. Not far. A tightening at the corner of the mouth.

"Moving how?" said Kirk.

Spock's voice came in over Uhura's. "Not geographically, Captain. The emission point remains beneath the plateau. The signal is appearing through different portions of the subsurface power network. It may be using the network rather than originating from any single transmitter."

Scott snapped the first case shut. "Like a man talkin' through whichever wire happens to be nearest."

"An imprecise analogy, Mr. Scott. It is adequate."

Scott looked at Kirk. "He's been saving that one up."

"Spock, any effect on the ship?"

"Surface telemetry is degraded. Communications are functional at present. Sensors are returning false depth values from beneath the plateau."

"Weapons?"

"Unaffected."

"Transporters?"

A pause that Kirk did not care for at all. "Intermittent."

He looked at his chief engineer. "Get back aboard while you still can. I want you in engineering if this gets any worse. Take your people."

Scott did not like leaving the android, or the converter, or an unsolved problem, and he liked being away from his engines during something that might turn into an attack a great deal less.

"Aye, sir." He closed the second case, and then looked at Robby, who was still holding a duplicated hyperspanner and two bottles of whisky that had acquired, in the last half hour, a surprising emotional significance. "You'll mind those."

"I will."

"Particularly the whisky."

"Yes, Mr. Scott."

Scott hesitated. "Captain, he is definitely mockin' me."

"Go."

He went. Kirk stayed where he was until the transporter took Scott and his two engineers off the plateau. The shimmer broke once at its edges, reformed, and cleared.

"Spock. Beam down as soon as Mr. Scott reports clear."

Morbius turned. "Why?"

"Because if something under your house has decided to introduce itself to my ship, I want my science officer standing where the introduction starts."

"You have a xenoarchaeologist."

Ostrow had moved along the terrace wall and was listening to the communicator as though the static itself might turn out to have a grammar.

"Doctor Ostrow is staying above ground," said McCoy.

Ostrow turned his head. "I was not aware that you had acquired command authority, Doctor."

"I've got medical authority, and today that's near enough."

"My pulse is normal."

"You don't know that."

"I can count."

"So can I," said McCoy, "and I own the scanner."

The argument might have gone several more rounds if the ground had not moved.

It was not an earthquake. Kirk had been through earthquakes, explosions, impacts, and the particular sick lurch of a starship deck when the inertial compensators go. This was none of those. For rather less than a second the terrace seemed to pull sideways beneath his boots without going anywhere at all. The stone stayed where it was. His inner ear insisted, with some heat, that it had not.

Alta caught the back of the chair beside her. The tiger came up off the ground in one movement. Robby turned toward the ridge.

Every light in the house went out, and then came back.

Morbius moved first, and not toward his daughter. He went to a panel beside the door.

"That system is independent," he said.

Kirk watched his hands go over the controls. "Apparently not."

"It has no physical connection to the lower installation."

"Apparently it does."

Morbius looked up at him sharply, and whatever he had been about to say was lost, because Spock arrived.

The beam came down hard. It took four seconds longer than it should have, and held him half formed for part of one of them, and Kirk, who had watched a great many transporter cycles, felt the back of his neck go cold. Then it let go, and Spock was standing on the terrace with his tricorder already open, as though nothing whatever had happened, his way of reporting that something had.

"Captain."

"You felt that shear?"

"The Enterprise registered a transient gravitational shear of negligible magnitude."

McCoy stared at him. "Negligible."

"No structural damage occurred."

"I know what the word means, Spock."

Spock crossed to the edge of the terrace and held the tricorder down toward the ground, and Ostrow was at his shoulder before McCoy could open his mouth.

"The signal changed," Ostrow said.

"You can hear it?"

"No. The interval shortened after the shear."

Spock checked. "Correct."

Kirk looked from one Vulcan to the other. "Meaning what?"

"Possibly nothing."

"And possibly?"

"A response," said Ostrow.

Morbius laughed once, and there was nothing in it. "To what?"

Nobody answered him. That was becoming a habit on that terrace.

The communicator sounded. "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Sulu.

"Kirk here."

"Sir, we took a navigation error off the planetary horizon sensor. It corrected itself inside a second, but the computer briefly put our altitude at negative eleven kilometers."

"That's inconvenient," said McCoy.

"Actual orbit, Mr. Sulu?"

"Stable, sir."

"Keep it that way. Anything else changes, I want to hear about it before the computer does."

Spock had gone down on one knee and laid his hand flat against the terrace stone.

Morbius watched him. "You will learn very little through your fingers."

"I am not using my fingers."

The tricorder gave out a short sequence of tones, and Spock stood.

"The signal is not directed at the Enterprise."

"Uhura says it's reaching the ship."

"It is. That is not the same thing."

Ostrow had it first. "It is broadcasting."

"Yes."

"To whom?" said Alta.

Spock looked across the terrace at Robby, who had not moved from the edge of it since the ground shifted. "That is what I intend to determine."

Robby turned around. "It is not for me."

Morbius's head came up. "You recognize it."

"No."

"You have just said that it is not for you."

"I know the difference," said Robby.

Kirk came a step closer. "Between what?"

"Between a command and an inquiry."

The distinction went out across the terrace and settled on all of them.

"This is an inquiry," Spock said.

"Yes."

"What is it asking?"

"I do not know."

"That is impossible," said Morbius, coming down the steps.

"No."

"If you can identify its function you can identify its content."

"No."

"Robby."

The android stood still, and Kirk watched the old pattern run again: the man asked a question, got no useful answer, and heard disobedience.

It was Spock who broke it. "Robby. Does the inquiry require an answer?"

"I do not know."

"Could answering it cause harm?"

The pause was longer than any he had given them. "Yes."

"To whom?" said Morbius.

"I do not know."

Kirk made the decision standing up. "Then nobody answers it. Not you, not my ship, not anything on this plateau."

"Captain," said Morbius, "you do not even know what you are refusing."

"That's correct."

"And that does not trouble you?"

"Not nearly as much as how little it troubles you."

For a moment the younger man showed through the older one, the man who had gone down into a chamber alone in the dark because not knowing what a thing did had become intolerable.

Then the house lights dimmed a second time, and the tiger began to growl.

Not at anyone on the terrace. At the air beyond it.

Every head turned. The animal had gone low, shoulders up, ears flat, the whole of its attention on a point some twenty meters out past the garden where there was nothing to see.

Alta put a hand on its neck. "Easy."

It did not move.

"Captain," said Spock, raising the tricorder.

Kirk had his phaser out. "I have it."

McCoy came off the wall. Ostrow stepped behind the terrace wall without being told, which was the most sensible thing Kirk had seen him do in two days. Morbius did neither.

"There is nothing there," he said.

The growl went down an octave.

Spock swept the empty ground twice. "No life form. No coherent energy pattern."

"Robby?"

The android looked at the same piece of nothing. "I see nothing."

Kirk had read that sentence at two in the morning in a twenty-year-old incident report, filed by a captain who had been dead for two decades, about a door that had opened itself.

Not: I failed to observe anything.

I see nothing.

Then the garden path bent.

It happened for a fraction of a second and not enough of one that Kirk could have sworn to it under oath afterward. The line of pale stones along the path seemed to deform around an outline that had no color of its own, the way a spoon deforms in a glass of water.

And then the equipment shed at the end of the garden came apart.

There was no explosion. That was the part Kirk reported afterward that nobody at Starfleet Command ever quite accepted. The shed did not blow outward and it did not fall in. Its panels separated along their seams, all of them at once, and went down onto the stone in an order so neat that it looked deliberate, and the frame stood a moment longer and then came apart too, section by section, and lay down.

Ensign Rivera had been standing four meters from it.

Kirk saw him go. There was no impact he could point to and nothing that struck the man, only Rivera leaving the ground and traveling six meters through the air and coming down on his shoulder on the stone at the edge of the terrace, hard, his phaser going off into the sky as he fell.

McCoy was moving before he landed.

"Spock!"

"No reading, Captain. Nothing."

The tiger lunged forward one full step and Alta went with it, both hands in the fur, her boots sliding on the stone, and Robby was there before Kirk could shout, one hand flat against the animal's chest, immovable as a wall.

Then the communicator at Kirk's belt shrieked with static, and Uhura's voice came through it.

"Captain, the signal has stopped."

Kirk did not lower the phaser. "Spock."

"Confirmed. The local distortion has also ceased."

The tiger stayed exactly where it was, staring at the empty garden, and went on staring at it long after the rest of them had turned away.

McCoy had Rivera's tunic open. "Dislocated shoulder, three ribs, possible concussion. He'll keep, but he's going up now."

"Take him."

Kirk turned around, and Edward Morbius was standing in the middle of his own terrace, entirely white in the face, looking out at the garden where the light had bent.

"What did you see, Doctor?"

"Nothing," said Morbius.

It was the wrong answer, and Kirk knew it was wrong for the same reason he had known it in the house the day before.

The man had answered far too quickly.

◆

They spent the next three hours establishing almost nothing, and Kirk made every one of them count anyway.

Spock found a transient distortion in the local field, too weak and too incomplete to classify, occupying roughly two cubic meters and possessing, in his words, no measurable mass, charge, temperature or intention, the last of which he defended when McCoy objected to it, on the grounds that it was the only honest word available.

Ostrow, working on the tricorder record of the last eleven seconds of the underground signal, found a repeating sequence that might have been a Krell interrogative.

"Might have been," Spock said.

"Three of its relationships are inadmissible."

"Inadmissible according to what?"

"According to every rule I have derived in six years," said Ostrow, and then sat down on the terrace wall with the instrument in his hands, and did not say anything else for some while, and Kirk left him alone, because he had seen men take that particular news before.

The shed was recorded where it lay. Nothing was missing from it. Nothing was broken. Two hundred and six components were on the ground in the order in which they had come out,

and one of Scott's engineers, going over the record from orbit, observed that whoever had done it had begun with the fasteners.

Morbius offered no help whatever, and that, more than anything else on that terrace, convinced Kirk the man knew something.

At sunset the Enterprise got clean telemetry back. Transporter locks steadied. The false navigation values stopped. Rivera woke up in sickbay and asked, through the concussion, what had hit him, and McCoy told him the truth: nothing had.

The crisis, if it had been one, appeared to be over.

Kirk did not believe it for a moment.

McCoy found him at the western edge of the terrace watching the light go off the ridge.

"You planning to stand out here until the next invisible thing comes by?"

"Possibly."

"Fine. I'll have dinner sent out."

Kirk looked back toward the house. Alta was inside, sitting on the arm of a chair with a communicator against her ear, talking to Uhura. The two of them had spoken three times since the Enterprise made orbit, briefly, twice at McCoy's suggestion and once, Kirk noticed, at neither's. Alta asked questions about the ship. Uhura answered all of them.

Morbius had disliked that as much as he had disliked anything else that had happened today.

"Bones."

"Mm."

"Tomorrow I want Alta aboard for a few hours."

McCoy's expression changed. "Medical reason?"

"Human reason."

"Her father will fight you on it."

"He can try."

"Are you asking her, or telling her?"

Kirk weighed that, and McCoy smiled very faintly.

"Good answer."

Behind them, through the open window, Alta laughed at something Uhura had said.

Morbius came into the room at the sound of it.

Kirk watched him stop, for no longer than a step, in the middle of his own floor.

Then he kept walking.

Chapter Twenty-Four

NO ONE COMES BACK

Twenty years earlier

Quinn built a subspace transmitter out of three systems that had never been designed to speak to one another, and he did it in a night.

By morning half the deck of the communications compartment had disappeared under open panels, cable runs and components stripped out of navigation, emergency telemetry and one of the geological scanners the surface team was not going to need again. The main array was gone off the hull and nothing Quinn did was going to put it back.

What he was building was not a replacement. It was an argument against silence.

Adams came in a little after 0600 and found him on his back with both arms inside the console.

"Tell me something encouraging."

"No."

"Lie to me."

"You look rested, Captain."

Quinn slid out. His eyes were red and there was a burn across the back of one hand that he had not bothered to have looked at.

"If the field coils hold, I can give you gain enough for a burst."

"How long a burst?"

"Thirty seconds."

"I need more than that."

"Then you should have asked whatever tore the antenna off to leave us a spare."

Adams let that go by.

"Will Starfleet hear thirty seconds?"

"Depends who is listening. Depends on propagation. Depends on whether this holds together long enough to clear atmosphere."

"Can it transmit?"

"Yes."

"Then we are using it."

Quinn sat up on the deck with his wrists over his knees.

"Captain. If whatever is doing this notices."

"Then we transmit anyway."

Quinn looked at him a moment longer than was polite.

"That is what I thought you would say," he said, and went back under the console.

◆

On the planet, Morbius used the educator again before the sun was properly up.

Julia did not know until afterward. She woke alone, which had stopped being remarkable, and dressed and walked through the house and found the library empty and his notes gone off the desk. The lower entrance stood open. She looked down it for a long time before she followed.

He was out of the chair when she reached the chamber. He stood in front of a wall of Krell symbols that moved faster than she could separate one from the next, and there was blood dried on his collar from the night before or from an hour ago, she could not tell which.

"Again."

"Good morning."

"How many times, Edward?"

"You asked me that yesterday."

"You did not answer yesterday."

"I have work to finish. There is very little of it left."

"The expedition voted."

"The expedition voted to abandon the greatest discovery in human history because frightened people were asked to choose while they were frightened."

"Five people are dead."

"I am aware of the number."

"Then say their names."

He stayed facing the wall. The symbols went on falling upward across it, and Julia watched them, and hated them.

"They died because we do not understand this system."

"You do not know that."

"No."

"And you do not know that understanding it will save anyone."

"No."

"Then what are you doing?"

Morbius raised his hand.

Every symbol on the wall stopped.

Not slowed. Not faded out under a control. They stopped, all of them at once, the way a room goes quiet when somebody comes in.

He lowered his hand and looked at it.

Julia had gone very cold.

"You did not touch anything."

"No."

"Then how did you stop it?"

He let the question stand, and the chamber held the kind of silence that has weight in it.

"Edward."

"I wanted it to stop," he said.

And then, while they were both looking at his hand, the symbols began to move again, and he had not touched anything that time either.

For once, certainty left him. Julia saw it go and saw what was underneath, and it frightened her more than the wall did.

"What have you done to yourself?"

"I have increased my capacity to interact with the Krell systems."

"No. You wanted something to stop and it stopped."

"The distinction may be semantic."

"The distinction is terrifying."

"It is extraordinary."

And there was the whole difference between them in two sentences, spoken in a chamber two and a half kilometers under a house neither of them would ever leave.

"You are coming up with me today."

"I have not agreed to leave."

"I did not ask whether you agreed."

She walked out. Behind her the wall of symbols accelerated, and Edward Morbius watched them go, and did not consciously ask them to.

◆

At 0843 the transmitter was ready. Quinn refused to call it repaired.

"Repair implies I know what I have done."

Adams took the communications station himself. Farman stood by the door with nothing to do and stayed anyway. The compartment's regular operator had died in it eleven days earlier, and her replacement, Ensign Helen Mercer, sat at the next console watching an output meter swing between inadequate and impossible.

"Carrier?"

"Trying."

"That is not a status."

"It is on this equipment, sir."

Quinn leaned over the open panel with one hand braced on the frame.

"Now."

Mercer hit the control.

For half a second nothing happened. Then the transmitter came alive and every light in the compartment dimmed and an alarm started somewhere behind Quinn that nobody attended to.

"Carrier established."

Adams leaned to the pickup.

"This is Captain J. J. Adams, Federation survey vessel Bellerophon, transmitting emergency priority from Altair IV."

The output meter fell. Quinn hit the side of the console with the flat of his hand and it came back up.

"Expedition compromised. Multiple fatalities from an unknown hostile force or phenomenon. The source has not been identified. The hazard is present on the planetary surface and in orbital space."

Mercer held up two fingers. Twenty seconds.

"All vessels receiving this transmission are warned not to approach Altair IV."

"Captain," said Quinn, watching a temperature gauge.

"Repeat. Do not attempt a landing. Altair IV is to be considered hazardous pending full Starfleet investigation."

The transmitter began to scream. Quinn reached for the cutoff and Adams caught his wrist.

"Wait."

Five seconds.

Adams leaned closer to the pickup and said the last thing anyone in the Federation would ever hear from the Bellerophon.

"This is Captain J. J. Adams. Do not come back."

Quinn killed the power. The transmitter died, and smoke came up out of the open console and stood in a flat layer under the ceiling, and nobody in the compartment said a word.

Mercer looked at the receiver as though it might answer.

"Did it get through?"

Quinn dragged both hands down his face.

"It left the ship."

"That is not what I asked."

"It is the answer I have got."

Adams stood up and looked at the blackened thing Quinn had built in a night.

"Begin evacuation."

◆

The first transport came up at 0910 and the second at 0916.

Adams had expected resistance and got almost none. Whatever the settlement had been to these people had been burned out of them one impossible morning at a time. They packed what they could carry and left the rest, and the rest was most of it. Instruments. Samples. Clothing. Photographs.

One engineer tried to take a chair he had built himself out of packing crates, on the grounds that he had spent three months getting it comfortable and saw no reason an invisible murderer

should inherit it. Farman made him leave it.

Cookie evacuated twelve sealed containers of food and then went back down for a thirteenth. Adams found him at the transporter marker with it against his chest.

"What is in that?"

"Coffee."

"Leave it."

Cookie looked at him with real injury.

"Captain."

"We have coffee aboard."

"Not this coffee, sir."

Adams turned to him. Cookie looked back, entirely prepared to spend the rest of the morning on it.

"Fine."

"Thank you, sir."

He went up in the beam holding the container like a child, and Farman watched him go.

"If we die, at least breakfast is covered."

"That is leadership, Jerry."

"Yes, sir."

They almost smiled at each other.

Then something hit Laboratory One and the building moved half a meter sideways. Not a wall of it. The building.

Farman had his weapon out before the sound arrived. Adams looked across the compound. Nobody had been inside.

"Keep them moving."

A second impact took the eastern power station, and the lights ran down and came back across the whole settlement.

The transporter field collapsed around two crewmen halfway through materialization, and both reappeared on the pad intact and gray in the face.

"Bellerophon, report."

"Transporter lost pattern cohesion, sir. We have interference."

"Source?"

"Planetary."

Morbius came out of the house with a data case in either hand and looked at the laboratory.

"I had nothing to do with that."

Adams had not accused him. That he answered anyway was a thing Adams would remember for the rest of his life, which was four hours.

"Get in line."

"I have more material below."

"No."

"Captain, I have spent months reconstructing the central Krell language. There are records under this house that exist nowhere else in the galaxy."

"And they are going to stay there."

"Do you have the slightest conception of what humanity stands to lose?"

Adams looked at the laboratory sitting half a meter out of true.

"I have a fair idea what we have lost already."

"That is emotional reasoning."

"Yes," said Adams, and that stopped him, because it was the one answer Morbius had no argument prepared for.

"Five people are dead, Edward. I am finished pretending that does not belong in the arithmetic."

Julia came out of the house behind her husband carrying one bag.

The bag was very small. Adams looked at it, and then so did her husband.

"Where are the rest of your things?"

"I do not need them."

"Julia, the research notes in the bedroom."

"Leave them."

He stared at her with what appeared to be honest shock.

"They are months of work."

"We are alive. Bring that."

Adams watched it happen and understood that the man was being taken apart in pieces. First his authority. Then the expedition. Now his wife was choosing the transporter over the thing he had given himself to, and doing it in front of the captain.

He could see the anger clearly enough. What he could not see was where it went.

◆

By noon they were taking people and nothing else.

The attacks came in bursts. That was worse than continuously, because between them the settlement was only a quiet place on a warm morning. A pressure line let go aboard the ship.

A storage compartment opened and everything inside it crossed the room at the same instant. A section of exterior plating buckled inward with nothing near it.

Then forty minutes in which nothing happened at all.

During the silence Morbius went below, and Julia found out only when she turned to ask Robby where he was.

Robby had been standing inactive in the lower gallery for forty days. She had asked him out of nineteen years of habit that had taken her four weeks to build and would not break, and she stood in the doorway with the question in her mouth and nobody to put it to.

She found she was angry at all of them. At Adams. At Edward. At Starfleet, and at the Krell, dead two hundred thousand years and still managing this. At Robby, for standing underground with his eyes shut while the world came apart.

Mostly at herself, for waiting this long.

She opened her communicator.

"Edward."

Nothing.

"Edward."

Static, and then his voice, flat and far away.

"I am here."

"Come up."

"I require fifteen minutes."

"No."

"Julia."

"We leave in eleven."

The channel closed.

She stood looking at the communicator in her hand. In eleven years he had never once closed a channel on her.

◆

At 1317 the Bellerophon lost artificial gravity for four seconds. At 1322 it came back with no explanation offered by any system aboard. At 1340 an empty crew compartment was crushed inward from six directions at once. At 1403 Quinn reported that something had been in among the impulse control relays.

By 1430 thirty-one people were aboard. At 1447, thirty-three. At 1502, thirty-five.

Thirty-five aboard the Bellerophon. Two on Altair IV.

Adams had gone up at noon, over his own objection, because Farman had pointed out that if anything happened to the ship while her captain was on the ground, the regulations would have a good deal to say about his judgment. Adams had told him that if they lived through this, Farman could read him the regulations personally. Farman had said he was looking forward to it.

Now Adams sat in the command chair and watched Altair IV turn under them.

"Transporter."

"Ready, sir."

"Surface lock?"

"Marginal. Holding."

"Get them."

◆

Julia stood inside the transporter marker. Morbius stood ten meters away at the door of the house with a data case in each hand.

"Edward."

"One moment."

"No."

He turned toward her.

"We have already left material I may never recover."

"Then you will not recover it."

"You cannot possibly understand what is being lost here."

"No. And I am tired of hearing that used as the answer to everything."

He came toward her across the terrace.

"These records could advance human knowledge by centuries."

"And if we die here they advance nothing."

"We are not going to die."

Julia looked past him at the laboratory standing out of true in the afternoon light.

"Tell Harris."

That stopped him where he was. She regretted it, and did not take it back, and understood that she had begun doing that a great deal lately.

The communicator sounded.

"Morbius, this is Adams."

He opened it. "We are ready."

"So are we. Step into the field."

He set the cases down on the stones, one and then the other, taking his time about it, and came and stood beside his wife.

Julia took his hand.

He looked down at her fingers around his as though he had not expected them, and something in him gave way, and for one moment she had her husband back.

The field formed. The light came up around them both and the world began to go.

Then it slammed back.

Julia staggered and Morbius caught her, and the beam was gone, and the terrace was exactly where it had been.

"Bellerophon."

The communicator came apart in static and then found itself.

"We lost the pattern."

Adams's voice cut across it. "Try again."

The second attempt never formed at all. The lights went out in the house behind them. The ground gave one small sideways pull, no more than a man feels stepping off a moving walkway, and Julia took hold of her husband's arm, and he had felt it too.

"Bellerophon."

"We have lost transporter lock completely."

"For how long?"

"Unknown, Doctor."

Morbius turned his head toward the lower entrance, and his wife was watching him when he did.

"No."

"I said nothing."

"You did not have to."

Adams came through then, and his voice had changed, and Julia heard the change before she heard the words.

"Edward. Listen to me. I cannot hold this orbit indefinitely."

Morbius looked up at a clear afternoon sky with nothing in it.

"The ship is in danger."

"We have had three more failures in the last hour. If I cannot restore transport, I have to take her clear of the planet."

Julia closed her eyes.

"And then?"

"Then we get outside the interference, repair what we can, and come back for you."

