

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter One

ADMIRAL JAMES T. KIRK LIKED HIS OFFICE in the Admiralty well enough. To him, the most important thing about it, aside from its prestigious size and generous appointments, was that it boasted an unobstructed view north to the Golden Gate and, in particular, the magnificent old bridge that spanned it.

Kirk had swiveled his chair around to gaze out the window behind his desk at the big bridge, its sharp angles softened to the eye by a hastily scheduled shower. The view from his old

office had been east, toward the bay. Nice enough, all right—but nothing at all like *this*. Obscured by the rain, the bridge looked like a painting done in oils, and Kirk had a certain taste for that sort of thing. He was also glad that the Fourth of July weekend was over and that the holiday bunting had been taken down from the towers; he liked the bridge just as it was, and rather resented it when the locals tarted it up with decorations. He supposed the people who were responsible for the bridge would do the same thing all over again for the festivities coming the week after next.

Kirk had little else to do but stare at the bridge, because the emergency rain had caused a hold in the countdown. Impatient, Kirk decided to call the Navy Yard chief again. He thumbed the direct-connect on his fonecom and, after a negligible wait, the image of a red-bearded Scottish giant swam onto the screen. The giant was dressed in one of the new Starfleet uniforms—the white-bibbed “penguin grays,” as they had quickly come to be known.

“Good morning again, Chief,” Kirk said.

“Aye, Admiral, an’ a wet one it still is, too,” Alec MacPherson answered. “We’re all just lookin’ at the rain an’ gettin’ a good case o’ th’ fidgets. The hold’s now at one hour an’ fifty-three minutes.” The big Scotsman snorted in disgust. “Couldna thot pesky woman ha’ waited a bit t’ make it rain?”

“I suppose not, Chief. Status?”

“Ready an’ waitin’, Admiral. Everythin’ is go. No problems from th’ nasty weather, either; I’ve got environmental shields up, an’ th’ saucer is locked tight as Grandma’s purse in any case. I wouldna mind settin’ th’ new launch time for as soon as practicable, though, sir. All o’ this is wearin’ me a wee bit thin.”

“Agreed,” Kirk said, nodding. “Let’s go

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

with what we discussed earlier. I make it, um, just under fourteen minutes until the rain's scheduled to end. Let's send her up five minutes after that; the sky over the city will have cleared enough by then. Keep in mind that there are a few tractor-pressor gangs topside who've got a good case of the fidgets, too."

"Aye, Admiral; I can well believe it. All right, sir; I'll be sending 'em a tick at T-minus eighteen. Admiral, have ye changed your mind about comin' over for the launch? Still plenty of time for ye to beam across town and stand wi' us here."

"Thanks, Mac," said Kirk, holding up a hand, "but you don't need me getting in your way. I'll stay here."

"As you wish, sir," MacPherson said. "Well, here's hopin' the gods are smilin' on us."

"Aye to that. Kirk out."

"G'bye, sir." MacPherson's image faded from the screen; Kirk thumbed another button.

A familiar face appeared on the screen. "Communications, *Enterprise*," Uhura said.

"Hello, Uhura. Let me talk to Captain Decker, please."

"Surely, Admiral. The captain is here on the bridge, sir; I'll put you through right away. Please stand by."

AT THE OPPOSITE END OF TOWN, at the communications console on the bridge of USS *Enterprise*, Lt. Commander Nyota Uhura swiveled in her seat to find a seemingly relaxed Willard Decker sitting comfortably in his command chair.

"Captain?" Uhura called. "Admiral Kirk calling, sir. On six."

"Thanks." Decker hit a button, and Kirk's face appeared on the main viewer. "Hello,

Admiral. What news?"

"Get ready to take a time tick from MacPherson, Will. The rain is supposed to stop in about fourteen minutes. You'll lift off five minutes after that. The tick will come at T-minus eighteen minutes."

"Understood," Decker said. "We're raring to go, sir."

Kirk grinned. "Well, just be sure you put all the little pieces in the right places. It'd be embarrassing to have anything left over when you're finished."

"Scotty says he knows where all the parts go," Decker replied, grinning. "Thanks for the advice, though, Admiral."

"Smooth sailing, Captain. Kirk out." The screen blanked.

Decker released the comm line and directed his attention forward, to the pilot station. At the helm was Diana Octavia Siobhan "Dossie" Flores, a relief helmsman and navigator during the latter part of the five-year mission and, with former helmsman Hikaru Sulu's reassignment, the officer in charge of the upgrade to helm systems. Former navigator Pavel Chekov had left ship's company to attend the Starfleet security school at Annapolis and had not yet been replaced, so Chief Suzanne DiFalco, Montgomery Scott's number-two for navigation systems, was pinch-hitting as navigator for this short flight.

"Chief," Decker said, "I trust you're ready to receive the time tick?"

"Aye, Captain," DiFalco answered. She paused for a moment and then added, "Got it, sir. The clock is now running." DiFalco's fingers flew across a series of buttons on her board. "Our projected course to Spacedock Four has been corrected for the new time of departure."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Amended course laid in, sir,” added Flores.
“Very good.”

It was quiet now on the bridge; everything that could be done had already been done, and then checked and re-checked. Captain Decker looked around him. Most of the people on the bridge were new to *Enterprise*, having been assigned aboard only during the six months that the saucer had been sitting in the Navy Yard. The green bridge crew had found its identity quickly, though, forming itself around the few veterans still aboard—which was exactly what Admiral Kirk and Captain Decker had hoped would happen. Much the same thing had occurred in Engineering, where Scotty had seeded a number of old hands among the new personnel who’d been trained in the latest methods of ship design, construction and maintenance.

“Well, it seems that there’s nothing left for us to do but wait,” the captain said. “Miss Uhura, please patch into the local 3V relay frequency for WorldNews and put a flat version on the main viewer. Let’s see what they’re saying about us.”

“Aye, sir.”

“— AND NOW THERE’S JUST A LITTLE MORE THAN twelve minutes to go until the scheduled end of the rain,” newscaster Nan Davis said, smiling into the trivision scanners. No one in her audience seeing the young woman could have guessed that Nan was nearly frantic, trying to fill air time with information she’d already repeated several times in as many different ways. *Good Lord*, she thought, *this is my first worldwide feed on Terra, and it’s going right down the poop chute! Damn the weather!*

“The weather might be terrible outside,”

Nan continued brightly, “but we’re nice and dry here in our San Francisco studios—and with us this morning are our special guests, Admiral Timothea Rogers of Starfleet Command Public Information, and retired Starfleet captain Robert April, the very first commander of the starship *Enterprise*.”

Both guests nodded to the scanners as their names were mentioned. April was a tall, distinguished looking man of about eighty with a handsome shock of white hair; he was casually but neatly dressed in civilian attire. Rogers, middle-aged and beginning to look it, was in Starfleet dress uniform. Her expression was intimidating; her straight, prematurely graying hair framed a long face that seemed unused to smiling. *This is a Starfleet flak?* Nan had thought when she’d met Rogers earlier that morning. *She’ll be awful on 3V—a real zombie.* The interview, so far, had proven her right. Admiral Rogers had been adequately responsive throughout the feed, but she was about as endearing as a Rigellian fever sore.

“For those of you just joining us,” Nan said, “the countdown for the liftoff of the renovated command section—or the ‘saucer,’ as the professionals call it—of the starship *Enterprise* has been put on hold due to a two-hour rain ordered early this morning by California Governor Sarah Meier. The unscheduled shower was needed to help extinguish a small forest fire that started around dawn near the city of Mill Valley, just north of San Francisco. We’re now told that the fire is out and that damage to the local ecosystem has been minimal.”

Nan, Rogers and April were seated comfortably on a small studio set that had been put together overnight by the WorldNews studio crew. The animated backdrop consisted of a moving starfield dominated by an artist’s

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

conception of the way *Enterprise* would look once her renovation had been completed. The setting looked good, better than the credit-pinching WorldNews art director usually managed to provide. Nan had been quite pleased with the set when she'd first seen it that morning, and had taken its presence as a good omen.

But that had been before she'd met Rogers. So much for omens.

"Starfleet has delayed the launch until just after the emergency rain," Nan told her audience, "for fear that turbulence from the command section's powerful impulse engines could worsen the weather and turn it more stormy than Weather Control intended it to be. The skies are scheduled to clear enough for the launch within a few minutes after the end of the shower."

Nan paused for a moment while the prompt bug in her ear buzzed. "We've just been informed by Starfleet," she said, "that the command section of the *Enterprise* will lift off five minutes after the scheduled end of the rain—or a little over fifteen minutes from now." She could not quite hide her relief from the scanners.

Nan turned slightly in her seat to face April. "Captain," she said, "it seems we're on our way again. Tell me, as the first skipper of the *Enterprise*, how do you feel about seeing her, well, reborn?"

April smiled. "Quite proud, Miss Davis, quite proud indeed. I still feel as if I'm a part of that ship; I spent quite a while aboard her, you know. The changes in technology since *Enterprise* was launched more than forty years ago have been considerable; I'm glad she's being brought fully up to date."

"Admiral," Nan asked Rogers, "can you tell

us something about those technological changes?"

Rogers nodded briskly. "Certainly. For one thing, there have been many advances in the management of shipboard environmental needs. The air filters and water reprocessors on the renovated *Enterprise* are designed to be three hundred and seven percent more efficient than those they are replacing—"

"That's amazing," Nan said, nodding. *That's dull as dishwater!* she thought. *I'd swear this woman's part Vulcan—the part that's not zomboid, I mean.*

Gamely, Nan tried again. "What about the ship's new warp engines?" she asked the admiral. "Isn't it true that the new ones are so powerful that they would have torn the old *Enterprise* apart?"

Rogers pursed her lips as if in distaste. "Well, yes, I suppose so," she answered dryly, "if you care to put the matter in sensationalistic terms. The new warp drivers do generate six times more power than the old ones, and such a strain would have been a problem for the old *Enterprise*. However, the re-design has taken the additional stress on the ship's frame into account."

"And what about the ship's new weaponry and shielding?" Nan prompted hopefully. "What can you tell us about those?"

"I can't discuss classified matters," Rogers said flatly. Then she frowned. It was a frown that made Nan wince; it reminded her of the time when she was four years old and had just peed on her mother's living room rug, right in front of about twenty party guests. Gads, that had been a bad day ... almost as bad as this one was turning out to be.

There was a brief, awkward silence, which reminded Nan that there had been one at that

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

party, too. She winced again.

“Er, when *Enterprise* was first built,” April said, trying to be helpful, “warp technology was in its infancy. The top speed I had available to me was warp four, and we really had to push her to get it.” He smiled. “We thought that was pretty good in those days, Miss Davis. Your viewers may not be aware that this *Enterprise* replaced a predecessor ship of the same name that wasn’t even a proper starship, in that it didn’t have warp capability at all.”

“Really?” Nan said.

“Oh, certainly,” April replied. “That ship accelerated under impulse power to reach something close to the speed of light. Those aboard her relied on Einsteinian effects in order to make a star voyage in what for them was a reasonable amount of subjective time. That was long ago, of course. Now the engineers are talking about achieving velocities much, much faster than warp eight with the next generation of ships — velocities so fast that we might need an entirely new way to reckon speed. I can’t wait to see that, and to be out there for it.”

“How are you going to manage that?” Nan asked.

“Somehow,” April replied, smiling even more broadly. “I hardly think I’m quite done yet.”

Love that man, Nan thought. “That brings up something else, Captain,” Nan said brightly. “You’ve just mentioned the next generation of ships. Why renovate the *Enterprise* instead of building an entirely new cruiser from scratch?”

“Well, Miss Davis,” April began, “my understanding is that the new design incorporates so much fresh technology, it can’t even be finalized for more than a decade —”

“The decision you’re talking about was made by Starfleet for two reasons,” Rogers said,

interrupting. Nan sighed in frustration just loudly enough for the audio pickups to catch the sound. She looked daggers at Rogers, but the admiral chose not to notice.

“Those reasons are money and time,” Rogers continued. “*Enterprise*’s renovation will cost only sixty-two point six percent of the price of constructing an entirely new cruiser, and work will be completed a year sooner. Another way we shortened the time factor was by taking the job away from Starfleet’s Construction Authority and giving it to our Fleet Deployment people.”

“Is that so?” Nan asked. *Is this ever going to end?* she wondered wearily.

“Indeed it is — and since things have gone so well with the *Enterprise* refit, Fleet Deployment will be handling all of Starfleet’s ship renovation projects from now on. The Construction Authority will continue to be in charge of building entirely new ships.”

“Fascinating,” Nan said, putting a feeble amount of forced fascination into her voice. “Why is it being done the way you’re doing it, though? Who’s responsible for the change?”

“Admiral James Kirk was put in charge of Fleet Deployment eight months ago,” Rogers said briskly. “The renovation plan is his.”

Interesting, Nan thought. *Jim Kirk, eh? I can tell that she doesn’t have much use for him, either. I wonder why not? What’s wrong with her, anyway?* “But aren’t starship repairs and so forth usually done in orbit, in special docks?” Nan asked. “I mean, the entire starship is usually left in one piece, isn’t it? Why was the command section detached and flown down for renovation?”

Rogers nodded. “Before now,” she said crisply, “Starfleet has always done this kind of work in the microgravitational environment

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

freely available in orbit. However, Admiral Kirk's plan represents an entirely new way of doing things. Simply put—and it was far from simple—Admiral Kirk broke the entire renovation process down into a series of small tasks. He then combined those tasks into a master renovation schedule that was much more efficient than the plan it replaced.”

Giving the devil his due, eh? “What, precisely, did Admiral Kirk come up with?” Nan asked.

“He determined that some of the renovation work could be done much more efficiently in a gravitational field, and that some of it could be done with only slightly more difficulty in gravity,” Rogers answered. “He then compared cost factors, and found that a substantial savings in time and budget could be realized if we did most of the work on the command section on the ground.”

“But isn't working in a gravity field inconvenient?”

“Not when you're painting, running wiring or laying carpet, among any number of other jobs,” Rogers replied. “Admiral Kirk knew, of course, that *Enterprise's* main gravity generators would not be up and running until rather late in the renovation process; in fact, they came on line only last week. We gained a great deal of time by not waiting for the engineering section to be made ready before beginning substantive work on the saucer. While the command section has its own, smaller gravity generators, they are not intended for months of continuous operation. So we took advantage of the biggest gravity generator in the immediate neighborhood—Terra itself.”

“Starfleet likes to point out that it's San Francisco's largest single employer—” Nan began.

“Well, it is,” Rogers said snappishly. “Starfleet's contribution to the local economy is considerable—”

Spare me the figures, please, thought Nan wearily.

“—and doing the saucer work on the ground at the Navy Yard allowed us to hire private contractors from the area to do jobs usually done by Starfleet engineers in orbit. These work-for-hire civilian crews commuted from their homes each day. They did not have to be transported or shuttled to orbit daily, or boarded there at Starfleet expense. This alone saved the Federation's taxpayers millions of credits.”

Nan nodded. “I see. So what's scheduled to happen next in the renovation process?”

“Work on the command section is nearly complete,” Rogers answered crisply. “As I've mentioned, Starfleet felt that the larger part of the work on the saucer—”

The control room called up a computer-generated graphic of *Enterprise* and put it on the air. Blinking arrows indicated the saucer-shaped command section.

“—could be done faster, easier and more cheaply on the ground. The engineering section, on the other hand—”

The arrows moved quickly from the command to the engineering section.

“—needed to be worked on in orbit. For one thing, the engineering section can't be landed. The command section, though, is actually constructed as a lifeboat and may be used as such in an emergency. In a procedure we call 'saucer separation,' the command section detaches from the rest of the ship and, under its own impulse power, can rendezvous with a rescue craft or make a landing on a planetary surface—that is to say, on either land or water.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

In 3V displays everywhere, little sparks appeared around the neck of *Enterprise*, and the ship was suddenly beheaded by an unseen headsman. The command section obediently flew away at appreciable speed toward a bluish-green planet that had suddenly been brought into the picture. *There's somebody up there with a sure touch for the graphics generator*, Nan thought appreciatively.

"Your viewers will recall that *Enterprise* returned from its historic five-year mission early last year," Rogers continued. "Six months ago, a skeleton crew separated the saucer and flew it down to the San Francisco Navy Yard. That's where it's been ever since, straddling four repair bays."

The control room switched to a live shot of the Navy Yard, the eastern part of which was dominated by *Enterprise's* command section. The remote 3V scanners caught the diminishing rain pattering down on the shields protecting the saucer from the weather. The mist in the air had condensed on the normally invisible shields, allowing them to be seen. They overlapped repeatedly, looking like exquisitely thin plates of clear crystal piled in shingle-like fashion above the saucer, protecting it.

"Work has continued right along on the engineering section since the separation," Rogers added. "For instance, the new warp drivers have already been mounted, and the reconstruction of the ship's warp assembly is now sixty-eight percent complete."

No decimals that time. She must be getting tired. "When do you think the whole job will be finished, Admiral?" Nan asked.

"Starfleet estimates that it will take another year," Rogers said. "After a brief shakedown cruise, *Enterprise* will be put back into active service, to continue its peaceful mission of

exploration and discovery."

Nan nodded. "Getting back to the business at hand, Admiral Rogers, will it be difficult to rejoin the two sections of the ship?"

"No, not particularly," answered Rogers, "but it is a job that calls for the utmost precision. The saucer will go into orbit, make rendezvous with Spacedock Four, and then be brought into precise position by tractor-pressor crews. Correctly mating the saucer with the engineering section will take careful handling — but our people are very good at that sort of thing. We're beginning to think about designs for ships that will permit easier saucer recovery, but that's still to come."

Well, that's all on that, I guess, Nan thought. She decided to change the subject and dig for a little more background. *Anything to liven this show up a little, please, God.* "Captain April is not the only *Enterprise* alumnus here today, Admiral Rogers," Nan said. "I understand that you yourself once served aboard her, years ago."

"Yes," Rogers replied, her expression turning cold enough to stop all conversation.

What'd I say, anyway? Nan asked herself in puzzlement. *Well, that'll teach me to try to bring a human interest element into a story.* Nan looked to her other guest for help, but even the cheerful Captain April appeared cowed.

Nan surrendered and turned to face the nearest scanner. "We'll be right back after these important messages," she said, hoping that the control room would manage to cue up something in time.

ACROSS THE CONTINENT, a slightly degraded 3V image flickered in the corner of a secondary-school classroom in the endlessly

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

rebuilt Chelsea section of N'York.

The room housed an experimental program at the cutting edge of the science of education. It was called "Project 14-B" by the administrators who had created it and "the Class" by everyone else, including its participants. The Class made a fetish of group participation. Its purpose was to find out whether students learned better when they challenged each other's intellects in a classroom setting.

To stimulate what the originators of the Class called "the appraisal and learning sectors of the conscious adolescent mind as perceived *en masse*," there were thirty-three students enrolled in the Class, a figure well beyond the standard limit of five. The term was nearly an entire year long, from the middle of September through the end of August, and enrollment was limited to second-year students who had completed more traditional programs of study in their first year. Parents enrolled their children in the Class because, despite all the controversy surrounding it, results were what counted—and the Class got results.

The Class curriculum demanded rote memorization and classroom recitation instead of the more traditional sleeplearning and end-of-term hypnotic review techniques. Oral and written tests had been devised to establish and rate the students' proficiency against an established standard, as well as to instill a spirit of competition among them.

Most unusual of all, though, the Class was not guided by an artificial-intelligence educational program. Instead, there was a teacher, an actual *person*, who came in every day and put his pupils through their paces. The person who had been hired for this unusually demanding job had turned out to be quite good at it, despite the initial misgivings of the school

board.

In the three years of its existence, the Class had made a not inconsiderable contribution to the sum of knowledge about how the adolescent human mind worked and how it might be made to work better. Students in the Class tended to do well once they became used to the way things were done in it, and they continued to do better than average after they returned to a more traditional educational setting. Someday, if the success enjoyed by the Class continued, its techniques might spread throughout the Federation.

The limits of what the Class could and could not do—its syllabus—were set in durasteel by its creators and could not be changed, but those limits were broad, and much could be done within them. On this particular day, the teacher had decided that the spirit of education and the requirements of the syllabus would best be served if the Class watched the trivised launch of *Enterprise*'s command section from the San Francisco Navy Yard.

The teacher had prepared his students by providing research materials in several media on Starfleet and the histories of ships bearing the name *Enterprise*, including biographical data on notable past commanders of those ships. Yesterday the Class had even viewed a very old motion picture—turnerized into full color and three-dee for modern audiences—that had told the story of one of the naval commanders most associated with the *Enterprise*, an admiral named Halsey. Halsey had lived and died a unimaginably long time ago, back when the ship then bearing the already proud name of *Enterprise* had been the first of three aircraft carriers that, in series, had belonged to the old United States Navy.

The students had long since become bored

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

by the delay in the countdown. The gentle murmur of their originally furtive conversation had gradually grown in volume to a dull roar. The teacher, who had been giving his full attention to the feed from San Francisco, now roused himself as his reverie was jarringly interrupted by a pitch aimed at viewers with indigestion.

He turned in his seat at the front of the room to face the Class directly and cleared his throat. That was all it took. Voices fell silent immediately. Heads turned toward him.

“The pre-launch activities will best be appreciated in silence,” the teacher said in a low, rumbling voice. He did not threaten them. He did not have to. The students gave their full attention to the commercial.

The teacher turned back to the trivision. He took pride in never having had even one serious disciplinary problem in the three years the Class had been in existence. It was understood that, as a practical matter, he alone was in charge of the day-to-day administration of the Class, and that made him responsible for everything that went on in it. This attitude completely dismissed the notion of most modern educators that students should have control of the curriculum—a notion the teacher treated with a quiet, almost amused disdain. He made it a practice to lay down the law, as it were, to each new group of students firmly, clearly and without equivocation every September... and, every September, each new group of students instantly came to accept his authority without question.

That kind of obedience from independent-minded young people was clearly a tribute to the teacher’s natural ability to control his class. It just might have had something to do with this, too: The teacher was a full-blooded Klingon. His name was G’dath, and most of his students

were scared to death of him.

ACROSS TOWN, in a shabby, ill-maintained apartment in an otherwise pleasant neighborhood known as Stuyvesant Preserve, two other Klingons were watching the same trivision feed with lessening interest.