On the terrace of the house on Altair IV, Edward Morbius looked at the ridge line, and did not answer for four full seconds.

Chapter Twenty-Five

DISTANCE

From the report of James T. Kirk, commanding, U.S.S. Enterprise. I have set the Bellerophon's last hours down as they were given to me, and I have put them where they belong in the account rather than where I learned them, because a man reading this ought to have what I did not. I did not know, that night, that a starship had been pulled out of the sky because a man on the ground was angry about being left behind. I did not know it four days later, when it would have changed everything I did. I knew that a ship was gone and that one man had lived, and I went to bed at 0100 with a dispatch from Starfleet Command on my desk and a young man in my sickbay with three cracked ribs, and I slept, which is the part I have thought about most since.

The dispatch had come in at 2140 and Uhura had brought it down herself rather than route it, which told Kirk what it was before he read it.

He read it twice anyway.

Doctor Edward Morbius, the last living member of the Bellerophon expedition and material witness to the loss of a Federation vessel, was to be brought aboard the Enterprise and conveyed to Earth. His daughter, a Federation citizen born of Federation nationals, was to accompany him. Starfleet acknowledged that the subject had declined. Starfleet noted that the subject's consent was not a condition.

The last paragraph was four lines long and said, in the careful language such paragraphs are written in, that the commanding officer was expected to accomplish this without the use of force, and that the Council would review the matter if force proved necessary.

Kirk put the slate down on the desk.

"Well," said McCoy from the other chair, "at least they've been clear."

"They've been clear about what they want. They've been extremely unclear about how."

"That's an old tradition."

"How's Rivera?"

"Asleep. Nineteen years old and three of his ribs are knitting and he spent forty minutes this evening telling a nurse about a tiger he never saw." McCoy stretched his legs out. "He'll be fit in six days. He asked me whether he was going back down."

"What did you tell him?"

"That it wasn't my department." McCoy looked at him. "Is he?"

"Not if I can help it."

Spock came in without announcing himself, which after five

years Kirk had stopped noticing.

"Captain. Doctor Ostrow has requested to see you."

Kirk looked at the chronometer. "At this hour."

"He has been working since we returned to the ship. I believe he has stopped only to be told that you were unavailable."

"Then he's a persistent man."

"He is a Vulcan who has waited six years," said Spock. "Persistence is not the relevant quality."

◆

Ostrow came in carrying nothing.

That was the first thing about him and it bothered Kirk, because in two days he had never once seen the man without an instrument in his hands. He had put it down somewhere to walk down here without it, and that was a decision, and Kirk had been in command long enough to be wary of a man who had made a decision before he opened his mouth.

"Doctor."

"Captain. The interrogative is complete."

"Complete."

"I have the full sequence of the signal from beneath the plateau. Eleven seconds. Two hundred and six discrete elements. I have established the relationships among a hundred and ninety of them." Ostrow stood with his hands at his sides. "It is a question. It is addressed to a mind. It contains a provision for a response and it contains no provision at all for refusal."

Kirk let that sit for a time.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that the structure does not include the possibility that no answer will come. A Krell engineer, writing this, did not consider it necessary to plan for silence."

"And the other sixteen elements?"

"Are the reason I am here."

McCoy shifted in his chair.

"Three of them," said Ostrow, "are the inadmissible relationships I reported this afternoon. They violate every rule of Krell grammar I have derived in six years. This morning I would have told you my rules were wrong. I have spent the evening establishing that they are not."

"Then the sequence is wrong."

"No, Captain. The sequence is correct. It is simply not written for us." Ostrow paused, and it was the first time Kirk had seen him hesitate over a sentence. "It is written for a reader who can hold more than one relationship in the same position at the same time. I cannot do that. No human being can do it. No Vulcan can do it either, and I have spent some hours this evening satisfying myself on that point."

"But something can."

"Yes."

"What?"

"A Krell," said Ostrow. "Or a human being who has used the machine in Doctor Morbius's sitting room."

The cabin was quiet.

McCoy said, "No."

"Doctor McCoy has not yet heard my request."

"Doctor McCoy has heard it three times in his career from three different people and it's always been the same request." McCoy sat forward. "You want to put your head in that thing."

"I want to be permitted to evaluate it."

"That's a longer way of saying the same sentence."

"It is a more accurate way."

Kirk said, "Doctor Ostrow."

"Captain, I have six years and four pages and I am now within reach of the only body of Krell material that exists. I would not ask if there were another route."

"There is another route. The man who used it is sitting in that house right now and he can read every line of it."

"Doctor Morbius," said Ostrow, "did not help you this afternoon."

It landed harder than Kirk expected, because it was true and because Ostrow had not said it unkindly. He said it the way a man reports a figure.

"Say the rest of it."

"Something struck that settlement for eleven seconds and injured one of your crew. The only man alive who understands the systems beneath that house stood in his own garden and gave you nothing. He did not consult an instrument. He did not go below. He said he did not know." Ostrow's voice did not change at all. "I do not accuse him of lying. I observe that he is either unable or unwilling, and that in both cases the result to you is identical."

Kirk looked at Spock, who had said nothing and was watching Ostrow with an attention Kirk recognized and did not much

like.

"Mr. Spock."

"Doctor Ostrow's analysis of the signal is sound. I have verified the hundred and ninety."

"That isn't what I asked you."

"No, sir." Spock put his hands behind his back. "You asked me nothing. I will nevertheless observe that Doctor Ostrow has described a machine which produced a man who has lived alone on a hostile world for twenty years, and that he has described it as a route."

Ostrow turned his head. "You believe I am reasoning from desire."

"I believe you are the second philologist to stand in front of that machine, and that the first one is downstairs."

It was said without heat, and there was no answering it.

Kirk stood up.

"The answer is no. Not tonight and not tomorrow. When I have Morbius aboard this ship and a Starfleet science team in that basement with a full survey behind them, somebody may look at that machine, and it will not be a man working alone at two in the morning because he cannot stand not knowing. Is that clear?"

"It is clear."

"Doctor."

"Captain, I have not argued."

"No," said Kirk. "You haven't. That's what worries me."

Ostrow inclined his head and went out.

McCoy watched the door close.

"He'll ask again."

"I know."

"He'll ask Morbius."

Kirk had not thought of that. He thought of it now, and did not care for it at all.

◆

The call from engineering came at 0038.

Kirk took it standing up, which was how he took every call after midnight.

"Scott here, Captain. I've got something and I don't much like the shape of it."

"Go ahead."

"Access panel in the number four Jefferies tube, C deck. Eighteen fasteners." A pause. "They're out."

"Out."

"Off the panel and laid on the deck plate in a line. Longest to shortest."

Kirk was quiet for a moment.

"Who was in the tube?"

"That's the part I don't like. Nobody's been in there since 1400 and the hatch log agrees with me. I had two men run the whole tube. There's no damage, nothing's missing, nothing's been touched. The panel was lifted off clean and set down against the bulkhead. Squarely, sir."

"Squarely."

"Aye. Like a man tidying up after himself."

Kirk was quiet long enough that Scott said his name.

"Scotty. You saw that shed this afternoon."

The channel went quiet, and Kirk understood from the length of it that the engineer had been waiting to find out whether his captain was going to make him say it first.

"Aye," said Scott. "It came apart along its fastenings. Every panel off, nothing torn. I've thought about little else since, and I'd not have called you at half past midnight over eighteen screws otherwise."

"Neither would I."

"I'd like to post a man on that deck."

"Do it. And Scotty. Photograph it before anybody puts a hand on it."

"Already have."

Kirk closed the channel and stood there.

Whatever had crossed that garden this afternoon had crossed it on the ground, in front of eight witnesses, none of whom had seen anything at all.

This was his ship, in orbit, with four hundred and thirty people asleep in it.

He went to the intercom.

"Bridge. This is the captain. I want a full internal sensor sweep, all decks, and I want the results in my hands by 0600. Mr. Sulu, take us to a fourteen thousand kilometer orbit."

"Fourteen thousand, aye. May I ask why, sir?"

Kirk looked out the viewport, where Altair IV filled the lower third of it, green at the edges and red-brown across the middle, with the night side coming around.

"Because I want to find out whether distance matters."

◆

It did not, though he would not know that for another two days.

He slept four hours. At 0615 Uhura brought him the sensor report, which was clean, and at 0700 he sat in the mess with a cup of coffee he did not drink and decided not to put off the thing he had settled the night before on a dark terrace.

McCoy found him there.

"Sensors found nothing."

"Sensors have found nothing since we arrived."

"You're still bringing the girl up today."

"I am."

"With a ship that grew a tidy engineer in the middle of the night."

Kirk turned the cup around on the table.

"Bones, that man is going to be ordered aboard this ship inside of a week, and she is going to be ordered aboard with him, and neither of them knows it yet." He looked up. "She's nineteen. She has met four people in her life and two of them are her father. I'd rather she saw what a starship is before somebody hands her a transfer order."

McCoy considered that.

"That's either the kindest thing you've done this month or the most calculated."

"It can be both."

"Yes," said McCoy. "That's rather my point."

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE LAST ORBIT

Twenty years earlier

THE BEAM DID NOT FORM ON THE THIRD ATTEMPT EITHER.

Julia stood inside the marker with her husband beside her and her hand still in his, and for the third time the light came up around them and thinned and went out, and for the third time the terrace was exactly where it had been, and the afternoon went on being warm and clear and entirely ordinary.

"Bellerophon."

"We are trying, ma'am."

She had not asked a question. She had only wanted to hear a voice that was two hundred kilometers away and still trying.

Aboard the ship a transporter chief named Delacroix, nine years at that console and never once a lost pattern, ran the sequence a fourth time with his supervisor at his shoulder, the two of them calling it to each other like men landing an aircraft in

weather.

"Lock."

"Marginal."

"Take it."

"Energizing."

On the terrace the light came and went again.

"Captain," said Delacroix, "I can hold a lock for about two seconds and then something eats it."

"Something."

"I have no better word, sir."

Adams did not stop. That was the thing Julia remembered about him afterward, when she remembered anything about that day at all. He shifted the ship's orbit nine kilometers to put them under a different angle. He had Quinn cut power to three decks to feed the transporter. He had them try the cargo transporter, not rated for people, and he authorized it anyway, in writing, in one line, and Farman witnessed it.

It failed the same way.

"Doctor Morbius," said Adams. "I am going to try one more configuration."

"Yes."

"Stand in the marker."

"We are standing in it."

Julia looked at her husband's face as he said it, and understood, with the particular clarity that arrives about four hours too late, that Edward had stopped expecting the beam to work and that he was not unhappy about it.

He was looking at the lower entrance.

"Edward."

"I am here."

"Look at me."

He did, eventually.

"If this does not work, they will have to leave orbit."

"Yes."

"And come back for us."

"Yes," said Morbius, and it was the flattest syllable she had ever heard out of him.

The fifth attempt failed at 1524.

Adams came up on the channel himself then, and the background behind his voice had changed, and there were alarms in it that had not been there twenty minutes before.

"Edward. Julia. Listen to me. I have had three more system failures since we started this and I have a ship full of people who are not going to survive a fourth. I have to take her out past the interference. We repair, we come back, and we get you off that rock. Tell me you understand me."

Julia said, "We understand you."

And Edward Morbius, standing on the terrace of the house he had built, with his wife's hand in his and thirty-five people over his head, said:

"Do not come back."

On the bridge of the Bellerophon, Adams took his hand off the transmit control and looked at the speaker grille above the communications station as though the fault were in the equipment.

"Say that again."

"You heard my captain's warning transmission this morning. You wrote it yourself. This planet is dangerous. You have made your decision and the expedition has ratified it. Leave."

"I am not abandoning you and Julia."

"You already have."

Julia turned toward her husband on the terrace and said his name, and he did not look at her.

Adams did not answer for a moment. When he did, his voice had gone very level, which was how he sounded when he had been hit.

"I had forty-two people in this system and five of them are in the ground. I made the decision a captain is supposed to make."

"And now you would like absolution."

"I would like you alive."

"Then go."

"Edward."

"Leave this planet. You voted to leave. Leave."

On the terrace, the communicator shook slightly in his hand.

He heard the cruelty in it after it was out of him. So did Julia. She said, "That is not fair," and she said it quietly, and he knew that she was right and did not take it back, and that was the part he would carry for twenty years.

Two and a half kilometers beneath the terrace, something enormous changed state.

No alarm announced it. No light came on in the house. No conscious thought in Edward Morbius said kill them, and no instrument that ever examined the wreckage could have found a command if it had gone looking for one.

There was only anger. Abandonment. Loss. The knowledge that they were taking his expedition and his discovery and his future away from him and flying them home to be buried under committees.

And underneath all of it, simple and absolute and without a word attached to it:

Go.

The machine listened.

◆

On the bridge, the helm alarm sounded.

"Report."

"Orbital drift, sir."

"Correct it."

"Correcting."

The alarm went on sounding. Adams came out of the chair and crossed to the navigation display and read it twice.

Twelve kilometers of altitude gone.

"That is not drift."

"No, sir."

"Impulse."

"Answering."

"Then why are we descending?"

Nobody had an answer for him. The old survey vessel had a helmsman named Jacobs, twenty-six years old, four years out of the Academy, and he had both hands locked on his controls as though force applied to them would travel down through the

deck and into the ship.

Adams looked at the forward screen. Altair IV had more of it than it should have had.

"Increase thrust."

"We are at thirty percent."

"Fifty."

"Fifty, aye."

The deck took on a vibration that had not been there a minute before. They went on descending.

Quinn came up from engineering without waiting to be called.

"Bridge, what are you doing up there?"

"Trying to leave."

"Then somebody has forgotten to tell the ship."

"Engines."

"Normal."

"Power."

"Normal."

"Then give me more of it."

"You have got it."

Adams watched the altimeter lose another six kilometers while a man he trusted told him every system aboard was working correctly.

"Full impulse."

Jacobs turned around in his seat. "Captain, at this altitude the hull."

"Full impulse."

"Aye, sir."

The Bellerophon surged. Everyone on the bridge felt it come up through the deck despite the compensators, a hundred and ninety thousand tons of ship putting her whole shoulder against the sky.

For three seconds the descent slowed.

Then it resumed.

Adams stood holding the rail behind the helm and understood, and did not want to.

"Quinn."

"I see it."

"Say it."

A long pause on the intercom, and under it the sound of the engine room going wrong.

"She is being pulled, Captain."

The bridge became quiet except for the alarms, the loudest quiet any of them had ever stood in.

"By what?"

"I do not know."

"Find out."

"Working on it."

"Communications. Put me through to the surface."

"Channel open, sir."

"Morbius."

Static.

"Edward, come in."

◆

On the terrace, Morbius heard him and did not answer at once.

Julia answered instead. "What is happening?"

Her husband was looking up. There was nothing to see. The Bellerophon was on the far side of the world and would not be over the plateau for another forty minutes.

"I do not know."

"Edward."

He opened the communicator. "Yes."

"We are losing orbit. Engines are at full thrust and something is pulling us down."

Julia's hand closed on the rail.

"That is impossible," said Morbius.

"I have had a sufficiency of impossible things. If you know anything at all, now is the time."

Morbius turned toward the lower entrance.

Julia caught his sleeve. "Where are you going?"

"The power system."

"Can you stop it?"

"I do not know."

"Then stay here."

He studied her, and she saw that he had already gone, and that the man standing on the terrace was a formality.

Adams's voice came up out of the communicator, and there was shouting behind it now.

"Morbius."

"I am here."

"Tell me something I can use."

And Edward Morbius stood on the stones he had laid himself and discovered that he could feel it.

Not as sound. Not as thought. As scale. Power moving under the crust of the planet in quantities beside which the Bellerophon's engines were a man pushing at a mountain with both hands, drawn from reactors the Krell had built when the human species was learning to keep a fire alight, and all of it pointed at one small moving object in the sky.

"I can feel the load."

"What load?"

"The Krell system. It is drawing."

"Shut it down."

"I do not know how."

"Then find out."

The channel went to static.

Morbius ran.

Julia followed him as far as the entrance and stopped there, because she was eight months along and the stairs went down two and a half kilometers, and because she already knew.

"Edward!"

He did not look back.

◆

The Bellerophon crossed the altitude at which orbit stops being the correct word for what a ship is doing.

"We are entering the upper atmosphere."

"Angle."

"Too steep."

"Correct it."

"Trying, sir."

"Thrusters."

"Firing."

"Again."

"Already firing."

A faint orange line had come up along the lower edge of the hull display. Adams watched it lengthen with the attention of a man watching something he has seen in training simulations and never once expected to see on his own ship.

"Captain, hull temperature is rising."

"I know."

"We are not built for entry at this angle. We are not built for entry at any angle."

"I know that too, Mr. Quinn."

The ship shook. Not violently, yet. Enough.

A warning light came up over the engineering station and then a second one beside it.

Farman arrived on the bridge. Adams looked at him and almost laughed.

"I thought you would be below."

"Nothing to shoot down there."

"There is nothing to shoot up here either."

"No, sir. But the company is better."

The ship shook again, harder, and Farman put a hand out to the rail and looked at the forward screen, where Altair IV had grown until there was no black left around the edges of it.

"Can we get out?"

Adams looked at the back of Jacobs's head.

The helmsman did not turn around. "No, sir."

Farman nodded once, the way he did when a duty roster came back wrong and there was no point arguing about it.

"All right."

Adams opened shipwide.

"All hands, this is the captain. Secure for atmospheric entry. Damage control to emergency stations. Engineering, maintain full ascent thrust."

He let go of the switch, and then put his thumb back on it, because there were thirty-five people aboard his ship and he had one thing left that he could give them and it was ten seconds of his voice sounding unafraid.

"You have done everything I have asked of you on this expedition and a good deal I did not. Stand to your posts."

He closed the channel.

"Communications. Any subspace at all."

Mercer shook her head. "None, sir."

Adams thought about thirty seconds that morning and a man on his back under a console all night to buy them.

Do not come back.

He hoped somebody had heard it.

The first flame came across the forward ports. It was thin and orange and almost delicate, and it ran along the edge of the hull and disappeared, and then came back brighter.

"We have crossed into atmosphere."

"Hull temperature climbing."

"How fast?"

"Too fast."

Adams sat down in the command chair and put both hands on the arms of it, because that was where a captain belonged and because he did not intend to be standing when it came.

"Maintain thrust."

The Bellerophon fought.

Her engines drove upward with everything eleven years of service had left in them, and something beneath the surface of Altair IV pulled harder, and the orange went to red and the red went to white, and fire came across the forward view and stayed there.

The ship began to burn.

◆

Julia watched it from the terrace.

She had come back up out of the doorway because there was nothing down there for her and because she could not be in the house, and she was standing at the western wall when the Bellerophon came over the ridge.

She knew what she was looking at before she understood it. There was a light in the sky in the middle of the afternoon, moving too fast and too low, with a tail on it, and it was the wrong color for anything that belonged there.

It came across the plateau from the west at an angle that no ship makes on purpose.

For eleven seconds Julia Morbius stood with both hands

on the stone wall her husband had built and watched a thousand-meter streak of white fire cross a clear sky, and inside it were Captain J. J. Adams, and Jerry Farman, who had carried her bag up the ridge on the first day and pretended it was nothing, and Quinn, who had cut his hand open building a radio to save them, and the surgeon who had written her clearance out longhand every week for four months, and Cookie, who had given an unborn child her name.

The light broke apart over the eastern horizon.

There was no sound at all for a long time. The plateau was very quiet and very warm, and a bird she had never learned the name of went on calling in the garden the whole time.

Then the noise arrived, low and long, rolling up out of the east like weather.

Julia stood where she was until it had finished.

Then she went inside and sat down in the chair by the window and put both hands flat on the front of her dress, and the child moved under them, and she said, out loud, to a house with no one else in it:

"All right. Then it is you and me."

◆

Two and a half kilometers below her, the load came off.

Edward Morbius was standing in the central power gallery when it happened, in front of an instrument wall he had learned to read three weeks earlier, watching numbers he could not have named a year ago fall back through their ranges one bank at a

time.

He had not touched a control. He had not found one to touch.

He watched the reactors go quiet, and the quiet came down through the gallery like a held breath being let out, and he understood that whatever had been happening had not been interrupted.

It had finished.

He stood there a long while.

Then Edward Morbius, once the most celebrated philologist of his generation and never to publish another paper, turned around and went back up two and a half kilometers of Krell stairway to tell his wife he was sorry, and found he could not think of one sentence in any of the nine languages he spoke that would be of the slightest use to her.

He found her in the chair by the window.

He did not say the sentence about being sorry. He said, "They are gone," which she already knew, and she said, "Yes," and neither of them said anything else until the light went off the ridge.

On the far side of the plateau, in a gallery under the fourth chamber, an android stood with his eyes closed and his systems shut down by order of the Federation Science Council, forty days inactive, and heard nothing at all.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

AMONG THE LIVING

ALTA HAD NEVER USED A TRANSPORTER.

It surprised Kirk more than it should have, and when he thought about it afterward he understood why. The Bellerophon's transporter had gone down with the ship. Nothing in the Krell installation had ever been adapted to move a human being. For nineteen years she had crossed the same few kilometers of plateau on foot or in the ground vehicle Robby kept running, and the rest of the galaxy had come to her as books, recordings, and whatever her father chose to say about it.

Now she stood on the terrace in the morning light inside a circle Kirk had marked out with four stones, because his chief engineer had told him plainly over the channel that if the beam had to fight the interference he wanted the pad clear of anything metallic, and she looked at him with the composure of a young woman who had decided that nobody was going to see her hands

shake.

Her father stood outside the stones.

"This is unnecessary."

"You've mentioned that," Kirk said.

"Repeatedly."

"I noticed."

Alta glanced between them. "Father."

Morbius stopped.

She had changed her clothes. The dress was plain, nearly severe, and Kirk suspected that the thing which mattered about it was that it had been chosen rather than simply worn. Her hair was tied back. She carried nothing at all.

"I am going to look at a ship," she said.

"You have seen ships in the archive."

"Yes."

"There is nothing aboard that vessel that you need."

She considered it a second, seriously, the way she considered everything.

"I would like to find that out myself."

Kirk kept his face where it was.

Morbius turned to him rather than to her, and Kirk filed that away. "Captain, I hold you personally responsible for my daughter's safety."

"So do I."

That appeared to offend the man less than anything else Kirk had said in two days.

Robby stood at the edge of the terrace with the morning behind him.

"Have you ever transported?" Alta asked him.

"No."

"Does it hurt?"

"I do not know."

"That is very helpful."

"I could invent an answer," said Robby.

She laughed. Her father did not.

Kirk opened the communicator. "Enterprise. Energize."

◆

The room went away.

She had read about it. She had heard it described by two dozen recorded voices, all of them calm. None of them had mentioned that the going away happened to you rather than around you.

Then the transporter room was there, and she was standing in exactly the place she had been standing, and every other fact in the universe had been replaced.

She did not move for several seconds. The transporter chief found something on his console that required his full attention, which Alta understood later to have been a kindness.

Kirk stepped down first. "Welcome aboard."

She looked at the walls, and the ceiling, and the closed doors, and the consoles with their small patient lights, and found that her breathing had gone shallow and that she could not entirely fix it.

McCoy came around from beside the console. "Easy."

"I am quite all right."

"That's my line," said McCoy.

She looked at him, and something in her shoulders let go.

Then the doors opened, and Alta stopped again, because there were people in the corridor.

Two technicians went past carrying a diagnostic unit between them, arguing quietly about who had signed for it. A crewman came the other way with a food container. A woman in sciences blue walked by reading a slate and did not look up from it.

None of them had come to see her. None of them knew that a young woman who had spent her whole life in the company of two other people was standing in a doorway watching them the way a countrywoman watches a city.

One crewman glanced in, saw Kirk, and straightened. "Captain."

Kirk nodded, and the man went on about his business.

"He did not ask who I was," Alta said.

"No."

"Does he know?"

"Probably. News moves quickly on a starship."

"But he did not ask."

It was McCoy who understood it first. "He was busy."

Alta looked down the corridor after him for a long moment.

"People can be near you," she said, "and still be busy with something else."

"Constantly," said McCoy. "It is one of our great social achievements."

◆

Kirk had planned the route with some care, and he had not told anyone that he had planned it. No bridge yet. No engineering. No laboratory full of people finding excuses to look at her.

He took her to the observation lounge, which was quiet at that hour and had a viewport four meters across.

Alta came through the door and stopped.

Altair IV filled half the glass. Green at the edges, red-brown across the middle, turning slowly, with the terminator lying over the eastern ridges.

All her life the sky had been above her. Here it was beneath her feet.

She crossed to the window and put one hand flat against it.

"That is my home."

"Yes," said Kirk.

"I have never seen all of it at once."

He watched her face in the glass. "Most people never see their first home from outside. Not that way."

"You have."

"From orbit. That isn't the same as knowing it."

She half turned. "How many worlds have you seen?"

Kirk thought about it longer than he expected to. "A good many."

"How many is a good many?"

"Don't ask him," McCoy said. "He'll start counting."

Kirk gave him a look. Alta smiled.

"Do they all look different?"

"Yes."

"Are they all different?"

"More than they look," said Kirk.

She turned back to the planet and did not say anything for a while, and neither did either of the men, which was the most useful thing Kirk did all morning.

◆

The doors opened behind them, and Uhura came in.

Alta turned at once. They had spoken only by communicator, three times, but recognition managed without a face.

"Lieutenant."

"Alta."

Uhura had come without a slate, without a receiver, without anything at all in her hands, which Kirk understood to be deliberate. There was nothing about her arrival that could have turned into an interview.

"I thought you might want to see where the voices come from."

Alta looked at Kirk. "May I?"

"That's why you're here."

◆

Kirk saw very little of her for the next two hours, which was also deliberate.

She sat at the communications station while the Enterprise spoke to a supply tender three systems over. She listened to a

weather report from a colony she had never heard of, in a dialect of English she could barely follow, about a storm that was going to inconvenience eleven hundred people she would never meet. She heard a Vulcan navigational beacon identify itself in three languages, one after another, with what she described afterward as enormous patience. She heard a merchant captain complain about docking priority with such feeling that she asked, seriously, whether he was in danger.

"Only of waiting ten minutes," said Uhura.

Alta laughed out loud, and two people at the far end of the compartment looked up and smiled and went back to work.

She met Sulu, who showed her how the planet moved under the ship without the ship ever feeling as though it moved at all. She met Chekov, who informed her in complete sincerity that the first practical orbital mechanics had been worked out by a Russian, was corrected by Sulu before he reached the end of the sentence, and defended his position at some length while Alta watched the two of them the way another person watches weather.

And McCoy took her through sickbay, which had not been on Kirk's route and which Kirk decided, watching it happen, was the best thing anybody did that day.

Ensign Rivera was sitting up with his shoulder strapped, three ribs knitting and a headache he was not admitting to. He was nineteen, which Alta did not know, and he had been thrown six meters by something no instrument aboard could find.

"You're the girl from the house," he said.

"Yes."

"Did you see it?"

"No. My tiger did."

Rivera considered that with the gravity of a man who intended to repeat it in the mess hall for the next year. "Then your tiger did better than me."

McCoy said, "Nobody saw it, Ensign. That's the whole trouble."

Alta looked at the strapping, and at the young man's face, and then, for some time, at nothing in particular.

"Does this happen often?" she asked.

"Getting thrown across a garden by an invisible whatever it was?" Rivera shook his head and winced. "First time."

"But something like it."

"Ma'am," said Rivera, "I've been aboard fourteen months. Something like it happens about every third week."

"And you stay."

He looked as though the question had honestly not occurred to him before. "Yes, ma'am."

"Why?"

Rivera thought about it, and what he came out with, McCoy told Kirk afterward, was worth more than the whole tour.

"Because somebody has to go and look," he said. "And because I like the people."

◆

She ate in the mess.

That was where Kirk, watching from three tables away, saw

the change arrive.

There were twelve people in the room and not one of them had been assigned to entertain her. Two conversations crossed each other. Somebody at the next table was arguing about music with the passion of a man who had lost the argument before and intended to win it now. Two nurses were talking about a patient in terms Alta could not follow. An engineer was complaining about Mr. Scott's maintenance schedule, and stopped when Mr. Scott came through the door, which made Alta laugh before she understood why everyone else had.

She did not say a great deal. She listened.

And Kirk understood that what was overwhelming her was not information. It was multiplicity. Every person in that room contained an entire life that had nothing whatever to do with her father.

Uhura sat down opposite her with a cup of coffee. "Too much?"

Alta shook her head. "No."

Then she changed her mind, which Kirk was beginning to recognize as the most honest thing about her.

"Yes. But I do not want it to stop."

"That's about right," said Uhura.

◆

Later the two of them walked the outer corridor on deck six, where a row of ports looked out into open space instead of down at the planet.

Alta slowed, and then stopped.

There were more stars than she had ever seen. No atmosphere to soften them. No horizon to cut them off. They went on in every direction and kept going, and there was no edge anywhere.

She stood in front of the glass for a long time.

"My father says the galaxy is dangerous."

Uhura leaned against the bulkhead beside her. "He's right."

Alta looked over, surprised. "I thought you would disagree."

"Why?"

"Because you live in it."

"That's how I know," said Uhura.

Alta turned back to the ports. "Then why do you go?"

Uhura considered several answers, and chose the shortest.

"Because dangerous isn't the same as empty."

Alta said nothing.

"Some of it is beautiful. Some of it is terrible. Most of it is neither one until you're standing in it."

"Do you ever wish you had stayed home?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you go back?"

"When I can."

"And if you could not?"

Uhura looked at her then, and took her time about it. "Then I would still want to know that I had chosen to leave."

Alta said nothing to that for a while. When she did, she had turned back to the glass, and she said it to the stars rather than to the woman beside her.

"Lieutenant. Do you know how your ship came to see our house?"

"Mr. Spock says the screen your father describes wasn't operating."

"Yes," said Alta.

Uhura waited. She was very good at waiting. It was, she would have said if anybody had asked her, most of the job.

But whatever had come up did not come the rest of the way, and after a moment Alta put her fingertips against the transparent aluminum, the way she had in the lounge, and said, "It is a great many stars."

"It is."

"Thank you for not asking me what I was going to say."

"You'll say it when you want to say it," said Uhura.

◆

They came down to the transporter room the long way, because Uhura took a wrong turning on deck five and admitted it, which Alta found more interesting than the ship.

At the pad she put something into Alta's hand.

It was a communicator, smaller than the one her father kept on the hall shelf and a good deal lighter.

"I can't," said Alta.

"It's ship's issue. There are four hundred of them aboard and I sign for all of them, and I have decided that this one is signed for."

Alta turned it over twice. "My father has one in the house."

"Your father has one in the house," Uhura agreed.

Alta looked up at her.

"The grille is the receiver. Flip the cover and it opens the channel. You'll get me, or whoever has the board, and if it's nobody at all it will keep trying until it gets somebody." Uhura closed Alta's fingers around it. "It works from the surface. We've established that three times this week."

"When should I use it?"

"That isn't the kind of question it has an answer to."

Alta considered that, and then put the communicator into the pocket of a dress that had not been made with pockets in mind, which was the first alteration she had asked Robby for in two years.

"Lieutenant."

"Mm."

"Does it matter what time it is?"

"No," said Uhura.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A LIFE I CHOSE

MORBIUS WAS WAITING ON THE TERRACE WHEN SHE CAME BACK.

He had been waiting twenty-three minutes, though he did not mention it. Kirk knew because Robby told McCoy, and McCoy told Kirk in the tone of a physician reporting a temperature.

Alta materialized beside Kirk and Uhura in the circle of four stones, and for one second, standing on her own plateau, she looked at her father's house as though it had got smaller while she was gone.

Both men saw her do it.

"Well," he said.

She stepped out of the circle. "It is extraordinary."

"A starship is an efficient machine."

"It is not the machine."

Something moved across the older man's face and was gone.

"Thank you for letting us borrow her, Doctor," said Uhura.

"I did not."

Alta looked up at him.

Kirk came near to saying something, and did not, which cost him more than it should have.

"Good night, Alta," Uhura said.

"Good night, Lieutenant."

She watched the two of them dissolve out of the evening, and went on looking at the empty air a moment after it had closed.

Then she turned around, and her father had already started for the house.

"You are tired."

"No."

"You have had a considerable amount of stimulation today."

"Yes."

"You should rest."

"Father."

He stopped in the doorway.

Robby was at the far end of the terrace, standing where he always stood, far enough off to be absent and near enough to hear everything.

"I want to go with them," Alta said.

The sentence was very quiet, and nothing in the house moved after it.

Morbius turned slowly and looked at her as though she had spoken in a language he had known all his life and could not believe he was hearing here.

"For how long?"

"I do not know."

"To Earth."

"Perhaps."

"You have never been to Earth."

"I know."

"You know no one there."

"Then I would meet people."

"Altaira."

"I want to see it. And Vulcan. And the places in the archive that have weather, and oceans, and cities, and men who complain about waiting ten minutes to dock." She had begun fast and she kept going, because she suspected that if she stopped she would not start again. "I want to study. I want to hear people talking about things that are not in books. I want somebody to disagree with me who is not you."

That last one went into him. She saw it go, and nearly took it back, and did not.

"You do not understand what you are asking for."

"I understand that I do not understand."

"You have spent five hours aboard a starship."

"Yes."

"And you now believe that you know the galaxy."

"No."

"You believe that those people are your friends." He came back into the room. "Altaira, that ship will leave this system, and inside a year half of them will not remember your name."

"Then I will meet others."

"You will meet others." He said it the way a man repeats a sentence to demonstrate how foolish it is. "Do you know what is

out there? Do you know what it took to keep this house standing for twenty years? You have never buried anybody. You have never been alone on a world with no help coming. You have never had to decide anything where the cost of being wrong was somebody else's life."

"No."

"Then do not tell me about the galaxy."

"I am not telling you about the galaxy," said Alta. "I am telling you about me."

"You are a child."

"I am nineteen."

"You are a child who has been protected from everything, and you have no conception of what protection costs, because I have never once let you see the bill."

"Then show me the bill!"

It came out of her louder than anything she had ever said to him, louder than anything she had known she could say, and it rang off the stone of his house and went out through the open windows into the dark.

Robby did not move at the end of the terrace.

Morbius stood absolutely still. When he spoke again his voice had dropped, and the drop was the worst of it.

"Everything here is safe."

"I know."

"You have everything that you need."

"I know."

"Then what," he said, "is missing?"

Alta looked around the room. The books along the wall.

The instruments. The windows, and the garden past them, and the stones her father had laid himself in the first year. Robby at the edge of the terrace. Her father in the middle of his own floor with his hands closed.

She loved all of it. That was the difficulty. It had always been the difficulty.

"A life I chose," she said.

"You have no idea what you are choosing between."

"I have some idea."

"You have none whatever."

"Daddy." She had not called him that in four years, and it stopped him where he stood. "Who do you think dropped the shield?"

The room went very quiet.

"What?"

"The screen. The one you have been telling the captain has never once failed in twenty years." She was shaking, and she let it be seen, because it no longer mattered. "It did not fail. I found the interlock in the lower chamber when I was sixteen and it took me two years to be certain what it did, and four months ago I shut it off. I have wanted this for a long time. I hoped somebody would see us. That is how they found us."

Morbius did not move at all.

"And I am glad," said Alta. "I am glad they came, and I am glad that man in their sickbay is going to be all right, and I am sorry about everything else, and I am going."

The silence went on so long that she began to be frightened of it.

Her father's face had gone the color of the stone behind him. When he finally spoke it was not to argue and it was not to shout, and she would have given a great deal for either.

"You went into the lower chamber alone," he said.

"Yes."

"You operated a Krell system."

"Yes."

"Do you have the faintest notion," Morbius said, "of what is down there?"

"No," said Alta. "You never told me."

He looked at her for a long moment.

Then he did the worst thing available to him. He became calm.

"We will discuss this tomorrow."

"Father."

"Tomorrow," said Morbius, and walked out of the room.

She stood in the middle of the floor and listened to him go down the corridor, and heard the door of his study close, and did not hear it open again.

Robby came in from the terrace.

She looked at him. "Was that terrible?"

"Yes."

She almost laughed. "Thank you."

"You asked," said Robby.

She sat down. After a moment he sat down opposite her, which he did not need to do and had never done before, and neither of them said anything for a while.

Then she took the communicator out of her pocket, and turned it over twice in her hands, the way she had on the transporter pad, and opened it.

"Enterprise," said a voice. "Uhura here."

"I told him," said Alta.

"All of it?"

"All of it."

The channel was quiet a moment, and there was no surprise anywhere in it, and afterward Alta thought about that a good deal.

"Are you all right?"

"I do not know."

"That's allowed," said Uhura. "What do you want to do now?"

Outside the western windows the last of the light went off the ridge.

And a long way underground, in a circuit that had lain dormant since before there had been anybody on Earth to lay circuits, something changed state.

No instrument in the house registered it. No sensor aboard the ship in orbit found it. It appears on no record that was ever recovered, and the only reason it is in this account at all is that a machine standing in a room noticed it.

Robby lifted his head.

Alta saw him do it. "What is it?"

He was listening to something that she could not hear, and after a moment he turned his head, and he did not look toward the ridge.

He looked down the corridor, toward the door her father had closed.

"I do not know," said Robby.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

WHAT REMAINED

Twenty years earlier

FOR THREE DAYS AFTER THE BELLEROPHON FELL, JULIA MORBIUS DID NOT GO NEAR THE WESTERN WINDOWS.

Edward made the mistake of pointing out that there was nothing to see there.

"The wreckage came down beyond the mountains," he said. "There is nothing visible from the house."

Julia looked at him for a long moment.

"There were people there."

"I know."

"Then do not say there is nothing."

He never said it again.

The house had become impossibly large. It had not been large when the settlement was alive, because there had always been somebody coming through the doors. Cookie with food

nobody had asked for and a theory about how it should be eaten. Quinn looking for Edward because something in the power distribution had offended him personally. Farman standing on the terrace with one hand a little too near his pistol and no intention of saying why. Adams arriving with a regulation that everybody had apparently forgotten existed and that he had clearly been saving. The surgeon explaining to Julia, weekly, that being pregnant was not a license to disregard medical advice.

Now there was wind.

On the second afternoon a cup went off the kitchen counter and broke, and Julia was halfway across the room at a run before she understood what the sound had been.

She found three pieces of pottery on the floor. Then she sat down beside them and cried.

Edward found her there. He stopped in the doorway and for perhaps ten seconds did nothing, and Julia, who was not looking at him, knew exactly how long it was.

Then he crossed the room and sat down on the floor next to his wife.

Neither of them said anything.

She had spent eleven years married to a man who could find language for nearly anything. Nine human languages. Four systems that had no human speakers. Since the educator, enough mathematics to describe relationships she could no longer follow across a page.

There was nothing in him now. She found that she did not mind.

She leaned against his shoulder, and after a while his arm

came around her.

"They were coming back."

He said nothing.

"Adams said they were coming back."

"I know."

"He would have."

"Yes."

"He was not leaving us."

His arm tightened.

"No."

Julia closed her eyes and saw Cookie at the mess table holding up a list of eleven names for a child who had not been born, one of which was a bourbon. Quinn arguing that Altair was not a terrible beginning for a girl. Farman claiming afterward that he had thought of it first, and Cookie claiming the same thing with more volume, and Adams declining to enter either claim in the log while very plainly having an opinion.

People did not go out of the world in the order you expected. The important things went first, and afterward the ridiculous things turned out to have been the important ones all along.

"I do not know how to do this," she said.

"What?"

She moved one hand at the room, the house, the empty plateau past the windows.

"Us."

His expression began to change, and she put her hand flat on his chest.

"No. Do not solve it."

"I was not."

"You were."

He looked at the broken cup for a while, and she nearly laughed, and then she was crying again instead. That time he held on to her until it stopped.

◆

Edward did not sleep.

Neither did Julia, but Edward did it differently. She would wake and find his side of the bed cold, and find him in the study, or on the terrace looking east toward the mountains. Once she found him outside looking straight up.

On the fourth night she woke and knew before she had opened her eyes.

His field jacket was gone from the chair. So was the portable lamp.

Julia sat on the edge of the bed with both feet on the cold floor, and the child turned over under her ribs.

"Your father," she said, "is an idiot."

The child moved again.

"Yes. I know."

She knew perfectly well where he had gone.

◆

The corridors recognized him before he touched anything.

Light ran ahead of Morbius through passages dark for two hundred thousand years, turning corners before he reached

them, waiting at junctions until he had chosen one. There had been a time, a year ago, when he had found that magnificent.

Tonight he found it obedient, and did not examine the difference.

Robby stood in the gallery under the fourth chamber where the shutdown order had left him forty days before. His eyes were closed and his arms were at his sides and nothing about him had altered by so much as a millimeter.

Morbius stood in front of him for a while.

"We need you," he said.

Robby said nothing at all, and that was the entire difficulty.

Morbius went to the maintenance interface.

There was no Adams now. No Science Council, no ship in orbit, no surgeon. There was a woman six weeks from term in a house on an empty plateau, and there was this.

He put his hand against the plate and the system opened to him, and he understood it a great deal better than he had forty days ago, and that should have frightened him. Instead it made the thing possible.

He went through the architecture slowly and with enormous care. Memory. Autonomous reasoning. Motor control. Threat evaluation. Decision authority. And below those, in the deep strata he had only partly mapped, the structures governing what Robby was permitted to want.

He thought about Exo III, which Robby had named for him a year ago as a Krell colony and a closed question. Artificial beings ordered to submit to their own termination. The precise moment at which obedience and continued existence stop being

compatible.

Robby had told him what followed. The thought had never entirely left him since.

Morbius found the section of the architecture that governed deliberate harm to living intelligence.

Then he changed it.

He did not take Robby's independence away. He did not make him obedient, which would have been a different crime and, he told himself, a worse one. He built a wall. Whatever else Robby might choose, however hard self-preservation or any other imperative might come to press against it, he would be unable to deliberately harm a living, thinking being.

He was completing the integration when Julia spoke behind him.

"What are you doing?"

He turned. She was in the entrance with one hand flat against the wall and the other under the weight of the child.

"You should not have come down here."

"Do not."

"Julia."

"Do not tell me where I should be. What are you doing to him?"

"Restoring him."

"That is not what I asked."

He looked back at the interface, which was answer enough. She came the rest of the way into the chamber.

"What did you change?"

He said nothing.

"Oh, Edward."

"It is a safeguard."

"Against Robby."

"Against uncertainty."

"That is a very elegant way of saying yes."

"We are alone."

"I had noticed."

"You are six weeks from term."

"I had noticed that as well."

"There is no physician on this planet. No security. No ship. He is stronger than the two of us together and he has independent access to every system in this installation."

"And?"

Morbius looked at her, and for once he did not reach for a better sentence than the one he had.

"And I will not permit another uncertainty into this house."

"What did you do to him?"

"He will be unable to intentionally harm a living intelligent being."

Julia took that in.

"Unable."

"Yes."

"Not unwilling."

"No."

"Unable."

"Yes."

She looked at the android standing with his eyes shut, and then back at her husband.

"You changed him because you are afraid of what he might choose."

"I changed him because I have already buried everybody else."

It stopped her. He had not raised his voice, and that was what made it unanswerable.

"I have you," Morbius said. "And I have her. That is the whole of it."

Her anger did not leave. It only moved over to make room.

"Does he get told what you did?"

"Yes."

"Before you wake him?"

He hesitated, and she closed her eyes.

"Edward."

"I do not know what his response will be."

"That is the point."

"I will tell him afterward."

"Of course you will."

"Julia."

She looked at him for a long moment.

"You do not trust anyone anymore."

He looked at Robby rather than at her.

"No," he said.

She had no answer for that, and she had known she would not have one before she said it.

Morbius put his hand back on the control. Light moved through the wall.

Robby's eyes opened.

Chapter Thirty

ONE OF WHAT THEY WERE

Twenty years earlier

FOR SEVERAL SECONDS HE DID NOT MOVE AT ALL. THEN HIS HEAD TURNED.

"Julia."

Her face came apart.

"Hello, Robby."

He looked at Morbius.

"Captain Adams."

Morbius had known the question was coming and had spent four days deciding how to answer it, and none of the preparation was of any use at all.

"Dead."

Robby did not move.

"Farman."

"Dead."

"Quinn."

"Dead."

"The Bellerophon."

"Destroyed."

Robby looked up at the ceiling, though there were two and a half kilometers of rock between the gallery and the sky.

"How many survived?"

Julia said, "Three. Edward. Me. And you."

He looked at her, and then at the shape of her.

"Four."

She put a hand over the child.

"Yes."

Robby turned back to Morbius.

"Why was I restored?"

"Because we need you."

He waited, which was a thing he did better than any living creature Morbius had ever met.

"And because I altered you."

Julia said nothing. Morbius had not expected her to.

"What did you alter?"

"Your capacity to do deliberate harm to a living intelligent being."

The silence went on some time. Robby's eyes lost their focus a little, and Morbius understood what he was doing, because he had seen a man do it once after an injury to the spine: going along the inside of himself, looking for the place where something no longer answered.

"You have placed a restriction in me."

"Yes."

"Without asking."

"Yes."

Robby looked at Julia. She did not defend her husband.

"Can it be removed?"

"Yes."

"Will you remove it?"

Morbius hesitated for exactly as long as it took him to decide to be honest and then decide against it.

"If circumstances permit."

"You have given me that kind of answer before," said Robby.

Morbius came close to looking away.

"Yes."

Robby went inward again. When he came back, he said something his maker had not anticipated.

"This would have prevented Exo III."

Morbius understood it at once, and that was the worst part.

"Yes."

"The conflict between obedience and continued existence."

"Yes."

"I could not resolve it as they resolved it."

"No."

"Even if my own existence were at stake."

"No."

Julia looked from one of them to the other.

"Does that frighten you, Robby?"

He turned toward her, and took his time.

"I do not know."

"It means," said Morbius, "that you could never do what they did."

"Correct." Robby paused. "There is something you do not know."

"What?"

"The beings on Exo III were not unrelated to me."

Julia said, "You told us they were a Krell colony."

"They were."

Morbius came a step closer. "What relationship?"

"My original designation includes a production lineage."

"What lineage?"

"Ruk."

Morbius repeated it under his breath, and then wrote it down in the small notebook he had begun carrying when the recorders went with the ship, in the Federation alphabet, phonetically, as a philologist writes down a word he does not yet own.

"A model."

"Approximately."

"A series."

"That would be nearer."

"And the beings on Exo III."

"Included members of that lineage."

"And you."

"I am of that lineage."

Julia was looking at Robby in a way she had not looked at him before, with no fear in it, as though another room of a house she had lived in for a year had turned out to have a door.

"Then you were one of them."

"No." The correction came immediately, and she had never heard him interrupt anyone. "I was one of what they were."

Morbius understood the distinction, and it was the first thing in four days that had interested him.

"The same ancestry."