“I find announcements such as these vulgar and unsettling,” one said, indicating the commercial for the indigestion remedy.

“Really?” returned the other. He was naturally inclined to be argumentative, and the idiot assigned to him was a perfect foil. “I rather enjoy them,” he continued. “I find in such announcements yet another symptom of Earther and, hence, Federation decline. Such things are a most promising indication of our eventual triumph.”

“Need the announcement be so... blunt, though, Superior?” the first one asked, pointing to the trivised image. “That graphic rendition, for example. Such things disturb me greatly. Why don’t humans simply go to their doctors in secret and keep these vulgarities to themselves?”

The other Klingon shrugged, uncaring. *This one is a fool indeed*, he thought. *I must constantly keep in mind that his blood is thinned by human taint*. “The Earthers do not seem to care about keeping such matters private,” he said, putting a certain, studied condescension in his voice. “Neither, for that matter, do I. My interest is only in the news portion of this feed, Klor—the *why* of it. I cannot imagine the Federation allowing wide publicity of such an important development in its secret war policy without its having an excellent reason for doing so—and anything that involves the one named Kirk is of great interest to us.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Now it was Klor's turn to shrug. "Perhaps there is no reason for the publicity, Superior, save idle Starfleet boasting," he said. "We certainly have learned nothing from this feed. That bloodless woman admiral, for example. She would not discuss classified information."

"What she says or does not say is of no importance to us," Keth said. "The Empire already has that data—from us, among others. We serve well."

"Would that we could do more than serve as furtive bandits gathering information," Klor responded with some heat. "It does not befit one of the Warrior class to sit the day through and watch the trivision set. It befits a Warrior to act, not react."

"Does it befit a Warrior to question Imperial orders?" Keth barked.

Klor blinked. "I meant no disrespect, Superior," he said hastily, averting his gaze.

Keth calmed down. *The fool has a point*, he thought. *This is indeed no work for a Warrior. Would that I had not volunteered for this duty—but my commander was ... persuasive. To be out on the border again, in the chair of command, a deck under my booted feet, blooded fighters at my side and all weapons at the ready—*

"Your word is taken," he said briefly. He then pointed to the 3V corner. "They seem to have returned to the news transmission now. Give it your full attention. Note each detail."

"I obey, Superior."

IN A CAVERNOUS BUILDING in Dulles Park, Virginia, a young woman named Alice Friedman had long since tuned a 3V-capable datapad to the WorldNews feed. She had turned the volume on the datapad low when the commercials had come on, but she was still

keeping half an ear on the feed. She didn't want to miss a thing that was happening in San Francisco, but she'd be damned if she'd watch commercials.

Alice had been up and working since before dawn, and this was not the first day in a row she'd done that; she was tired. She sighed wearily as she ran a hand through her curly brown hair, increasing its disorder. Alice again wished for coffee, but the servitor was broken.

Far away, outside somewhere, she heard the groaning and rumbling of heavy machinery. The crews were still at work on the dart, hard up against a looming deadline that could not be changed. The dart would be ready on time, though; they'd worked right through the long Fourth of July holiday the weekend before, just to make sure it would be. Alice was confident that they'd make it now, although she'd earlier had her doubts.

Alice had made a successful career out of pushing orbital lifting bodies for freight lines—she was one of the few women who'd ever done that for a living—and, more recently, she'd spent endless hours in the dart simulator. She would spend many more hours in it before the big day came, a little less than two weeks from now.

Alice finished reading a section of the manual and shifted her attention back to the WorldNews feed. The commercial break was finally over, and her datapad was now showing a picture of *Enterprise's* command section still patiently awaiting liftoff.

Some woman was babbling a description of the scene, though Alice and anyone else watching could see everything perfectly well for themselves. *Captioned for the thinking-impaired*, she thought with no little irritation. *God, I hate WorldNews.*

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Alice told the datapad to turn its audio down completely, and she gazed at the picture. She knew that flying the dart would be a piece of chocolate layer cake compared to flying that big saucer. The command section looked about as aerodynamic as a pizza with everything. Despite that, Alice desperately wanted to try her hand at flying a starship, even half of one . . . but she knew she would have to settle for taking the helm of one of its predecessors — for now, at least.

KIRK'S WIFE, VICE ADMIRAL LORI CIANA, was in her office at the Admiralty watching Starfleet's own in-house, closed-circuit video of the flight. Lori was missing nothing important, because WorldNews was picking up the same feed and using it within its own coverage.

Lori could not bring herself to watch the discussion on WorldNews. While she genuinely liked Bob April and considered him a friend, she simply could not stand listening to that horrible Rogers woman. It seemed bad enough to Lori that, as part of the commanding admiral's inner staff, she often had to do business with Rogers; she'd be damned if she'd listen to her on 3V as well. *Why did Hy Nogura let her go on trivision, anyway?* Lori wondered. *She's terrible!*

It was turning out to be a very frustrating day. *Jim must be frantic*, she thought. *Oh, why did they have to make it rain?* Lori again thought about calling her husband to lend him some moral support, but she reluctantly decided that it would be . . . inappropriate. Things between the two of them had been going poorly in recent weeks, and she simply did not feel free to call Jim. There was a distinct possibility that he might react badly to being bothered at what

must be a busy time for him, and that would only add to their problems. Lori's hesitance to call her husband was in itself a very bad sign, and she knew it.

Lori noted that Jim had not called her, either.

There was a aching place inside Lori that was worried about Jim and wanted to see and soothe him, but there was also an angry place that wanted to have nothing to do with him. Right now, the aching place was the size of her thumb, while the angry place was about the size of northern California.

Maybe I'll stop by his office later, Lori thought, *and maybe I won't*.

As it turned out, she didn't.

That was the way things were between them.

KIRK WATCHED THROUGH HIS WINDOW as the rain shower came to a gentle, gradual halt. He saw that the bridge stood out in sharp detail now, and pedestrians and bicyclists were once again beginning to cross it.

There was a knock at Kirk's door. "Come," he said.

The door slid open and Kirk's chief of staff, Lieutenant Commander Kevin Riley, stuck his head inside the room, his reddish-brown hair in its usual unruly state. As a pointed joke, Kirk had bought Riley a two-meter-long plastic comb and given it to him at the office party the previous Christmas. Kirk had been topped when Riley had actually managed to comb his hair with the thing, the comb in one hand and a drink in the other. Since then, Kirk had not mentioned the subject of Riley's hair . . . and he had come to think that not doing so had been a bad mistake.

"Admiral?" Riley said, scratching his barely regulation beard. "With your permission, I'm

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

going up to the rec area to eyeball the launch. Thought you might want to come along, sir. Can't beat the view, if you ask me. Which you didn't, of course. Sir."

Kirk swiveled around and looked at Riley, considering it. Once the saucer left the ground, the ship would officially belong to Will Decker. At that point, Kirk's direct responsibility for *Enterprise* would be completely ended at long, long last. He'd been planning to stay in his office and watch the launch by himself on television, but... dammit, he should see her off with his own eyes. It was only right that he do so. After all, she had once been his best girl.

"Fine," Kirk said. "We'd better hurry; there's not much time left."

"Don't I know it. Sir. I'm having a 'tube held."

"Be right with you." Kirk rummaged quickly through a desk drawer and drew out an old clamshell-model communicator, on the chance that Decker or MacPherson might need to talk to him at the last moment. It had been quite a while since Kirk had last used the gadget, and in the intervening time Starfleet had changed over to a more compact and efficient wrist model. The clamshells were compatible, however. He'd had this particular one with him at the end of the five-year mission and had kept it afterward as a souvenir. The communicator was still ready for use; its batteries were designed to last more than a century in storage. As a precaution, however, Kirk flipped the communicator open and casually thumbed the self-test routine.

A compressed signal shot from the device in his hand and headed at the speed of light for a point about thirty-six thousand kilometers above Terra's equator. There the signal found a Starfleet communications satellite in

geosynchronous orbit. The bird caught the signal, analyzed it, acknowledged it, amplified it, and sent it streaking back to its source. The signal found the communicator and entered it. The communicator thoroughly interrogated the signal and quickly determined that the pulse it had just received was the same as the one that it had sent, this to a five-nines degree of accuracy. The communicator then allowed a light to glow green briefly, indicating the successful end of the test. The whole process had taken just over half a second; Kirk's thumb had not yet left the self-test actuator.

Kirk snapped the clamshell shut and, fumbling a bit, attached the communicator to his belt near the small of his back, under the jacket of his penguin grays. Then he dictated the communicator's frequency number into his fonecom. Any calls to Kirk's office would now be relayed to him through the communicator, no matter where he might be.

Kirk walked over to the bookshelf on which he kept Old Yeller, the stuffed armadillo he kept as a—well, as a mascot and a memento. He rapped Yeller's shell three times for luck.

"Hello, Jimmy," the armadillo said in a deep, gentle voice that sounded like Texas.

"All right," Kirk said, the ritual completed. "Let's go, Mr. Riley."

He and Riley left the office and walked quickly down the long hallway to the lifttube bank. One 'tube was waiting, as Riley had already arranged. They entered it.

"Roof," Kirk ordered the automatics. The door sighed shut and, with a very slight jolt, they were on their way. The lifttube wasn't as talented as a starship turbolift. It could only go up and down in a vertical shaft, but it could travel at an acceleration that challenged the capacity of the lifttube's inertial dampeners. The

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Admiralty was one of the tallest buildings on a planet that boasted many superskyscrapers, some of them more than two kilometers high. The 'tubes had to be fast.

"I sometimes wonder what would happen if I was in one of these things and the earthquake suppressors failed," Riley said.

"Riley-flavored toothpaste, that's what would happen," Kirk said impatiently. He was not in a mood for idle conversation. He was annoyed, and it showed.

Riley raised an eyebrow and looked away.

Kirk sighed, instantly regretful. "I suppose I'm off my feed today, Mr. Riley," he said. "Sorry."

"No need, Admiral," Riley said quietly. "I'm going to miss her, too. We both spent a lot of time aboard her."

Kirk idly watched the floor indicator count off the two hundredth story of the building and hurry on past it. "That we did, Commander," he said quietly. "That we did."

"Roof," announced the 'tube, and its door eased open onto the recreation area. The Admiralty was huge—huge enough for the tall, tapered building to have a large, flat summit that housed tennis and basketball courts, a jogging and running track, a swimming pool, and other athletic facilities. The whole area was covered by a transparent aluminum dome that protected the rec area from the howling winds and allowed its use in all sorts of weather. The rec area would not have gotten the least bit wet from that morning's rain even without the dome, however; the summit of the Admiralty was well above that day's cloud cover.

This morning, the major activity on the roof was not sports, but sightseeing. Kirk and Riley walked quickly to the southernmost part of the rec area, joining the small crowd of Starfleet

personnel already gathered there.

The city seems so incredibly small, looking at it from up here, Kirk thought. He found that the clouds immediately above the city had dispersed already; he let his gaze wander southeast toward the Navy Yard. From this great height, on a perfectly clear day, Kirk would have been able to see more than three hundred kilometers in any direction. Because of the low clouds hanging over the area, though, Kirk's view was limited to most of a San Francisco that had apparently not changed very much since the late nineteenth century, even though the Greater Quake in the middle of the twenty-first century had leveled the old city and most of the surrounding area.

While many of the towns and smaller cities around San Francisco had been lost and forgotten, the city itself had been painfully reconstructed over the course of the twenty years following the Greater Quake. What growth San Francisco had experienced since the rebuilding had been kept largely underground. Sub-San-Fran, the subterranean city, ran more than twenty levels down in some areas, and the city was forever digging wider and more deeply.

"Good morning, gentlemen," came a deceptively soft voice.

Kirk and Riley turned as one. Standing near the edge of the dome and looking out over the city was a short, roundish and very old man: Starfleet Commanding Admiral Heihachiro Nogura. "Good morning, sir," they answered respectfully.

"Going to give me another ship today, Mr. Kirk?" Nogura asked.

Kirk smiled. "Yes, sir. A big piece of one, anyway. The rest of her will be ready soon."

Nogura nodded. "Yes, indeed," he said. "I look forward to that day." More quietly, he

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

continued, “I must say, James, that when your proposal for the renovation of *Enterprise* hit my desk, I was a bit doubtful.”

“I know, sir.”

Nogura nodded. “I did not think it could be done,” he went on. “At least, I did not believe it could be done within the cost and time limits you suggested. I thought there was even a distinct possibility that it could not be done at all; we had never attempted a stem-to-stern renovation in this manner before.”

Kirk shrugged. “It’s working.”

“You’ve made it work,” Nogura said.

“You’re bringing the job in on time and under budget. I’ve had more than a few fences to mend with the Construction Authority people; they didn’t like my taking *Enterprise* away from them. You’ve delivered handsomely, though, and no one argues with results — at least, they dare not argue them with *me*. You’ve done an excellent job on this, James. I’ll make it more formal later; for now, please accept my sincerest congratulations. Well done.” He held out his hand, and Kirk shook it.

“Thank you, Admiral,” Kirk said. “I’ll take those congratulations not just for myself, but also for the topside and ground crews who’ve been busting their—I mean to say, working very hard to meet the schedule.”

“Of course,” Nogura said. “Mr. Riley, do you wear a watch?”

“Yes, sir. Um, it’s coming up to T-minus thirty seconds—mark.”

“Then, gentlemen, let us watch the show we came here to see.” The three of them looked toward the southeast.

The sky over the city was now entirely clear. Kirk could see all the way across town to the Navy Yard, and he plainly saw the large saucer shape within it. He also saw crowds clustered

here and there in cleared areas of the city, waiting. Kirk thought the rain might keep just about everyone indoors, and it had, but once the weather had improved, people had come swarming outside. He saw even greater crowds gathering along the waterline in the New Oakland area, across the bay and east of the city.

“Count down from ten, please, Mr. Riley,” Kirk said.

“Yes, Admiral. We are at T-minus thirteen seconds.” Riley paused and then began counting.

At T-minus five seconds, Kirk saw a shimmer of heat appear at the aft end of the command section, where the impulse engine outlets were located. Dust flew around the saucer as its mighty belly thrusters cleared their throats. Kirk closed his eyes for a second and imagined the bridge at it must be now, seeing in his mind’s eye the quiet tension and professional calm that he insisted he did not miss.

“Zero,” Riley said at last. *Full thrusters, helm*, Kirk thought. His hand closed, as if he were grasping the arm of a chair.

The command section lifted vertically and ever so slowly. Its landing legs retracted smoothly into the shell, shaking the dust of Terra from their pads. The saucer continued rising.

For the first time in half a year, *Enterprise* was under weigh, once again a creature that lived in the sky.

“HOLDING STEADY, CAPTAIN,” Flores reported. “Altitude now fifty meters. Climbing slowly, as per program.”

“Start bringing her around to starboard,”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Decker ordered.

“Aye, Captain,” Flores said, and she played a rapid tattoo on her thruster command pad. Their course was going to take them the long way around San Francisco. The Navy Yard was located in the southeastern corner of the city. The saucer would head right out over the bay at first and then make its way north along the eastern edge of the city’s waterline, past China Basin and North Beach. It would then turn to the west over Fisherman’s Wharf and sail the skies just off the Marina and the old Presidio, where the Admiralty was located. After that, the saucer would pass through the Golden Gate and head farther west to position itself for its leap into orbit.

“Captain, we are at three hundred meters,” Flores reported. “Level-one altitude, condition nominal. Awaiting go for level two.”

“Rig shields for aerodynamics, helm,” Decker said. “Impulse power, one tenth. Continue gaining altitude to level two. Ease off thrusters.” One-tenth of full impulse power was all Decker would order until the saucer was clear of the city. Any more than that would rattle windows and bother several million sets of eardrums below.

Dossie smoothly cut in the impulse engines and swung the saucer out over San Francisco Bay. She headed it north by northwest and, as per orders, allowed the saucer to climb gradually.

“Let’s have a look down, Uhura,” Decker said.

“On the screen now, Captain,” she answered. “This view is below and to port. Magnification two.”

Decker could see people gathered all along the east side of San Francisco. They were waving hands, arms, flags, jackets and even

bedsheets. He caught a glimpse of bunches of helium-filled balloons being released from one of the city’s many parks. Every other person seemed to be using a viddycam to record the launch. The crowd seemed to be enjoying itself quite a bit. *Well, so am I*, Decker thought, struggling not to smile and not quite succeeding.

Seeing all those viddycams in use reminded Decker of something. The sun was high in a bright sky now; the bottom of the saucer would be obscured by shade. “Give me full navigation lights, Chief,” he told DiFalco. “Let’s let ’em see who we are.”

“Nav lights on full, Captain,” DiFalco said, pressing a button.

The sudden appearance of the powerful lights drew an instant, enthusiastic response from the crowds below as the proud name and number of *Enterprise* leaped out at them. Decker could no longer hide a grin. *Jim Kirk was right*, he thought happily. *There is nothing, absolutely nothing, like this. Nothing!*

“This is the view below and to starboard, Captain,” Uhura said. The scene on the screen changed and zoomed in to scan equally happy throngs standing at the edges of the thick woods in the New Oakland area. *They’re even cheering us over in Berkeley*, noted Decker. *I thought all those ‘new human’ kids absolutely hated Starfleet! Fan-tas-tic!*

“View angle ahead and below, please,” Decker requested, and Uhura complied. The screen now showed the wild redwood growth of southern Marin County and, farther north, a thick white carpet of nearly unbroken cloud that stretched to the limits of his vision. Decker looked in vain for the blackened patch of woods left by that morning’s fire. Mill Valley was only ten kilometers or so north of the Golden Gate, but the area was hidden under lingering low

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

clouds. However, Decker thought he could make out tiny motes — flitters — swarming above what must have been the burn zone. *Fire patrols, perhaps, or rubberneckers*, Decker thought.

The saucer sailed between the towers of the great, gray Bay Bridge east of Rincon Hill and swung westward, still gaining altitude. It then passed directly over the resort on Alcatraz Island. Looking down into the exercise yard, Decker saw several hundred people in prison stripes waving replica firearms at the saucer. Judging from all the bodies sprawled on the ground, there seemed to be yet another recreational riot in progress. Decker had never understood the attraction of Alcatraz as a vacation spot — he preferred the surfing reservations down the coast, around Big Sur — but the people down below seemed to be having a good time.

The saucer was approaching the Presidio now. “Admiralty to port,” DiFalco said.

“Miss Flores,” Decker said, “let’s gain some more altitude. I want us to come level with the roof. Chief, make ready to circle the building.” Working together, Flores and DiFalco smoothly brought the command section level with the summit of the Admiralty tower. They began to circle.

“Dead slow,” Decker continued. “Uhura, let’s have a look at the rec area — tracking view, please. Let’s see if we recognize anybody.”

“Yes, sir,” Uhura said. “Tracking view, magnification three.”

Mag three was sufficient to make the features of the people in the rec area plainly visible; Uhura’s real-time image processors kept the picture steady. The command section was approaching the northern face of the Admiralty, but the crowd at that end of the roof was

relatively sparse, and Decker saw no one he knew.

As the saucer passed the southern end, Uhura had her cameras pan the much larger crowd there. *Admiral Nogura*, Decker thought with pleasure. *And standing right next to him, Jim Kirk. We’re getting quite a sendoff.*

“Helm, slow us a touch as we pass Admiral Kirk,” Decker said. “Navigator, as we do so, blink your lights in captain’s salute.”

DeFalco did, and the captain watched as Nogura, Kirk and some of the others in the crowd returned the salute in the ancient manner: fingertips to eyebrow, longest way up and quickest way down. It seemed to Decker that Kirk held his salute the longest, if only by a fraction of a second. A hand salute in Starfleet, very rarely given, was intended to be quite a compliment.

Uhura let the view linger on the Admiralty rec area as the command section completed its circuit of the building and once again began heading northwest, toward the Golden Gate. She watched as the saucer left James Kirk behind.

After a moment or two, DiFalco reported, “Captain, we’ve passed the Golden Gate and are now approaching Point Bonita.”

“Fine, Chief,” Decker said. He leaned back in his chair. “Miss Flores, let’s stop wasting time. Get us to our departure point. Impulse engines, full.”

“Full impulse power,” Flores acknowledged. “Aye, aye, sir.”

THE CROWD OF SPECTATORS was breaking up, but Kirk continued to watch as the saucer began its long sprint out over the Pacific. Nogura watched Kirk. The two men remained there, quietly, even after the saucer had disappeared

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

into the clean cobalt vastness of the western sky.

“A nice departure, James,” Nogura said at last. “Very impressive.”

Kirk’s eyes remained on the horizon. “Yes, sir. It surely was.” *They didn’t call me*, he suddenly thought, more wistfully than he might have wanted to. *I guess they didn’t need me after all.*

“Do you miss her?” Nogura asked suddenly.

Kirk looked at him. “I’ve got a good job, Admiral,” he said. “I have no complaints. In fact, I’ve got to get going on the renovation of *Endeavour*. Everything’s ready, of course, but I’ve learned a great deal from the *Enterprise* project. I think I can cut the time factor even further by —”

Nogura held up a hand to interrupt him. “James, I need to talk with you about that, and some other things as well. How about meeting me at fourteen hundred hours in my office?”

“Why, certainly, sir.”

Chapter Two

TO ECONOMIZE ON FUEL and to minimize wear and tear on its impulse engines, *Enterprise*’s command section would take three leisurely, rising orbits to catch up with Spacedock Four, once it had positioned itself well out over the Pacific and changed course for the southeast. G’dath did not plan to have the Class sit in place for nearly four and a half hours while the saucer made the trip. As soon as the WorldNews people confirmed that the saucer had reached its departure point safely and was on its way up, G’dath rose and ordered the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

trivision set to turn itself off.

“I trust you have all learned something from this feed,” G’dath said to the members of the Class. The students nodded their quick agreement with that statement, and there was an accompanying low murmur of assent.

“Mr. Brickner,” the teacher said, pointing at an unfortunate victim in the front row, “please rise and tell us what you learned from watching the event.”

The hapless Brickner stood, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Even if G’dath had not been a Klingon, the sound of his voice would have intimidated anyone; it was the kind of deep, resonant voice that filled a room with its commanding tone and left no space for another ego. English was not G’dath’s second language; it was more like his eleventh, and he spoke it flawlessly, with a generalized North American accent. Given the way most of them looked and many of them acted, all Klingons might be expected to have rasping, monstrous voices that sounded the way sandpaper looked. Instead, G’dath sounded like an actor who’d learned his projection and diction during an extended tour with the American branch of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

“Um, could you please repeat the question, Mr. G’dath?” Brickner said timidly.