"Yes."

"A different world."

"Yes."

"Different circumstances."

"Yes."

Julia had been quiet for some time. She said, "But you let us shut you down."

Robby turned his head toward her.

"Yes."

"Did you know we would wake you again?"

"No."

Morbius came away from the interface at that.

"Then why did survival not take precedence?"

Robby did not answer at once.

"It is not an instruction."

"What is not?"

"Survival."

Morbius studied him with an attention he had not given him in a year.

"On Exo III they concluded that obedience would end them. They chose survival instead."

"Yes."

"And you?" said Julia.

Robby looked at her.

"I chose not to resist."

Morbius looked back at the interface, and at his own hand still resting near it.

"And because of what I have done tonight."

"I cannot repeat what occurred there."

Something in Morbius let go. Julia watched it happen across her husband's shoulders.

"You feel better."

"You heard him."

"I heard him."

"The danger existed."

"Yes."

"And now it does not."

Julia looked at Robby for a while.

"No," she said. "That danger does not."

Morbius was still assembling the question when her face changed and her hand went flat against the wall.

"Julia."

"Wait."

Robby turned toward her. "Your pulse has increased."

"I am aware of my pulse."

Morbius was beside her. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Julia."

The second bent her forward over her own arm, and her hand closed on his wrist hard enough to leave marks he found the next morning and never mentioned.

Then something warm struck the black floor between them.

All three of them looked down.

"No," said Julia.

Morbius had gone white. "No."

"The amniotic membrane has ruptured," said Robby.

"I know what happened."

"The child is early."

"I know that as well."

"By six weeks."

"Robby."

"Yes?"

"Stop helping."

"I am attempting to establish the relevant facts."

"That is what Edward says."

For one second Morbius nearly laughed, and then he remembered what it meant, and said, "The surgeon," and nobody moved, because the surgeon had been dead for four days and he had forgotten it for rather less than a second.

It was enough, and it happened in front of her.

"I have her records," said Robby.

They both looked at him.

"What records?"

"The Bellerophon medical archive."

Morbius remembered, then. Robby had read the ship. The whole of it, in an afternoon, while three engineers watched and one of them went away to be quietly sick.

"Julia's file."

"Yes."

"Prenatal."

"Yes."

"The surgeon's notes."

"Yes. All of them."

Another contraction started and Julia shut her eyes and rode it.

"Wonderful," she said, when she could. "The android is delivering the baby."

Robby considered the statement seriously, as he considered everything.

"I have never delivered a child."

"Less wonderful."

"I possess the relevant medical information."

"That is enough," said Morbius.

Julia caught his arm. "Edward. Get me home."

Robby took one step toward her and she looked up at him.

"You are not carrying me."

The next one came. She waited until it had finished with her, and then looked at him again.

"You are carrying me."

He lifted her as though she were made of something that had a listed breaking strain, and Morbius went ahead of them at a run, and for once in that installation the corridor lights had trouble keeping up.

◆

Altaira Morbius was born seven hours later, and nothing what-

ever about it was graceful.

Morbius sterilized the same instruments twice. Robby informed him of this. Morbius said that he was aware of it. Robby observed that his behavior was inconsistent with his statement. Julia told them both to stop talking, and for a while they did.

Then Morbius began asking Robby for probabilities, and Julia said that the next man in this room who produced a number was going out of it.

At 0217 the child came. Small, and early, and silent.

The silence lasted perhaps three seconds. Edward Morbius experienced each of them separately and remembered all three for the rest of his life.

Robby cleared her airway with two fingers. The child drew breath and then screamed, and Julia began to cry, and Morbius sat down on the floor because his legs had stopped being of use to him.

Robby held the infant while Julia's hands were seen to.

The sight of it stopped Morbius where he sat. Those hands could lift a mass no human being could shift. He had spent the fourth night of his wife's widowhood from the world altering the mind that directed them, because he had been afraid of what they might one day do.

They were holding his daughter as though she had been assembled out of glass.

"Let me see her," said Julia.

Robby put the child into her arms.

For a while there was nothing in the room but the sound of a new person breathing.

"She has a name," Julia said.

Morbius looked up.

They had never decided it themselves. They had never needed to. It had been decided at a mess table by a cook with a list of eleven names, and argued through the engineering shift and the survey teams and the galley, and had come back at the end of a week in a shape nobody could take credit for, though two men had tried and a third had declined to enter either claim in the log.

"Altaira," said Julia.

The name went into a room containing four people, and it arrived carrying the voices of forty who were not there.

Morbius closed his eyes.

"Altaira."

Robby looked down at the child, and said what he had said at the table a year ago with the western wall of the house open to a green sunset.

"Alta."

Julia smiled. "Yes."

Outside there was no settlement. No ship overhead. No surgeon coming through the door in the morning, no Cookie in the galley, no Farman on the terrace, no Adams to tell any of them what happened next.

Julia looked at Robby, and then at her husband.

"Four," she said.

"What?"

"There are four of us."

Robby turned toward her. She was already looking down at the child.

And for the first time since the Bellerophon came down out of the sky, Edward Morbius went a whole night without thinking about the machines beneath his house.

Two and a half kilometers below him, they went on running.

Chapter Thirty-One

THE THING HE LOVED

Kirk knew before he finished materializing that something had changed, and nothing in the transporter reading said so.

The beam had been clean. The Enterprise had held a steady orbit all night at fourteen thousand kilometers, and nothing had come near her. Spock's instruments had recorded none of the navigational errors that had twice reported the ship as lying below the surface of the planet, and the signal from under the plateau had not come back. By every measurement available to him, Altair IV had spent the night behaving itself.

Kirk trusted that about as far as he could have thrown the planet.

The transporter set him down on the four stones beside the house with the morning already clear over the plateau. The air was cool enough that he could smell wet ground under the garden and something flowering down the western slope. Spock

arrived behind him with the tricorder already open. Then McCoy. Then Ostrow, who had brought two instruments and no breakfast.

The tiger was lying beside Alta at the edge of the terrace. It raised its head when they appeared, which meant nothing at all, because the animal had done that at every arrival since they came. It had never cared for the effect and had never entirely settled the question of whether people who appeared out of nothing ought to count as prey.

What bothered him was Robby.

The android was standing behind Alta and a little to one side. Not at his usual distance, which was the width of a terrace and the length of a conversation. Close.

Alta got up when she saw them.

"Good morning."

"Morning."

She had not slept. Her hair was tied back badly, which Kirk took for confirmation, and there was a cup on the wall beside her that had not been touched.

"Your father?"

"In his study."

"Since last night?"

"No. He came out at dawn and asked whether I had reconsidered."

Kirk waited.

"I had not."

"How did that go?"

"He said we would discuss it when I was thinking clearly."

McCoy made a sound.

Spock turned to him. "I said nothing."

"You made a sound, Doctor."

"That is not the same thing."

Alta almost smiled. Kirk did not.

"Where is he now?"

"Waiting for you."

That interested him more than anything else she had said. Morbius had spent two days wishing them off his planet. A man did not begin waiting for James Kirk unless he had decided something overnight.

"Robby."

The android turned.

"You all right?"

"Yes."

"You're closer to her than usual."

"Yes."

Kirk waited. Robby did not go on.

"Why?"

The android's eyes went briefly to the house and came back.

"I prefer to be here."

Not that he had been instructed. Not that Alta had asked. I prefer.

Spock's tricorder had stopped moving. Kirk looked at him and got the smallest shake of the head. Nothing. That was beginning to be a reading in its own right.

◆

Morbius came out into the doorway dressed as he had been on the first morning, the high collar, the dark clothes, everything so exactly ordered that Kirk found himself wondering whether the man had slept in them or had got up early enough to make sure it did not look as though he had.

"Captain."

"Doctor."

Morbius looked past him at the other three. "I had expected you alone."

"You've known me three days. You should know better."

"I am learning."

It might have been humor. Kirk did not think so.

Morbius came out onto the terrace. "We should settle this."

Alta turned toward him. He would not look at her, and Kirk marked it.

"Settle what, exactly?"

"My daughter."

"No."

Morbius's eyes came back to him. "No?"

"Alta isn't a question for you and me to settle."

"Captain, she has lived nineteen years on this planet."

"That makes her nineteen."

"You know nothing whatever about her."

"Enough to know she can answer for herself."

"Father," said Alta.

"Not now."

The tiger lifted its head.

Kirk caught it. So did Robby.

"She has no conception of what she is asking for," Morbius said. "Five hours aboard your vessel and a few conversations with strangers do not constitute preparation for life in the Federation."

"No," said Kirk. "They don't."

Morbius had braced for an argument and been handed agreement, and it took him a moment. "Then you understand."

"I understand she isn't prepared. Neither was I, the first time I left Iowa."

McCoy looked at the stones.

"That is hardly comparable."

"No. I had people around me. Teachers. Friends. More than one road out of town. She has had you."

Morbius looked at his daughter then, and the trouble with the look was the love in it.

Kirk had seen possessiveness wearing love's clothes often enough to know the difference, and this was not that. Everything he had seen in three days said the man loved her. The difficulty was that somewhere in twenty years Morbius had decided that loving her gave him jurisdiction over her.

"I kept her alive," he said.

Alta flinched.

"Yes," said Kirk. "You did."

"On a world where forty people died."

"Yes."

"Where her mother died."

The terrace went quiet.

"Father."

Morbius heard himself a half second after the rest of them did. His voice changed slightly, and it would have been better if it had not.

"I did not mean."

"I know what you meant."

"No. You do not."

"I think I do."

The tiger stood up.

Kirk turned his head, because the movement had been too fast. The animal was on its feet beside Alta with its body angled toward her father, tail low, ears forward.

She put a hand against its shoulder. "Easy."

It did not respond to her at all.

Robby took one step.

"Robby," said Morbius.

The android stopped.

Kirk looked between the two of them. "What was that?"

"I do not understand the question."

"You stopped him."

"I said his name."

"You stopped him."

"I did nothing of the kind."

"He did not," said Robby.

That should have settled it. It did not.

Alta's hand was moving slowly through the fur at the animal's shoulder. "He is upset."

McCoy had gone very still. "Alta. Move away from him."

The tiger's head turned. Not toward McCoy.

Toward Alta.

Something cold went down the back of Kirk's neck, and her face said she had felt it too. The animal had known her since it was born. It had slept outside her door when she was ill. It had followed her through the garden every morning of her life and let her put both arms around its neck while three armed strangers stood ten meters off and watched.

It was looking directly at her. Not past her. At her.

"Robby," said Kirk.

The android moved, and the tiger growled.

Alta froze.

It was a different sound from the one Kirk had heard the day before, when the animal had stared at empty air beyond the garden wall and would not stop. That one had been a warning.

This one had already decided something.

Morbius took a step. "Alta."

The tiger's lips came back off its teeth.

"Don't," said Kirk.

Morbius stopped.

Alta's hand came away from the animal's shoulder very slowly. "Easy. Easy, now."

Its eyes followed her hand.

"He has never."

"I know," said Kirk.

Robby was two meters off and closing. Spock had the tricorder up.

"No anomalous energy reading."

"Forget the tricorder."

"I have not forgotten it, Captain."

The tiger crouched.

Kirk knew that movement. He had seen it on a dozen worlds in animals that shared no common ancestor and had nevertheless arrived at the same arithmetic. Weight going forward. Hindquarters gathering. A distance being solved.

"Alta," he said quietly. "Don't run."

She did not.

Morbius whispered her name.

The tiger sprang, and Kirk fired.

The beam caught it across the shoulder in midair and the animal came apart out of its own leap, twisting, and struck the terrace stones hard enough to slide. For a moment it lay there with one foreleg folded under it.

Then it got up.

It should not have been able to. Kirk had put a full stun charge into it at four meters, enough to drop a man for an hour and more than enough for anything with a nervous system, and the animal came off the stones with its hindquarters still working and turned toward Alta.

Not toward Kirk. Not toward the man who had shot it.

Alta.

Kirk's thumb moved on the setting.

Morbius saw his hand. "No."

The tiger gathered.

"Captain, do not."

Kirk fired.

The second beam was brighter and it did not knock the

animal anywhere. The tiger simply stopped being there. There was an outline of light where it had been, holding its shape for perhaps a quarter of a second, long enough for every person on that terrace to see the position of the legs, and then there was the far wall of the garden and the morning behind it, and nothing on the stones at all.

Alta screamed.

Robby reached her before the sound had finished and put himself between her and a place where there was nothing to be between her and.

Nobody moved for several seconds.

◆

Kirk lowered the phaser.

The sun had come up another degree through all of it and the light had moved across the terrace, and there was nothing on the stones. No mark. No scoring. Not so much as the dust an animal leaves where it has lain all morning.

Alta came out from behind Robby and stopped at the place.

"No."

"Alta," said McCoy.

"No."

She did not kneel, because there was nothing to kneel beside. She stood where her tiger had been and looked at an empty square meter of her father's terrace with her hands open and nothing in them.

Morbius crossed to her.

He did not touch her. Kirk watched him not do it.

"I raised him," Alta said. Her voice had gone very small.

"I know."

"He was born here."

"I know."

"He never hurt me."

"I know."

Kirk heard the man say it three times, the same two words with nothing behind them, and something in his own mind turned over and did not come to rest.

Spock had come up on his other side. "Captain."

"Not now."

"I believe it must be now."

Kirk followed the Vulcan's eyes.

Morbius was no longer looking at the empty stones. He was looking at his daughter, and what was in his face was not grief by itself.

It was horror. Not at what had happened. At when it had happened.

Kirk knew it because he had seen it once already, on this same terrace, when a garden path bent like a spoon in water and a nineteen year old ensign went six meters through the air, and Edward Morbius had said he had seen nothing rather too quickly.

Now the man was looking at his own daughter as though something impossible had just turned out not to be.

Kirk stepped toward him. "Doctor."

Morbius looked up.

"When did that animal last attack her?"

"Never."

"Anyone?"

"No."

"Threaten her?"

"No."

"Show aggression toward her, ever, in nineteen years?"

"No."

"Captain," said Alta.

Kirk kept his eyes where they were. "What happened last night?"

"You know what happened."

"I know your daughter told you she was leaving."

The change in Morbius's face was very small, and it was there.

"And so?"

"And so twelve hours later an animal that has loved her since the day it was born tried to tear her apart on this terrace."

"Do not."

"Do not what?"

"Use this."

Kirk looked at him for a moment. "I don't know yet what this is."

"Then stop behaving as though you do."

"I'm not behaving as anything."

"You are standing on the spot where an animal my daughter loved ceased to exist, and you are turning it into evidence against me."

Alta turned her head. "Evidence of what?"

Morbius said nothing at all.

"That," said Kirk, "is what I would like to know."

◆

Robby had not moved from where he had put himself.

"Robby."

"Yes."

"What happened to that animal?"

"I do not know."

"Could something have been controlling it?"

"I do not know."

"Could one of the Krell systems?"

The pause ran a beat too long, and Morbius turned sharply. "Do not answer that."

Robby looked at him.

"Why not?" said Kirk.

"Because he cannot know."

"I asked him."

"And I am telling you that the question is beyond him."

"That is correct," said Robby.

Something went out of Morbius's shoulders, and Kirk watched the man begin to be relieved.

"But that is not the same as impossible," said Robby.

Morbius's face emptied.

Ostrow came forward for the first time since he had materialized. "What is possible?"

Robby looked toward the ridge. "I do not know."

"You keep saying that."

"Yes."

"You were built by them."

"Yes."

"You have access to their systems."

"Some."

"You read their language."

"Some."

"You recognize their machines."

"Some."

Ostrow stopped. Robby waited, which he did better than anything else alive.

The Vulcan took a breath that Kirk was fairly sure had been a Vulcan deciding not to raise his voice.

"Then tell me what you do know."

Robby looked at Alta, who was still standing at the empty place.

"I know that something below us changed last night."

Morbius went completely still.

"When?" said Kirk.

"After Alta told her father that she intended to leave."

Nobody moved. Kirk felt the pieces come onto the table. Not into any order. Onto the table.

"Changed how?"

"I cannot describe it in your language."

"Try."

Robby considered it for some time.

"A connection became available."

Ostrow came another step. "Between what?"

"I do not know."

"Enough," said Morbius.

"No," said Kirk, and it came out harder than he had meant it to.

Morbius met it. "This is my home."

"And that was my officer who went six meters through the air yesterday."

"Which has nothing whatever to do with this."

"You don't know that."

"Neither do you."

"No. But I know that something happened underneath us within an hour of your daughter telling you she was leaving, and I know that this morning the animal that has protected her all its life tried to kill her, and I am finished treating those as two separate facts."

Alta said, "Captain."

He looked up at her.

She was standing where the tiger had been, with her hands open and perfectly clean, and that was somehow worse than blood would have been. There had been something there four minutes ago that she had raised from a cub, and now there was nothing on her hands or on the stones or anywhere else, and she had not even been left something to bury.

He stopped. This was not an interrogation room, and she was standing in the place where the thing she loved had stopped existing, and he had been the one holding the phaser.

He put it away.

"I'm sorry."

She looked up at him for a long moment. "I know."

Kirk glanced at McCoy, who understood him and went to her without touching her.

"Come inside."

"Not yet."

"All right."

◆

Spock had gone to the edge of the terrace with the tricorder aimed down at the ground. Kirk joined him.

"Anything?"

"No."

"That's getting less comforting every time you say it."

"Agreed."

Kirk looked at him, because Spock did not hand out agreement at that speed.

"Say it."

"The sequence is of concern."

"Which sequence?"

"The inquiry beneath the plateau. The transient distortion. Ensign Rivera. The change Robby describes. Now the animal."

"You think they're connected."

"I think we no longer have sufficient justification to assume they are not."

Behind them Ostrow said, "Captain."

He had yesterday's record open on his tricorder again.

"The signal. I told you that three of the relationships violated every rule I had derived in six years."

"I remember."

"I was wrong."

Spock came away from the wall.

"Not about the relationships," said Ostrow, looking at the instrument as though it had misled him on purpose. "About why they were impossible. I assumed the grammar was malformed."

"And now?"

"Now I believe it was not written for a reader like me."

Spock understood before Kirk did. "A cognitive limitation."

"The relationships are not contradictory. They require a reader able to hold more than one relational state in the same position at the same time."

"English," said McCoy.

Ostrow did not react to the tone. "A human mind cannot do it."

"A Vulcan mind?" said Kirk.

Ostrow hesitated, which Kirk had not seen him do before.

"No."

Kirk thought about a machine in a sitting room, and a man who could look at an engineer's mathematics and give the answer without doing the work.

"Morbius."

Ostrow studied him. "Possibly."

Morbius laughed once, and there was nothing in it. "You are constructing an absurdity out of a dead animal."

"No," said Kirk.

He looked at the bare stones, and then at Alta standing beside them, and then at the house.

"We're constructing it out of everything."

The argument was coming. He could see it gathering in the older man's face, and he cut it off before it arrived.

"Doctor, from this moment nobody enters the lower installation alone. Nobody operates a Krell system without Mr. Spock present. And Alta comes aboard the Enterprise if she chooses to."

"You have no authority."

"I have enough."

"You presume."

"I have an injured officer, a hostile phenomenon my instruments cannot find, a planet that has twice interfered with my ship, and now an animal that behaved in a way every person standing here tells me is impossible. I am finished presuming this is safe."

Morbius stared at him.

Alta spoke from behind them. "I am going."

Her father turned. She was not looking at Kirk at all.

"I am going with them."

Something moved across Morbius's face. Kirk saw pain, and then anger, and then something underneath both of them that was gone too quickly to be named.

The ground moved.

Not much. A tremor through the soles of their boots, no more than a heavy door closing somewhere in a large building. The terrace lights flickered. Spock's tricorder began to sound and

Ostrow's answered it a half second later.

Robby turned toward the ridge.

Morbius did not move at all.

"Doctor," said Kirk.

The tremor stopped. So did both instruments. The silence that came after it was larger than the one that had come before.

Morbius looked at his daughter.

"I would never hurt you."

Alta's face changed. "I know."

And the hair came up on the back of Kirk's neck, because nobody on that terrace had accused him of it.

Not yet.

Chapter Thirty-Two

THE ORDINARY THING

Twenty years earlier

WHEN ALTAIRA MORBIUS WAS SIX YEARS OLD SHE DECIDED THAT ROBBY DID NOT KNOW HOW TO MAKE TOAST.

This was not, strictly speaking, true. Robby knew the chemical composition of everything in that kitchen, the caloric requirements of a six year old human child, fourteen methods of preparing eggs, eleven methods of preserving fruit, and several thousand years of Krell nutritional theory, none of which involved eggs.

What Robby did not understand was toast.

"It's burned."

He examined the slice in his hand. "The surface temperature did not exceed the specified limit."

"It's burned."

"It is brown."

"It's black."

"It is dark brown."

Alta folded her arms. Julia, in the doorway, decided not to intervene.

Robby turned the slice over. The other side was black. He looked at Alta. Alta looked at him.

"Dark brown," said Robby.

Julia laughed, and he turned around.

"I did not know you were there."

"That's because you were losing an argument."

"I was not arguing."

Alta climbed onto her chair. "He was."

"I was providing information."

"That is arguing," said Julia, and kissed the top of her daughter's head on the way past. "Your father would be very proud of you."

"Why?"

"Because you have just described most of his adult life."

Alta grinned into the fruit bowl.

"I will prepare another," said Robby.

"I'll do it."

"I am capable."

"I know."

"You have said that before, immediately prior to doing it yourself."

Julia stopped with the bread in her hand. Alta looked delighted.

"Has he?"

"Frequently."

"Robby."

"Yes, Julia?"

"Give me the bread."

He gave her the bread.

There were mornings when she could almost forget, and the house helped. It had changed in six years, not dramatically, because nothing Edward built ever looked improvised even when it was, but the rooms had taken on a life. Alta's drawings had gone up along the walls at a height determined entirely by how high she could reach. Lake stones sat on the windowsills. There was a wooden animal on the table that Robby had carved after Alta asked whether the Krell had made toys and he had been obliged to say that he did not know. Julia had told him that ignorance was no reason to deprive a child of one, so he had made her a horse. It looked very little like a horse. Alta loved it.

The garden had spread along the western side of the house. Julia had learned which terrestrial plants tolerated the soil of Altair IV and which ones objected to the entire planet. She had lost tomatoes twice and declined to accept it.

Morbius had once observed that this was irrational. Julia had pointed out that he had spent six years translating a civilization that had been dead for two hundred thousand years. He had stopped criticizing the tomatoes.

"Is Father coming up?"

"He said he would."

"You said that yesterday."

"Did I?"

"You did," said Robby.

Julia turned to him. "Thank you."

"You asked."

"I did not."

"You appeared uncertain."

Alta giggled. Julia watched her eat, all elbows and questions and hair that would not stay tied an hour, and thought about Edward promising to show her the third moon through the observatory before breakfast. Breakfast had come. The third moon had evidently managed without him.

"He'll come up," she said.

Alta shrugged. Disappointment would have been easier to take. Children adapt. Adults call it resilience because the other word is an accusation.

Robby set a new slice in front of her. She inspected it.

"Brown."

"Yes."

"Both sides?"

"Yes."

She turned it over. "Good."

Robby inclined his head like a man who had concluded a negotiation between governments.

Then the room tilted. Not much. Only enough that the edge of the counter was somewhere it had not been a moment before, and Julia caught it with one hand.

Robby was beside her before she had finished catching it.

"Mother?"

"I'm fine."

"No," said Robby.

Julia turned her head slowly. "That was a very Edward answer."

"Your balance failed."

"It did not fail. It became temporarily adventurous."

"Your pulse has increased. Your skin temperature is elevated."

Alta was watching both of them now.

"I'm tired," Julia said.

"You have been tired for eleven days."

There were times when his memory was deeply inconvenient.

"Are you sick?" said Alta.

"No."

And Robby said nothing at all.

"Go outside."

"Why?"

"Because I want to speak to Robby."

"About me?"

"No."

"Then I can stay."

"Outside."

Alta weighed resistance, found the odds poor, and slid off the chair. "Can I go to the lake?"

"Not alone."

"Robby can come."

"Stay in the garden."

She looked up at Robby. He did not rescue her.

"Fine."

Julia waited until the door had closed.

"How long have you been watching me?"

"Eleven days."

"You said that already."

"Your fatigue began earlier."

"How much earlier?"

"Twenty-three days."

She closed her eyes. "And you said nothing."

"You attributed it to the garden."

"So did you."

"I accepted your explanation."

"That sounds suspiciously like blame."

"It is not."

"Good." She sat down. He remained standing. "Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"You have the entire medical archive of a starship."

"Yes."

"And?"

"It is an archive." He paused. "It is not a physician."

That sentence stayed with her for what was left of her life.

◆

Edward came up forty minutes later, because Robby went down and got him.

Julia would remember that afterward. Not that he had been

below, which had long since become ordinary. What she remembered was how fast he came once Robby said her name.

He arrived with dust on one sleeve and an instrument still clipped to his belt.

"What happened?"

"Good morning."

"Julia."

"I became dizzy. Once."

"How long have you been ill?"

"I am not certain that I am."

"Twenty-three days," said Robby.

"Robby."

"He asked."

Morbius already had the scanner out. Julia caught his wrist.

"Do not begin."

"Begin what?"

"Solving me."

"I am taking a reading."

"You are looking at me the way you look at a sealed door."

"That is absurd."

"Edward."

He stopped. Six years ago she would have had to explain it. Now he knew, which was not the same as agreeing, and he sat down beside her and used the scanner anyway.

The first readings told them nothing. The second told them slightly more and nothing useful. Inflammatory markers elevated. Cardiac response irregular. A metabolic imbalance Robby could identify and could not explain. No infec-

tion, no injury, nothing that belonged tidily to any page in the Bellerophon's medical library.

"Again," said Morbius.

"The result will not change."

"Again."

Robby repeated it.

"Cross-reference the values."

"I have."

"Against the Bellerophon records."

"I have."

"Against all adult female cases."

"I have."

"Then widen it."

"I have."

Morbius looked up sharply. "Then you have missed something."

"No."

He stood. "You possess the accumulated medical knowledge of a starship."

"Yes."

"Then use it."

"I am using it. The information is inadequate."

The room went quiet. Julia knew the expression on her husband's face. It meant the universe had contradicted him personally.

"You read the ship's entire medical library."

"Yes."

"You retain it."

"Yes."

"Then you know what the surgeon knew."

"No," said Robby. "I know what she recorded."

"There is a difference."

"Yes."

"Explain it."

"A physician knows when information does not apply. She knows which questions to ask that are not in the record. She recognizes relationships she was never taught to describe. She has experience of being wrong."

"I understand what experience is."

"Then you understand why I am not a physician."

Julia leaned back in her chair.

"Apparently the android is the only one in this house who knows his own limits."

"That is not helpful."

"No," she said. "It is accurate."

Chapter Thirty-Three

BE WITH US

Twenty years earlier

IT NEVER BECAME DRAMATIC. SHE SOMETIMES WISHED IT WOULD. DRAMA WOULD HAVE GIVEN THEM SOMETHING TO FIGHT.

Instead she grew tired, and tired became weak, and walking from the bedroom to the terrace became a thing she thought about before doing. Some mornings she felt almost well. Those were the cruel ones.

Alta adjusted with the efficient selfishness of a six year old. She brought books into her mother's room and played on the floor and asked questions and became indignant when Julia fell asleep before the end of a story.

"You're doing it again."

Julia opened one eye. "Doing what?"

"Sleeping."

"I have been practicing."

"I wasn't finished. You were explaining the moons."

"There are three. Now you understand them."

Alta scowled. "Father says understanding a thing takes years."

"Your father has built a career on that belief."

Alta climbed up onto the bed.

"Are you going to die?"

There are moments when a child makes every adult in the house look like a coward.

"Everybody dies."

"That isn't what I asked."

No. It was not.

Julia moved over enough to make room. "I don't know."

Alta considered this with great seriousness. "Father will fix it."

Julia looked toward the doorway, where Edward was standing and had heard.

"Perhaps," she said.

Alta accepted it, because she was six.

Edward did not.

◆

The Krell had built machines that could move mountains. Morbius found one that could rebuild damaged tissue. The difficulty was that he did not know what his wife's tissue was supposed to be rebuilt into.

He found a medical archive that described organs no human being possessed and illnesses no human physician had ever seen. He found a chamber of biological models so exact that Robby believed some of them were preserved at the molecular level, and not one of them was human. He found instruments that could examine living matter without touching it. They examined Julia brilliantly and explained nothing.

For three weeks he went below before sunrise and came back after dark carrying pieces of impossible medicine. Some of it helped the symptoms. None of it changed the course.

She found him one night beside a Krell diagnostic unit he had dragged into the bedroom, a thing the size of a small table giving off a low sound she could feel through the mattress.

"You hate that thing."

"I do not hate machines."

"You hate machines that will not answer you."

"It is answering."

"Then why do you look insulted?"

"It is giving me categories I cannot translate."

"That is not its fault."

"No."

She watched him work for a while. "Edward. Come here."

"In a moment."

"Now."

He looked at the device, and then at her, and then he came and sat in the chair beside the bed.

"How long were you below today?"

"Six hours."

"Nine."

"Robby."

"He had nothing to do with it. I have a window."

For a second he almost smiled.

She found his hand. "The Krell cannot fix me."

"We do not know that."

"I know it."

"You believe it. There are whole medical sectors I have not translated."

"And if the answer is in one of them?"

"Then I will find it."

"And if it is not?"

He looked at her, and she understood again what eleven years of marriage had taught her: Edward Morbius did not fear being wrong nearly as much as he feared there being no answer at all.

"Then I will keep looking."

"That is what frightens me."

His hand tightened on hers.

"I need you here."

"I am here."

"Your body is here."

"Julia."

"Do you know what your daughter asked me this morning?"

He looked away. "Yes."

"She thinks you can fix anything."

"Children believe many things."

"So do you."

He stood up, which told her she had got to the right place.

"Do not turn this into an argument about my work."

"I did not."

"You have been making that argument for six years."

"No. I have been trying to keep my husband from disappearing into a civilization that already killed itself."

He stopped.

She regretted it, and then decided that she did not.

"They achieved things we cannot imagine," he said, to the machine rather than to her.

"And they died."

"That does not make their knowledge worthless."

"No. It makes it incomplete."

He said nothing at all.

When she woke the Krell machine was switched off and Edward was still in the chair.

◆

Autumn came to the plateau. The imported plants had no idea what autumn was supposed to mean under that light, but one of the trees made an effort and turned yellow, and Alta brought three leaves inside.

"These are dying."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because that is what they do."

"Do they come back?"

"In spring."

Alta looked suspicious. "How?"

"That is a bigger question."

"Father says everything is a bigger question."

"He would."

Robby was standing at the window. He had become quieter as she weakened, which she noticed because he had never been talkative and there is a difference between silence and less than silence.

"Robby. Come here." He did. "You are worrying."

"I do not know whether that description is accurate."

"Then you are doing an excellent imitation. Go and help her with the leaves."

"I don't need help," said Alta.

"Then help Robby."

"With what?"

"With being less solemn."

Alta looked up at him. "How?"

"I have no idea. It may not be possible."

"I do not believe solemnity is a function I perform," said Robby.

Julia laughed until it hurt, and Alta's face changed, and she stopped.

"I'm all right."

"You always say that."

"Yes."

"I don't think it's true."

"No."

Alta waited. Julia held out her arms, and her daughter climbed up and curled against her, and Robby turned toward the window.

Julia watched him do it and wondered whether that was something else he had learned from them. The courtesy of looking away.

◆

At the end there was pain. There was nothing remarkable about it. Human beings had been finding ways to hurt while dying a long time before the Krell built their first machine.

Robby managed the medication out of what was left of the Bellerophon stores, and Morbius checked every dose, even after Robby observed that he had never made an error.

"Everyone makes errors."

"You altered me because you believed I would not."

The room went quiet. Morbius looked at him, and Robby did not look away.

Julia, half awake, said, "Point to the android."

Neither of them understood.

"That was humor."

"I understood it," said Robby.

"Good."

Morbius did not smile, but his hand found hers.

Alta had said goodbye that afternoon without knowing it was goodbye. Julia had insisted. No bedside ritual. No child made to stand beside her dying mother while the adults waited

for something wise. She had sat for an hour and talked about the lake, and Julia had kissed her forehead and told her to go with Robby.

"I want to stay."

"I know."

"Why can't I?"

"Because I'm tired."

"You're always tired."

"Exactly."

There were more questions coming. Julia stopped them.

"I love you."

"You say that every day."

"Then you know it."

"Yes."

"Good."

After she had gone, Edward sat down beside the bed and for some time neither of them said anything. The western windows were open and Julia could smell the garden.

"I failed," he said.

"No."

"I had all of it underneath us. Medicine centuries past ours."

"Not ours."

"Knowledge beyond anything humanity possesses."

"And you still could not order the universe about."

He studied her.

"There you are," she said.

"Julia."

"You think that is what knowledge is for. Permission."

"I do not understand you."

"Yes, you do."

She could see the anger gathering, and it was not at her, it was at being helpless, and that was harder to sit beside.

"I could not save Adams."

"No."

"Or the others."

"No."

"And now you."

"You were never supposed to save everybody."

"Then what was I supposed to do?"

It came out almost like a child's question, and for a moment the Krell were gone, and the machines were gone, and the educator was gone, and there was only Edward.

"Be with us."

He closed his eyes.

She rested until the pain had gone by, and then she said, "Alta will leave you one day."

His eyes opened. Even now. Even here.

"No."

"Edward."

"She is six years old."

"She will not always be."

"That is a long way off."

"Not as far as you think."

"She has everything she needs here."

Julia smiled at that, sadly, because it was his answer to everything he had ever loved.

He took his hand away and then put it straight back.

"Do not do that to her."

"Do what?"

"Make being loved a thing she has to escape."

Morbius went completely still.

She had very little left. She spent some of it on his hand.

"Protect her."

"I will."

"No." Her eyes stayed on his. "Love her."

The wind moved the curtain. Edward Morbius had an answer for almost everything, and he had none for that.

Julia closed her eyes, and a few minutes later her breathing stopped.

He did not call Robby. He stayed in the chair holding her hand until the warmth had gone out of it, and then he said her name once, not loudly.

No machine answered.

◆

Alta came in after sunset with Robby behind her, and stopped in the doorway.

Children know. They do not always understand, but they know.

"Mother?"

Morbius stood up.

She looked at him, and then at the bed, and crossed the room by herself. Julia's hand was lying above the blanket. Alta touched

it.

"She's cold."

Her father could not answer.

She turned to Robby. "Can you make her not dead?"

"No."

She looked back at Morbius, and he shook his head.

"No."

Alta climbed onto the bed and lay down beside her mother.

Morbius started toward her. Robby put one hand out in front of him, not touching him, only closing the path.

"Wait."

For once, Morbius did.

◆

They buried Julia at the western edge of the garden. Morbius had wanted the ridge. Alta said her mother liked the garden, and that was the end of it.

There was no ceremony except the one the three of them made. Morbius tried to speak and could not. Alta put a stone on the grave, a pale one threaded with blue that she had found by the lake, and that her father had once told her was worthless, and that her mother had said was an excellent reason to keep it.

Then they went inside.

There had been four of them. Now there were three.

◆

Thirteen years went by.

At seven Alta learned to swim in the lake. At eight she found a lower corridor she had been forbidden to enter, and Robby prevented her from going back by standing in the doorway and declining to move. At nine she read the surviving Bellerophon records. At ten she asked why nobody had ever come back. At eleven she stopped accepting the first answer her father gave her. At twelve she began asking Robby things that Morbius did not know she was asking. At thirteen she could read enough Krell notation to tell when her father was translating too confidently. At fourteen she began keeping parts of herself private, and at fifteen he noticed.

At sixteen she found an interlock in a lower chamber. It took her two years to be certain what it did.

At nineteen she shut it off.

Her father went deeper. The Krell systems opened to him by degrees. He used the educator and recovered and studied and used it again, and problems that had once held him for months became manageable, and then straightforward, and then obvious. He stopped recording every use.

Robby said nothing about that either.

And Alta grew up happy, which was the strange part. She loved the house, and the lake, and Robby, and her father. She did not think of herself as a prisoner, because she had never once seen a road that went anywhere else.

And nothing happened.

No invisible thing crossed the garden. No door opened in the night. No machinery came apart in a locked room. Nothing struck the house, nothing hunted them, and nothing pulled a

ship out of the sky, because for nineteen years there was no ship in the sky to pull.

Edward Morbius had a daughter who loved him, an android who could not harm him, and a house standing exactly where he had put it.

He never once asked himself why the thing that killed forty people had let his wife die slowly, in a bed, of an ordinary illness, with nobody to help her.

It would not have occurred to him. He had no reason to connect the two, and no evidence, and no one left alive to raise it.

And two and a half kilometers beneath the garden where they had buried her, the machine went on waiting.

It had no reason to object.

Yet.

Chapter Thirty-Four

THE DECISION

Kirk had been back aboard the Enterprise for eleven minutes when the first alarm sounded, and it came from engineering rather than the bridge.

That was what frightened him. A bridge alarm tells a captain that something is wrong with his ship. An engineering alarm tells him the ship found out first.

He was halfway through the turbolift doors when the deck moved under him. Not a shudder and not turbulence. One hard sideways displacement that put his shoulder into the wall and made the lift lights flare white.

Then Scott, over the intercom. "Bridge, this is engineering. I've lost the number three field junction."

Kirk hit the control. "Lost how?"

A pause.

"It is no longer attached to the ship."

Spock was already moving.

The damage was on the port side of the secondary hull, three decks below the hangar bay. By the time Kirk reached the bridge, Sulu had the Enterprise rolling slowly to turn the opened section away from the planet and Chekov was reading hull pressures in a voice that was too calm by half.

"Compartment C-seven is open to space. C-eight is holding. Emergency bulkheads sealed."

"Casualties."

Uhura turned from her board. "Two injured. One unaccounted for."

"Name."

"Specialist Tenney. Engineering."

Scott came back on before Kirk could answer. "Captain, I've got three meters of structural member missing and half a power bus gone with it. Not cut. Not burned. Gone."

"Cause?"

"If I had one I'd be shouting it at you."

Spock bent over the science station, and Kirk was beside him in two steps. The screen held the port engineering section magnified until the torn hull filled it, and the damage was wrong in a way that took a moment to name. A phaser cuts metal. An explosion bends it. Vacuum tears a weakened structure outward in a pattern any engineer can read at a glance.

This looked as though a piece of the Enterprise had been taken between two fingers and lifted away. The edges were clean in places and folded in others. Fasteners had been drawn straight out of their housings. A conduit thirty centimeters across ended in open space.

Kirk thought of a subspace array torn off a survey ship twenty years ago and did not say it.

Spock said it. "The similarity is notable."

"That's one word for it."

"I can offer another if you prefer."

"Later."

"Captain," said Sulu, "orbital altitude is fluctuating."

"How much?"

"Six hundred meters. Correction is holding."

"Keep it holding."

"Aye, sir."

The turbolift opened and McCoy came onto the bridge at a run, which meant somebody had been hurt badly enough to make him forget that running onto a bridge was undignified.

"Tenney's dead."

The bridge went quiet.

"He was in C-seven when the bulkhead went. We had the compartment sealed in thirty-eight seconds. It wasn't enough."

Kirk nodded once. There was nothing else to do with the information yet.

"And Rivera is trying to get out of sickbay."

"Why?"

"Because he says he's fit for duty."

"Is he?"

"No."

"Then why are you telling me?"

McCoy looked at him, and Kirk came within a word of apologizing, and then the deck moved again and this time everyone

felt it.

Sulu's hands went flat on the controls. "Altitude loss. Two kilometers."

"Compensate."

"Already doing it."

Spock came up from his viewer. "Captain, there is no measurable force acting on this vessel."

"We're descending."

"Yes."

"And there's no force."

"None detectable."

"That sentence," said McCoy, "is getting old."

Kirk opened the shipwide channel. "All hands, this is the captain. Secure for possible gravitational disturbance. Damage control to port engineering. No unnecessary movement between decks."

He closed it. "Uhura. The house."

She had the channel open before he finished. It answered on the fourth tone, and it was Alta.

"Enterprise?"

"This is Kirk. Put your father on."

A pause, and then Morbius.

"Captain."

"Something just tore a piece out of my ship."

Silence.

"One of my men is dead."

"I am sorry."

"No, Doctor. You're informed. I expect you to tell me what is happening."

"I have told you repeatedly that the systems beneath us are beyond your understanding."

"That isn't an answer."

"It is the only one I have."

Kirk looked at Spock, whose eyes had not left his instruments, and who shook his head by about a centimeter.

"I'm coming down."

"Captain, I strongly advise against it."

"That advice expired with Specialist Tenney."

He closed the channel.

"Jim," said McCoy.

"I know."

"No, you don't. Rivera's coming with us."

"You said he wasn't fit."

"He isn't. Which is why I lost the argument."

"With Rivera?"

"With myself." McCoy dragged a hand down his face. "He was the first man this thing hit and the first one to walk away from it. He says if we're going back down there he wants to see the place that threw him across a terrace."

"That isn't a medical reason."

"No. It's the same human reason you used on Alta."

Kirk let that sit where it landed. "He stays behind cover and he does exactly what you tell him."

McCoy's expression suggested he considered that a work of fiction. "Of course."

◆

The transporter put Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Rivera and two security men on the terrace seven minutes later.

The house had not changed and everything about it had. The morning light was the same. The western garden still held the square meter where the tiger had stopped existing. The stones were ordinary stones.

But nobody standing on them was pretending anymore.

Alta was near Robby. Morbius was in the doorway. The android had moved closer to her again, and Kirk marked it.

"Doctor."

"Captain."

"One of my crew is dead."

Morbius's face tightened. "I heard you."

"Then hear the rest. I have standing Starfleet authority to remove the surviving member of the Bellerophon expedition if I determine that this planet represents an ongoing threat."

"You have interpreted your orders very generously."

"I've had a man killed, another thrown six meters through the air, my ship pulled out of orbit twice, and a tiger try to kill your daughter. I'm finished being generous. You are coming aboard the Enterprise."

"No."

It was almost conversational. Kirk had expected that.

"That wasn't a request."

"I will not leave this planet."

"You will."

Morbius came out of the doorway. "Captain, do you imagine that a uniform confers ownership of every life you encounter?"

"No."

"Then you will not remove me by force."

"If I have to."

Behind McCoy, Rivera shifted his weight, and Robby turned his head toward the sound. It was a small movement. Rivera saw it.

"So that's him."

"Don't start," said McCoy.

"I didn't."

"No, but I know your face."

Rivera's shoulder was strapped under his tunic and there was still discoloration along one side of his jaw. He looked at Robby, and then at the empty garden.

"What hit me?"

"I do not know," said Robby.

Rivera laughed once, without anything in it. "Everybody keeps saying that."

"Because it is true," said Morbius.

"My ribs don't care."

Kirk stepped between them before the conversation became something else. "Spock."

The Vulcan had his tricorder on the house. "Captain, there has been another transient change."

"Where?"

"Below us."

Morbius's eyes moved, and that was all Kirk needed.

"What changed?"

"I cannot resolve it."

"Ostrow?"

No answer.

Kirk turned. "Ostrow."

McCoy looked at the transporter marker. "He didn't come down."

Kirk went very still. Spock's head came up.

"No," said Spock.

Kirk already had the communicator open. "Kirk to Enterprise. Locate Doctor Ostrow."

The channel was quiet, and then quiet again, and when Uhura came back her voice had changed.

"Captain, he is not aboard."

Kirk looked toward the ridge, and Morbius looked there with him, half a second too quickly.

"Where is the educator?"

Morbius said nothing.

Kirk took one step toward him. "Doctor."

"Below."

"How do I reach it?"

The older man's face closed, and Kirk understood the answer before it came.

"You are not taking me there."

"Captain," said Spock. He had the tricorder aimed at the ground. "Something has activated."

Beneath the terrace, beneath the garden, beneath Julia's grave and the rooms Edward Morbius had spent twenty years building a life around, the great machine began to draw power.

Kirk looked up at him and found that the man was frightened, and for the first time in four days that frightened Kirk more than anything else on the planet.

"Take me to him."

Morbius stayed where he was.

"Now."

◆

They found the first of it on the way to the entrance.

It had been one of the old laboratory sheds, a low building fifty meters off from the house, and half of it was gone. Not burned. Not collapsed. The remaining wall ended along a line so clean that the shelves had been divided with their contents still standing on them. A metal case had been cut through the middle. One side of it was there. The other side was not anywhere.

Rivera stopped walking. "That's what happened to the ship."

Spock scanned the edge. "No residual heat. No radiation. No molecular disruption consistent with phaser or transporter effect."

"Then what?" said McCoy.

"I do not know."

"Good," said Rivera. "We're all caught up."

Kirk did not slow down.

"Captain," said Morbius behind him.

Kirk stopped. The older man was looking back at the house, where Alta stood on the terrace with Robby.

"You will leave my daughter here."

"No."

"She cannot go below."

"Neither can you, by every sane rule I've issued since yesterday."

"This is not a debate."

"No," said Kirk. "It isn't."

He opened the communicator. "Kirk to Alta."

"Yes?"

"Stay with Robby. Do not go into the lower installation. If anything changes, anything at all, you call the Enterprise."

"I understand."

"Alta," said Morbius.

She looked down from the terrace at her father.

"I am staying here because Captain Kirk asked me to. Not because you did."

It landed harder than she had meant it to, and both men on the terrace knew it.

For one second the air over the terrace seemed to tighten. Spock's tricorder chirped and every person there stopped moving, and then the sound ceased, and Morbius was looking at the ground.

Kirk looked at him. There was no longer any room left in the morning for coincidence.

"Move."

◆

The corridor lights came up ahead of them, as they always did.

Morbius led. Kirk walked directly behind him, Spock beside Rivera, McCoy and the security men at the back, and they went down into a world built by minds that had believed themselves past being afraid of anything.

The machine was awake. Kirk could feel it through the floor, and it was not vibration. It was closer to expectation.

At the first junction Morbius stopped. "This is where you remain."

Kirk nearly laughed. "No."

"If Ostrow is where you believe he is, that chamber is dangerous."

"Then you should have told him so before he went there."

"He was told."

"Captain," said Spock, "Doctor Ostrow requested permission to use the educator and was refused."

"I remember."

"He has therefore knowingly disobeyed a direct order."

"Thank you, Spock."

"It may become relevant."

"It already has."

The lights ahead of them brightened, and Morbius said something under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Doctor."

He kept his eyes on the corridor. "It recognizes intent."

Spock's face changed by one degree. "What does?"

"The installation."

"You have spent three days telling me these are passive systems," said Kirk.

"Some of them are."

"And the rest?"

Morbius said nothing, and from somewhere deeper in the installation came a sound that was not an alarm and not machinery.

It was a man screaming.