“No, I cannot,” G’dath said. “Please sit down. Mr. Cherniack, how about you? I saw you nodding your head.”

Cherniack stood. “Um, that the saucer section of a starship can detach and fly on its own, if it has to?”

“Are you asking me a question, Mr. Cherniack?”

“Uh, no, Mr. G’dath.”

“Very well. Yes, that information was

supplied in the interview with the Starfleet admiral, but it’s something that you should have known already from your study materials. Please be seated. How about you, Mr. Siegel?”

Siegel stood. “It seems like Starfleet is in an awful rush to get the thing finished,” he said. “That lady talked about saving all kinds of time and money on the project.”

Somebody in the class tittered, and G’dath cast an icy glare in the direction of the sound. “You might think that what Mr. Siegel has just said is funny,” the Klingon chided, “but he has hit upon the *only* important thing that was mentioned in that entire feed. Very good, Mr. Siegel. Please be seated.”

G’dath’s chair scraped against the floor as he rose from his desk. He began pacing slowly back and forth at the front of the room. “Let us consider the motives for rushing a starship to completion. What do you think that means? Mr. Stoller?”

“I’m not sure—”

“Please stand when you address the Class, Mr. Stoller.”

The student rose. “I’m sorry, sir. Uh, I think that if Starfleet is in a rush, it needs the ship back on duty pretty quickly.”

“No doubt. And why might that be?”

Stoller hesitated.

“Come, come, Mr. Stoller,” G’dath prompted. “Why might that be?”

“Well,” Stoller said, “begging your pardon, Mr. G’dath, but the Federation is scared of the, uh, Klingons.”

“Indeed? What makes you think so?”

“Well, we almost had a war with you a few years ago, you know.”

“You, Mr. Stoller? I think you mean ‘them,’ do you not? For my part, I have been living on Terra for more than five years, and I

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

have been a Federation citizen for the last three. In the future, please attempt not to paint your targets with so broad a brush.” Stoller turned red with embarrassment, and G’dath smiled. It was not a pretty sight.

“That point aside, though, you’re quite right,” G’dath continued. “Some six years ago, the Federation and the Empire went to war. The fighting ended shortly after the outbreak of hostilities due to the Organian Intervention, and the truce declared at that time was soon formalized into the Organian Peace Treaty. That treaty is still operative. Simply put, it states that the Empire cannot attack the Federation, or vice-versa, without inviting an Organian response. Be seated, Mr. Stoller; you suddenly look tired. Miss Durgin, why do the Organians bother to preserve the peace?”

“‘Bother’? Why, I suppose they love peace, sir.”

“Then why is it that the Organians fail to do anything about Orionese pirate raids, various brushfire wars in Klingonese space, or any number of other warlike things?” G’dath asked.

Durgin thought about it. “The Organians have predicted that, one day, the Federation and the Empire will become friendly,” she said. “A war between the two powers would cost millions, maybe billions of lives and perhaps destroy both civilizations. A war would, in any case, eliminate any chance of eventual friendship between the two powers. In comparison, the other problems you mention may not matter much to the Organians.”

“That sounds reasonable, Miss Durgin,” G’dath said, and the girl smiled. “However, it is fatally flawed,” he added after a moment, and her face fell. “Please sit down.”

G’dath continued pacing. “Consider this for a moment,” he said. “If the Organians are

indeed operating from a moral imperative—namely, that they have intervened because they believe that killing and destruction are wrong, and they have determined to do something about it—then one might, with justice, expect them to do something about *all* of it. The Organians apparently have the power to do whatever they wish to do, at least in this regard. However, they have chosen not to exercise that power.

“As for the rest of your theory, Miss Durgin,” G’dath continued, “it is a matter of historical fact that nations at war have often become quite friendly in the peace that followed, if that peace was a fair and just one. Examples from the history of our own Terra abound, and should be familiar to you. I would not expect you to be quite so familiar with the history of the Klingon Empire in this respect, but that is an ignorance I hope to cure before we are done for the year.”

A hand went up in the back of the class. “Miss Greene?”

“Mr. G’dath, the thing Mr. Stoller mentioned about the Federation being scared of the Klingons: Why should we be scared of them, if the Organians are preventing a war between us? Everybody I know is paranoid about Klingons.”

“Paranoid about all Klingons, Miss Greene?” G’dath’s face, hard for humans to read in any case, was expressionless.

The girl frowned. “With all respect, Mr. G’dath, you can’t bait me,” she said. “I mean the Warrior class—the ultra-conservative influence that dominates the Empire.”

G’dath smiled again, this time quite warmly. He liked it when his students fought back, although most of them did not seem to realize it. “Very well,” he said. “Stretch your mind, Miss Greene,” he prodded. “Think about what you’ve

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

said. Tell me why people are afraid of Klingons, as you put it, if the Organians are preventing them from starting a war with us.”

Her answer came quickly. “I don’t think people trust the Organians, either,” she said.

“*HAH!*” G’dath cried, slapping his hands together in glee. His students blinked, startled. “Yes! You’ve pinned it, Miss Greene,” G’dath said happily. “Excellent!”

G’dath stopped pacing and faced the Class, standing tall, his feet planted widely, arms akimbo; it was his accustomed posture of dominance, and he truly dominated. “The Federation does not trust the Organians to keep the peace,” he said. “The Klingon Empire does not, either. Interestingly, the reasons for this feeling of mistrust are exactly the same on both sides of our common border. Does anyone care to venture a guess as to what they might be? Mr. Sherman?”

Sherman rose. “I’d have no reason to trust the Organians,” he said.

“Interesting. Please elaborate.”

“There is no guarantee that the Organians will continue to keep the peace,” Sherman said. “Nothing I see keeps them from dropping the whole idea—and, if they did so, where would that leave us? I think the Klingons might feel the same way about it.”

“Very good, Mr. Sherman,” G’dath said, nodding. “Exactly so. Neither we nor the Klingon Empire can be sure the Organians will keep their part of the agreement, because neither side is quite sure why the Organians got themselves involved with us in the first place. Perhaps they intended their intervention to be temporary; it is certainly true that the Organians have not been heard from since shortly after the Treaty was signed. It is even possible that the treaty is an elaborate device to lure us into

Organian domination. Great minds—pardon my sarcasm—on both sides of the border have considered all the possibilities, and they have time and again seized upon the worst of them.

“I’ll spare you all from having to come up with the other reason I had in mind,” G’dath continued. “We know little about the Organians. We know they stand upon a rung of the evolutionary ladder far above the one we occupy. They are sentient beings of pure energy; they long ago stopped needing their bodies to act as containers for their minds. We do not *think* Organians can die, but we are not sure, and they will not tell us. Even crediting the Organians with the purest and most unselfish of motives, it must be supposed that some presently unimaginable force or natural disaster could wipe them out or, at the very least, distract them from maintaining the peace between the Federation and the Empire.”

G’dath reseated himself at his desk. “Therefore,” he continued, “both sides feel they must act as if the Organians will not be there tomorrow. Starfleet states that its primary purpose is exploration and discovery, and its record of accomplishment in these areas is unarguable. However, Starfleet also has a role to play in maintaining the security of the Federation, and so the fleet is being augmented. Where there were but twelve Federation cruiser-class starships ten years ago, there are now forty-one built or a-building. One of those original dozen ships, the *Enterprise*, is being rushed back into service after extensive renovation, and other aging cruisers will be updated in the near future. These ships will be used primarily for exploration and discovery, certainly, but they also carry weapons—and the Klingon Empire knows it.

“At the same time,” G’dath continued, “the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Klingon Empire has developed an entirely new type of warship, the *K't'inga*-class heavy cruiser, and it is building them as fast as it can. Those running the Empire do not even bother to claim that the Imperial Fleet is intended to serve any purpose other than conquest and consolidation. It is also an interesting fact that the Organians have done nothing to stop the buildup on either side, despite the risk to peace the buildup itself entails. Why they have done nothing about it is yet another question without an answer.”

G'dath raised a finger. “And so,” he said, “the following is what was to be learned from watching the trivision today. Despite the Organian Peace Treaty, the threat of hostilities between the Federation and the Empire continues, and this is due to policies that are guided not by reasoned thinking but by fear, apprehension and suspicion. Mr. Siegel also mentioned the budgetary savings realized in the renovation of the *Enterprise*. That savings indeed feeds the buildup; I suggest to you that credits not expended on one ship can be spent on others.

“I would also suggest to you,” the teacher continued, “that there is a significant segment of public opinion that objects to Starfleet simply because its very existence might be taken as provocative. This pacifistic opinion is becoming politically important, and so it must be catered to by the Federation government—at least to some extent.”

G'dath looked at his watch. “We will discuss the pros and cons of a Federation presence in space next week,” he concluded. “It still lacks a few minutes of fifteen, but I think we will end our session now. It is a very pleasant day, and we should go out and enjoy what is left of it.”

As the members of the Class gathered their things and prepared to leave, the teacher cleared his throat.

“Extra assignments first,” G'dath announced, and there was a low groan. Despite all precedent, some of the students had begun to hope that the teacher had forgotten.

“Mr. Brickner,” G'dath said, “I desire from you a paper of two thousand words with your thoughts on the subjects we've just discussed. Include an outline—and, this time, please do the outline before you write the paper, and not after.”

Brickner's face fell.

“Mr. Cherniack,” G'dath continued, “I want a summary of two thousand words on starship survival techniques, with appropriate discussion. Mr. Stoller, please excerpt and discuss the repatriation and asylum provisions in the appendices to the Organian Peace Treaty, with particular attention to the text dealing with the bestowing of citizenship; three thousand words, if you please. Miss Durgin, please supply me with three thousand words giving examples of eventual amity between formerly warring nations. Take your examples from the history of Terra; I want at least five such in your paper. You are not limited as to era, but I would surely not neglect the twentieth century. Mr. Rico, the paper you submitted to me this morning on the mechanization of infantry during the second millennium was quite unsatisfactory. I want the paper rewritten—and you may add another thousand words to its length. The deadline for all papers is Monday, as this is Friday. Enjoy your weekend, everyone.”

The Class made good its escape. Once the last student had left the room, G'dath permitted himself a small smile. He listened to his students' muted conversation as they headed

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

down the halls and, as they left the building, he shifted his attention to the street three floors below.

Feeling themselves safe, some of his students were talking about him in their usual fashion, calling him by the derogatory nicknames they thought he did not know. G'dath liked that sort of rebellion on general principles—the insults showed a certain spirit among his group—but the names stung. G'dath liked spirit, and meant to encourage it, but he liked even more the fact that several of his better students, such as Greene and Siegel, never participated in the name-calling and, in fact, frequently defended him against their classmates. That pleased G'dath. Not only was he touched that some of his students would take his part against their peers, but it demonstrated the ability of humans to grow beyond prejudice. It gave him great hope.

Satisfied that he had done another good day's work, G'dath gathered his things and left the room. The lights obediently faded as they sensed him go.

G'DATH WALKED TWO BLOCKS DOWNTOWN and caught the busy crosstown slidewalk rolling eastward toward Stuyvesant Preserve. The slidewalk ran from river to river at street level. G'dath always caught the slidewalk at the corner of Fourteenth Street and the Avenue of the Federation, which all N'Yorkers called Sixth Avenue.

The slidewalk was nothing more than a wide strip of strong, textured metal that was propelled by small but powerful friction grips on side tracks; it most closely resembled a conveyor belt. Unless there was a problem, the slidewalk never stopped; people simply stepped on and

stepped off. The slidewalk was inarguably the most pleasant and efficient way to move large numbers of people in an urban area. Private vehicles were almost unknown in the city. Flitters for hire—taxicabs—were available for fast point-to-point travel in N'York, but the city government imposed such a high user fee on privately owned vehicles that, effectively, only cabs and emergency vehicles were permitted to operate.

The slidewalk ran at a steady eight kilometers per hour, adequate for a short-range trip. If that wasn't fast enough for some people, however, they could walk, jog or even run in the direction of travel. They might even catch one of the silent, battery-driven jitneys that ran along routes where slidewalks had not been installed. Most transit users, however, preferred to walk a few blocks and take the slidewalk. After several centuries, most N'Yorkers had finally learned how not to rush.

G'dath was one of those determined non-rushers. He was generally content to lean quietly against a convenient stanchion on the slidewalk and drink in the usually beautiful N'York weather. He liked his weather warm and dry, which this fine day in July was. The Klington knew that N'York summers had once been brutally hot seasons, but that had been before Terrans had learned to control their weather.

The slidewalk passed over the sunken Fifth Avenue Strip, the wide north-south slidewalk that ran from Central Park South to Washington Square. G'dath saw that, like the Fourteenth Street slidewalk, the Strip was fairly crowded. The nice weather had apparently coaxed many N'Yorkers to leave their offices.

G'dath looked up again as he and his fellow passengers rolled past the Strip. The Klington noticed that he was being stared at by some and

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

carefully ignored by others. Despite the crowding on the sidewalk, G'dath noticed that he had plenty of room; no one cared to stand near him.

All of this was nothing new. G'dath was quite used to attracting attention wherever he went. *Perhaps they expect me to go berserk and begin tearing them limb from limb*, he thought. He did not see another of his kind anywhere on the sidewalk. He almost never did and, as always, it made him feel very much alone. He looked away and watched the buildings along Fourteenth Street roll by.

Having left Fifth Avenue a long block behind, the sidewalk was now passing the western half of the park located in Union Square. The square was a carefully maintained oasis in the impersonal desert of kilometer-high buildings surrounding it. Solar reflectors brought the sun into the park so the green things growing there might thrive. The venerable old trees of the square shaded office workers eating their late lunches and students cutting classes at their nearby colleges. While the north-south avenues that had once run through Union Square had long since been closed, famed Broadway had been diverted underground so that it might run uninterrupted through Manhattan, just as it had for centuries.

The sidewalk continued rolling east, leaving behind the commercial district, and entered a residential neighborhood. G'dath got off at Fourteenth Street and First Avenue, the southwestern limit of Stuyvesant Preserve. He thought that some of his fellow passengers seemed relieved at his departure, and he wished for the millionth time that he could find it within himself to be less sensitive about such things.

G'dath stopped for a moment at the corner newsfax, thumbed the charge plate, and ordered

his usual afternoon newspaper. Since it was Friday, he asked for copies of his favorite weekly magazines as well. G'dath preferred using the public 'fax to downloading material at home, as did many other people; using the 'fax was slightly cheaper and somewhat faster.

The newsfax debited a piddling amount of credit from his personal account and deposited three small squares of brightly colored RAMspam in its retrieval slot. The 'fax then thanked G'dath warmly in a female voice designed by skilled psychometricians to be most attractive to heterosexual human males. G'dath thought they might have done a better job of it, though. With all the breathiness in the voice, he could hardly understand it, even with his sensitive hearing. G'dath put the RAMspam in his pocket, retrieved his charge chip, and walked along the pedway and on into the Preserve.

ONCE UPON A TIME, VERY LONG AGO, there had not even been land here. There had been the river, and fish, and eel and clams and lobsters; there had even been sharks and dolphins.

In the nineteenth century, an era when humanity preferred in its arrogance to wrestle with nature rather than woo her, the river had been murdered by pollution. The area had been filled in with land and built upon. Cheap, inadequate apartments designed to house the immigrant poor had sprung up on the new land quickly, and the housing had lingered for far too long.

Then, in the middle of the twentieth century, at the bare beginnings of human civilization, the slum housing was razed and new housing was built—but this time with consideration for the human spirit. The new housing provided not

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

only shelter, but privacy and dignity. People had fought hard to escape the slums, but they fought even harder to get into the new housing that had replaced them. The provision of such housing was a signal that, at least in this way, humanity had taken a turn for the better.

That progressive spirit had been kept when, in their turn, the twentieth-century buildings had been torn down and replaced in the middle of the twenty-first century. That newer housing project was Stuyvesant Preserve, where G'dath and some sixty thousand other beings dwelled. The Preserve was an eye-catching collection of tall, well-designed apartment complexes set in the middle of pleasant, rolling parkland that lay hard by the restored banks of the thriving East River. Water from fountains played in the air as squirrels and sparrows skittered and flew. Young residents played in safe recreation areas while their elders relaxed on comfortable benches along winding walking paths that seemed more like nature trails than pedways.

Except for its great, old trees, the Preserve still looked new. The grounds were well-maintained, and low-power shielding protected the outer walls of the apartment buildings from the elements. With proper maintenance, the Preserve might last another thousand years before reconstruction or a major renovation would be required.

There was one supreme irony in all this. Like its vile grandparent of the nineteenth century, Stuyvesant Preserve still played home to immigrants. However, those long-departed original residents could not have begun to imagine the distant places from which these latest immigrants had come ... for some of them, like G'dath, were refugees from the stars.

G'DATH STROLLED SLOWLY THROUGH THE GROUNDS of the Preserve. The air was fresh and thick with the scent of green, growing things, and the happy sounds of children at excited play fell on his ears easily. He met and greeted several acquaintances; he was glad to see them, and they him. Here, at least, was a place where he did not feel like a stranger. Here, he felt at ease. Here, he belonged.

The Preserve played home to Andorians and Klingons, Australians and Ghanians, Skorr and Rigellians, Filipinos and Britons, Lactrans and Argellians. No one seemed strange, because everyone was.

G'dath lived in a building near the center of the Preserve. The entrance was located near a large fountain that had survived the razing of the previous housing project on the site. The sunlight broke and shattered against the flying droplets from the three fountain sprays, forming bright rainbows that even Klingon eyes could see ... and other things had been added to the water, to appeal to those species equipped to sense their beauty.

G'dath was not ten meters from the front door of his building when he heard a slight rustle to his right. He quickly turned and saw a small movement in a thick crop of bushes some ten meters away. The area was largely hidden from view by a group of trees, and he would have missed the movement entirely had he not been cued to it by hearing the rustle. He left the path and, walking onto the grass, went over to the bushes. He bent and peered into them, consciously adjusting his eyes to the darkness.

He saw two small bright spots of green looking back at him.

What is that? G'dath wondered, adjusting his vision further. *It is an animal—but not a squirrel, that's for certain.* He sensed that

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

something was wrong with it, whatever it was. *Hunger, that's it*, he realized. *That, and fear. Loneliness.* He understood that last.

As the pupils of his eyes dilated further and his retinas became more sensitive to the low light, G'dath made out a small nose and whiskers under the eyes. *It is a cat*, he suddenly realized. *No—it is a kitten, I believe they are called. A youngling cat. It is lost, perhaps, or willfully abandoned. Yes, abandoned. The kitten certainly does not look feral to me.*

The little cat and the big Klingon continued to study each other. *I wonder how long it has been here? G'dath wondered. It appears to be thin but, as nearly as I can tell without examining it closely, it seems healthy enough.*

G'dath had no idea how old the kitten might be; he had absolutely no experience with cats. The much larger analog species on his home planet of Klinzhai could not be domesticated and, in any case, it matured far differently. As a youngling on the family agricultural parcel, though, G'dath had had a pet targ, and his deep affection for the faithful beast lingered even now. He felt a similar pull toward this little one in front of him, although it was as unlike a targ as anything could be.

The attraction was apparently mutual. The kitten cautiously emerged from the bush and, after a moment, began approaching G'dath slowly. The Klingon blinked rapidly to help readjust his eyes for use in full daylight. Still squinting, he looked at the kitten. He saw that its fur was mostly gray, but that it had white paws and a white bib.

The kitten looked suspiciously at G'dath with big brown eyes, cocking its small head from one side to the other as it sniffed at him. The kitten's tail waved back and forth, sending semaphore signals in a body language known

only to its fellow felines.

Instinctively, as he would approach a target that was a stranger to him, G'dath crouched slowly, extending his hand knuckles out and palm inward. The kitten tensed, as if ready to bolt. "Here, little one," the Klingon said softly. "No harm will come to you."

G'dath waited patiently and did not move. After a while the animal approached him. It sniffed tentatively at his outstretched hand and then rubbed its head against the Klingon's knuckles. G'dath passed his hand lightly over the kitten's head and scratched it between its ears. The kitten seemed to smile as its mouth stretched back and its eyes closed in pleasure.

G'dath stood. The kitten trotted closer to him and began walking back and forth in front of him like a sentry, stropping against his leg on each pass. *I appear to have been adopted, G'dath thought. However, the rules in the Preserve say I cannot have an animal in the apartment with me. There are no pets allowed. I am a law-abiding person. I suppose I could give the kitten over to the authorities—*

G'dath looked down at the kitten again. It was sitting on the ground, its head cocked slightly to one side, and it was gazing up at him with wide eyes.

It trusted him completely.

The Klingon shrugged his large shoulders. *It is time to begin breaking the rules*, he decided. He looked behind him, back toward the pedway, and saw no one. He extended his hearing and heard no one within troublesome range. *It is well*, he thought. *The fewer complications there are, the better for us both.*

"We are going home now, little one," G'dath told the kitten. He stooped and picked it up. The kitten remained calm. The Klingon hid the kitten under his jacket and casually resumed

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

his walk toward his apartment building. He thought it possible that the doorkeeper might be able to detect the kitten if he simply held it in his arms . . . and it was probably wiser to conceal the little creature in any case. Despite his conviction that what he was doing was right, he was nervous about breaking a rule.

G'dath entered the lobby of his building and greeted the doorkeeper with his usual extreme courtesy. The content of whatever G'dath might happen to say was completely irrelevant to the doorkeeper, but it amused the Klingon to be scrupulously polite to a machine. The doorkeeper checked G'dath's voiceprint against its databanks and, since G'dath had not used the special phrase that signaled trouble, allowed the security door to open. G'dath noted with some relief that the doorkeeper did not react to the presence of the kitten under his jacket.

A lifttube was open and waiting. G'dath entered it.

"Hello, lifttube, and how has your day been?" he greeted it. The 'tube, warned by the doorkeeper, knew to take him to the fifty-first floor, where his apartment was; if G'dath had desired another destination, he would have said so.

When he reached his destination a few seconds later, G'dath politely thanked the uncaring 'tube and walked down the hall to the door of his apartment. He spoke to the door using a specific and special phrase. The door decided that G'dath was indeed the tenant of that apartment, and a relay turned off the security shielding that kept the apartment from being entered by anyone else.

The apartment door was talented. The phrase G'dath had used unlocked it with no complications. An alternative phrase would have unlocked it and, at the same time, set off

an alarm in the Stuyvesant Preserve security office. The phrase was used in case a felon forced a tenant to open a door under duress. Such things happened occasionally, despite all precautions. Criminals sometimes lurked in the Preserve—

"Hello, there," came a soft voice behind him.

The Klingon wheeled, startled, but it was only Mr. Olesky, the old man who had moved into the apartment across the hall a week or so before. G'dath had passed him in the hallway once or twice, and each time Mr. Olesky had greeted him pleasantly. That had surprised G'dath; simple courtesy was not something he encountered every day.

"Is something the matter?" Mr. Olesky asked, genuinely concerned. "Don't tell me you didn't hear me coming—not with that hearing of yours."

G'dath shook his head. "No, I did not hear you. I was . . . thinking." *I hope he does not notice the youngling cat*, he thought . . . but he was very much afraid the little thing would squirm under his jacket. He held the garment closed more tightly, hoping that the kitten did not make too noticeable a lump.

"Ah," Mr. Olesky said. "Thinking. I had an uncle who thought once. Wrong place, wrong time. Flitter landed right on him while he was doing it. Squashed him flat. Nobody in the family's done any thinking since."

"Truly?"

"It's a joke. Say, are you cold?"

"Cold? Why, no."

"You're holding your jacket closed pretty tight, there."

"Oh. No, I am not cold. This is a—nervous mannerism of mine. It is somewhat analogous to a human, er, twitching."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“No kidding? Really? Well, you learn something new every day. Anyway, reason I’m here —package came for you this morning. I took it for you.”

“A package?”

“Yeah. They needed a thumbprint on the delivery receipt, and the doorkeeper’s short on thumbs. You expecting something from an outfit called Custom Electronics, over on Third?”

“Why, yes,” G’dath said, growing excited. “Yes, I am.”

“Here it is,” Mr. Olesky said, handing a small box to G’dath. The Klingon reached for it, momentarily forgetting the kitten hidden underneath his jacket.

Mr. Olesky watched in fascination. “You *do* learn something new every day,” he said. “I didn’t know you could make your chest roll around like that.”

“Ah—”

“Hey, was that a squeak?”

“I did not hear anything,” G’dath said as he slipped the package into a pocket. “Perhaps the building is settling.”

Mr. Olesky nodded his head slowly. “Maybe so. Well, take it easy.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Olesky. Thank you for taking receipt of the package for me.”

“Don’t mention it. See you around.”

“Certainly. Thank you once more.”

G’dath entered his apartment, closed and locked the door behind him with another command, and put the RAMspam on a table just inside the entrance. The kitten stuck its head out of G’dath’s jacket and blinked.

G’dath took the baby cat and placed it carefully on the floor. “There you are, little one,” he said. The kitten stood still for a moment, looking around the room. Then it

began walking here and there on its thin legs, sniffing in the direction of everything.

G’dath’s apartment was small, but a large window gave it an atmosphere of airiness. The Klingon’s taste in furniture came directly from his upbringing. He favored pieces of light design fashioned in walnut, with bright, textured fabrics for upholstery. He also had a rug of many stark colors, with red predominating. Since G’dath was a devout person, there was a *shimi-shan* in a corner of the living room, its iconic centerpiece oriented to the north in order to indicate the direction of the Birthplace—or, rather, where the Birthplace would be if this were Klinzhai and not Terra. The *shimi-shan* was the very same one that, by tradition, had been placed by his sleeping mat during the night before his fourth birthday; it was always done that way so the shrine would be the first thing a male youngling would see upon awakening. The *shimi-shan* was one of the few items G’dath had been able to take with him when he’d left the Empire.

G’dath had no artwork on his walls, in observance of the Precept against ostentatious display. Instead, what space there was had been taken up by long shelves filled with RAMspam wafers and printed material; much of the latter consisted of old books. G’dath preferred going through books to reading RAMspam files from a datapad or a console.

There was no trivision receiver in the apartment. G’dath could not abide 3V, except for current events specials such as the feed today from San Francisco. If there was something he thought he should see, G’dath would set his computer to record the program and play it back for him at a later time, with the commercial announcements stripped out; the computer’s flatscreen monitor was adequate for

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

his modest tastes.

G'dath kept his computer in the bedroom on a small desk near his sleeping mat. The computer was a very old IBApple with a mere three deabytes of RAM, fourth-level AI ROM, and no holo capability at all. It wasn't much, as far as Terran home computers went, but it was a far better machine than he could ever have gotten for private use back in the Empire, and he was glad to have it. G'dath kept the computer in his bedroom because he had the kind of itchy mind that would frequently wake him up in the middle of the night to prompt him to explore the whichness of what or the thisness of that.

G'dath went to the desk and seated himself. The kitten found a place next to his right boot, settled back on its haunches, and watched the Klingon's every move with great interest.

"Computer," G'dath said.

"Working."

"Access the databanks of the N'York Public Library."

"Ready."

"Subject: cats. How much do you have?"

"Linking into associated databanks," the computer said. "Found. Three-point-seven terabytes on cats available. Specific interest?"

"I need to know what to do for a kitten."

"Excuse me?"

G'dath's order had been too complicated for the primitive machine. "Kittens," he tried.

"Three hundred seventy megabytes."

"Caring for kittens."

"One hundred seventy megabytes."

"Primary needs."

"Summary article available. One hundred forty kilobytes."

"Download, please."

"Working. Done. Access file KITTENCARE."

"Put KITTENCARE on screen."

"Working. Done."

G'dath paged through the long article quickly and noted his most immediate needs. *A litter box?* he wondered. *What purpose could a box of trash serve—oh, I see. Ah, and there is specially manufactured food for them as well. There are toys available, too—and they have their own medical specialists. I shall need to make the acquaintance of one.*

G'dath found a stylus and began making written notes on a paper pad, a method of working he liked because it helped him to think. When he finished, he saved the entire KITTENCARE file to persistent RAM.

"Computer."

"Working."

"Load integrity routine, final revision."

"Found. Loaded. Ready."

"Stand by." G'dath retrieved the Custom Electronics package from his pocket and carefully opened it. Inside was precisely what he expected to find—a black plastic chip assembly, six centimeters across, with the merest fleck of gold set precisely in its center. That tiny bit of gold was the chip G'dath had spent several years designing and Custom Electronics had spent several months constructing. The Klingon had sacrificed much for this moment... but he knew that the culmination of his dream might now—literally—be within his grasp. Since G'dath was a religious man, he also felt it was beyond coincidence that the chip assembly had arrived today, what with the reporter from the WorldNews organization coming to see him tomorrow about the story she planned to do about him and his work.

G'dath plugged a small lead from the computer into a port on the chip assembly. "Run

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

integrity routine,” he said. The computer carried the schematics of the chip in non-volatile memory and would spot any manufacturing defects in it. Given the complexity of the chip, the test would take several hours.

“Well, my little friend—” G’dath said, looking down.

The kitten was gone.

G’dath left the bedroom and walked into the living room, looking around. “Kitten?” he called. “Where are you, kitten?”

There was no answering sound. The Klingon was puzzled. *Where could it have gone?* he asked himself apprehensively. *Out the window somehow?* He was relieved to note that the window was closed and, in any case, the soft shimmering just beyond it showed that the shielding protecting the building remained in place.

“Kitten? Hello, kitten?” he called again. “Come here, kitten.” He was growing quite worried. *Is it dead already?* he wondered anxiously. *What have I done wrong?*

There suddenly came a soft squeaking sound from one of the topmost bookshelves, and G’dath looked in that direction. The kitten was looking down at him, wide-eyed. It was apparently fearful of jumping back down to the floor.

G’dath smiled with relief and shook his head. “Now how did you ever get up there?” he asked. “That shelf is more than two meters above the floor. That was quite a leap, little one.” He stood on tip-toe, carefully reached for the kitten, and retrieved it.

The kitten looked at him calmly, utterly self-possessed and calm in the Klingon’s grasp. He felt it buzzing contentedly in his powerful hands.

“I believe there are some scraps for you in

the stasis unit in the kitchen,” G’dath told it. “I will go out presently and secure you something more appropriate—”

The door chime sounded.

Who can that be? wondered G’dath. Have I been found out already? He walked quickly to the bedroom, deposited the kitten gently on the sleeping mat, and left, ordering the door to slide shut behind him. G’dath put his eye to the small peeper plate set into the front door to see who was ringing the bell.

It was Mr. Olesky. G’dath ordered the front door to open. “Yes, Mr. Olesky?” he asked politely. “What may I do for you?”

“Oh, not a thing, not a thing,” the old man said. “I just thought you might need this.” G’dath looked down and saw that his neighbor was holding out a small freshpak of tuna.

“They like fish, especially tuna,” Mr. Olesky said in a low voice, “and I had this on hand. I figured the poor little thing must be pretty hungry, and this’ll give you a chance to run out and get some real cat food.”

“Er, thank you,” G’dath said. “Thank you very much. This is very thoughtful.”

“No huhu. Just don’t let anybody else in the building see the kitten; you know what’d happen. ’Bye, now.” The old man returned to his own apartment.

G’dath remained at the open front door, as nearly overwhelmed by Mr. Olesky’s thoughtfulness as it was possible for him to be. Kindness always affected him that way, on those rare occasions when he encountered it. He allowed his front door to close after a moment.

The Klingon opened the bedroom door, and the kitten came bounding out. It jumped on top of the table, landing squarely on the RAMspam placed there by G’dath, sending the squares spinning and flying. The Klingon picked up the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

kitten, which regarded him with bright eyes for a moment. It then yawned widely, and the Klingon smiled.

G'dath held the kitten a bit higher and looked more closely. "You are a male," he said, and the kitten squeaked agreement. "Some things in the galaxy do not change very much, do they? All right, Leaper; let us get you fed. A —a friend has brought you something good to eat. It will be a fine first meal in your new home."

The Klingon put the kitten down on the floor and walked into the kitchen. Leaper trotted closely after him.

Chapter Three

AT FIFTEEN SECONDS BEFORE fourteen hundred hours in San Francisco, Kirk entered Admiral Nogura's reception area and was greeted by one of his yeomen. "Good afternoon, Admiral Kirk," the young ensign said, rising quickly. "This way, please. The admiral will see you immediately."

The yeoman escorted Kirk across the waiting area to a door made of genuine oak. It was marked PRIVATE at eye level in neat gold lettering. The yeoman knocked softly on the wooden door just under the word; it made a

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

satisfying sound. “Come,” came Nogura’s voice. The office door swung itself open, and Kirk walked in.

Nogura was standing at his office bar, which was usually hidden behind a copy of a world map originally drawn in the sixteenth century by a cartographer with more imagination than fact at his disposal. There was a servitor, but the old admiral was mixing drinks by hand. He liked to supply the personal touch whenever possible.

Nogura’s office was larger than Kirk’s, as the privileges of rank demanded, and its decor tended toward the Eastern. The generally old-fashioned air of the room reflected Nogura’s traditional values. Tasteful Japanese prints in thin black frames had been hung with a skilled eye for balance and symmetry. That eye had been Heihachiro Nogura’s. There was no artwork in the office that related to space or the sea, or to the gallant ships that plied both.

“I thought that you might not mind, James,” Nogura said, handing him a filled glass. “Your usual. This is going to be one of those talks you are supposed to have over a drink.”

“Oh-oh,” Kirk said, shaking his head in mock despair. “I knew it.”

“What is the matter?” Nogura asked, feigning surprise. “I am told I mix a *good* drink. Come, James; let us sit down over there.” Nogura indicated the informal conference area in the corner nearest the window, away from his desk. The commanding admiral had virtually the same view of the Golden Gate that Kirk enjoyed, since Nogura’s office was located almost directly above his.

Nogura turned in his seat to face the window. “That bridge is truly beautiful,” he said, gazing fondly at it. “I have always loved it; there is nothing else quite like it anywhere. Did you know I was part American?”

“No, sir, I didn’t.”

“I am,” he said, still looking at the bridge. “My three-times-great-grandfather was from this very city, as a matter of fact. He was born here in the twenty-twenties, according to the family records; my people had been in California for five generations by then. Great-great-great-grandfather was one of those who went back to Japan after the Greater Quake, when Tokyo opened its doors to American refugees of Japanese ancestry—that was before discrimination in immigration policy was banned, of course. I still have blood relatives here in the city, however, including more than a few great-great-great-grandnieces and nephews; some of us stayed. James, there is a problem.”

The old man had a knack for bending a conversation until it broke. “All right, Admiral,” Kirk said. “Shoot.”

Nogura shifted a bit to face Kirk directly. “Did you see Timothea Rogers on the trivision this morning?” he asked.

“Um, yes.”

“And what did you think?”

Kirk paused. “She was awful,” he said finally.

“That is precisely the word I had in mind,” said Nogura, nodding slowly. He sipped his drink, letting a certain silence grow.

“James,” Nogura continued after a moment, “when public relations in Starfleet was no more than a simple matter of mailing holos of starships to schoolchildren, Rogers did well. Now, though, the political situation is such that I *must* have somebody out there on point who does not appear on trivision as—as a cold fish. Those political forces arrayed against us are making a good case for themselves. We of Starfleet do not do nearly so well.”

“So you want me to do the job for you,”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Kirk said, knowing his Nogura.

“That is correct.”

“But, Admiral, I don’t want to leave Fleet Deployment,” Kirk said. “I like it there.”

“Truly? It seems to me you could use a change.”

“I had a change eight months ago,” Kirk replied. “I don’t think I need another.”

Nogura turned serious. “I disagree,” he said, studying the rim of his glass. “Very little around here escapes my attention, James. I know about your problems with Lori.”

Kirk’s lips tightened. “With all due respect, sir, I think my marriage is *my* business—and mine alone.”

Nogura looked Kirk straight in the eye. “Not if your personal problems begin to affect your job performance.”

“Have they?”

“Not yet,” Nogura said. “I intend to prevent that from happening.”

“They won’t.”

“They will,” Nogura said quietly. “It is inevitable, James; I *know*. Besides, I do not intend for you to drop your current job. You will remain in charge of Fleet Deployment. I want you to wear a second hat. Chief MacPherson can take over the day-to-day work on the refit of *Endeavour*. Your organization is in place, correct? Used to its job, morale high, skills sharp?”

“Yes, sir, but—”

“Hear me, James. No more rebuilding individual ships for you; I want you to go public for Starfleet and help me rebuild them *all*.”

Nogura gestured at Kirk with his glass. “I want you to tell people about us. They will listen to you. You are, after all, a hero.”

“I’m a hero?” Kirk said, genuinely puzzled. “Admiral, excuse me, but where in hell did you

get an idea like that?”

“You are a hero,” Nogura said flatly.

“Genuinely. Your mission was the stuff of epics. People became very excited about it. They are *still* excited about it.” The admiral shrugged. “In these times, that is more than enough to make one a hero—and I need a hero right now, James.”

“I’m not a hero,” Kirk said.

“Very well, then,” Nogura said agreeably. “You are not a hero. Regardless, James, I do most sincerely need whatever it is you are.” Those bright, dark eyes set in that aged Asian face studied Kirk intently.

“You know we have political problems,” Nogura continued. “Rogers is not helping to solve them. Indeed, she has been responsible for causing some and making others worse.”

“I agree with you about that,” Kirk replied, “but I’m still not sure what I can do to help.”

Nogura waved his free hand. “Be yourself, James,” he said. “That is enough. Just be James Kirk, only be him in full public view. Look—I would like to show you something.” The old admiral touched a button on the conference table, and a life-sized three-dimensional image took form in the opposite corner of the room.

Admiral Kirk blinked. He was a bit surprised to find himself looking at Captain Kirk standing easily in the trivision zone. The handsome, confident figure in the now-obsolete yellow command shirt was talking, but there was no audio; Nogura had not activated it.

“Why, that’s me,” the real Kirk said unnecessarily. “What’s this from, Admiral?”

“Your first formal post-mission media briefing, the day after you brought *Enterprise* home. Remember that?”

Kirk grimaced. “Like the Christians remember the lions,” he said. “I kept wanting to

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

raise my shields and get the hell out of there.”

“Indeed?” Nogura said. He gestured at the hologram. “I know you were nearing your inner limits; in fact, when you went on your post-mission six-month furlough, I was afraid I was not going to get you back. Believe me, though—I cannot tell that you were in trouble merely by looking at this piece of omnitape. The scars do not show. In a word, you were acting... heroically.”

Kirk continued to watch himself perform for the reporters. *Where was this thing held, anyway?* he wondered. *Here at the Admiralty, or at Spacedock? I just can't remember. Certainly not aboard ship...*

“I know you took a while to recover your equilibrium,” Nogura continued, “but that is not the point. Look at yourself there, James. You were still in command, answering all the questions and getting the reporters to like you—which they did, by the way; the coverage we received was very favorable, despite the perceptible anti-Starfleet bias the media often show. That coverage turned out to be very important to us, James. The successful completion of your five-year mission was the primary topic of conversation at every Federation political dinner for many weeks afterward.”

Nogura let Kirk watch himself for another moment and then continued. “I could show you figures on how just this one appearance of yours improved our public image, helped us with recruitment, and smoothed our way through Appropriations in Geneva,” the old admiral said. “It did do all of those things, too. Make no mistake about that.”

“Okay, Admiral,” Kirk said. “I believe in the value of good public relations—but I’m no hero.”

“If you are not a hero, Mr. Kirk,” Nogura replied, “you’ll do until one comes along.”

Kirk watched his other self raise his finger to make a point. *I think I still have that damned shirt somewhere*, he thought idly. *I never did turn it in for recycling. I just couldn't—not the very last shirt. It's still in the closet at home. Wasteful of me, I know.*

“Have you seen enough?” Nogura asked, and Kirk nodded. The old admiral touched another button, and Captain Kirk disappeared into thin air.

“What I would like you to do,” Nogura said, “is make a number of public appearances on behalf of Starfleet. I want you to represent us in the arena of public opinion. I want you to explain to people what it is that we do, and what it is that we want to do in the years ahead. I want you to correct the misperception that we are intended as a force for aggression. I want you to tell people the truth: that we are the best chance for peace there is, because our mission is not to conduct warfare against others, but to explore new worlds and open them to colonization. Indeed, we help relieve the population pressures that most often lead to war by conducting this exploration.”

“So what am I supposed to say to people?” Kirk asked.

Nogura shrugged. “Say anything you want to say,” he told him. “Simply be honest. Being honest is what you do the best.”

“Flatterer.”

“It is the simple truth, James. Will you do this thing for me?”

Kirk pondered. “Have you run this past Timmie Rogers yet?”

“No,” Nogura said. “This is my decision and my responsibility. I am not going to fire Timothea, James. She has a long and good

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

record in Starfleet; I am not going to throw her out of the building simply because she failed at a job that I should not have given her in the first place. I will not penalize her for my own failure. She will remain in nominal charge of the public relations office, but you will be the man out front.”

Kirk frowned. “I’d be working for Timmie?”

“No. You would be working for me and reporting directly to me, not Timothea.”

Kirk paused. “I also need to know if any of this infringes on Lori’s turf.”

Nogura shook his head. “No, James, it does not. Lori Ciana will continue to be my personal representative to the ‘new human’ groups. You will be Starfleet’s spokesman to *everyone*. Admiral Ciana’s role will be more finely tuned—and far less visible—than yours. Please be assured that I have no desire to add to your... personal difficulties.”

“I see,” Kirk said, falling silent.

Nogura waited patiently.

Suddenly Kirk nodded and said, “Admiral, if you really need me, then I accept.”

Nogura held out his hand, and Kirk shook it. “Thank you very much, James,” Nogura said, smiling broadly. “I know you hate having to do this sort of thing, good as you are at it.”

“I’ll try not to let it show. Um, when do I start?”

“How does tomorrow morning sound?”

Nogura asked. “I have already arranged for you to be a guest on the *WorldNews Saturday* interview program.”

“You have, eh?” Kirk said, smiling ruefully. “You were that sure of me?”

“I was fairly sure that you would want to help me and Starfleet, yes; I like to think that I know you pretty well by now. By the way, you

will be talking about the Dart Project. Do you know much about it?”

“Quite a bit, actually,” Kirk said. “Old spacecraft fascinate me, and that one’s just about the oldest there is. Besides—well, the name. You know.”

“I do know,” Nogura said, “and I understand completely. You will be fine tomorrow, then.”

“I will. I appreciate your confidence in me, Admiral.”

“And I, in turn, appreciate your help.” Nogura leaned back in his chair. “Very well, James,” he said. “Everything you need to know for your guest appearance—where the studios are, a progress report on the status of the project, and that sort of thing—will be available for download to your ID when you return to your office. I will call Timothea Rogers in here a little later this afternoon and get that part of it over with.”

“Here’s luck,” Kirk said. He touched glasses with Nogura, and both men drained what was left of their drinks.

KIRK HAD NO ROLE TO PLAY in the flight of *Enterprise*’s command section, but he was vitally interested in its outcome. He arrived back in his office to find Riley sitting in his chair and watching trivision.

“Comfortable?” Kirk asked pleasantly as Riley scrambled out of Kirk’s chair.

“Sorry, Admiral.” For once, Riley seemed almost embarrassed to be caught loafing.

Kirk looked at the 3V image. It looked odd, because it had no depth. The picture was a flat monochromatic wafer hanging in the air equidistant from the array of depth pickups buried in the floor around the periphery of the office’s trivision zone. That the picture was in

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

two-dee meant that it had to be very old indeed; the absence of color and depth probably meant the work was protected by anti-turnerizing legislation.

Kirk knew to the year just how old the show was, because he recognized it and was familiar with its history. What Riley was watching was precisely three hundred fourteen years old.

“Which episode is it?” Kirk asked.

“Oh, it’s the one where Ralph sneaks out and goes bowling with Norton without telling Alice, and he hurts his back. Ralph has a bus company physical in the morning—”

“I remember.”

“I was actually just about to put WorldNews on. Really.”

“So go ahead,” said Kirk tiredly. “No, wait—not the WorldNews feed. Put on our own closed-circuit feed instead, and let’s have mission audio with it. I’d like to listen to the rendezvous traffic, but let’s keep it down.”

“Yes, sir.” Riley selected the in-house feed with the trivision controls recessed into the surface of Kirk’s desk. The commander then reseated himself across the room as the admiral sat down in his own chair.