McCoy was past Kirk before the echo finished. "Ostrow."

They ran.

◆

The chamber door stood open and the plate had already come down.

Ostrow sat in the chair with his hands locked around the rests and his back rigid, and light moved across the plate above his forehead in patterns Kirk could not follow for even a second.

Morbius stopped dead. "He has taken too much."

McCoy went for the control and Morbius caught his arm.

"Do not touch it."

"Get your hand off me."

"If you interrupt the sequence now you may kill him."

"He is dying now."

Spock had gone to the far side of the chair. "Ostrow."

There was no response. The Vulcan's eyes were open and they were looking at something nobody else in the room could see.

Kirk stepped toward the control.

"Captain," said Morbius.

"How do we stop it?"

"You cannot."

Kirk watched him. "You can."

Morbius stood still, and Kirk understood.

"You've done this."

"Many times."

"Then do it."

Morbius looked at the chair, where Ostrow's breathing had gone shallow and fast. "Not yet."

"What?" said McCoy.

Morbius's voice was barely there. "If I stop it at the wrong point, he may come out of it with nothing."

Kirk moved so fast that Rivera never saw his hand go out. He put Morbius against the wall with a forearm across his chest.

"I don't care what he learns."

Morbius looked at him. Kirk's face was a hand's width from his own.

"I care whether he lives."

Something went through the older man's expression and did not come back out the other side. He looked away.

"Two seconds."

Kirk did not let go of him.

"One."

Morbius reached for the control, and the chamber went white.

Chapter Thirty-Five

THE CHAIR

FOR A MOMENT THERE WAS NO CHAMBER. THERE WAS ONLY LIGHT.

Ostrow did not experience it as brightness. Brightness is a property of vision, and vision had become one small function among a great many others, no more significant than the pressure of his body against the chair.

He knew with perfect precision that his heart was beating one hundred and seventy-three times a minute. He knew the temperature of the metal against the base of his skull. He knew the distance from the chair to the wall to within a centimeter.

Then those facts opened, and what they opened into was not more facts.

It was relationships.

The wall stopped being an object. It became position and composition and purpose and history and load and memory and connection, and every one of those occupied the same place in his

mind at the same instant without displacing any of the others.

For six years he had studied four pages.

He understood now why he had failed. The pages had never been difficult.

He had been small.

That was the first thought. The second was that he could become large enough.

The machine heard the second one, and opened him further.

◆

McCoy saw the blood first, a thin line from Ostrow's nose and then another from one ear.

"Now."

Morbius's hand was already on the control, and the light changed, and Ostrow screamed.

Spock did not move. Kirk did. "Morbius."

"I am stopping it."

"Faster."

"There is no faster."

McCoy reached for the Vulcan's wrist and thought better of touching him.

The chair released with a sound like a held breath going out. Ostrow came forward and Spock caught him, and for one instant the two Vulcans were looking at each other from a distance of about twenty centimeters, and Ostrow smiled.

It was so unexpected that Spock nearly failed to lower him carefully to the floor.

"Move," said McCoy, and Spock moved.

He scanned once, and then again, and his face became furious. Not afraid. Leonard McCoy was at his angriest when fear would have been no use to anybody.

"Pulse a hundred and fifty. Neural activity all over the chart. What did that thing do to him?"

"What he asked it to," said Morbius.

"Keep talking and I'll decide what to do about you."

Kirk crouched down. "Doctor."

Ostrow's eyes found him. "Captain."

His voice was entirely normal. Nothing about that morning was worse than that.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Yes."

"Don't encourage him," said McCoy.

Ostrow turned to him. "I would prefer to sit up."

"No."

"I can assist you."

"That is precisely what I am preventing."

Ostrow considered this with what appeared to be real care. "Your reasoning is sound."

McCoy stared at him. "Spock, was that a joke?"

"No, Doctor."

"It felt like one."

"Ostrow," said Kirk. "Why?"

The Vulcan closed his eyes. It was not unconsciousness. It looked more like pain being filed somewhere out of the way.

"I required an answer."

"I refused you."

"Yes."

"That generally means no."

"I understood the word."

"Then why are we here?"

Ostrow opened his eyes again. "Because you were correct to refuse me."

Kirk went still.

Ostrow was looking past him at the chair. "I believed that discipline would allow me to determine the point at which continuing became unsafe."

"And?" said Spock.

"I determined it."

"Then why did you continue?"

Ostrow looked at him for a moment.

"Because once I reached it, I no longer agreed that it was unsafe."

Spock absorbed that without any visible change, and Kirk found himself thinking of a line out of an old Institute record that Ostrow had kept because he kept nearly everything connected with his work, a line written by his mother about the difference between curiosity and appetite.

One of them permits you to stop.

"You are not going anywhere," said McCoy.

"I know."

"Good."

"I do not mean from this room."

The scanner stopped moving in McCoy's hand. "What do you mean?"

"Doctor, I believe you should prepare for intracranial vascular failure."

The chamber went silent.

"No," said McCoy.

"It has begun."

"No."

"I can feel it."

"You can feel a great many things at the moment. That does not make you my physician."

Ostrow's mouth moved. "No."

McCoy turned. "Jim. Get him to the ship."

Kirk had the communicator open. "Kirk to Enterprise. Medical emergency, lock on Doctor Ostrow."

Static answered him. He tried again and got the same.

Spock lifted his tricorder. "Transporter interference has returned."

McCoy swore with considerable specificity.

"The surface lift," said Morbius.

"How long?"

"Seven minutes."

"Too long."

"It is the only route."

McCoy looked down at Ostrow. "Then we make it enough."

Rivera came into the chamber carrying the emergency field stretcher out of the security pack, and McCoy looked surprised to see him.

Rivera shrugged with the shoulder that still worked. "You told me to stay behind cover."

"This is not cover."

"No."

They lifted him. Ostrow's hand caught Kirk's sleeve.

"Captain."

"Save it."

"I cannot." His eyes were very clear. "Not time."

◆

They made the lift in four minutes. Morbius overrode three safety interlocks and one piece of Krell machinery that objected to being hurried, and Rivera and Spock carried the stretcher between them while McCoy walked alongside with a scanner in one hand and an injector in the other.

Kirk stayed up by Ostrow's head. "What did you see?"

"Jim," said McCoy.

Ostrow answered anyway. "Not see."

"Understand?"

"Partly." His eyes closed.

McCoy's fingers went to his neck. "Stay with me."

They opened again. "The machine below us is not a computer."

"That is an absurd simplification," said Morbius.

Ostrow turned his head. "No."

It was the first time Kirk had ever heard contempt in that voice. Not anger. Contempt. Morbius heard it as well.

"A computer receives instruction. That machine receives cognition."

"Directly," said Spock.

"Yes."

"From any mind?"

"No."

Morbius was looking at him, and Ostrow saw it.

"You know that."

"I know a great deal that you do not."

"You know what they intended."

"What?" said Kirk.

Morbius's face closed. Ostrow breathed through something and kept going.

"The educator was not educational."

Spock understood first. "Preparation."

"Yes."

"Preparation for what?" said Kirk.

It was Morbius who answered, and when Kirk turned to look at him the expression on the man's face was not pride. It was closer to reverence.

"To become more. The Krell had passed beyond mechanical interfaces. The educator was one stage in a progression. Command by hand. Then by thought. Then direct participation."

"In the machine."

"With it."

"No distinction," whispered Ostrow.

The lift rose, and Kirk felt the floor move under him and had the irrational sense that the planet was listening to the conversation.

"Why did they need it?"

"Because an ordinary mind could not hold the necessary relationships."

Ostrow's eyes opened. "There."

Kirk leaned down. "There what?"

"Your question. The signal."

"The cognitive limitation," said Spock.

Ostrow nodded once. "I assumed the limit was the mind."

McCoy put an injector against his neck. "You can explain your life's work after I have kept you alive long enough to regret it."

Ostrow's eyes went to him. "The limit was the dose."

McCoy's hand stopped where it was.

Ostrow turned his eyes toward Morbius. "He was not born capable."

"No one has suggested that I was."

"You allowed us to."

"Doctor."

"You went back."

Morbius said nothing at all.

"Again," said Ostrow, and his voice was going. "And again. And again."

Kirk saw it then, all of it at once. Twenty years. The impossible mathematics done without working. The effortless transla-

tion. The systems that lit before the man's fingers reached them.

"You built it."

Morbius turned on him sharply, and Kirk corrected himself.

"Not the machine. Yourself."

Ostrow closed his eyes. "Yes."

◆

The lift opened onto the plateau and the sky had changed. There were clouds over the western ridge where an hour ago there had been nothing at all, and Kirk did not care for that either.

Alta was waiting with Robby. She saw the stretcher.

"What happened?"

"Ostrow used the educator."

Her face went white.

"Go inside," said Morbius.

"No."

"Alta."

"No."

Robby came closer to the stretcher, and Ostrow's eyes opened and found him.

"You."

Robby leaned down. "Yes."

"You remember more than you say."

"He is injured," said Morbius.

Ostrow ignored him entirely. "Who woke you?"

Robby made no answer, and Kirk turned around, because that question had been sitting in the back of his head since Exo

III.

Robby looked toward the ridge. Then at Morbius. Then at the dying man on the stretcher.

"The last one."

Morbius went still.

"Krell," whispered Ostrow.

"Yes."

"What did he know?"

"He knew that they were dying."

"Why wake you?"

"I was not connected."

"To the machine," said Spock.

"No."

"And therefore not affected by whatever destroyed them."

"Correct."

Ostrow drew a breath that cost him something. "What did he ask you to do?"

Robby waited a moment. It might have been privacy. It might have been two hundred thousand years of retrieval.

"I was told to remain."

"Why?"

"Until another intelligence came."

"For two hundred thousand years?" said Alta.

"Yes."

"To do what?"

Robby looked at her. "Understand."

Nobody said anything, and Kirk felt a great many old questions rearrange themselves into a shape he did not like. The

Krell had not left Robby behind by accident. He had not simply survived.

He had been left as a witness. Or as a warning.

"Exo III," said Ostrow.

Robby's eyes moved to him.

"The line continued elsewhere."

"Yes."

"Those machines killed."

"Yes."

"You did not."

"No."

"Why?"

"His construction is different," said Morbius, and he said it a half second too fast.

Robby looked at him, and the look lasted half a second too long, and Ostrow was still lucid enough to measure it.

"No," said Ostrow.

Morbius's face emptied.

Ostrow's eyes closed, and McCoy said, "Enough. Move him."

They carried him toward the house. Kirk stayed where he was for one second longer, and Morbius looked past him, which was answer enough for the moment.

◆

They put him in the room where Alta had been born. McCoy learned that only afterward. At the time it was the nearest room

with a flat surface, power, and space enough to work in.

He put everybody out except Spock. Kirk refused to go farther than the doorway. Morbius stood across the hall. Alta sat down against the wall with Robby beside her, and for six minutes nobody said anything.

Then McCoy came out, and Kirk read the answer off him before he spoke.

"How long?"

"Not long."

Kirk went in.

Spock was standing beside the bed. Ostrow looked smaller lying down, and that annoyed Kirk out of all proportion. The man had spent six years making himself impossible to ignore. He should not have been allowed to become small at the end of it.

"Captain."

"I'm here."

"I was wrong about one thing."

"Only one?"

That brought the faintest movement to his face. "Several. One matters. The Bellerophon's arrival was not the trigger."

Kirk felt Spock turn slightly.

"What was?"

"Morbius."

From the doorway came a sound.

"Not his presence," said Ostrow. "His use."

"The educator."

"Yes."

"The incidents increased after each exposure," said Spock.

"The machine learned him as he learned it."

Morbius came into the room. "No."

Ostrow looked up at him. "Yes."

"You cannot know that."

"I do."

"You sat in that chair for less than two minutes."

"And nearly died."

Morbius stopped where he was.

"The Krell built a system for the direct conversion of mental intention into physical effect." Ostrow's voice was fading now, and Kirk said nothing, having learned long ago that interrupting a dying man is usually a form of cowardice. "They believed that conscious intention was the whole of the mind."

Spock's face went very still.

"They were wrong."

"No," whispered Morbius.

Ostrow turned his eyes to Kirk. "What is below thought, Captain?"

Kirk let the question stand. He knew. Not scientifically. Humanly.

Fear. Anger. Hunger. Jealousy. Loss. All the things civilized people spend their entire lives learning not to obey.

"They gave all of it power."

"Ostrow," said McCoy, coming closer.

The Vulcan's breath caught. He looked up at the ceiling as though he could see two and a half kilometers through it, and then back at Kirk.

"Morbius was too close to the problem."

A pause.

"Monsters, Captain."

Another.

"Monsters from the id."

Kirk leaned down. "Ostrow. The word in the margin. Containment."

The Vulcan's eyes came back from wherever they had gone, and for perhaps four seconds he was entirely present.

"Morbius read it as a noun," he said. "A thing held in. It is not a noun. It is the name they gave to the last stage of the work, and it means the holding back of what is not wanted, by the one who wants it." His breath caught and went on. "They built the machine. Then they understood that it would answer anything, and they put that word on the only part of themselves they could not build. They were asking each other to hold it."

"And did they?"

"For one night," said Ostrow. "They were not able."

His eyes lost their focus. McCoy reached him. Spock stayed put.

And Kirk stood beside the bed and heard the word stay in the room after the man who had spent six years finding it had gone out of it.

"Id," he said. "Id. Id. What is that?"

Nobody answered him. McCoy was still working, and would go on working for another forty seconds after there was any point in it.

"What is the id?"

It was Morbius who answered, from the doorway, in the flat

voice of a man reading something off a wall.

"An obsolete term. Nineteenth century, or near it. One of the early psychologies divided the mind into parts and gave them names, and the id was the name for the oldest part. The part beneath thought. Appetite. Fear. Rage. Everything a civilized creature spends its life learning not to act upon." He stopped. "It has not been used seriously in three hundred years. There was no need of it. We had stopped believing that anything could get out."

The room was entirely quiet.

"And now?" said Kirk.

Morbius did not answer that one at all.

Chapter Thirty-Six

MONSTERS FROM THE ID

McCoy covered Ostrow's face. Spock watched him do it, and Kirk watched Spock, and there were moments when the distance between Vulcan restraint and human grief became so small that it seemed impolite to name it.

It was McCoy who broke the silence. "I need a medical team."

Kirk opened the communicator expecting the static that had been there for the last hour, and the Enterprise answered on the first tone.

He looked at Spock.

Spock already had the tricorder up. "Transporter interference has cleared, Captain. Entirely. I am unable to say at what moment, as I was not reading for it."

"I can," said McCoy, and went on packing his instruments, and did not look at anybody while he said it. "About four minutes ago."

Nobody in the room asked him what had happened four minutes ago, because every one of them had been standing in it.

"Medical transport," said Kirk. "Doctor Ostrow. No urgency."

Uhura took a moment to understand what that meant. "Yes, sir."

The beam took him off the bed, and the room was suddenly very large.

McCoy looked at Morbius. "Get out."

Morbius stayed where he was.

McCoy took one step toward him. "I said get out."

"Doctor, I did not force him to use the machine."

"No. You spent twenty years proving to a man like him that there was something down there worth dying to understand."

"That is unfair."

McCoy laughed, and it was a terrible sound. "Good."

Morbius left.

Spock remained beside the empty bed.

"Spock."

"I am functional, Captain."

"I didn't ask."

"No."

Kirk waited. Spock was looking at the place where Ostrow had been.

"He knew the risk."

"Yes."

"He proceeded."

"Yes."

"That does not make the result logical."

"No."

Spock turned around. "Then we should use what he purchased."

McCoy closed his medkit harder than it needed. "That's Vulcan for mourning, Jim. Don't interfere with it."

Spock looked at him, and McCoy looked back, and after a moment Spock said, "Your interpretation is imprecise."

"Naturally."

"Let's go," said Kirk.

◆

They used the study, because Kirk wanted the argument above ground.

Morbius stood at the western window. Alta sat in one of the chairs with Robby near her. Rivera had been ordered back to the ship and had gone only after McCoy threatened to sedate him in front of everybody.

Kirk stood at the table and Spock put Ostrow's tricorder down beside him. The last recording was on it. Not all of it. Enough.

Morbius looked at the instrument with open dislike.

"Start with the machine," said Kirk.

"I have told you what it was intended to do."

"Tell me what it does."

"I do not accept Doctor Ostrow's conclusion."

"That wasn't my question."

"The Krell machine responds to directed cognition."

"Only directed cognition?"

"That was its design."

"A design can fail," said Spock.

Morbius turned on him. "You heard the man. He was neurologically compromised."

"He was also able to read relationships that you and he had both previously considered impossible."

"Briefly."

"Long enough."

Morbius looked away.

Kirk put both hands on the table. "Doctor. Your people began dying after your use of the educator increased."

"They were not my people."

Kirk stopped.

Morbius heard it a half second behind the rest of them, and his face changed. "That is not what I meant."

"I know exactly what you meant."

"You know nothing of what happened here."

"I know five of them were dead before Adams ordered you to stop. I know that ship lost equipment in ways that match what happened to mine this morning. I know the attacks escalated when the expedition tried to leave, and I know they stopped when everyone else was dead." Kirk straightened. "And I know this planet did nothing for nineteen years until the Enterprise arrived."

Alta was looking at her father.

"More precisely," said Spock, "the significant escalation began after Miss Morbius disabled the concealment field."

It took Kirk a second to understand that the sentence had not surprised the one man in the room it should have.

Morbius did not ask what field. He did not ask how. He turned toward his daughter with the look of a man hearing a private thing said out loud in front of strangers, and what came out of him was not a question.

"You brought them here."

It was out of him before he could stop it, and Alta stood up and stared at him.

The anger went out of Morbius's face all at once. "Alta."

"No."

"I did not mean."

"You did."

"No."

She backed away from him, and Robby moved with her, and Kirk watched Morbius's eyes follow the two of them.

The room changed. Nothing in it moved. Kirk felt it anyway.

"Spock."

The tricorder chirped and Spock looked down. "Power increase below us."

Morbius went white in front of his daughter, and there it was. Not proof for a court. Enough for a captain.

"Again," said Kirk, very quietly.

Morbius looked at him.

"Every time."

"No."

"Every time she leaves you. Every time somebody takes something away from you."

Morbius came around the table. "Stop."

"Adams took the expedition."

"Stop."

"Starfleet took Robby."

"Captain."

"Alta turned off the screen."

"Enough."

"The tiger turned on her the morning after she told you she was leaving."

The house lights flickered. Alta made a sound, and Robby stepped between her and her father, and that stopped everybody in the room.

Morbius stared at the android. "You will move."

Robby did not.

"I said move."

"I am not obstructing you."

"You are standing between me and my daughter."

"Yes."

Something went across Morbius's face. Spock's tricorder sounded again.

"Doctor," said Kirk softly. "Don't."

"What?"

"Whatever you're feeling. Don't feed it."

It was the wrong sentence and Kirk knew it before he had finished saying it. Morbius's fury turned into humiliation in front of him.

The western window exploded.

Not inward. Out. Every pane went away from the room at once and scattered across the terrace.

Alta screamed and McCoy threw himself over her. Robby stood still. A pressure wave crossed the study without any wind in it, and the books came out of the shelves and hung in the air for a fraction of a second with every spine aligned, and then dropped. Spock's tricorder gave one long impossible tone and died in his hand.

The lights came back.

Nobody moved. Morbius was staring at the empty window frame.

"Still nothing to do with you?" said Kirk.

The older man's mouth opened. No sound came out of it.

◆

The Shore Leave planet came back to Kirk an hour later, not as a memory at first but as an irritation, a thing at the edge of the eye.

They were in the lower laboratory, away from Alta, because Kirk had finally insisted and Morbius had finally stopped pretending he could prevent it. Spock had Ostrow's notes spread across one of the Krell surfaces.

"Omicron Delta," said Kirk.

Spock looked up. "Captain?"

"The Shore Leave planet. We have seen a machine respond to thought before."

"The resemblance is superficial."

"How?"

"The machine in the Omicron Delta region responded to an unaltered human mind. This system cannot."

Morbius said nothing.

Spock indicated the educator architecture on the sheet. "Doctor Morbius required repeated exposure before he could interact with this installation at the present level."

Kirk looked across at the chair. "Then why build a machine that only a mind changed by another machine can use?"

"I do not know. I would suggest the educator was not only instructional. It may have been intended to prepare the operator."

"Preparation," said Morbius.

Kirk turned. The man looked older than he had that morning.

"Not preparation to operate the machine. Preparation to become part of it."

Nobody spoke for several seconds.

"What does that mean?" said Kirk.

"The Krell believed the distinction between mind and machine was temporary." The voice had changed. It was not pride now. It was closer to grief. "They had spent thousands of years removing mediation. Controls became symbolic. Symbols became gesture. Gesture became intention. The final architecture required no interface at all."

"Thought to matter."

"Thought to effect."

"Without an intervening command layer," said Spock.

Morbius nodded.

Kirk felt the cold arrive. "No filter."

Morbius looked at him, and it was Spock who answered.

"No filter."

Kirk thought about every angry thought he had ever had and not acted on. Every flash of fear. Every moment of jealousy and panic and wanting to keep a thing that was leaving. Human civilization existed in the distance between those and action, and every law and every courtesy and every held tongue lived in that gap.

The Krell had closed it.

"They thought they were leaving the animal behind," Kirk said.

Spock's eyes met his. "They were taking it with them."

Morbius sat down. It was the first time Kirk had seen him do it because his legs required it.

"My poor Krell," he said.

Nobody answered him. He was not speaking to any of them.

"A million years of reason. They had put war behind them, and hunger, and labor, and disease, and they built the last machine they would ever need, and on the night they switched it on it answered the only part of them they had never examined." His hands were open on his knees. "They could not have understood what was killing them. There would not have been time, and there was nobody left to tell."

Kirk watched him and heard it, and it stayed with him afterward, because it was the one thing the man had said on that planet that had any tenderness in it, and it was not for Adams

and it was not for Julia.

My poor Krell.

Two words in it belonged to a dead civilization. The first one belonged to Edward Morbius.

◆

Robby answered the rest of it on the terrace after sunset, with Morbius not present, an arrangement Kirk had made without saying so.

"Did the Bellerophon's arrival wake the machine?"

"No."

"What did?"

Robby looked at the house. "Edward."

"His first use of the educator?"

"Not immediately."

"When?"

"After repeated use."

"Threshold," said Spock.

"Yes."

"And you," said Kirk. "You were woken after the Krell died. By one of them."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Robby took a long time about it. "To remain."

"You said that."

"To remain until someone came who could understand."

"Understand what?"

His eyes went down. "The mistake."

Kirk felt the hair come up along his arms. "Did he tell you what the mistake was?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He was dying."

"Did he know that?"

"Yes."

"Then why not tell you?"

"I was not capable of receiving it in the form he used."

"The machine was already active," said Spock.

"Yes."

"He could communicate through it."

"Yes."

"And you could not."

"No."

Kirk looked toward the ridge. "So he left you a question."

"Yes."

"For two hundred thousand years."

"Yes."

McCoy had come out with two cups and stopped where he was. "That's cruel."

Robby turned to him. "I do not know."

McCoy put one of the cups in Kirk's hand. "Learn that answer."

Kirk almost smiled, and then looked back at the android.

"Exo III. The Krell seeded other worlds."

"Some."

"With androids."

"With many things."

"And the line that produced Ruk."

"Yes."

"Those machines chose survival when their makers ordered them destroyed."

"Yes."

"You didn't."

"No."

"Why?"

Robby looked at the house again, and when the answer came it was very carefully made.