Both men watched silently as remotely controlled trivision scanners mounted on Spacedock Four picked up the oncoming saucer. The scene was set against the brilliantly lighted Terra, its bright clouds modestly hiding the planetary geography behind a veil of vapor. The gentle and, to Kirk’s ear, comforting chatter of mission audio occupied the auditory background. Kirk easily recognized Uhura’s voice among all the others.

“God, this is a beautiful shot,” Kirk said. “Window, go opaque.”

The window behind Kirk turned completely black, shutting out all daylight. The trivision

picture was solid and without interference. It seemed to Kirk as if he were hanging in space, sitting in a comfortable chair and feeling a godlike disdain for anything like a pressure suit. He watched as the saucer slowly came toward him, rising. He felt as if he could reach out and touch it. He might even have tried, had Riley not been there with him.

“Where’s Spacedock Four now?” Kirk asked.

Riley did some figures in his head. “Um, near enough thirty-six degrees east, seven degrees south—right over central Tanzania, more or less.”

SPACEDOCK FOUR WAS NOT MUCH MORE than a lattice of metal open to space. It was just wide and deep enough to service a cruiser-class starship. Spacedock Four rode a low orbit that skipped back and forth across the equator by as much as ten degrees of latitude. Its much bigger brother, the main Spacedock, bore no number and was an enormous enclosed facility in a much higher, geosynchronous orbit above the Atlantic Ocean.

As big as the main Spacedock was, it was always terribly crowded and busy. In contrast, *Enterprise* could have Spacedock Four all to herself for as long as her renovation might take. There would be no pressure to get *Enterprise* finished just because some other ship needed the dock space.

Captain Decker watched Spacedock Four grow in the main screen. The saucer was approaching it from below and to the rear. He could see *Enterprise*’s engineering section floating serenely in the center of the lattice. The section was being held steady relative to the spacedock frame by a series of tractor-pressor

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

beams set against its hull.

The last time Decker had been here, the new warp drivers had not yet been attached to the engine pylons. The engineering section had looked to him like a big white yam with three tuber sprouts sticking out of it at awkward angles. It had, truth to tell, been a rather disheartening sight. Now, with the drivers on, the engineering section looked less like a yam and more like part of a ship, although there were still large patches of the hull that hadn't yet been covered with trititanium plating.

Decker's job today was to put the last big piece of a very intricate puzzle into place, and to do it right the first time. The saucer would overtake Spacedock Four, pass it, and then back its way in so that it could be seated precisely on the main pylon by skilled gangs wielding portable tractor-pressor equipment. The complicated inbound maneuver was designed to avoid damage to the warp drivers, which rode aft of the neck and a bit higher than the saucer.

As the saucer passed Spacedock Four, one of the blank screens on Dossie's board suddenly came alive with a red, box-like design. It blinked steadily, pulsing like a heartbeat; crosshairs in the center of the display wavered.

"Rendezvous cue on my board, Captain," Flores reported. "Shall I begin alignment maneuvers?"

"Go ahead, Commander," Decker said.

"Navigation controls slaved to helm," DiFalco reported. "All yours, Dossie."

"Thanks, Suzanne," Flores replied. She got busy, and the crosshairs in the rendezvous cue soon stopped wavering. The cue would guide Dossie into Spacedock Four, and it would allow her to position the saucer correctly above the neck of the main pylon in a close approximation of the precise mating position. Once all that had

been done, Flores would lock her board. The tractor-pressor gangs would then take over and pull the saucer down the rest of the way, using their push-and-pull beams to make the final, painstaking corrections that would seat the saucer correctly. If they bumped or missed, the damage to the saucer and the pylon could be considerable.

"Forward motion stopped," Flores reported. "Orientation along x and y axes is right on the money. Minus sixteen meters on z axis; correcting." Dossie's fingers danced for a moment on her controls. The rendezvous cue then held steady and Flores said, "We're lined up, Captain."

"Back her in, Miss Flores."

"Aye, sir. Closing with forward end of Spacedock Four, ten meters per second."

"Uhura," Decker said, "let's take a look."

"Rear view, Captain," Uhura answered. "Magnification one."

The yawning mouth of the spacedock appeared and grew steadily larger on the viewer as the saucer approached. Decker could see the worksuited teepee gangs at their posts here and there on the lattice of the spacedock, well out of the way of the saucer's path and ready to take over.

"Uhura, please get me the engineering section," Decker requested. "I want to talk to Mr. Scott." There was a brief pause, and then the chief engineer's familiar burr came over the bridge's speakers. "Aye, Cap'n? Scott here."

"We'll be in shortly, Scotty. Status on your end?"

Decker could almost see Scott shrug. "Nothin' much ta do now. We're all ready for the couplin'. The teepee gangs are holdin' us as steady as the flow o' the river Clyde. All I can do is wurra about how the gangs pull off the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

placement. Wish I was doin' it meself; we'll nae get a second chance there."

"We won't need more than one shot at it, Mr. Scott," said Decker. "I'm now having Uhura establish an open line between you and us."

"Aye, Captain. Scott out."

"Captain," Flores said, "we're now entering Spacedock Four. Extrapolation shows us still within lateral tolerance for docking. I'm slowing us to eight meters per second."

"Very good," Decker said. He watched the viewer intently. The delicate-looking metalwork of the spacedock began rolling past them slowly. *Enterprise's* engineering section floated in the center of the screen. Decker could see the tractor-pressor gangs tracking the saucer with their gun-like equipment, waiting for the word from their chief to take over.

"Five meters per second, Captain," Flores said. "Range to docking, two hundred meters."

"Uhura, please get me the teepee chief," Decker said, and almost instantly there came a rough voice. "Welcome to Spacedock Four, Captain Decker. Head ganger here. Name's Billingsgate."

"Hello, Chief," Decker answered. "Ready to dance?"

"Just name the tune, Captain."

"Stand by, then. Miss Flores, distance to docking?"

"One hundred fifty-five meters."

"Bring us to a dead stop at fifty meters. Chief Billingsgate, you'll have us at your mercy in twenty seconds."

"Awaiting your word, Captain. Don't worry; we'll treat her kindly."

"You'd better, Billy," came Scotty's voice, "or I'll have your—"

"Quiet, all," ordered Decker. "Status, Miss

Flores?"

"Speed steady at five meters per second, Captain. Distance now eighty meters."

There was a pause.

"Fifty meters, Captain," Flores reported. "All stop."

"Take it, Billingsgate," Decker said.

There was a slight jar as the teepee gangs hit the saucer simultaneously at many points with their tractor and pressor beams. Then there came a sudden, loud *whap!* and a sharp, jarring shift to starboard.

"Dammit, crew six," came Billingsgate's voice, "you're two percent above nominal! Ease it down *now!* Crew three, boost two percent to correct, and cut to nominal at my signal." There was another *whap!* and a shift, this time to port.

"Cut!" the head ganger said. "That's got her, people. Great, great. Just *super!* Okay, she's steady and holding. Ease her on in, now. Crew one, start pushing as per program. Easy, *real* easy!"

"Uhura, give us a front view, please," Decker said more calmly than he felt.

The scene changed to show the front end of the spacedock. Decker could see a gang of six teepee handlers—undoubtedly crew number one—floating in the center of the spacedock around a large teepee assembly. The equipment, which had been quickly brought into position by its crew after the saucer had passed by, was being held steady by smaller teepee beams aimed at it from the spacedock frame.

"Rear view again, please," Decker ordered.

"Rear view, sir," Uhura answered.

The scene shifted to show the forward ends of *Enterprise's* warp drivers filling the screen. They were huge—so much so that not very much of the spacedock could be seen beyond them.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Flores consulted her board. “We’re close now, Captain. Seconds only.”

Billingsgate’s voice came again. “Very good, people. Very good. Ease her on down, seven. Eight, watch that drop rate. One, stop pushing. Six, pull her even with the neck. All right, seven and eight, let her down now. Easy, easy.”

There was a bump as gentle as the kiss of a Irish breeze.

“Docked, Captain,” Flores reported.

“Mr. Scott!” Decker called. “Latch on!”

There was a quick series of heavy *thunks* from somewhere down below. Decker felt the vibration through his command chair.

“Latched, Captain,” Scotty said. “I show all green here. I also show full environmental integrity at the dockin’ interface.”

“All green at this end, too, Captain,” Flores said.

“All of the saucer’s environmental functions have been transferred to Engineering, Captain,” DiFalco reported. “No appreciable delay in transfer. Saucer-resident functions are now on standby.”

“Teepee gangs powering down,” Billingsgate called. “You’re being held in place by spacedock systems now, *Enterprise*. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Same here,” Decker said. “Thank you, Chief.”

Just then, the bridge turbolift doors slid open and onto the bridge stepped Montgomery Scott. Decker swung his chair to face him. The chief engineer was smiling broadly.

“Just thought I’d be the first t’ welcome ye officially, Captain,” he said brightly. “Besides, I had t’ check the functionin’ o’ the turbolift, now, did I not?”

“That you did, Mr. Scott,” Decker said,

rising, “and thank you for the welcome.” He held out his hand, and Scotty shook it. It was only then that Decker relaxed, heaving a very audible sigh of relief—a sigh that was echoed by the others on the bridge, and one that was soon lost in laughter, cheering and no small amount of applause.

KIRK FELT HIS GUT begin to unclench. He watched closely as the trivision scanners showed the reunited *Enterprise* serenely maintaining station in the center of the spacedock. Everything seemed to be fine. *Nice, Will, very nice*, Kirk thought. *Couldn’t have done better myself.*

The thought suddenly groused him, and he sighed.

Kirk turned his attention back to the data display screen set into the surface of his desk. True to his word, Nogura had quickly supplied him with the details of what he would need to know for his appearance the next morning on the WorldNews interview show. The only thing Nogura had not supplied him with was the desire to do the show in the first place ... but Kirk had always been a good sailor, and he would do the best he could for his boss.

From what he could see, the Dart Project seemed to be going well. It was close to schedule and still under budget, although not by very much. Despite the rather high cost, Kirk felt that Nogura had been right about funding the project. It was certainly a worthy cause, and it would secure a great deal of friendly media coverage. Kirk knew that trying to keep the media friendly was a job that he was going to become very familiar with in the next few months—years, perhaps. *Will it be for the rest of my career?* Kirk wondered, and he suddenly

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

felt a touch of despair. *Just what the hell have I gotten myself into, really?* He shivered and read on, the datascreen scrolling automatically as his eyes scanned the displayed text and graphics.

Kirk saw that a woman named Alice Friedman had been tapped as pilot of the dart. He noted that she had been asked by Nogura to appear on the show with Kirk but had begged off, claiming a very tight pre-flight schedule. Well, Kirk could understand and appreciate her problem; he'd been stuck behind the eight-ball of a deadline once or twice himself. He studied Alice's photograph, and he thought he saw a determined strength in her features. She had carved out a successful career in a field traditionally dominated by males, and he liked that. Apparently Alice had taken the women's liberation movement of the last decade or so to heart—and she hadn't been the only one, either. Starfleet *had* finally gotten rid of those short skirts...

“Riley?” Kirk called.

The office door opened, and Riley stuck his head in. “Right here, Admiral,” he said.

“I'm going to head home now,” Kirk said. “Anything pending?”

“No, sir, the board's clear. Uh, what time should I meet you at the 3V studio?”

“The show starts at nine hundred hours, so an hour before that should do it.”

“Got it. See you then. Good night, Admiral.” The door closed.

Kirk ordered his datascreen to copy the Dart Project files to RAMspam and, twenty seconds later, he dropped the squares into his briefcase. As he did so, it struck him that the briefcase was probably his most ridiculous possession. It was, in its way, a reminder of what Kirk had once been by helping to define what he was now; no other object could have symbolized his change

of status so well. He had once sworn that he'd never condescend to own a briefcase. Well, he'd been wrong about that. *I wish all those people who think I'm a hero could see me lugging this thing around*, he said to himself. *Since when do heroes carry briefcases home from work, hmmm, Heihachiro?*

Kirk suddenly imagined the legendary Conan the Barbarian whomping an enemy over the head with a fur-covered briefcase and, grinning, left the office by the unmarked side door that opened directly out onto the hallway.

KIRK CAUGHT THE SON OF BART to the stop nearest his apartment building and walked the rest of the way. He lived with his wife in a pleasant high-rise just off the corner of Hyde and Bay, near Fisherman's Wharf. A cable car line ran right past his building, and the constant clangor of cable car bells was part of the background of Kirk's home life.

The building's doorkeeper passed him through the security block and on into the lobby. Kirk took a waiting lifttube to his floor.

Entering the apartment, Kirk found that, as usual, the household computer had been tipped off by the doorkeeper that he was on his way, and so it had turned on the lights for him; in addition, freshly scented air was coming in from somewhere. It was a talented computer, the best Kirk could get. It kept the books, ordered the groceries, maintained security and performed a host of other chores. The computer, a Mitsubishi-Siemens model 496, had been engrammed with an ersatz personality that Kirk found pleasant and easy-going; in a fit of impishness, he had named the computer Landru Junior.

Kirk dropped his briefcase just inside the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

door. Lori was not home yet, but it was still early.

“Good afternoon, Jim,” the computer greeted him. “I didn’t expect you home at this time. Are you ill?”

“No, Junior, I’m fine. I left early and brought some work home with me, that’s all. Anything happening?”

“There’s mail for you,” the computer said. “There’s also a fonecom message pending. You presently have no business appointments or social engagements listed for the next twenty-four hours. Want some coffee?”

“Please.” Kirk heard the servitor gurgle to startup in the kitchenette. “Who’s the fone call from? Summarize.”

“The fonecom message is from Nan Davis of the San Francisco bureau of WorldNews. She’d like to talk to you sometime tonight after twenty o’clock. Are you going to be on 3V, Jim?”

“That’s right.” Kirk walked into the bedroom and began changing into civilian clothing. “Here’s an appointment entry, before I forget. Tomorrow morning, eight hundred hours, the WorldNews bureau at Union Square. Nan Davis is the contact. Append the address and fonecom code from her message or the listings, I don’t care which.”

“Your coffee’s ready, Jim.”

“Fine. Hold the message for a minute.” Kirk fastened his belt and walked into the kitchenette. He took the waiting mug from the servitor. The servitor had already added the proper amounts of lightener and sweetener; Kirk usually took his coffee black, but his stomach had been giving him problems lately, and so he’d reprogrammed Junior.

Kirk sipped. The coffee was perfect; good old Junior. He took a no-calorie doughnut from

the stasis box and walked back out to the main room. “Junior,” he said, “you can give me that fonecom message now.”

“All right, Jim. Received today at fourteen thirty-three. Message begins. *Admiral, this is Nan Davis of the WorldNews San Francisco bureau. Thanks for obliging us. I’d like to go over some of the material we’ll be discussing tomorrow, but I have to leave the studio soon, and I won’t be back today. You can get me after twenty at my home; your computer has my fonecom code. Thanks, and it’ll be nice to see you again.* That’s it, Jim. Is there a reply?”

Kirk was a bit puzzled. “Wait a minute. ‘Again’? Junior, do you have anything in your appointments log indicating that I’ve met Nan Davis before?”

“Running,” Junior said. “No, Jim. There are no past appointments or social engagements of any sort listed for her. She’s not even on the Christmas card list. I’m carrying the name ‘Nan Davis’ in the trivision listings file I download every Friday, but that’s all.”

“Then I don’t get it,” Kirk said. “Well, I suppose I’ll find out all about it later. Uh, Junior, what time is it?”

“Sixteen eleven and forty-three seconds, Jim.”

“Thanks. That’s all for now.”

Kirk knew that he had two or three hours to go over the material on the Dart Project before Lori arrived home. He retrieved the RAMspam from his briefcase and dropped it on the small desk in the apartment’s office nook. The small space had been a closet when Kirk had moved in; he’d had the door and frame torn out and the desk and some shelving installed. Both he and Lori used it.

Kirk sat down and rummaged in a drawer for a stylus and notepad. He found a pad easily

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

enough, but the only stylus left in the drawer had dried out. Kirk opened the drawer where he knew Lori kept her own stationery supplies.

The drawer was empty.

Kirk opened the other drawers on Lori's side of the desk. They were all empty. He rose, went into their bedroom and looked in Lori's closet. No, everything still seemed to be there, as nearly as he could tell. Kirk softly closed the closet door and, after a moment, spotted a stylus on their bedside table. He picked it up and left the room.

Kirk reseated himself at the desk and began going through the Dart Project files. He was suddenly glad that Hy Nogura had offered him a new job, no matter what it was. A new job, a new challenge, would help take his mind off the collapse of his marriage. Kirk considered that perhaps Nogura had given him the job at least in part because the old admiral had known it would do precisely that.

By the time Kirk had read six pages into the material, he was humming.

Chapter Four

G'DATH RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT a little after twenty-one o'clock. He was loaded down with packages. Leaper emerged from under the living room couch and, by prancing and dancing around G'dath, made clear his all-consuming interest in the mysterious bags and boxes the Klingon had brought home with him. There was nothing in Leaper's tiny brain except the burning desire to plunge into those wonderful, unknown packages and tear them to shreds.

"I will give you your things in a while,

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Leaper,” G’dath said. He put the packages down. “First, though, I need to see how the test of my chip assembly is proceeding.”

The kitten ignored G’dath and continued to sniff and paw at the packages.

“Later, little one,” the Klingon said patiently.

The kitten began to worry at the plastic band around the biggest of the bundles.

G’dath sighed. He had just become acquainted with the two rules concerning the possession of a cat.

Rule one: The cat comes first.

Rule two: In case of doubt, refer to rule one.

“I hope you appreciate this, Leaper,” G’dath said, and the kitten squeaked in response.

“All right, then,” the Klingon said. “We will consider this interruption a test of my self-control.” He picked up the big bundle, the one in which Leaper had been most interested. “I had to go outside the immediate neighborhood for these items,” he told the cat. “The retail merchants bordering the Preserve do not bother to stock items for cats, as pets are not allowed here. For that same reason, little one, I could not have anything delivered. We are, after all, breaking the rules.”

Leaper paid absolutely no attention to him. He began poking at another package with his tiny paws.

“A moment, cat,” G’dath said. “We will take a look at the contents of all the packages. This one will be first.”

The big package contained a cat box.

A minute or so later, the Klingon had piled a dozen plastic containers of prepared cat food, several toys and a two-kilogram sack of cat litter in the center of the room. Leaper prowled around and through it all, sniffing and touching and pawing and stropping.

The persistent inquisitiveness of the little animal impressed G’dath mightily. He wondered what the species of terrestrial felines might evolve into, say, four or five million years hence. He felt certain that, above all, it would be a race that possessed an overwhelming sense of inquisitiveness. It would most probably conquer this entire end of the galaxy — if it didn’t grow bored with the idea and collectively trot off to do something else instead.

G’dath picked up the cat box and sack of litter and took them into the bathroom; Leaper followed him closely. The Klingon placed the box in the bathtub next to the shower stall and poured the entire contents of the sack into the box. The tub would contain any mess Leaper might make, including thrown litter.

G’dath himself had no use for the bathtub, so he thought that the cat might as well have it for himself. Due to a strong Klingon cultural taboo against immersion in water, G’dath showered instead of bathed. Both the tub and the shower had waterless sonic modes available, but while sonics were useful in killing germs and delivering massages, they did absolutely nothing to remove dirt or detritus from skin . . . and since body odor was caused mainly by dead bacteria, sonics actually compounded the problem. Technology had not yet managed to replace soap and water.

Aside from what he’d read in the KITTENCARE file, G’dath had had the advantage of a thorough briefing by an apprehensive but cooperative salesman at the pet supply store, so the Klingon knew just what to do. He picked Leaper up and set the kitten in the middle of the box. The granules of clay crunched together as Leaper’s slight weight settled on them.

The puzzled little cat sniffed at the litter for

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

a moment and then wandered out of the box. He suddenly jumped out of the tub and headed straight for the shower stall. G'dath returned him to the litter box, and Leaper escaped again.

G'dath decided that attempting to cajole the kitten into staying inside the box wouldn't work, so the Klingon simply held him there. The little thing strained against G'dath's hands, but to no avail. The Klingon then gently took one of Leaper's paws and showed him how to scratch at the litter. After a moment, instinct suddenly took over. Leaper scratched and squatted, and G'dath let him go, feeling fatherly pride.

"*Intelligent* kitten," the Klingon said in soothing, encouraging tones. "*Praiseworthy* Leaper. *Good* little being." He continued to watch as Leaper did his business and covered it; the kitten took his time and did a most careful job of camouflage.

G'dath left Leaper alone and returned to the main room to unwrap the cat toys. He hoped they would make the animal feel even more at home. He had bought latex rodents, balls with bells inside them and other such things, all in accord with the tentative suggestions of the salesman at the pet supply store.

As it turned out, what G'dath bought didn't matter. When the Klingon came back from having stacked the cat food containers in the kitchen cupboard, he found Leaper ignoring the toys and playing gleefully with the wrappings.

WITH HIS NEW-FOUND FRIEND FED, evacuated and amused, G'dath felt free to proceed with his own agenda. He entered the bedroom and saw that, as he had expected, the test of the chip assembly was still proceeding. He sighed with relief to see that, as yet, no errors were listed on the computer screen.

G'dath seated himself before the computer and watched as coding raced across the computer screen at a speed too fast for him to follow. If something was wrong with the chip, and if the flaw was in his design and not in the manufacture of it—well, it would be many more months before the Klingon could afford to try again.

An hour and ten minutes passed. Slowly.

"Test complete," the computer announced at last. "Results within design limits. Next?"

"End."

"Thank you," said the computer.

"Thank *you*," the Klingon replied, and for once his politeness to a machine was genuine.

G'dath rose and went over to the window, and looked outside. "Off," he said, and the bedroom lights dimmed and died.

It was an hour past sunset. From up here, nearly two hundred fifty meters high, G'dath could see many, many thousands of lights all over the city. He knew that each light represented several lives, and that all of them were lives that G'dath would surely affect—if his experiment tonight worked.

G'dath looked up, adjusting his eyes. There were also many, many lights sharing the clear sky over the city with Terra's moon, Luna. Those lights were the stars, and some of them represented many billions of lives. G'dath knew he would be affecting those lives, too, if his experiment worked.

He would be affecting them all irrevocably, but would it be for the better? The Klingon fervently hoped so. The known galaxy was in enough trouble as it was, and he did not care to add to its problems.

G'dath went into the kitchen and returned to the living room with several pieces of fruit and a handful of sunflower seeds. His head bowed, he

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

approached the *shimi-shan* and placed the food in the shallow receptacle intended for it on the altar. “For success, if You will it,” he said to his ancestors. He backed away reverently while murmuring a prayer; it was one that he had recited daily during his childhood, and it comforted him now.

It was time to mount the chip assembly in the prototype. That almost trivial task was the last piece of the puzzle, the last stroke of the brush. It would constitute the last few moments of more than five long years of work.

G’dath retrieved the prototype from the padded box in which he’d kept it. The prototype was a transparent aluminum globe half a meter in diameter and stuffed with electronics. Transparent aluminum had been a fortunate choice. The globe was very strong, yet the aluminum was malleable enough to shape and work easily using only household tools. That do-it-yourself approach had saved G’dath the considerable cost of jobbing the work out.

The transparency of the globe allowed G’dath to see its electronic innards. It may not have been completely necessary for the Klingon to see inside the globe, but he liked the play of the interior lights against its inside surface, and he believed in his heart that aesthetics counted for something. He had come from a place where they did not count for much at all, and he had had quite enough of that.

There were three interdependent modules crowded into the globe. One provided light shielding to protect it, another served as a guidance system, and the third housed the drive. The chip assembly he was about to install would govern the drive and coordinate the workings of the three modules with each other.

G’dath fit the assembly into place without difficulty. The globe was now complete; the

experiment could proceed. Using the point of a stylus, he threw a small switch just inside the access panel, and a number of lights inside the globe began to glow softly.

The Klingon smiled in triumph. Whatever happened now didn’t really matter very much to G’dath, because his main theory had been proven. The lights in the globe were glowing with power, but the globe contained neither an energy source nor a receiver.

The power seemed to be coming from nowhere.

That was the whole point.

G’dath stood there, holding the globe and admiring it as Leaper, sensing the Klingon’s pleasure, came up and began stropping against his leg. After a while, G’dath walked over to the window; Leaper trotted after him, his pads gently thudding against the brightly colored carpet.

G’dath looked at the sky again. The full moon had a little more than an hour to go before it would reach its zenith. He looked at Luna, studying it casually. It was a remarkable moon, nearly unique in known space for its huge size relative to its primary. Like most aliens who had come to Terra, it had taken him a while to learn to see the legendary Man in the Moon. That wasn’t very surprising, when even some humans saw not a man there, but the slender body of a woman or the crouched form of a rabbit. G’dath had long since come to see a face there, though, although he could not determine its sex. It had always looked to the Klingon as if the face were crying out—perhaps in pain, perhaps in dismay, perhaps even in wonder. Tonight, if all went well, his globe would pay that mysterious face a brief but significant visit.

G’dath slid his window open. It was designed to move easily along the lines of the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

light shielding that protected the facade of the building. The shielding also allowed a bit of breeze—a fraction of the stiff winds to be found more than fifty stories high—to waft into the apartment. The fresh air smelled of the sea, of trees and of freshly cut grass. It also smelled of opportunity.

The Klingon set the globe on the windowsill. He was strangely unexcited. He already knew the principle behind the globe was correct; he'd known that ever since the internal lights had come on when he flipped the first relay. All that was left to do was to show how those principles might be applied on a more practical basis, and G'dath would satisfy himself on that score before he revealed the existence of his discovery to anyone. Then, perhaps, G'dath would be given the place that had heretofore been denied him in Federation society.

With no fanfare and not very much in the way of expectation, G'dath again poked his stylus inside the access panel and tripped a series of relays. He now felt a gentle and welcome resistance when he moved the globe. It seemed to want to stay where it was.

"Inertial control, Leaper," G'dath informed the cat. "Observe." He moved the globe again, this time more quickly, and it resisted him more strongly than at first. Leaper blinked quizzically at the prototype.

The Klingon deactivated the globe's inertial dampeners. He then set the prototype on the windowsill and turned the dampeners back on.

"All right, little one," G'dath said. "You are my only witness, at least for now. You certainly came into my life on a most interesting day."

The kitten blinked again at the sound of G'dath's voice. It was a sound that the little animal was beginning to come to understand as

a comforting one. Secure and feeling safe, Leaper yawned widely and settled down on the rug for a nap.

"So be it, then," G'dath said. He tripped another relay.

The globe began to rise slowly as the chip ordered it to expend the barest minimum of its motive force. It was a force that G'dath had not yet even named. It was something new and marvelous in the universe, and it had not been necessary for G'dath to name it to appreciate it.

The shielded globe slid easily through the shielding protecting the building, as one soap bubble might slide through another. It rose and then hovered hundreds of meters above the buildings of Stuyvesant Preserve, waiting for the next timed command to be issued by the chip. The blinking lights inside the prototype were still visible to G'dath's deliberately enhanced vision. He watched the globe carefully.

Suddenly there was a clap of thunder close to hand, and the globe vanished from sight. A panicked Leaper jumped up and ran at top speed into the bedroom to hide. The thunder hurt G'dath's ears, but he didn't mind very much: It was the sound of success. He'd seen no fiery flash of disaster, so the sound had not been caused by an explosion aboard the prototype. The globe had streaked away, as its programming ordered; the thunderclap had been caused by air rushing back into the column of vacuum left behind by the prototype.

The globe was on its way. If all continued to go well, the globe would circle Luna, take a few readings to confirm its position, and be back hovering in front of G'dath's window in just under fifty-three minutes.

There was nothing to do but wait—

Suddenly there was another clap of thunder.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

The Klingon hurried to the window. It was indeed the globe, and it was descending slowly toward him.

G'dath was hugely disappointed. *True, it was a first flight, he thought, but I had hoped so much for a quick success. Well, this will teach me a deserved and humbling lesson.*

The globe re-entered G'dath's apartment and settled onto the floor. Whatever else might have gone wrong with the device, its inertial guidance system was functioning perfectly. The lights inside died as the prototype automatically turned itself off.

G'dath picked up the globe and inspected it. It looked fine. Its onboard shielding and inertial dampeners had completely protected it from the heat and shock of its rough departure and return.

G'dath opened the access panel and removed the chip assembly. Setting the globe back down, he went into the bedroom, again connected the computer lead to the assembly port, and downloaded the trip log. G'dath watched the screen as data flowed from the assembly to his IBAApple. There were star readings and a valid record of the globe's course, after all. The Klingon examined the data almost casually at first, and then much more closely.

The data were not at all what he expected.

The data were, in fact, impossible.

The Klingon studied the data for what seemed like hours. He then checked everything carefully, over and over again, and finally became convinced that the data were indeed valid—and that the implications of his experiment that night were far, far bigger than he could have imagined.

This will surely impress that reporter, if I dare tell her about it, thought G'dath. He suddenly decided that he would not—at least,

not right away.

Leaper came back into the room, sniffing the air. “Well, little one,” the Klingon rumbled, pointing at the readouts on the computer screen, “what do you think about that?”

The kitten blinked at him.

“Very wise,” G'dath replied. “I don't quite know what to think about it, either.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter Five

IT WAS NEARLY half past nineteen in San Francisco.
“Lori’s coming up, Jim,” Landru Junior reported. “The doorkeeper just let her in.”
“Thanks,” Kirk replied distractedly. He remained seated at the desk, reading his files about the Dart Project.
Lori let herself in. Jim swiveled around in his chair and gave his wife a half-smile. He did not know what to say to her, so he said nothing. The words of greeting used to come to both of them naturally, and sometimes they hadn’t even

needed words . . . but those days seemed to be over, not even halfway through their one-year marriage contract. They had become mere spectators, reduced to watching the marvelous thing they’d once had between them die and become dust.

As had been happening more and more often lately, it fell to Junior to be the first to say something. “Good evening, Lori,” the computer said. “You have some mail, and there are messages for you. Want some coffee? It’s ready.”

“Not now, Junior. Thank you.”

“Hi,” Jim finally said. “How was your day?”

Lori turned and looked at him for a long time. It had been Lori’s deep brown eyes that had first attracted Jim’s attention when they’d met. They were the kind of brown eyes that were as large as forever, dark pools in which Jim once felt he could have floated until the end of time.

Lori was thin and of average height and, although she looked younger than Jim, she was actually five years older than he was. Initially, Jim had not thought of Lori as being his type but, quickly, he had realized that she was everything he could have wanted, and he’d been outrageously delighted by the discovery. She’d come to feel the same. They’d quickly decided to sign a contract, and their first few months together had been wonderful.

The middle months had been troublesome.

The last few months had been terrible— as terrible as the silence that now filled the space between them.

At last Lori answered him. “Hello, Jim,” she said slowly. “My day was considerably less exciting than yours was, I think. Everyone’s talking about the *Enterprise* job. Congratulations.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Thanks,” he said casually.

“I tried dropping in on you in your office this afternoon, but you’d already gone.”

Jim shrugged and rose. “I just had to get out of the building, that’s all,” he said. “Uh, Hy Nogura and I had a talk this afternoon.” He began to pace.

Lori nodded, her eyes following him back and forth. “So he told me. Congratulations on the new job, too.”

Jim stopped. “Did you have approval?”

“I didn’t have any say-so in the matter, Jim—but, yes, I would have approved of it, and do.”

“Thank you again.”

“It’s too bad I had to hear about it from the grapevine.”

“Eh?” Jim was startled. “Didn’t Nogura tell you about it himself? I thought he’d already run the idea past you—”

“No, he hadn’t,” Lori said, and now Jim saw carefully restrained anger in the shallow lines around her mouth and under those magic brown eyes. “I understand he told Timothea Rogers after he told you, but he still hasn’t talked to *me* about it yet.” She shrugged. “I suppose I have no need-to-know ... or perhaps the admiral felt my husband might want to tell me himself. I guess he was wrong.” She turned away from him.

“Oh, hell,” Jim said. “Lori, I’m very sorry. I feel awful. It was thoughtless of me. I know I should have told you.”

He could hear the beginning of tears in her voice. “Forget it, Jim,” she said. “Just forget it. It’s no one’s fault. It just *is*.”

Jim fumbled for something to say. “Look, Lori, let’s go out tonight,” he offered. “We haven’t gone out for dinner in a long time. We could go for some seafood over on the Wharf,

maybe get ourselves some sushi at that nice little place in Japantown—”

She would not face him. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t feel much like going out.”

“How about the theater, then? Everyone’s talking about that new production of *The Odd Couple*—you know, the one with the Vulcan and Klingon roommates in it? It’s sold out, but I think I could wangle us some tickets. I understand the fellow playing the Vulcan is pretty good—”

“I don’t like the classics.”

Jim was running out of ideas. “How about we just go for a walk? We haven’t done that for a while, either. It’s a nice night out ... “ It was almost a plea.

Lori turned to face him. “No, Jim,” she said. “Let’s just stay in tonight.” She rubbed her eyes. “I’m really tired. I think I’ll take a nap.”

Jim sighed. His shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. “All I can say is, I’m sorry. I really am.”

Lori didn’t answer. She walked past him and into their bedroom; the lightweight interior door slid shut behind her. Jim wondered whether she had gone so far as to lock it, but he realized that he really didn’t want to know. He considered that the answer might make him feel even worse than he did already.

Kirk sat down again at the desk and tried to continue his reading, but he was having trouble concentrating. He found himself re-reading the same two simple paragraphs over and over again. *Nothing like having a clear mind*, he thought, and he suddenly felt a surge of anger at Lori for—well, for distracting him. Then he felt disgusted with himself for feeling that way. *I’m just not going to let myself win this one, am I?* he thought.

Kirk ordered the datascreen to blank itself,

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

stood, stretched, and looked out the window. It was about an hour before sunset, and it was going to be a beautiful evening. He watched as, here and there, the lights of the city came on automatically, like a thickening swarm of stars busily being born.

He had been standing there for only a few moments when the fonecom buzzed. "Are you taking calls, Jim?" Junior asked.

"Sure, why not?" Kirk said. "Visual?"

"Yes."

"Put it through at the desk terminal, then." He walked back across the room and reseated himself at the desk.

The text Kirk had been reading came up briefly and then faded again from the datascreen. It was replaced by the long, unsmiling face of Timothea Rogers. She was in uniform, and Kirk could see from the wall behind her that she was still in her office, even though it was after nineteen on a Friday.

"Good evening, James," she began. "Congratulations."

Kirk blinked in surprise. "Hello, Timothea," he said after a moment. "Uh, thank you. Thank you very much."

"Don't look so shocked," Rogers said. "I'm capable of making a friendly gesture now and then."

"I'm sorry," Kirk said. "I certainly didn't mean to be rude."

"No offense taken," Rogers replied primly. "I simply wished to offer you my best wishes as you begin your new duties."

"Uh, Timothea, look —"

Rogers waved a hand. "I don't need an explanation or an excuse from you, James. I've been fired, although the commanding admiral has been careful not to put it in those terms, so as to spare my feelings." She paused. "I haven't

been doing very well as Starfleet's representative to the public, I know. I sincerely hope you do better."

"Well, thank you," Kirk said. "Thank you very much. I appreciate it."

"You're quite welcome." She paused and looked uncomfortable. "Um, tradition demands that an officer buy his or her successor a drink ..."

"Yes?"

There was a long pause. Suddenly, Rogers gathered herself and said briskly, "Well, that's all, I guess. Again, best of luck to you. Good night, James —"

"Hold it!" Kirk yelled, startling Rogers. He had finally understood what she had been getting at. *Will miracles never cease?* he thought. *Timmie Rogers, trying to be sociable?* "Um, I'm sorry I did that, but I didn't want you to break the circuit," he said. "I accept your kind offer."

"The drink?"

"Yes. Thank you. Where and when?"

"I'm still at the Admiralty," Rogers said. "I'll meet you somewhere. I'm afraid I don't know very many places to go, however. Please pick one for us."

"How about the Presbyterian Bar and Grill, right by Lafayette Park? In about, say, half an hour?"

"That sounds fine."

"Do you need directions?"

"I'll find it," Rogers said. "See you there at twenty-thirty, James." She disconnected, and the text of the notes on the Dart Project reappeared on the datascreen. Kirk set the terminal on standby.

Perhaps Lori might like to come along, he thought. "Junior?" he called out. "Is Lori awake?"

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“She’s dozing lightly, Jim.”

“Oh. Well, don’t disturb her, then. I’m going out. When Lori wakes up, please tell her I expect to be back by twenty-two or so.”

“Will do, Jim. Have a good time.”

“Thanks.” Kirk grabbed a cool-weather vest from the hall closet and left the apartment as quietly as he could.

WALKING BRISKLY, KIRK ARRIVED at the Presbyterian Bar & Grill in less than thirty minutes. Friday nights were usually busy at the Presbyterian, and tonight was no exception. The place was packed, and the sound system was booming an old song. It was a zok-pop hit from the ’50s, the kind of music Kirk had followed in his late teens and for which he still felt the most affection. He listened to the song and felt warmed by it.

Kirk slowly made his way through the crowd to the bar. The Presbyterian was a traditional place that boasted a short, stout, pipe-smoking bartender who wore an apron, mixed all the drinks himself by hand, and seemed to be there whenever Kirk was. There were also human cooks, waiters and waitresses. The personal touch meant that food and drink at the Presbyterian was more expensive than at other places but, at the same time, the Presbyterian had a lot more personality.

“Hey, Paul,” Kirk greeted the bartender.

“Hello there, Jim!” the barkeep returned.

“Long time no see! Hey, I got something new for you tonight.”

“What is it?”

“A Saurian Alexander.”

“You’re kidding!” Kirk said, surprised.

“Really? Where did you get Saurian brandy?”

“I’ll never tell.” Paul’s eyes glowed with

intrigue. “You gotta guess where I got it. Want one while you’re thinking about it?”

“How could I refuse?”

“Comin’ right up, then.” Paul began mixing the drink, pouring equal amounts of sweet cream, creme de cacao and the brandy into a shaker. Kirk saw the bottle. The brandy was indeed from Saurus; he was impressed. Saurian brandy was exceedingly rare on Terra. The Saurians exported little enough of it, and then only to nearby star systems. Kirk hadn’t seen a bottle of it since his *Enterprise* days.

“So how’s tricks?” Paul asked as he added cracked ice to the shaker. “Wife okay?”

“She’s fine, thanks.”

Paul looked closely at Kirk’s face. “Oh, I see,” he said. He picked up the shaker. “Sorry, Jim,” he said as he shook.

Kirk shrugged. You couldn’t hide anything from a good bartender. “Thanks,” he said.

Paul opened the shaker and strained some of its contents into a tall cocktail glass. He then set the drink in front of Kirk. “Here, this one’s on me,” he said. “I been there.”

“Thanks, Paul.” Kirk saluted the bartender with the glass. “*L’chaim.*”

“Likewise.”

Kirk sipped at his drink. “Hey, Paul, this is really pretty good.”

The bartender beamed and took an extra two puffs on his pipe. “You expected anything less?” he asked. “Hey, you wanna see a menu? The special tonight is scallops.”

“No, not yet,” Kirk replied. “By the way, I’m meeting someone here at half-past. Can I get a table?”

“Gee, I dunno,” Paul said. “Pretty busy tonight. Is it a lady?”

“Yes, but—”

Paul’s eyes lighted up. “Ah-ha!” he cried.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“That’s the never-say-die Jim Kirk I remember, all right. Who is she?”

Kirk waved a hand. “No, no, it’s not like that. Co-worker, that’s all.”

“Another admiral?”

“As a matter of fact, she is.”

Paul looked impressed. “Jeez, two of ’em in the place at once,” he said. “Okay, I can always find a table for double admirals. Look, take that reserved one over in the far corner. I’ll keep that party happy somehow when it gets here.”

“Thanks, Paul. I owe you one.”

The bartender, his pipe still clenched in his teeth, grinned at that as he wiped a glass. “Jim Kirk owes *me* one? Hey, skipper, I remember you when. You don’t owe me a thing.”

Kirk had nothing to say to that. He simply gave Paul a little wave, made his way through the crowd to the table, and seated himself. He waited quietly, listening to the music, and remembering back to where he had been and what he’d been doing when he heard that song for the very first time, when life was a great deal simpler and he was much more sure about the universe and his place in it. He sipped his Saurian Alexander. *Damn*, he thought, *even this drink tastes like the old days*.

The time passed quickly ... so much so that Timothea Rogers surprised him when she arrived at the Presbyterian precisely at half-past twenty. Kirk, spotting her out of the corner of his eye, rose and waved. Rogers saw him immediately, and Kirk watched her thread her way through the crowd almost effortlessly. She made it through the throng much more quickly than he himself had.

She nodded a greeting to Kirk as she neared the table. “Good evening, James,” she said. “Nice to see you outside the office.”

“You, too, Timothea,” Kirk replied. He

searched for something else to say. “Uh, I’m glad you asked me out. You, uh, look very nice tonight.”

Rogers had changed into casual civilian clothes, almost certainly in her office at the Admiralty. Kirk did not think he had ever seen her in mufti before. To tell the truth, he had not really been sure that Rogers owned *any* clothing that had not been issued by Starfleet.

Unfortunately, the civvies Rogers wore did nothing to change her forbidding manner. Kirk thought that was a shame because, under the kilometer of icecap that had grown over her personality, Timmie Rogers was—had once been—quite friendly.

“I see you started early,” she said, looking at his half-empty glass. There was the tiniest edge to her tone.

Kirk ignored it. “No, no,” he said, raising his glass slightly. “This is a present from the barkeep. I’ve been nursing it since just after I got here.”

“What is it? It looks a bit out of the ordinary.”

“It’s a Saurian Alexander—a traditional Terran recipe made with Saurian brandy.”

“Really? Isn’t it unusual to find Saurian liquor on Terra?”

“Very much so. I suggest you take advantage.”

“I think I will try one, at that,” Rogers decided. “How do I order?”

“Use that little button near your hand there to talk to the bartender. There’s a two-way pickup hidden in the table.”

“Thank you.” She pressed the button with two fingers and spoke in an authoritative voice. “Attention, bartender. Attention, bartender. I would like a Saurian Alexander, please. Repeating, a Saurian Alexander. Are you

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

receiving? Over.”

“I hear ya okay,” came Paul’s voice. “Hey, Jim, tell that gal to lighten up, will ya? This is supposed to be a *friendly* place, for Clyde’s sake. This ain’t a starship, and I ain’t a galley slave.”

Kirk pressed his own button. “Right, Paul,” he said. “Sorry. She’s new here.”

“Aw, that’s okay,” Paul answered. “Hey, I’ll buy your friend’s first drink, too. Maybe it’ll make her smile. You want a fresh one while I’m at it? I still got most of a shaker full.”

“Yes, please,” Kirk said. “Thanks.” He cut the circuit.

Rogers blinked. “Did I offend him?” she asked Kirk. “I certainly didn’t intend to.”

Kirk smiled. “I know,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“This is certainly an interesting place,” Rogers said. “Particularly the name.”

“Isn’t it?” Kirk said. “A few hundred years ago, this building used to be a hospital called the Presbyterian. It was rebuilt and converted to apartments not too long after the Greater Quake. You know the saying: ‘Everything new in San Francisco is three hundred years old to start with.’”

“I’ve heard it,” she said. “Do you come here often?”

“I used to, before I got married. I’ve only been here once or twice with Lori, though. She doesn’t like places like this.”

“Oh. How are you two doing?”

Kirk shrugged. “We’re all right.”

“Really? Not according to what I’ve heard.”

“That depends on what you’ve heard,” Kirk said casually.

“It’s all over the Admiralty that you two are going to let your contract lapse.”

Kirk frowned. “You certainly are blunt,” he

said. “In fact, ‘blunt’ hardly begins to describe it. ‘Offensive’ might be more like it.”

Rogers shrugged. “Sorry, but am I supposed to pretend I don’t know anything about your troubles? Two of Heihachiro Nogura’s top staffers get married. About six months later, they’re going to split up. People *will* talk.”

“I guess they will—but I don’t particularly like the idea that my problems are being discussed rather publicly behind my back.”

“Like it or not, it’s going to happen.” Rogers turned away and looked around the room.

“Don’t you think the people in here seem a bit odd? Flighty, I mean?”

“I like it here,” Kirk said, frowning. “I like the place, the people, and every speck of sawdust on the floor. As a matter of fact, I like it all a lot.”