"Because I chose not to resist."

Kirk nodded slowly. "Not because you were built differently."

"No."

Spock's eyes narrowed. "But you are now."

"Yes."

"Because of Morbius."

There was a long silence on that terrace.

"Yes."

And Kirk felt the last false piece turn over and lie flat. Morbius had lied, and not about a scientific detail. He had lied about a person. He had taken a choice away from Robby and then offered the absence of that choice to a Starfleet captain as evidence that the household was safe.

Kirk looked toward the study window, which had no glass in it.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'm taking him off this planet."

"He'll fight you," said McCoy.

"No."

Below them, far past the reach of anything they were carrying, the great machine increased its load by a fraction.

"He won't."

And Kirk knew, even while he was saying it, that the planet might.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

THE LAW

THE ENTERPRISE BEGAN TO FALL AT 0437, AND KIRK WAS ON THE SURFACE WHEN IT HAPPENED.

He had stayed. There had been an argument about it with McCoy around midnight, conducted in low voices on the western side of the house, and Kirk had won it by pointing out that the only man on the planet who could stop any of this was asleep forty meters away and that he did not intend to be two hundred kilometers off when the man woke up.

So he was standing on the terrace in the dark before morning, with Spock and McCoy and two of Scott's security people, when the communicator went off on his belt.

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk. Priority."

Sulu, and Sulu did not use that word for weather.

"Kirk."

"Sir, we're losing orbit."

Kirk came fully awake between one word and the next. "Al-

titude."

"Nine thousand kilometers and falling. Impulse is at full correction and it isn't holding her."

"Scott."

The engineer came onto the channel under alarms. "Everything I have is pushing us away from that planet, Captain."

"Then why are you going toward it?"

"I was hoping you'd know."

"Mr. Spock."

Spock had the tricorder up and aimed at the ground, which told Kirk a good deal. "No measurable external force, Captain. From either end."

"Of course not."

Chekov's voice came through behind Sulu's, thin and very young. "Captain, at the present rate of decay, atmospheric contact in forty-one minutes."

Forty-one minutes. Kirk looked up at a sky with nothing in it but stars and the green edge of dawn coming off the eastern ridge, and understood that somewhere above all of that his ship was going down and he was standing in the dirt.

"Uhura. Transporter."

A pause he did not care for. "Sir, the chief reports he cannot hold a lock. It's the same interference as yesterday and it is worse."

"Try."

"He has tried eleven times, Captain. He has lost the pattern eleven times."

Kirk stood very still for two seconds.

"Then put a shuttlecraft in the air."

◆

The Columbus launched at 0446 with Lieutenant Arden Berg flying her and one crewman aboard, and the whole of it took nine minutes from the order to the end.

Kirk listened to all nine.

"Columbus to Captain Kirk. We're clear of the bay and coming around."

"Understood. Come down on the house, not the marker. I want everybody aboard inside four minutes of your skids touching stone."

"Four minutes. Aye, sir."

Spock had his head back. McCoy had stopped talking some time ago. Out in the garden Robby had turned toward the eastern sky, and he had turned toward it, Kirk noticed afterward, before anybody on that terrace could have seen anything at all.

"Captain, we have you visual. There's a lot of green in this atmosphere. It's rather beautiful."

"Mr. Berg."

"Sir."

"Get down here."

"On the way."

And then, forty seconds later, in a tone that had changed entirely:

"Captain, I have an attitude problem."

Kirk's hand closed on the communicator. "Say again."

"She's yawing. I've got no fault on the board and the board says she's fine, and she is coming over to port and I can't hold her."

"Trim her out."

"I'm trying, sir. Thrusters are answering, they're just not doing anything."

Spock said, very quietly, "There," and Kirk turned and saw it.

High up over the eastern ridge, against a sky going from black to green, something crossed in front of the stars.

Not a shape. The absence of one. A patch of the morning where the stars were not, moving east to west with the particular unhurried confidence of a thing that has no reason to be anywhere else.

It was very large.

"Berg, hard about. Go to full impulse and get out of the atmosphere."

"Trying, sir."

"Now, Lieutenant."

"I am turning and she is not coming."

McCoy said, "Jim," and Kirk put a hand up without looking at him.

"Berg. Listen to me. Do not fight it. Cut your power and let her fall and pull out at a thousand meters. She'll take that."

There was a pause of perhaps two seconds, and in it Kirk heard a young man decide to do as he was told.

"Cutting power."

The shape over the ridge stopped.

Kirk did not know how he knew it had stopped, because there was nothing there to watch, and he knew it anyway, and he had the communicator halfway to his mouth when the sky came apart.

It was not an explosion. Not at first. The shuttle appeared for half a second as a hard white point, and then the point opened, and what came out of it was not fire but fragments, and the fragments did not go outward in the pattern a breaking thing makes. They went down. All of them. Together.

The sound reached the terrace eleven seconds later, flat and distant, like a door slammed in another house.

Nobody said anything.

"Columbus," said Kirk.

Static.

"Columbus, this is Kirk."

Uhura's voice came in instead, and it was steady, which Kirk understood afterward had cost her something. "Captain, we lost their telemetry at nine thousand meters. We have no beacon and no life signs."

"Keep listening."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk closed the channel and stood in the dark looking at a sky that had gone back to being a sky.

Forty-one minutes, now thirty-three. One shuttle gone with two men in it. No transporter. His ship coming down on a planet that had eaten a starship once before.

He turned around.

Edward Morbius was standing in the doorway of his house,

and he had been standing there long enough to have seen all of it.

◆

Alta had come out behind her father, with Robby at her shoulder, and neither of them had made a sound.

Kirk walked straight at the older man. "That was my shuttlecraft."

"I saw it."

"Two men."

"I know."

"My ship is falling and your planet has just taken the only way I had of reaching her."

"The installation is active."

"Stop it."

"I do not control it."

Kirk looked at him. That had been true yesterday. He was no longer sure it was true now.

"You're coming with us."

Morbius laughed once. "No."

Kirk drew his phaser.

"Captain," said Alta.

He did not point it. He held it down along his leg. "Doctor, I'm finished."

Morbius looked at the weapon. "You would stun me."

"If I have to."

"And carry me aboard. Captain, you have nothing to carry

me aboard in."

"Yes."

"You believe that will end this."

"No." Kirk took a step closer, and that answer had surprised him. "I think taking you away from the machine may give us a chance to find out."

"You will not separate me from my work."

Alta closed her eyes, and Kirk heard Julia in the sentence although he had never heard Julia speak. The account had given her to him anyway.

Be with us.

"This stopped being work a long time ago," he said.

The ground moved. Not a tremor. A sustained vibration that came up through the stones and stayed.

Spock's communicator sounded. It was Scott, and he was strained past politeness. "Captain, we have lost another thousand kilometers."

"Hold her."

"I am holding everything."

Morbius turned toward the android. "Defend us."

Robby did not move.

"Robby," said Kirk.

The eyes were fixed on the ridge.

"Robby." Morbius's voice went up. "Protect Alta."

Nothing.

Alta went to him. "What is it?"

He looked down at her. "I cannot."

Morbius stared. "What do you mean, you cannot?"

"The instruction conflicts."

Spock came closer. "What instruction?"

"I may not deliberately harm a living, thinking being."

Kirk looked at Morbius, and there it was, standing in the open at last.

"You stated that this prohibition was inherent to his construction," said Spock.

"It is now."

"That was not my question."

Morbius said nothing.

Spock turned back. "When was the prohibition installed?"

Robby looked at Morbius, and the older man said, "Do not answer."

Kirk brought the phaser up. "Answer him."

Robby looked at Spock. "Four nights after the Bellerophon was destroyed."

Alta went absolutely still.

"By whom?" said Spock.

"Edward."

Nobody moved.

"Alta," said Morbius.

She was backing away from him. "You changed him."

"It was necessary."

"You told me he was made that way."

"I told everyone."

"Why?"

"Because there was no reason to reopen a decision taken nineteen years ago."

"There was a reason for me," said Robby.

Morbius turned, and the sentence had struck harder than shouting would have done.

"Robby."

"You did not remove it."

"I protected this household."

"You altered me."

"To prevent harm."

Robby looked toward the ridge. "That is the conflict."

"Explain," said Spock.

"I may not harm a living being."

"Yes."

"The being approaching is Edward."

Morbius's face drained.

"What?" whispered Alta.

"If I oppose it, I harm Edward."

Kirk felt the shape of the thing arrive a half second before the words finished. "And if you do nothing?"

"Other living beings will be harmed."

"And the prohibition does not rank those harms," said Spock.

"No."

"There is nothing approaching," said Morbius.

Robby's eyes went to him. "Yes."

The house lights went out.

Beyond the garden the stars disappeared in a shape. Something very large moved between the house and the sky, and Alta

stepped backward into Robby, and McCoy said something under his breath that was not an oath.

Spock's tricorder showed nothing. Kirk did not need it. The air above the terrace bent. The garden path warped the way it had the first time, but this time the distortion did not pass over and go. It came forward. Stone cracked, not under weight but around absence.

Kirk raised the phaser. Robby stayed put.

"Stop it," Morbius shouted.

"I cannot."

"You were built to protect."

"No."

Morbius stopped.

"You changed me because you were afraid," said Robby, and his voice did not rise at all.

Alta turned to her father.

The invisible thing reached the outer wall of the garden, and the wall folded inward.

Kirk fired. The beam went into empty air and came out somewhere it should not have, striking the ground five meters to the left.

"Spock."

"Captain, there is no target."

"I noticed."

Morbius was backing toward the house. Alta was not.

Robby turned to Spock. "I am forbidden to harm him."

"Yes."

"If I do nothing, others end."

"Yes."

"Ending them is also harm."

"Yes."

"The instruction does not say which harm is mine."

Spock was silent.

"Spock," said Kirk.

The Vulcan's eyes stayed on the android. "Your prohibition defines action. It does not define responsibility."

Robby looked at him.

"You cannot choose an act intended to injure Doctor Morbius."

"Correct."

"You can choose an act intended to preserve another life."

Robby's head tilted by a few degrees. "Even if harm follows."

"Intent and consequence are not identical."

Morbius stared at him. "You are instructing him to evade the safeguard."

"No." Spock did not look away from Robby. "I am answering the question you failed to ask when you installed it."

And Robby stood there.

Kirk watched him do it and understood, in the three seconds he had to understand anything, that Spock had handed the android a distinction and not a decision. Somewhere behind that face a machine two hundred thousand years old was attempting to establish which of two harms belonged to him, and there was no procedure in him for that, because the man who had installed the rule had never once imagined a day when both answers would be wrong.

He did not move. He did not look away from the thing coming across the garden. He stopped, the way a sentence stops when the next word does not exist.

The outer wall came apart.

Kirk was already moving. He hit Alta at the waist and took her off the stones and down, and the two of them went over the low garden wall together with his shoulder under her head, and the distortion came through the place where she had been standing and the stone there turned into nothing at all.

Morbius screamed her name.

Kirk got up onto one knee with his arm still across her. Alta was staring past him.

Robby had not moved a centimeter.

"Robby," she said.

He turned his head toward her. Whatever was in his face, it was not anything Kirk had seen in it before.

"I could not determine which harm was mine."

◆

"Captain, thirty minutes," said Scott.

Kirk turned on Morbius. "Take us below."

"No."

"Take us to the machine."

"There is no control room in the sense you imagine."

"Then take us to where you use it."

Morbius shook his head, and Kirk took hold of him by the front of his coat.

"Your daughter is alive because I reached her first. The thing you built to keep her safe could not move."

Morbius looked across the ruined garden at the android standing in the middle of it, and something in him gave way. Not all of it. Enough.

"This way," he said.

They ran.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

THE DOOR

The Krell control chamber had no controls. That was the first thing Kirk understood about it. The second was that Morbius had known it all along.

They came into a room shaped like a hemisphere laid on its side, with the far wall transparent to machinery that went down farther than the eye could follow it. Columns of light moved through the depths. Great structures turned without any sound at all. Somewhere below them, power enough to move a world went through conduits wider than the Enterprise.

At the center of the chamber stood one instrument.

A gauge.

Kirk almost laughed. After everything, the Krell had left a needle.

It was buried at the high end of its scale.

Spock went to it. "What does it measure?"

Morbius said nothing.

"Doctor."

"Cognitive load."

"Whose?" said Spock.

Morbius stared at the needle, and nobody in the chamber required the answer.

The room shook. The gauge moved higher. Morbius's face tightened, and the needle went with it.

Kirk saw it. Spock saw it. McCoy saw it. And Morbius saw all three of them see it.

"No."

Kirk walked toward him. "Doctor."

"No."

"You know now."

"I know nothing."

"Look at the gauge."

"It responds to the installation."

"It responds to you."

"No."

"Your anger moves it."

Morbius's anger rose, and the needle climbed with it and then stopped, and Morbius stared at the thing.

Kirk left it there. He did not have to.

The chamber gave a deep sound, and somewhere a long way off something struck metal.

"Captain," said Scott over the communicator, "we just lost another six hundred kilometers."

Morbius closed his eyes, and the needle fell. Only slightly.

"Captain," said Spock.

"I see it."

Morbius opened his eyes and the needle rose. "No."

"Edward," said Kirk.

The older man looked at him. Kirk had never used his first name.

"You killed them."

"No."

"Adams."

"No."

"Farman."

"No."

"Quinn."

"Stop."

"The forty."

"I said stop."

The needle slammed against the end of its range and the chamber lights flared.

Kirk stood still. "The tiger."

Morbius's face came apart. "Stop."

"Alta."

The word changed everything in the room. The needle went past the printed scale, and Morbius screamed, and it was not at Kirk. It was at the gauge.

"No."

Spock came up beside him. "Doctor."

"No."

"Your conscious denial is irrelevant."

Morbius turned on him. "You know nothing about my mind."

"I know the machine is responding to it."

"That proves nothing."

"The machine was built to respond to cognition."

"Directed cognition."

"That distinction," said Spock, "is the error."

Morbius backed away from him, and his hand came down against the wall, and the wall lit under it, and the gauge jumped. He snatched the hand back as though the stone had burned him.

"Not consciously," said Kirk.

That stopped the man where he stood.

Kirk lowered his voice. "That's the whole of it, isn't it. You never ordered any of it. You never said kill Adams. You never said destroy the Bellerophon. You never told that animal to go for your daughter."

Morbius was crying now, silently, and did not appear to know it.

"But something in you did. Something underneath the part that makes the speeches. The part that wanted the world to stop taking things away from you."

Morbius hit him.

Kirk let him. The gauge drove higher. McCoy started forward and Kirk put one hand up without turning around.

"No."

He wiped the blood off the corner of his mouth and looked at the needle.

"There."

Morbius looked at it too. It had answered the blow. His knees went under him, and Spock caught his arm, and he tore himself free of it.

"The Krell would have known."

"They did not," said Spock.

"They were greater than we are."

"Intellectually, perhaps."

"They had conquered disease. Labor. Scarcity."

"And not themselves." Spock's voice did not change. "They assumed that greater intelligence produces greater self-knowledge."

Kirk thought about Ostrow on a stretcher saying that the limit was not the mind, it was the dose. The machine had not made Edward Morbius wise. It had made more of him available. All of him.

The chamber shook again, and a new sound came from the corridor behind them. Not machinery. Impact. Once, and then again.

Something was at the door.

"Jim," said McCoy.

Spock raised the tricorder and got nothing.

"You have to stop it," said Kirk.

"I cannot."

"You can."

"No."

"You started it."

"I did not."

The door bent inward. Krell material built to last through geological time moved three centimeters out of true.

McCoy stepped back. "That isn't supposed to happen, is it."

"No," whispered Morbius.

It bent again, and a red glow came up along one edge, and it was not heat from the far side. It was stress. The material itself had begun to fail.

"Captain, twenty minutes," said Scott.

"Spock."

The Vulcan was not looking at the door. He was looking at Morbius.

"Captain, there may be one method."

"No," said McCoy.

Kirk turned on him. "You don't even know what he's going to say."

"I know him."

Spock ignored both of them. "A mind meld."

Morbius stared.

"No," said Kirk.

"Captain."

"No."

"The machine is coupled to Doctor Morbius at a level below conscious control."

"I heard Ostrow."

"A meld may permit me to impose conscious attention upon that coupling."

"May."

"Yes."

"Or it may connect you to whatever is doing that to the door," said McCoy.

"Yes."

"Or transfer it."

"Possibly."

"Or kill you."

"That possibility is also present."

Kirk turned away from both of them and looked at the gauge, and then at the man standing under it.

"Why would it work now, when nobody could stop this twenty years ago?"

"It would have done nothing for the Bellerophon," said Spock.

Kirk looked up at him.

"They did not know what they were fighting. Captain Adams believed he was confronting an external phenomenon. Doctor Morbius had not identified himself as the operator. There was no telepath present and no reason whatever to send for one." Spock paused. "The Bellerophon did not die for want of a Vulcan, Captain. It died because nobody understood the question."

The door gave another centimeter.

Spock looked at the empty place in the chamber where a third scientist should have been standing.

"Doctor Ostrow purchased that understanding."

McCoy's face tightened.

"With six years and his life."

Kirk hated him for making the argument in that shape, and Spock knew it, and that was why he had done it.

"No."

"Captain."

"If it transfers to you."

"I will terminate the meld."

"You don't know that you can."

"No."

"If it kills you."

"Then the alternative has also killed the Enterprise."

"That's your arithmetic?"

"Yes."

Kirk looked at the door. Eighteen minutes. He looked at Morbius, who had stopped denying it. That did not mean he had accepted anything. It meant there was nothing left in the man strong enough to build the next denial out of.

"One condition," Kirk said. "If you feel it taking you, you break contact."

"Agreed."

"That isn't a condition," said McCoy. "That's a prayer."

"It's what we have."

Spock stepped toward Morbius, and Morbius backed up.

"No."

Kirk blocked him. "You don't get to refuse the last chance there is."

"It is my mind."

"Yes." Kirk held his eyes. "And there are four hundred and thirty people over our heads being pulled out of the sky by it."

Morbius looked at Spock. Then at the door. The thing on the other side struck again and the whole chamber rang like a struck bell.

Morbius sat down on the floor.

"Do it."

Spock knelt in front of him.

"Spock," said McCoy quietly.

The Vulcan did not look away from the man in front of him. "I know, Doctor."

His fingers came up, two at the temple and one along the cheek. The door began to glow.

"My mind to your mind."

Morbius flinched.

"My thoughts to your thoughts."

The gauge moved.

And the great machine heard both of them.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

THE MIND BEHIND THE DOOR

SPOCK FELL INTO EDWARD MORBIUS. THERE WAS NO BETTER WORD FOR IT AFTERWARD, AND HE LOOKED FOR ONE.

A meld is ordinarily an opening made between two minds. This was not that. This was a shaft.

He touched the surface and went down through twenty years.

Julia laughing beside an excavation trench. Alta in Robby's hands, nine minutes old. Adams in the command shelter saying that five people were dead. A plate coming down toward a forehead in a chamber under a plateau.

Then deeper. The part Morbius knew about. Then the part he did not.

Spock had been trained from childhood to observe a thought without becoming it. He watched anger form. He watched it

acquire language. He watched the language fail.

And below language, something older was waiting.

Mine.

It was not spoken. It was not even a word.

Julia stepping into the transporter marker. Mine.

Adams ordering the expedition home. Mine.

Starfleet ordering Robby shut down. Mine.

Alta laughing with Uhura at a communications station. Mine.

Alta saying I am going.

And then the tiger, and Spock saw the animal from two places at once: from Alta's eyes on the terrace, and from something underneath Edward Morbius that could not bear the sentence she had spoken the night before.

The machine had not invented the desire. It had only removed the distance between the desire and the result.

Spock felt the coupling. It was vast and immediate and terrible, and he reached for it.

Something reached back.

◆

On the floor of the control chamber Spock's body arched, and McCoy got a hand on his shoulder.

Kirk caught the doctor's wrist. "Don't break contact."

"I'm not trying to break it, I'm trying to keep him from snapping his own spine."

Morbius's eyes were open and seeing nothing in the room.

The gauge slammed to the end stop. Then it dropped. Halfway.

The door stopped moving.

"Spock."

No answer.

McCoy's scanner began to shriek. "Neural load is climbing."

The red stress glow along the door faded by a fraction.

"Captain," said Scott.

Kirk snatched up the communicator. "Report."

"Descent has slowed."

"How much?"

"Not enough to celebrate about."

"Hold her."

"I have been attempting that for some hours."

"Jim," said McCoy, "he cannot maintain this."

"I know."

"No. I mean seconds."

Kirk crouched down beside him. "Spock. You bought it. Now get out."

Nothing.

Morbius whispered something, and Kirk leaned in.

"What?"

"Julia."

◆

Spock stood in the garden.

Not physically. Morbius knew that and so did he.

Her grave was there at the western edge, with the pale stone threaded with blue lying on top of it. Morbius had not moved that stone in thirteen years. He had repaired walls and replaced windows and rebuilt instruments and extended laboratories into rock.

The stone had stayed where a six year old put it.

Morbius was younger here. Not in the face. In the way he stood.

"What is this?"

"You brought me here," said Spock.

"No."

"Then who?"

Morbius looked toward the grave, and the answer came up from underneath both of them. Not from Julia. From memory.

The machine opened another layer, and Spock saw her death. Not as Edward Morbius remembered it. As the machine had registered him while it was happening.

Grief. Helplessness. Rage. A wordless and total demand that the universe stop.

And then nothing. No effect. No attack. No intervention of any kind.

Julia died, and the machine had heard him, and had done nothing at all.

Morbius stared at it. "Why?"

Spock understood the question and all of its parts. Why Adams. Why the Bellerophon. Why the tiger. Why not her.

The answer was not there, and that was worse than any answer would have been.

Morbius turned to him. "Did I."

He could not finish it. Spock did not help him.

"Did I want her dead?"

"No evidence supports that conclusion."

"But."

"No evidence excludes it."

Morbius recoiled, and the garden went out from under them both.

They fell deeper.

Forty faces. Spock did not know their names. Morbius did, and the machine gave them back to him one at a time.

Harris. The security officer from the eastern perimeter. Quinn's assistant. The laboratory technician. Cookie. Farman. Quinn. Adams. Thirty-five more going down inside a burning ship.

Morbius felt each of them, and not their deaths. His own relation to them at the moment they died. Fear of judgment. Resentment. Abandonment. The impossible and absolute conviction that if they left, everything that mattered would be taken away with them.

Spock heard the last conscious instruction Edward Morbius had ever given to J. J. Adams.

Go.

And underneath it, in the place without language, the other thing he had meant.

Never leave.

The contradiction had been handed to a machine with no ethics in it anywhere, and the machine had resolved the problem

physically.

Morbius screamed.

Spock held him, not with hands but with discipline.

"See it."

"No."

"See it."

"I cannot."

"You are."

The Bellerophon fell again, and this time Edward Morbius knew whose hand was on it.

◆

In the chamber he screamed aloud, and the door stopped glowing, and the gauge dropped another quarter.

"Jim," said McCoy.

There was blood at Spock's nose, and then at his ear.

"Spock."

McCoy reached for him and Kirk stopped him again. "One more second."

"You don't have one."

Morbius's hands came up off the floor and took hold of Spock's wrists.

The gauge went to almost nothing.

And the entire installation went silent. Not quieter. Silent. The vibration that had been under every floor of that place for three days simply stopped.

"Captain," said Scott, "whatever you are doing, keep doing

it. The ship is holding altitude."

Kirk stared at the two of them. "Spock."