“No accounting for taste,” Rogers said.

At that moment, and before Kirk could respond, a young waitress arrived with their drinks. “Two Saurian Alexanders,” she said briskly, placing napkins and drinks on the table. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you,” Kirk answered as pleasantly as he could manage. The waitress left.

“Human help?” Rogers said, watching her. “You don’t see *that* every day. The prices here must be outrageous.”

“Only somewhat,” Kirk said. “As I said, I like everything here. That includes the high prices. And speaking of ‘outrageous’ —”

Rogers sipped her drink and made a face. “Yes? By the way, this drink is incredibly vile. I don’t know how you can stand it.”

“—what *are* people saying, anyway?”

“Hmmm? About what?”

“You know. Lori and me.”

“Oh, that. I don’t really care, James. It’s not important.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“I disagree. It’s quite important.”

“No, it’s not.” Rogers put her drink down and looked at Kirk. “I don’t think the end of your marriage to Lori Ciana is going to affect your Starfleet career in any negative way. Therefore, why should you care about what people in the Admiralty might say?”

“Well, I *do* care—”

“Frankly,” Rogers said, “I think you’re more worried about your image than your marriage.”

“Nonsense,” Kirk said, controlling his anger.

“No, I believe I’m right.” Rogers’ eyes flashed and her mouth firmed. Kirk had never seen her quite like this before—coldly enraged and relentless, and all of it directed at him. “You’re on the wrong side of thirty-five now, James. You’re no longer quite the wonder boy, are you? And you’re finding out that you can’t stand that.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

“Completely,” Kirk said. “I wondered why you’d asked me out, Admiral, and now I know. You wanted to beat up on me a little for taking your job. Well, fair enough. I’m not your first victim, and I’m sure I won’t be your last. But please don’t go on and on as if you had no axe to grind.”

“What do you mean by that?” Rogers said suspiciously.

“I mean that you’ve had your knife out for me ever since I took the job at the Admiralty. Why? Why have you insisted on always giving me such a goddamned hard time over the least little thing?”

Rogers looked away from him and said nothing.

“Nothing to say? Then let me guess,” Kirk said. “I think it all comes down to two words.”

“Which are?” Rogers said disinterestedly.

She was counting the number of tiles in the ceiling.

“Christopher Pike.”

Rogers’ eyes snapped back to Kirk’s. “How *dare* you!” she spat.

“How dare I indeed, Number One.”

Rogers’ jaw clenched, and her eyes filled with fire. “Don’t you ever call me that again, Kirk,” she said through clenched teeth. “Not *ever*.”

Kirk traced a finger through the damp rings left on the table by his glass. “I didn’t take his job away from him, Timothea,” he said quietly. “I came along after Starfleet had already reassigned him.”

“I know that, of course.”

“And I didn’t cause his accident.”

She looked away. “I know that, too.”

“So why are you blaming me?”

“This conversation is pointless.” Rogers thumbed the charge plate in front of her, and it *chirruped* in response. “Well, I’ve bought you your drink, Admiral,” she said briskly, “even if it *was* your second. Again, my congratulations. I trust I will see you at the Admiralty on Monday.”

“I’ll be on trivision tomorrow morning,” he said. “Look for me then.”

“I sleep late on Saturdays, Admiral. Good night.” Without another word, Rogers rose and disappeared into the crowd.

“Hoo boy, Jim,” came Paul’s voice from the pickup. “You want to stay away from *that* one, for sure. She’s as sour as a Vulcan Bloody Mary.”

“A what?”

“A Vulcan Bloody Mary,” Paul said. “It’s another acquired taste. Instead of tomato juice, you use lime juice. Take a swallow and it makes you look like a Vulcan, too. All squinty. They

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

like it, though, as long as you leave out the vodka.”

“Oh,” Kirk said. His mouth puckered with just the thought of it.

“You really gotta work with her?” Paul asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Sorry. Want another drink?”

“No, thanks, my friend,” Kirk said. “I’m going to finish this one and then head on home. You drink the rest of them for me and put them on my tab. By the way—”

“Yeah?”

“I figured it out. You got the brandy from the Saurian trade mission across town—the private stock. Right?”

“Right, Jim,” Paul said. He sounded a little disappointed. “The charge d’affaires is a good customer here. How’d you get it?”

“I finally realized there wasn’t any tax sticker on the bottle.”

“Give the man a point,” Paul said. “Thanks for the Alexanders, too.”

So I got it, Kirk thought. Pretty light stuff for a guy who used to out-think supercomputers for a living, though.

He drained his glass quickly and left.

IT STILL LACKED TEN MINUTES of twenty-one. Kirk decided to walk home. He had come to enjoy watching people, which was a pleasure that a career in space had long denied him; there were few crowds aboard a starship. It was also true that, on a lovely evening such as this, even the thought of taking Son of BART or a flitter home bordered on the obscene. Kirk had been shipboard for too much of his life to waste beautiful weather.

Kirk walked through Lafayette Park and

joined a small crowd listening to a slight young woman singing an ancient folk song. Her voice was clear and pleasant, and she accompanied herself on a sixteen-string acoustic guitar which she played very well. Her song was a very old one about the wreck of an ocean-going pleasure craft and the adventures of survivors named Gilligan, the Skipper, the Movie Star, the Professor and Mary Ann, and others. Kirk wondered just how old a song it actually was. It had been a long, long time since anyone had thought a movie star important enough to sing about.

Across the way, mimes in their traditional black clothing and whiteface makeup were Walking Against the Wind, Climbing a Rope, and Slipping on Freshly Waxed Floors. Nearby, a bearded man dressed in purple robes was preaching to an amused group of passersby. A puppet show a little farther along was drawing more of a crowd, though. It was a Punch and Judy show, Kirk realized, part of a street theater tradition that was a thousand years old and more.

As Kirk left the park and continued down Clay Street in the direction of Nob Hill, he began skywatching. He looked southward, to his right, for the constellation of Centaurus, but he knew that it would still be too low in the sky for him to see any of it. Theta and Iota Centauri, both second-magnitude stars about sixty lightyears away, would rise far enough for him to see around midnight, but bright Alpha Centauri A, Kirk’s adopted home star, never rose above the horizon at this latitude. He missed it.

Still looking south, Kirk could easily make out a group of tiny but intensely bright lights scattered along a line drawn generally along the path of Luna. The lights marked some of the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

space platforms and other large installations that humans had been building in orbit for more than two and a half centuries. Even Space Station Freedom was still up there doing business, although Federation tugs had to drag the raggedy-assed old can back into its proper orbit now and then. The station, which now belonged to the Federation, had been the first permanently manned orbital facility built by the United States. It was nearly three hundred years old now, and its rickety frame clearly could not take the stress of a retrofit, so it was forever fated to be a victim of the solar wind. History demanded that Space Station Freedom be preserved, but it was getting tougher to do so with each passing year.

Kirk had been stationed aboard Freedom briefly during his senior year at the Academy. The most talented members of the senior class usually drew a command of some minor sort in order to allow the powers-that-be to see how candidates for graduation might perform. Kirk had been given command of one of the supply shuttlecraft assigned to Freedom. That was the first time he'd ever been in the center seat outside of a simulation room, and he'd done well, so Kirk had always felt a special affection for Freedom. He could always recognize the station by the distinctive pattern its blinking red and blue nav lights made. He saw them flashing now, and he thought for the first time that the station might be winking at him, as if sharing a joke. Kirk wondered what it might be.

A set of flashing white lights near the station suddenly caught his attention. He realized what it was: The low orbit of Spacedock Four had brought the facility into that same piece of sky. Kirk watched the lights of the spacedock blinking in their distinctive pattern. Asleep just behind those lights was *Enterprise*, the final

command of his career. He realized with an inner thud that Space Station Freedom and *Enterprise*, Alpha and Omega, were right there before his eyes in one small chunk of the endless sky.

He stood there on Clay Street and watched as Spacedock Four's lights eclipsed and then passed those of Space Station Freedom. It took only a few minutes.

Kirk suddenly felt very tired. He decided to catch a ride home after all. He walked the few remaining blocks to Hyde Street and boarded a cable car at the corner of Jackson as it slowed to make the turn north toward Fisherman's Wharf.

LORI WAS SITTING ON THE COUCH when Jim arrived home; there was a cup of black coffee on the table before her. "Hi," she said. "Where did you go?"

"Didn't Junior tell you?" Jim said, genuinely puzzled.

"He just said you'd be back by twenty-two. You're early."

"Oh. Sorry. I must have forgotten—" Jim saw Lori tense a little at that, and kicked himself mentally. "Timmie Rogers called to invite me out for a drink she thought she owed me," he continued. "You were sleeping, so I didn't bother you."

"You could have."

"I was trying to be considerate."

"I appreciate it," Lori replied, in a tone that made it clear she did not. "Look, Jim, we have a lot of things to talk about."

"I know."

"We're splitting up."

"I know that, too."

"This is the first time either of us has admitted it out loud, though."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Yes,” Jim said, and he sighed. “I still don’t know why we’re bailing out, Lori. I don’t think we’ve given ourselves half a chance.”

Lori shook her head. “Jim, we’ve given ourselves every chance,” she said almost coldly. “We’re just drifting apart, and we can’t help it. You ignore me, and I resent it. In turn, you resent my anger. It’s a vicious circle—one we can’t break. We should never have turned the affair into a marriage, Jim. That was a mistake. We had a great affair. We may again.”

“Lori, I can’t agree with that,” Jim said quickly. “I mean, you helped me pulled myself together after—”

“After that damned five-year mission I keep hearing about, yes. That captain-killing mission. What kills *me* is, you want it back.”

“I want it back?” Jim was genuinely puzzled by her attitude. “Are you kidding, Lori? If you are, it’s not funny.”

“I’m not intending to be funny,” Lori said quietly. “Jim, I know you. You should never have taken the promotion. Flying a desk is tearing you up inside.”

“Dammit!” Jim exploded. “Lori, look. I made a decision. I took the promotion *and* that desk because Hy Nogura needed me to help straighten out the Rittenhouse mess. I also got to work with *you*, which made things even better.”

“Did it?”

“It did—and if I’m sorry about anything, it’s that Nogura took me off diplomacy detail after only a few months and put me in charge of Deployment... but he had even more problems in that area, and I understand why he needed me there. But as for being ‘torn up inside’ —”

“Well? Go ahead, Jim. Why not try talking about it for once?”

“All right, but you asked for it,” Jim said. He began pacing. “One of my two best friends

has dropped out of sight because his fiancée was killed right before his eyes; he couldn’t handle it, and I don’t blame him. My other best friend is off on Vulcan getting his brain washed, and I’ve found out that I’m more than a little responsible for that. He’s made it quite clear that I’ll never see him again, either, because he’ll have exorcised his human half and so he won’t even remember me. Isn’t that nice? Now my wife wants to leave me. So, yes, I’ve had more than enough happen to tear me up inside. But *none* of it is because of my job!”

“Listen to your anger, Jim,” Lori said. “It *is* because of your job. You *hate* it. Oh, you can do public relations and deployment work until forever rolls around, just as long as you know there’s a starship in your future—but you *don’t* know that one is. In fact, it’s unlikely.”

“It’s very unlikely,” Jim said heatedly. “In fact, the world would just about have to come to an end before I’d get another command. I know that already. So?”

“So you’ve been healing for a while, and God knows you’ve needed to heal—but now you’re finished with that, and so your frustration is beginning to build. You want to turn the clock back a couple of years, to become again what you once were.”

“Nonsense.”

Lori shook her head. “Jim, what’s the best-known cliché about starship captains? That they should never marry because they’re already married to their ships? You’re a starship captain. You always will be, no matter what Nogura calls you.”

“Lori, you’re all wrong about this.”

“Am I Jim? Am I really?” There were tears in her eyes now. “Look at it this way. You’re the one man who beat all the odds and brought his ship home intact after five monstrously

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

difficult and dangerous years. You successfully met every serious challenge you faced. You've become part of Starfleet history for that very reason. You've never failed at *anything*, not really—until now. Your marriage has failed, and guess what? You're hardly making a *peep* about it. I'm hearing a lot of lip service and nothing else."

"That's not so!"

"That's exactly so." Lori shook her head wearily. "The Jim Kirk I married would be fighting as fiercely as a Klingon warrior to keep us together," she said. "But you're not. You'd rather be free of me—free to move and free to act. Admit it."

"Never," Jim said flatly. "It's not true."

Lori sighed. "Lord, I tried, I really did. Jim, mark my words. You're letting our marriage go by default because you think you can't save it. I'm telling you that you can, but you won't. You refuse to believe me. You won't even listen. Well, Mr. Kirk, listen now."

Lori stood and faced Jim directly. "You said yourself that the world would have to come to an end before you'd get another starship command. I admit it looks that way, but I am telling you now that you *will* get that command, no matter how you have to do it, because you simply won't be denied. It won't take you that long to get it, either. Dammit, I even think you'll manage to get *Enterprise* away from Will Decker, precisely because you're determined to get her back and keep her, even if you don't know it yourself—and, compared to you, Decker's just a kid from the boonies. You'll rob him blind."

"Lori, that's crazy," Jim retorted. "All of it. I'll never get a command, and Will Decker has *Enterprise* for as long as he wants her. And you can't read my mind."

"I'm a xenopsychologist, remember? I'm and expert on the psychology of aliens. It's what I do, like commanding starships is what you do."

"I'm not an alien, Lori."

"You are to me, Jim." Lori turned to pick up a light jacket she'd placed over the arm of the couch. "I'm leaving tonight," she said. "Right now, in fact. I'll send for my things over the weekend. I'll be staying in Tereshkova House until I can find a place of my own. Junior's been told to forward my mail and calls."

"Lori, our contract doesn't expire until—"

"Why wait?" Lori said simply, putting on the jacket. "I can't take it anymore. Can you?"

"I'd like to try."

"No, you wouldn't." She came near him and kissed him on the cheek. "Goodbye, Jim," she said softly. "I'm sorry. I do love you, you know. God bless."

She turned quickly and left before Jim could say another word. He watched silently as the apartment door slid shut behind her, forever.

KIRK STOOD THERE, STARING AT THE DOOR and thinking about nothing much at all, until sometime later when Junior said, "Are you taking calls, Jim?"

Kirk wheeled around. "No, goddamn it!" he shouted. "Take a message!"

"Whew! Sure, Jim. Want to hear it as it comes in?"

Kirk sighed heavily. "All right. I'm sorry, Junior." *Why am I apologizing to a computer?*

"No problem," Junior said. "Here's the message, picked up in progress." Junior's male voice suddenly became pleasantly female. "*—that I couldn't reach you tonight, so I'll see you tomorrow morning at the studio. Good night,*

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

now. That's it, Jim; the line's been dropped by the other party. Want to hear the message from the beginning?"

"Was that the WorldNews woman, Nan somebody?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Jim. Nan Davis at WorldNews."

"I don't need to hear the message."

"Do you wish to speak with her?"

Kirk shook his head.

"Do you wish to speak with her?" Junior asked again.

"Sorry—I mean, no, I don't want to talk to her now; I'll be seeing her in the morning anyway. I'm turning in early, Junior. Standard nighttime security routine. Wake me at six hundred hours." He headed for the bedroom.

"Will do, Jim?"

Kirk stopped. "Yes?"

"One more thing. Tonight's shutdown routine includes a pending order by Ciana, Lori, formerly residing at this address, to remove the household access privileges of Ciana, Lori and to initiate permanent mail and fonecom forwarding subroutines for her. Ciana, Lori has initiated these subroutines, but they require your approval as householder of record to be put into effect. Shall I go ahead?"

"All right," Kirk said. "Do it."

"Done. Good night, Jim."

"I've had better," Kirk said as he walked into his half-empty bedroom. The door slid shut behind him.

Chapter Six

JAMES KIRK SPENT a restless night. The next morning he arose, depilated, showered, and dressed in a fresh set of penguin grays. He decided he had no interest in breakfast, so he took his briefcase in hand, left the apartment and caught a cable car to Union Square. Even though there were plenty of seats, Kirk held on to a pole and rode on the outside step as the car climbed up the Hyde Street hill.

It was a clear, crisp morning and Kirk began to feel as if it just might be the kind of day that would bring a fresh start, Although he had not

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

slept well, Kirk suddenly felt rested and light on his feet. He thought he should be feeling worse, but he was glad he did not; he did, after all, have a job to do. He even grinned and allowed himself to hang from the handhold a bit as the cable car rounded the corner onto Washington Street and again when it turned onto Powell a few minutes later.

The San Francisco bureau of WorldNews was located in a small, above-ground office building on Powell Street, on the western side of the square; the cable car line ran right past it. Kirk hopped off when the car reached Geary Street. He backtracked half a block to the WorldNews building and entered the lobby precisely at eight hundred hours.

“Admiral Kirk?” a voice called. Kirk turned and saw a young, slight, red-headed woman hurrying toward him. She was carrying a large datapad.

“I’m Jim Kirk,” he said, smiling. “Miss Davis?”

“No, Admiral,” she said, extending her hand, “I’m Nan’s producer, Jenny Hogan. I’m pleased to meet you. Nan’s still upstairs, getting the show together. Shall we go up? The bureau’s on the second floor.”

“Surely,” Kirk said. “Lead the way.”

They headed for a nearby escalator. The WorldNews building was only nine stories high, which was not nearly tall enough to warrant the installation of a lifttube system. There were elevators, but no one liked waiting for them.

“Has my chief of staff arrived yet?” Kirk asked as they stepped onto the escalator.

“Lieutenant Commander Riley?”

“No, Admiral, he hasn’t,” Jenny said.

“Would you like me to call him for you? What’s his code?”

Kirk frowned. “No, that’s all right, thank

you,” he said. “I’ll take care of it myself.” Something in Kirk’s voice made Jenny glad that she worked for WorldNews and not Starfleet. *I wouldn’t want to cross that man*, she thought. *Not even a little bit.*

“I see you brought your briefcase,” Jenny said. “Perhaps you’d like to set yourself up in the green room right away, maybe get some reading done?”

“The green room?”

“The waiting room, I mean.”

“Oh,” he said. “Yes, that would be fine.”

“Great,” Jenny smiled. “You’ll find some breakfast waiting there for you.”

“That’s very hospitable,” Kirk said. “I appreciate the thought.”

Kirk and Jenny reached the top of the escalator and walked down a short hallway. A large door marked with a WorldNews logo—a stylized Mercator projection of Terra—split itself down the middle and parted to reveal a room with about a dozen computer consoles installed on desks that were set closely together. There were six or seven people in the room.

“This is our newsroom,” Jenny said. “Ever been in one before, Admiral?”

“No, I can’t say that I have,” Kirk answered. “Who are these people? Secretaries?”

“No, they’re news writers,” Jenny replied. “Secretaries won’t work on weekends.”

Each news writer was sitting at a console and either dictating or keyboarding busily. The mumbling and muttering in the room was constant. Occasionally, someone would laugh out loud. Kirk could also see that empty recyclable coffee cups were strewn all over the place, and that uncountable fragments of printout littered the carpet.

“Newsrooms haven’t really changed very much in hundreds of years,” Jenny said. “You

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

can see ones that look just like this in old twentieth-century films. The equipment might be faster and better now, but the work itself, and the kind of people doing it, have remained pretty much the same.”

“Really?” Kirk said. “You know, it’s funny. I have a friend, Leonard McCoy, who had an ancestor in your business back around that time. Bones said that one day the newsroom staff got so sick of him that a few of them threw a rope over a light fixture and lynched him. It supposedly had something to do with his making a fuss about the difference between ‘several’ and ‘a few.’ There was a big trial afterward.”

“Really? How did it turn out?”

“The jury refused to convict.”

Jenny smiled. “Your friend Bones might have been exaggerating,” she said. “My research suggests he would do that occasionally.”

“He would indeed,” Kirk said. “Your research sounds pretty thorough.”

“Part of my job, Admiral. This way, please.”

Kirk and Jenny walked through the newsroom to the small studio complex that neighbored it. The green room was off to one side of the studio. The door opened to reveal a pleasant, if small, room with several chairs and a table that held breakfast for two. A stasis field was keeping everything on the tabletop as hot or cold as it was when the caterer had placed it there an hour or so before. “This is it, Admiral,” said Jenny. “Our green room.”

“But the walls are brown,” Kirk said, puzzled. “Why is it called the ‘green room’?”

“The walls are taupe, actually,” Jenny said. “Now, is there anything I can get you? Do you need a datapad, for instance?”

“No, I brought my own,” Kirk said, indicating his briefcase. “Thank you, though.”

“Then I’ll leave you alone,” Jenny said. “Nan will come by in just a few minutes, after she’s finished going over some last-minute things with the senior producer. I’ll send the commander along when he gets here. Enjoy your breakfast, Admiral.”

“I will,” Kirk said. “Thanks again.”

The door slid closed behind the young producer. Kirk looked at the breakfast and wondered if the scrambled eggs and butter were genuine or synthetic. The bacon probably wasn’t real, but he couldn’t tell about the marmalade and toast just by looking at it—and, thank goodness, there was plenty of coffee.

It all smelled wonderful and, suddenly, Kirk was hungry. He seated himself at the table. “Field off,” he said, and the tell-tale stasis sparkle over the tabletop disappeared. Kirk picked up a fork and tasted the eggs. They were real, and he made quick work of them. The bacon was textured soy protein—a bit chewy, but not bad. Kirk spread the synthetic butter on his authentic toast and, folding his first slice in half, dunked it in his genuine coffee. It flashed through his mind that dunking toast, particularly buttered toast, was one of the things Lori absolutely hated to see him do. Soggy as it was, he dunked the same piece of toast again. Half of it promptly broke off and plopped into the cup, splattering his uniform. He frowned and blotted the slight mess off the stainproof material with a napkin.

When Kirk finished his breakfast, he dug into his briefcase for his datapad and, turning it on, scrolled to an end-of-file summary of the Dart Project. Kirk skimmed it, letting the facts and numbers he hadn’t already memorized float lightly against the ceiling of his mind. Kirk did not have a photographic memory, but it was a very good one—more than good enough to

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

allow him to wing a discussion of the important details from the summary.

The door to the green room slid open again, and Kirk looked up. It was Riley—bleary-eyed, beard untrimmed and uncombed, his hair mussed beyond redemption. He was dressed in badly wrinkled civilian clothing. Kirk heard muted laughter from the newsroom follow Riley inside.