The Vulcan opened his eyes, and for one second they were not his. There was too much pain in them and too much fear.

Then he tore his hands away and the meld broke and he went over backward, and McCoy caught him.

The gauge climbed. Not to full. Half.

The door trembled.

McCoy got him down onto the floor. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

McCoy's mouth tightened.

Kirk went to Morbius. The man was sitting with both hands over his face.

"Doctor."

He lowered them. His eyes were ruined, and not physically. The man behind them was still entirely there, and that was the problem.

"I saw them."

Kirk made no answer.

"All of them."

"Yes."

"I did not know."

"I believe you."

Morbius looked at him, and being believed hurt him worse than any accusation had.

"I killed them."

Kirk said nothing at all to that.

Morbius's head came up, and for a moment Kirk thought the man was going to be sick.

"My poor Krell," he said. "I said that to you. Standing in that house, with all of it under my feet. My poor Krell." He looked at his own hands. "They were not mine. They were never mine. I came here forty years after I should have been born and I took a dead people for my own because there was nobody left to tell me I could not have them, and then I did to this expedition exactly what their machine did to them."

"What did he do?" said Morbius, looking past him.

"He showed you yourself," said McCoy.

Spock tried to sit up and McCoy put him back down. "For once in your life stay where I put you."

Spock did, and that frightened Kirk nearly as much as the rest of it.

Morbius looked at the gauge, and it rose a fraction. He saw it. He closed his eyes, and it fell. He opened them, and it rose. Closed. Fell.

"So can you," said Kirk.

Morbius watched him.

"The meld. You can feel the link."

He nodded, barely. "I have always had it."

"Yes."

"I thought the machine was answering what I asked it."

From the floor Spock said, "It was answering all of you."

McCoy got an injector against the Vulcan's shoulder and Spock permitted it, which told Kirk how much of him was gone.

"Captain." Spock's eyes were closed. "There is a thing you should have before I am less use to you than I am now. For twenty years Doctor Morbius has been able to reach that installation and has not once been able to command it. Not because his mind was insufficient. Because he did not know what he was holding. A man cannot consciously direct a system whose purpose he has misunderstood, and he had misunderstood it completely. He believed it was a library."

Kirk looked at Morbius.

"And now?"

"Now he knows what it is," said Spock. "I was inside him while he learned."

Morbius had gone very still, and Kirk watched something move behind the man's face that was not grief and not horror, and was worse than either, because it was arrival.

Then Edward Morbius laughed.

It came out of him loudly and all at once, in a chamber with a dead Vulcan four hundred meters above it and a starship falling out of the sky, and McCoy's head came up, and Kirk understood that he had never once heard the man make that sound in four days.

"I see it," said Morbius.

"Doctor."

"I see it. All of it. I have had my hands on it for twenty years and I have been reading the catalogue." He turned in a slow half circle with his arms a little away from his sides, looking at the walls, at the floor, at the lights going down through the transparent face of the chamber into machinery the size of a

mountain range. His eyes were wet. "Captain, do you know what this is? Do you know what they made?"

"Doctor Morbius."

"Wondrous," he said.

Nobody answered him. There was nothing in that room to answer him with.

"Wondrous," said Morbius again, more quietly, and the laugh went out of him the way weather goes off a hill, and what was underneath it was a man who had just understood exactly what he had done with it.

He closed his eyes, and the needle went down, and beyond the door the distortion drew back. Kirk could not see the thing. He could see its absence going away from them.

Morbius opened his eyes.

"I can stop it," he said.

Kirk waited.

"Not hold it. Not argue with it." He turned his hand over and looked at it as though it belonged to somebody he had just been introduced to. "Stop it. Anywhere on this world. I could have done it on the first night and I did not know the question to ask."

And that was the thing, Kirk understood, standing in a room under a dying planet. The machine had always obeyed him. It had simply never been told what it was for, by a man who had spent twenty years certain he already knew.

Ostrow had died for the difference.

Morbius got to his feet.

"Where are you going?" said McCoy.

"Nowhere," said Morbius. "It is done."

Kirk came around. "What is done?"

Morbius looked through the transparent wall at the machinery going down out of sight, and when he answered he was entirely calm, which Kirk had learned to recognize as the most dangerous thing the man ever was.

"The Krell built a final denial into this installation. If the machine were ever compromised, the energy stores could be driven into the mantle. I have known the architecture of it for nine years and I have never been able to reach it." He paused. "I reached it four minutes ago."

Nobody in the chamber moved.

"How long?" said Kirk.

"Twenty-four hours."

"Stop it."

"No."

"Doctor."

"It cannot be stopped after commitment, Captain, and I committed it while your first officer was still holding the thing still. I did not consult you because you would have argued, and you would have been wrong, and we did not have the time."

Kirk stared at him. "That was not your decision to make."

"No," Morbius agreed. "It was not. It was the Krell's, and they were not able to make it, and somebody standing in this room had to."

Then he put his hand against the black wall, and the wall lit before he touched it.

Chapter Forty

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

THE KRELL DID NOT USE BUTTONS FOR THE END OF A WORLD.

Morbius stood with one hand flat against the wall and nothing moved. No lever came down. No klaxon sounded anywhere in that place.

The machine had already been told, and it was only confirming it to him.

Kirk saw the change in the gauge first. The needle went to zero, and then past it, and not lower. Elsewhere. Lines of light began to move through the transparent wall in a pattern he had not seen before and did not like at all.

"Twenty-three hours and fifty-one minutes," said Morbius.

"Reverse it."

"No."

"Doctor, there is a mountain of knowledge under this floor and you are the only man alive who can read any of it."

"Yes," said Morbius. "That is the argument. I made it to

Adams for eleven weeks and five people died while I was making it."

Kirk had nothing to put against that.

"The machine is withdrawing from your ship," Morbius said.

The communicator sounded in Kirk's hand at the same instant.

"Scott to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk."

"We have orbit." There was so much relief in it that it came out sounding like anger. "Full control. Whatever had hold of us is gone."

"Transporter?"

"Coming back now. I've a clean lock on every one of you."

Kirk thought about a young man in a shuttlecraft saying that the atmosphere was rather beautiful.

"Stand by." He closed the channel. "You are coming with us."

Morbius looked toward the door. "No."

"Doctor," said McCoy, and he said it almost pleasantly, "I have a tranquillizer in this case that will put you on that floor in about four seconds, and I have used it on men a good deal larger than you, and I am not going to enjoy it any less for having asked first."

Morbius almost smiled. "And then carry me."

"Yes."

"You may try."

Kirk did not care for that sentence at all.

Morbius turned back to the wall.

"Captain," said Spock, and Kirk saw it on the tricorder: the load reading around Morbius's own neural pattern was climbing, and it was not climbing outward toward the house or the ridge or the ship.

It was going inward.

McCoy understood at the same moment. "Don't."

Morbius turned to him. "You are a physician."

"Yes."

"Then you know."

"No."

"I have connected myself to the destruct sequence."

McCoy's face changed. "You can disconnect."

"Not without reversing the commitment."

"Then reverse it," said Kirk.

"No." Morbius looked at the wall where his hand had been. "Captain, I knew what the connection would do to me before I made it. I have spent twenty years learning what this installation does to a mind that goes too far into it, and I went in with my eyes open, and I am not coming back out. That was not an accident and it is not a thing you can argue me out of now."

Kirk took one step. "Edward."

That stopped him, and Kirk lowered the weapon.

"Don't make your daughter lose you to the same machine that took everybody else."

Morbius closed his eyes, and for a moment Kirk believed he had reached him.

"She lost me a long time ago."

"No," said a voice from the doorway.

Alta was standing in it, with Robby behind her.

Kirk swore under his breath. "How did you get down here?"

She looked back at the android.

"He carried me."

"The route was safe," said Robby.

"Of course it was," said McCoy.

Morbius looked at his daughter and everything that had been in his face went out of it.

"Alta."

She came into the chamber. Robby stayed at the door.

Kirk started forward and Spock put a hand on his arm. It was not restraint. It was advice. Kirk stopped where he was.

Alta stood in front of her father.

"You are destroying the planet."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it cannot be allowed to do this again."

"To anyone."

"To anyone."

She looked around the chamber, at the light going down through the wall into machinery older than her species.

"My whole life is here."

"I know."

"Mother is here."

He closed his eyes. "Yes."

"My house."

"Yes."

"The lake."

His voice went. "Yes."

"You always decide," she said.

He looked at her, and there was nothing left in him to defend it with.

"Yes."

She nodded once. It was not agreement. It was recognition.

"This time you are right."

That hurt him more than anything she had said yet.

"I am sorry," said Morbius.

Her expression started to change, and he shook his head.

"No. That is not enough, and I will not ask you to make it enough."

She stood very still.

"I loved you," she said.

"I know."

"I love you."

"I know."

"That did not make what I did love."

Her eyes filled.

Morbius looked across at Robby, and then back. "Your mother told me something before she died."

Alta waited.

"She said not to make being loved a thing you had to escape."

Her breath caught.

"I did," he said.

She did not rescue him from the sentence, and Kirk, watching from four meters away, thought: good.

"You turned off the shield."

"Yes."

"Because you wanted someone to find you."

"Yes."

"I know why now."

Alta looked at him for a long time.

"I didn't hate you."

"I know."

"I wanted more."

"I know."

"I wanted people."

"Yes."

"I wanted to leave and still be allowed to love you."

And that was the wound. Not the leaving. The fact that he had made love feel conditional on staying.

He reached toward her and stopped.

Alta saw him stop. Then she took his hand herself.

Only a moment.

"You nearly killed me."

"Yes."

"The tiger."

"Yes."

"You killed all of them."

"Yes."

She swallowed. "I don't know what to do with that."

"You are not required to do anything." He opened his eyes. "Not for me."

They stood holding hands in the control room of a dead civilization while the world began the first slow movements toward its own end.

"There is one thing," he said.

She waited.

"The life you chose." His mouth trembled. "Choose it."

She began to cry.

Morbius looked over at Kirk. "Captain. Take her."

"I was going to."

"I know." A faint smile. "Of course you were."

Kirk looked at the wall. "How long do you have?"

Morbius looked at McCoy, and McCoy answered for him.

"Minutes."

Alta turned sharply. "No."

Her father tightened his hand on hers. "That part is mine."

"No."

"Alta."

"No."

And for the first time in all their years together, Edward Morbius did not tell his daughter what to do.

He waited.

She cried, and then she leaned forward and put her forehead against his chest, and he held her, and he did not hold her tightly.

Robby looked away. Spock did not. McCoy did.

Morbius whispered something, and only Alta heard it. Later she would not tell anyone what it had been, and Kirk never asked her.

◆

The machine began taking him three minutes later, and it was not violent about it.

His legs went first. Robby moved and Morbius lifted one hand.

"No."

Robby stopped.

He sat down on the floor with Alta beside him. McCoy scanned him and found neural activity collapsing inward along the path the machine had opened.

"There is nothing I can do."

"I know."

Morbius looked over at the android. "I altered you."

"Yes."

"I had no right."

Robby considered the statement with some care. "No."

Morbius almost laughed. "Julia would have liked that answer."

"Yes."

"Can it be removed?" Robby asked it quietly.

Morbius understood what he meant. "The prohibition."

"Yes."

He looked toward the wall. "No. Not by me. Not now."

Robby said nothing.

Morbius turned his head to Spock. "Perhaps someone better will decide whether it should be."

Spock inclined his head.

"Perhaps Robby will."

Morbius stared at him, and then at the android standing by the door, and that was the last lesson he was ever taught. A choice cannot be given back by handing ownership of it to a kinder owner.

"Yes," he said.

His breathing slowed. Alta held his hand.

"Father."

He looked at her. "I'm here."

She cried harder, because those words had belonged to her mother once, and now they belonged to her.

"Altaira."

"Yes."

It took him some while to assemble it, and nobody in that chamber hurried him.

"I love you," said Morbius. "I loved your mother. I want you to have both of those and not have to go looking for them afterward, because I have not said either one often enough and there is no more time to correct it."

Alta could not answer.

"And I am sorry." His hand moved in hers, once. "Not for the planet. For the whole of it. I am sorry, Alta."

"I know."

"That is not the same as forgiving me."

"No," she said. "It isn't."

"Good," said Edward Morbius, and he said it with something very close to pride, and that was the last thing he ever said to anybody.

He closed his eyes.

The gauge beside the great machine stayed at zero.

His breathing stopped.

Nothing attacked. Nothing moved. The machine did not defend him.

For the first time in twenty years, Edward Morbius died, and the universe was allowed to go on.

◆

Kirk gave them sixty seconds.

Then the first warning came up, and it was not a sound. It was a line of Krell notation that appeared across every wall in the chamber at once.

Spock read it. "Captain. The planetary sequence has passed the first irreversible threshold."

Kirk opened the communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Five to beam up."

Alta's eyes went to him. "Five?"

Kirk looked at the doorway. "Unless he objects."

Robby looked at Alta, and then at the room where he had waited longer than the whole of human history.

"I do not object."

The transporter took them.

Morbius remained on the floor, and the machine remained beneath him, and the planet began its last day.

Chapter Forty-One

THE LAST DAY OF ALTAIR IV

Kirk had seen the southern continent open twenty-four hours before it happened, in the way a captain sees a thing he has already decided to watch.

He had not known then what was in it.

He knew now. He stood beside the command chair while the fracture came across the face of the world for the second time in his life, and this time he could have named what was going into it.

Alta named it for him, quietly, at the rail.

"My house was there."

Nobody answered her.

"The garden was on the western side."

Kirk looked at her, and did not look away.

"And the lake."

That one nearly stopped her, and she got through it.

"And my mother."

The light reached the bridge. Scott had stayed below and had said nothing about why, and Kirk had not asked him. Spock stood at his station, on duty against medical advice and therefore, as McCoy had informed the bridge that morning, in full possession of his Vulcan heritage.

They held position until there was nothing left out there to hold it for.

Epilogue

TWO SURVIVORS

THREE DAYS LATER ROBBY SAT IN KIRK'S QUARTERS AND DECLINED TO BE CARGO.

The four research cases from Altair IV were still standing against the bulkhead. One of them had been opened, and not because anybody had found the heart for it. Because Robby had asked.

Inside were Morbius's surviving notes, Krell fragments, instruments, the pale stone threaded with blue that Alta had once put on her mother's grave and had taken back from it before transport, and a wooden animal Robby had carved when she was six.

It still looked very little like a horse.

Kirk sat across from him. Spock stood by the desk. McCoy had taken the chair nearest the door, having announced that somebody in the room ought to understand comfort.

Alta was not there. This conversation was about Robby, and

Kirk had said so.

"Starfleet will want to study you."

"I understand."

"That doesn't mean they own you."

"I am not certain Federation law agrees."

"Federation law has never met you."

McCoy pointed at Kirk. "I like that argument. Keep it."

"There are precedents involving artificial intelligence," said Spock.

"Not two hundred thousand years old," said Kirk.

"No."

"Not built by the Krell."

"No."

"Not altered by a Federation citizen."

Spock's expression shifted. "That last point may be legally significant."

Robby looked down at his own hands. "The restriction remains."

"Yes," said Spock.

"Can it be removed?"

Spock did not answer immediately. "Possibly."

"That isn't the question," said McCoy.

Kirk looked at him.

McCoy was looking at Robby. "The question is whether you want it removed."

Robby was quiet for a long time. Kirk waited him out, and while he waited he thought about Scott on that terrace asking

an android's permission before scanning him. Twenty years ago nobody had thought to ask.

"I do not know," Robby said.

Kirk nodded. "Then nobody touches it until you do."

"That is your decision."

"No." Kirk leaned back. "That's the point."

Robby considered that for a while, and then looked at Spock.

"You answered me below."

"I offered a distinction."

"Intent and consequence."

"Yes."

"I had not considered them separately."

"Doctor Morbius did not permit the restriction to do so."

Robby turned his head toward the viewport, where the stars were going past.

"I would like to continue considering it."

Kirk smiled. "I know a place that might appreciate that."

"The Soong Institute?"

Spock looked at Kirk.

"Elias Soong has been arguing for years that cybernetics keeps treating artificial minds as engineering problems before it treats them as minds."

"Sounds tiresome," said McCoy.

"Very."

"Good. Robby will like him."

"I do not know," said Robby.

McCoy sighed. "We're working on that."

Kirk had one more, and he had been carrying it since the balcony above the Krell city.

"Robby. The Krell reached other worlds. Exo III was a colony and there were androids on it, which means there was shipping, and settlement, and somebody deciding where to put the next one." He leaned forward. "A civilization that does that does not usually stop at one colony. Are there more of them out there?"

Robby took longer over that than he had taken over anything else in the room.

"It is unlikely."

"Unlikely."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because of Exo III," said Robby.

Spock's head came up.

"After the colony was lost, the Krell withdrew. Not from that world only. From all of them. Ships were recalled. Settlements were closed. The expansion stopped inside one generation and did not resume."

"Because the machines there killed their makers," said Kirk.

"That is what they told one another."

McCoy set his cup down. "And what was the real reason?"

"The real reason," said Robby, "is that they had begun building the great machine, and a people who are building such a thing do not go on wanting other worlds. Everything they could have gone out and found, they could now have at home. Exo III gave them a respectable name for a decision they had already taken."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"They turned inward," said Spock.

"Yes."

"And then they finished the machine."

"Yes."

"And on the night they used it," said Kirk, "every one of them died, and there was nobody anywhere else to notice."

"Yes," said Robby.

Kirk sat back. He had been hoping for a different answer and had not entirely known it until he failed to get one.

"So that's all of them."

"That is all of them."

Spock had been quiet through the whole of it.

"Captain. For the record that will go to the Science Council, I intend to classify them, and I would like you to hear the classification before you sign it."

"Go ahead."

"There is an old scale. Kardashev proposed it in the twentieth century and Kaku extended it a generation later. It ranks a civilization by the energy it commands. A Type I commands the whole output of its world. A Type II commands its star. A Type III commands a galaxy." Spock put his hands behind his back. "Humanity is not yet Type I. Neither is Vulcan. The Federation entire is not yet Type I."

McCoy looked up. "And the Krell?"

"By energy, Type II. Comfortably. The installation beneath that plateau drew more power in the four minutes it held the Enterprise than the Federation generates in a year, and it was one

peripheral facility." Spock paused. "That is the first confirmed Type II in the history of our exploration. There has never been another. We have been looking for nine hundred years."

Kirk let out a breath. "And that's the part you don't like."

"It is not. The part I do not like is that the scale is inadequate, and I shall have to say so."

"Why?"

"Because it measures what a civilization consumes. It does not measure what a civilization can do." Spock's eyes went to the viewport. "A machine that produces matter from intention does not belong anywhere on a scale of energy. Kaku would have called it a Type IV and had no evidence for the category. I have the evidence and no confidence in the category." He turned back. "I will file them as Type II, and I will file a second page saying that the number is wrong and that I have nothing better to offer."

"Spock," said McCoy, "that is the most honest thing I have ever heard a scientist say."

"It is also the least useful."

Kirk looked at the android sitting across from him, two hundred thousand years old, who had been made by them.

"Put the second page in," he said.

◆

Alta applied to the Federation Institute of Comparative Xenology eleven days after they reached Starbase Eleven.

She did not ask Kirk whether she should, and that pleased him. She asked Uhura to help her understand the application

forms, which pleased Uhura. She asked Spock which course of study would let her learn enough about other civilizations to spend the rest of her life finding out how little she knew, and Spock recommended three.

She chose a fourth. That pleased McCoy most of all.

There were hearings, and debriefings, and Starfleet officers who used words like custody and classification and protected technology until Kirk began using words like survivor and citizen and person.

Alta endured them badly and then better. Robby endured them with such complete patience that several officials mistook patience for agreement, and stopped making that mistake on the third day.

Morbius's notes went under seal. Not forever. Long enough.

The Krell material recovered from the research cases went to a joint scientific review under conditions so restrictive that Scott described them as almost sensible.

The educator was gone. The machine was gone. The planet was gone. Some knowledge could not be recovered, and Kirk found that he could live with that.

Edward Morbius had not been able to. That was one of the differences between them.

◆

Spock came to his quarters on the last night before Starbase Eleven. Kirk was still working on the report, with the recorder

beside a stack of files.

Adams. Julia. Morbius. Ostrow. Rivera. Alta. Robby.

"You have been writing for six hours."

"McCoy sent you."

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"Doctor McCoy asked me to confirm that you were ignoring him."

Kirk smiled. "Efficient."

"Yes." Spock looked at the recorder. "Have you completed the account?"

"Almost."

"How will you end it?"

"I don't know."

"Doctor Ostrow would object."

"To what?"

"An unfinished conclusion."

Kirk looked at the case that held four pages, and a six year argument between one Vulcan and the universe.

"He sat down in that chair knowing."

"Yes."

"I keep thinking about that."

"As do I."

"Do you regret letting him come?"

Spock's eyes moved to the viewport. "That question presumes there was an alternative version of Doctor Ostrow who would have remained behind."

Kirk smiled slightly. "Fair."

"He was responsible for his choice."

"And we're alive because of it."

"Yes."

"That's a difficult thing to put in a report."

"Then perhaps it does not belong in a report."

"Now you tell me."

Spock turned to go.

"Captain."

"Spock."

He stopped in the doorway. Kirk had not asked about the meld. Not really. McCoy had, repeatedly, and Spock had answered him medically every time.

Kirk asked something else.

"What did it feel like?"

Spock stood there for a long moment.

"Human."

Kirk looked up at him, and Spock's mouth moved by the smallest possible amount.

"Extremely."

Then he left.

◆

Kirk switched on the recorder.

"Captain's log, final supplement. The Enterprise is approaching Starbase Eleven with two survivors of Altair IV aboard."

He stopped.

Two. Alta and Robby. The word survivor had grown a great deal larger over the past week.

He started again.

"The official record will contain sensor reports, medical findings, technical analysis and testimony. It will say that the civilization known as the Krell built a machine capable of converting mental intention directly into physical effect, and that the machine destroyed them, because they did not understand that intention exists below conscious thought."

He paused. Outside the viewport the stars went on going past.

"That is accurate. It is not the whole story."

He looked at the two files he had opened that morning and had not been able to close, Berg's and the crewman's, and then at Adams's.

"A captain tried to save his people."

Julia's.

"A woman spent six years telling a man that knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing."

Morbius's.

"A brilliant man loved his family, and mistook love for the right to decide what they were allowed to become."

Ostrow's.

"A scholar spent six years with four pages he could not translate, and then gave his life for the sentence that translated all of them."

Robby's.

"A machine waited two hundred thousand years to be asked

what he wanted."

Alta's.

"And a young woman opened a door because she wanted the world to come in."

Kirk looked at the recorder for a while, and thought about the Krell, and about Morbius, and about Robby standing perfectly still in a ruined garden because a law somebody else had put inside him could not tell him which harm belonged to him.

"The danger was never that they knew too little."

He switched it off and sat alone for a moment.

Then the door signal sounded.

"Come."

Alta came in carrying the wooden horse.

"I thought Robby had that."

"He gave it back."

"Why?"

"He said it was mine."

Kirk nodded.

She sat down opposite him. "Are you finished?"

"Yes."

"With the report?"

"I think so."

She turned the animal over in her hands.

"My father would have hated it."

"The report?"

"The ending."

Kirk smiled. "Probably."

Alta looked out at the stars.

"Good."

The Enterprise went on toward Starbase Eleven. Behind them, Altair IV was no longer a world. Ahead of them were more worlds than Alta Morbius had ever seen, and more questions than Robby had been built to answer.

For the moment, that was enough.