“Sorry, Admiral,” Riley said. “I overslept. Didn’t mean to. Sir.”

Kirk ordered the datapad to go on standby. “Step inside, Mr. Riley,” Kirk said quietly. “I want that door closed.”

“Yes, sir.” Riley stepped forward three paces, and the door slid shut.

“Mr. Riley,” Kirk began, “you do realize, don’t you, that oversleeping is not an acceptable excuse?”

“Uh, sir—”

“You do recall that you were supposed to have been here at eight hundred hours? Nearly twenty minutes ago?”

Kirk’s quiet tone was making Riley more nervous than shouting might have. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“You do further realize that you, as my chief of staff, were supposed to help me prepare for this interview?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Where’s your datapad?”

“My what? Sir?”

“Your datapad, Mister Riley. I’m talking about the datapad with all your notes on the Dart Project. I’m referring, of course, to the copious notes you made as you were preparing to help me for this interview knowing, as you do, that I have never done this sort of thing before.”

“Uh, I don’t seem to have any notes with

me, Admiral.”

“Oh?” Kirk said, too quietly. “And why is that, Mister?”

“Well, sir, I, uh, I guess I didn’t bring my notes along—”

“You didn’t bring any notes? Why not, Commander?”

“Well, sir, I was—”

“Are you next going to try to tell me that you don’t have your datapad with you at this time because you were running very late this morning?”

“Uh, yes, sir. That’s correct. Sir. The notes are in my computer at the Admiralty—”

“Come to attention, Commander,” Kirk snapped, and Riley did. Kirk rose from the table and, approaching Riley slowly, finally stopped and studied his face with exaggerated care from a distance of about two centimeters. The lieutenant commander carefully kept his bleary eyes straight ahead. He tried not to blink too often.

“Why, Mr. Riley,” Kirk said after a moment, “I believe you failed to trim around that excuse for a beard this morning.”

“Actually, sir—”

“I didn’t ask you a question, did I, Mister? You’re at attention.” Kirk stepped back. “Mister,” he said, “do you see that clock over there on the wall?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What time is it, Commander?”

“Eight eighteen, sir.”

“Very good. Now here’s what you’re going to do, Mister. You will locate a comb and shaving or depilatory equipment. You will then find a men’s room somewhere in this building, and you will make yourself presentable. Having done so, you will be back in this room no later than eight twenty-eight. If I am not otherwise

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

occupied at that time, we will then discuss the proper wearing of the uniform. We will, in fact, discuss the specific point that the uniform is to be worn when one is on official Starfleet business, unless an exemption has been specifically granted. We will further discuss the point that neither I nor anyone else has granted you any such exemption. We will *then* discuss the point that you, Mr. Riley, are a goddamned embarrassment to me and to the organization we both serve. Now get the hell out of my sight.”

“Yes, sir,” Riley said. He did a proper about-face and left the room hastily, the door sliding aside for him just in time.

After it closed again, Kirk sighed. Riley just wasn't working out, and the fact was a vast disappointment to him. Originally, Kirk had been pleased to have Riley as his chief of staff. They'd served together aboard *Enterprise* early in the five-year mission, when Riley had been assigned aboard as an engineering officer and later posted to navigator. Even more significantly, they were both the only surviving witnesses to the infamous massacre on Tarsus IV, and that had created a quiet bond between them.

However, this time Kirk had finally had enough. Riley had, in his time, amused him and irritated him, helped him and hindered him. Kirk had long felt that there was much more good than bad in Riley and that, as chief of staff, he would mature into a fine Starfleet officer. It had not happened, and Kirk had at last come to think it would never happen ... and it bothered him that he could have misjudged Riley's character so badly. This morning, Kirk had been forced to treat Riley—a Starfleet lieutenant commander!—no differently from an Academy plebe. The necessity offended Kirk, and he was determined that it would never happen again.

Kirk had chosen to believe that the looney Riley—the one who, ill with the Psi 2000 virus, had put *Enterprise* in extreme danger by petulantly locking off the engineering section and killing the ship's engines while singing “I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen” over and over again—was the aberration and not the essential, real Riley. Instead, Kirk had found to his disappointment and dismay that the looney Riley was ever-present. Careless, even crazed, behavior was an aspect of his character that Kevin Riley hardly bothered to control. It was a damned shame, because it was precisely those looney aspects—his spunk, his willingness to take chances and his offbeat sense of humor—that, if held in check, made Riley a candidate for command. Kirk had thought Riley might do best in the center chair of a Scout-class deep-space exploration vessel, and he would have proposed him for it in a minute had Riley given him any excuse to do so. Riley hadn't.

Clearly, there were better and more capable aides to be found in Starfleet's ranks. Kirk would shortly be as busy as he'd ever been before in his life, and he needed someone at his side upon whom he could rely to handle the details. He was there at WorldNews as Starfleet's public face; Riley had shown up only to draw a mocking mustache upon it. His chief of staff had made him look foolish ... and being made to look foolish was precisely the one thing guaranteed to upset James Tiberius Kirk the most.

The door opened again and in walked a tall, blonde woman, providing a pleasant interruption to Kirk's train of thought. “Good morning, Admiral,” the woman said, smiling. “I'm Nan Davis.” She held out her hand, and Kirk shook it. “It's been a long time.”

Kirk recognized her instantly. “Of course,”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

he said. “You used to do the *Nan’s Newsnight* program back on Centaurus. I watched your show pretty regularly, whenever I was there. I liked it.”

“My fan,” she said, pleased. “Thank you.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t seen your work here yet,” he added. “Otherwise, I’d have realized right away who you were.”

They seated themselves at the table. “You snuck out on me back then, Admiral,” Nan said, picking up a piece of the toast intended for Riley. “May I?”

“Go ahead. When did I sneak out on you?”

“Thanks,” she said, taking a bite. “I’ve been too busy to eat breakfast. Um, what I meant was, I never got the chance to interview you about the Barclay affair for *Newsnight*. All I ever got from you was thirty seconds of ‘no comment’ at the Starfleet gate at McIverton Spaceport.” She wagged a finger at him, still chewing. “Not nice.”

“Shame on me,” Kirk said, pouring himself a second cup of coffee. “Well, today I’m all yours. You can make up for it. Coffee?”

“No, thanks,” Nan said. “I’ve had too much already. As for the interview, we’ll hit the high points, don’t worry. Are you all set?”

“I think so,” Kirk replied.

“Nervous?”

“Who, me? Nervous?”

“Well, remember the words of Oscar Wilde,” Nan said. “‘In the olden days, we had the rack. Now we have the press.’ Can I borrow your napkin?”

Kirk handed it to her. “Actually, I’m looking forward to this,” he said, and he tried very hard to make her believe it. “The Dart Project deserves all the attention it can get—”

“Whoops!” Nan said, holding up a hand. “I’m glad you want to talk about it, but save it

for air, please—and I’ve really got to run. It’s almost half-past, and there are always millions of details to attend to before a show. See any crumbs?”

“No. Clean as a whistle.”

“Good. The makeup man always sighs heavily if I go in there wearing breakfast. Excuse me?”

“Certainly.” They both rose. “See you later,” Kirk said.

“Count on it,” Nan replied, and she left. The door remained open, however, as Riley returned—completely clean-shaven, hair neatly in place, and dressed in a set of impeccably clean penguin grays. He was carrying a datapad.

Kirk blinked, surprised. Riley stopped just inside the door and snapped to attention. “Ready for inspection, Admiral,” he said crisply.

Kirk looked him over quickly. “You pass, Mr. Riley,” he said, nodding slowly. “You certainly do. I won’t even ask how you managed it. I’ll content myself with simply wondering why you don’t do it more often.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

At least his eyes are still red, Kirk thought. *Otherwise I’d think it was some sort of Riley robot that he keeps in reserve for emergencies.*

“Have some coffee,” Kirk said, gesturing toward the table. “You look as if you could use it.”

“Why, thank you, Admiral,” Riley replied. He went to the table and poured a cup. “Have some yourself, sir?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Yes, thank you. By the way, getting rid of that beard suits you.”

“I thought it was about time, sir,” Riley said.

“You bet your ass it was,” Kirk replied.

Riley did not quite dare to turn around. “It won’t happen again, sir,” he said quietly. There was the hint of a plea in his voice.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

After a moment Kirk said, “Your word on that, Kevin?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, then.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“Don’t mention it,” Kirk said. “Ever again.”

Riley turned, gave Kirk a properly lightened and sweetened cup of coffee, and then handed him the datapad. “My notes on the Dart Project, sir.”

Kirk chose not to notice the WorldNews logo stamped prominently on the spine of the datapad. If Riley had “borrowed” it from someone’s desk for a quick data transfer from his terminal over at the Admiralty, then so be it; Kirk appreciated the art of improvisation. “Fine,” Kirk said. “Let’s go over this together; we still have some time. Grab your own coffee and sit down.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once they started, they worked well together ... but, of course, they went back a long way.

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD JIMMY KIRK, traveling with his mother and older brother Sam, was beginning a scheduled one-week stopover on the remote colony world of Tarsus IV. The Kirks were waiting for a connecting flight to the starbase where Commander Kirk was stationed temporarily. The family would be together for the first time in more than three years, and they were all looking forward to the reunion.

Before their flight arrived, however, the Kirks were caught in the turmoil that accompanied the rapid infestation of the colony’s crops and stored food by what would later be named the Tarsean Blight. The disease ran through everything like fire through a tinder-dry forest. It rendered more than ninety

percent of the food supply inedible.

Reports were made, and Tarsus IV suddenly found itself under a strict, Federation-imposed quarantine. Relief agencies quickly dispatched rations, but any aid to the already starving population would take several weeks to arrive at that remote location ... and even when it did, the Blight would certainly attack any food supplies upon delivery and ruin nearly all of them. Stasis, irradiation and special packaging could hinder, but not prevent, the spread of the Blight.

The colony still had its farm animals and a small amount of unaffected grain in storage, but there was far too little on hand to support everyone. Governor Kodos decided that, to save even half the population of the colony, the other half—some four thousand men, women and children—would have to be liquidated. Kodos was willing to gamble that the surviving half of the colony could survive on short rations long enough either for sufficient aid to arrive or a counteragent for the Blight to be found.

A secret lottery was conducted by Kodos and his most trusted associates. Colonists were randomly chosen to die by the computer normally used to direct ground traffic in the capital city. Kodos then needed to find enough colonial police officials and reservists willing to follow his orders and enforce his plan. Here Kodos relied on instinct, and he selected well. The governor had to liquidate only four officials while finding the thirty or so that he needed to carry out the arrests and executions. Kodos regretted the necessity of those initial four deaths, but he had to maintain security ... and, he reflected, those deaths would spare four other lives. The books would balance.

Being offworlders, the Kirks and their fellow tourists played no part in the plans of Kodos; they were simply confined to their hotel

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

rooms and put on short rations. They waited and, like everyone else on Tarsus IV, slowly starved.

About two weeks into the crisis Sam became ill. Jimmy, as hungry as the rest of them, decided to sneak out of the hotel and search for food. It did not occur to him that there was no more food to be had that was not under armed guard, or that it might be dangerous simply to travel the streets. He knew only that his mother was very hungry and his brother had become sick, and he wanted to help them. It was what his father would expect him to do.

Jimmy easily eluded the colony police stationed around the hotel and headed for the center of town. He kept a sharp eye out for cops and other potentially troublesome adults. Jimmy was fast and naturally athletic; even weak from hunger, his energy reserves were considerable.

Jimmy found not even a scrap of food, although he searched high and low for hours. He traveled the city by sneaking along back streets and through alleys and, where necessary, over rooftops.

At one point, rummaging through heaps of trash in an alley, Jimmy was nearly spotted by a troop of colony police marching a line of people down the street on which the alley opened. Jimmy dove behind a pile of refuse and watched.

Everyone seemed to be heading toward the center of town. The people were being herded along like criminals, but they did not look like criminals to Jimmy. Some of the marchers were small children stumbling along in the wake of adults; some of the adults were cradling infants or toddlers in their arms. Jimmy could not imagine why the police were ordering the people around and harshly prodding some of them with their batons.

The police had not spotted him, but a young woman in the march had. Jimmy saw that she was holding a small, drowsing boy cradled in her arms. He watched as the woman muttered something to the man next to her. The man looked in Jimmy's direction, blinked and shrugged. The woman said something else to him and, after a moment, the man nodded slowly. Jimmy saw him lick his lips.

Suddenly the man howled and attacked the two colony police nearest him. He punched one of them in the back of the head, sending him sprawling; the other was taken out with a kick to the crotch. Other police rushed toward the scene of the trouble. In all the confusion, the woman broke free and ran into the alley. The boy in her arms stirred but did not awaken.

"Son?" she said, running straight toward Jimmy. "Son, for the love of God, you've got to help us!"

Suddenly there were cries from the street. One of the police had spotted the woman running away.

Jimmy's eyes were wide. "The police. Behind you. They're coming."

"I know," she said, not taking the time to look. "Take my boy away. Please, son. Get him out of here. His name's Kevin. Kevin Riley. He's four." Her voice choked. "He's only four, for God's sake. Save him. Please!"

Jimmy had no idea what was going on, but he saw something bright and desperate in the woman's eyes, something that was not hunger, and it made him act instinctively. Jimmy reached out and took the small boy from her. He seemed to weigh hardly anything.

"Go!" she said, pointing down the alley, away from the street. "That way. Go quickly, and may God help you!" The woman then turned away and bent to grab two heavy pieces

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

of junked metal lying on the cracked concrete flooring of the alley.

Jimmy turned and ran, the woman's son cradled in his arms. "*Murderers!*" he heard the woman cry, and he knew that she must have thrown the metal objects hard at the police, one after another, because there came a heavy *smack!* and a cry of pain.

Then Jimmy heard the whine of a phaser and a shrill cry from the woman ... a cry that was cut off in the middle. He saw a hint of greenish light on the rough walls to either side of him.

He ran faster.

The police were after *him* now. They were shouting at him, ordering him to stop. Jimmy knew better. Rounding a bend in the alley, he found an open doorway and ducked inside.

The police ran on past.

Jimmy knew they would be back before long, but they would waste a little time looking for him. Thinking quickly, Jimmy decided to abandon the alley entirely and, instead, investigate the building he was in. It might afford a good hiding place.

The building was only three stories tall. Jimmy climbed the stairs as quickly and quietly as he could, puffing slightly. It was a residential building, with apartments clustered off the stairway, but Jimmy didn't hear any activity. The building seemed empty. He tried several doors as he passed them. All were locked.

As he reached the top floor, he heard his pursuers enter the building through the doorway below. He froze and held his breath.

Jimmy heard the men cursing a blue streak—but they did not run upstairs to look for him. They left the building, and as their angry voices receded back up the alley, Jimmy began to breathe again.

An old-fashioned hinged door opened onto

the roof. It wasn't locked. Jimmy ducked his head out. He saw that the roof was surrounded by brickwork about a meter high, which was enough to block the view from nearby buildings. The only way he and the boy might be spotted is if someone flew overhead in a plane or a flitter, under the low clouds ... but Jimmy could always duck back inside with the kid if he heard something coming.

His arms tired and aching, Jimmy put the kid down so that he sat with his back to the high wall. Throughout all the running around, the kid—Kevin—had barely stirred. *At least he's been quiet*, Jimmy thought gratefully.

Jimmy was sure that the building was empty, but nevertheless he moved across the roof quietly. Cautiously, he peered over the rim of the brickwork.

He found that he was looking down at the town's central square—but instead of being the pleasant park that the Kirks had visited when they'd first arrived on Tarsus IV, it had been converted into a holding pen; tall coils of barbed wire now fenced the square off from the rest of the city. Jimmy saw that there were thousands of people in the square. He heard the dull roar of many hundreds of conversations all taken together, and despite it he could easily make out the sound of a woman sobbing. Occasionally, he heard one of the police bark a command.

"Hello?" came a voice from behind Jimmy, and he whirled, but it was only the kid. He had gotten up and was wandering over, rubbing his eyes. "Where's my mommy?" he asked.

"She told me to take care of you. My name's Jimmy—er, Jim."

"I'm Kevin. I'm four. Where's my mommy and daddy? What are you looking at? Can I see?"

"It's not safe."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Let me see.”

“Oh, all right.” Jimmy picked Kevin up so he could see over the wall—just in time to see a door open onto the long balcony that dominated the front of the biggest building on the square. A tall, bearded man emerged and studied the crowd below for a few moments. Jimmy thought the man’s beard made him look like one of the Three Musketeers. He wondered who the man was.

Jimmy and Kevin both watched as the man began to read from a piece of paper.

“The revolution is successful, but survival depends on drastic measures,” he said in a clear, theatrical voice. “Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony.” He paused for a moment, and then continued in a lower tone. “Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to death. Your execution is so ordered. Signed, Kodos, governor of Tarsus IV.”

That was when the shouting and screaming began. The man with the beard calmly folded the piece of paper, put it away, and went back inside the big building. The door closed behind him as the police drew their phasers and leveled them on the crowd.

Thousands of people. Thousands.

Jimmy put Kevin down. “I want to see,” the kid said.

“No,” Jimmy said. He sat down next to the boy, his mouth dry. “No, you don’t want to see this—and neither do I.”

Then it came. Jimmy covered his ears against the loud, piercingly shrill whine of massed phaser fire. He looked up and saw an ugly green glow lighting the bottoms of the clouds hanging low above the square.

“Make it stop!” the kid cried, putting his

hands over his ears.

“I can’t,” Jimmy said. “Shhh.”

He closed his eyes until everything was quiet.

When night at last fell and the last of the police had left the area, Jimmy picked up Kevin, left the roof and cautiously made his way back to the hotel, where his mother and brother were beside themselves with worry. Jimmy told his story to his family. The Kirks hid Kevin in their room and gave him a share of their own meager rations.

It was only three days later that a Federation relief team beamed down, released a genetically tailored counteragent to the Blight into the atmosphere of Tarsus IV and, to its horror, discovered irrefutable evidence of the massacre in the square. As many of the police officials who participated in it and could be found were arrested and tried. Kodos himself was never found—at least, not right away. In the years following the massacre, some of the best and a few of the worst minds in the Federation generated many millions of words on how such a terrible thing could have occurred in such an enlightened era. None of what they said meant very much.

Kevin Riley was placed with relatives who raised him in the nation of Eire, on Terra. Jimmy Kirk did not see or hear of him again until many years later and many lightyears away, when Captain James Kirk found Kevin Riley among his ship’s complement. As Kirk soon discovered, Riley had only the haziest memory of the events of that terrible day and, in fact, he believed that it had been an adult who’d saved him.

Kirk never corrected him.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“GOOD DAY, EVERYONE,” NAN SAID as the studio lights brightened and the trivision scanners began whirring. “I’m Nan Davis, and this is WorldNews Saturday, coming to you live from San Francisco, California. Our first guest is Admiral James T. Kirk of Starfleet Command, and we’ll be talking today about this summer’s Apollo Tricentennial and Starfleet’s role in the celebrations.”

Kirk nodded at the nearest scanner in what he hoped was a friendly way.

“If you’ll forgive a personal note,” Nan continued, “I first met Admiral Kirk nearly four years ago, when he came to my home planet, Centaurus—Alpha Centauri A IV, for you purists—to take the notorious Reuben Barclay and one of his surviving confederates into Federation custody following the New Athens bombing. Admiral, it’s nice to see you again, particularly under these much more pleasant circumstances.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Miss Davis,” Kirk replied pleasantly, “and I agree completely about the circumstances.”

“Admiral, just why is Starfleet going to be celebrating Apollo Day a week from Tuesday?”

“Well,” Kirk began, “I don’t think anyone can disagree that the first manned lunar landing was important to history—as important as the first voyage of Columbus, in fact. It was the very first time that humans had set foot on a surface that was not of Terra, and that’s more than enough reason for Starfleet to participate in the celebration.”

“But what do you say to those people who feel that there’s no purpose in taking note of a nationalistic achievement these days, when nationalism doesn’t mean very much anymore? You can’t deny that the landing was the product of a nationalistic, er, space race, can you?”

“Well, no, I wouldn’t deny that,” Kirk said, “nor would I deny that the voyages of Columbus were for nationalistic purposes, either. I’d point out, though, that much of Terra still celebrates Columbus Day, even though Columbus sailed for Spain for purposes of commercial exploitation. It is a celebration of the achievements of Columbus, not his motives. Similarly, the Apollo Tricentennial does not celebrate nationalism, but the bravery and daring of courageous explorers. I think we in Starfleet are being even-handed, too; we’re not leaving anybody out. We’re celebrating the initial American landing on Luna this year, but we also observed the three hundredth anniversary of the launching of Sputnik by the old Soviet Union twelve years ago.”

The prompt bug in Nan’s ear buzzed briefly, and she turned to face the nearest scanner. “We’re now going to show you archival video of that first lunar landing so long ago.”

The three-dimensional video viewers had been watching shrank into itself, becoming a flat, monochromatic square hanging in mid-air. It now showed two men in bulky pressure suits moving around the lunar surface. Their spidery spacecraft stood in the background. The pictures were gray, smeared, blurry and, really, quite awful. The wonder of them was that they existed at all.

“This video not been reprocessed for trivision,” Nan continued. “You’re seeing it just as the people of the world saw it three hundred years ago... except that they watched it live, as the events you are seeing were actually happening.”

Kirk watched as the two astronauts skipped here and there between the lunar lander and the camera, never going very far in that first, careful exploration.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Remember what year it was,” Nan said softly as the world watched the ancient video. “Nineteen sixty-nine. Except for these two men you see here, and a third waiting in orbit for their return to the mother ship, there are no humans who are not on Terra. None. The men of Apollo 11 are absolutely, utterly alone. If these two men run into trouble on the lunar surface, no rescue is possible. There are no well-stocked shelters waiting for them just beyond the next rill. There are no rescue teams on constant standby over in Luna City. The only supplies these men have are whatever they brought with them in the small, fragile vehicle in which they landed. If that little spacecraft behind them fails to lift off—if its primitive, chemically powered engines fail to ignite for any of a hundred reasons—the explorers can do little or nothing about making repairs. They will simply run out of air and die, as completely alone as anyone has ever been.

“Sometimes we speak of courage without really knowing what we mean by the word,” Nan continued. “Look at these men, and know that what you see here is beyond courage.” She fell silent then, letting her audience listen to the voices of the first humans to venture onto alien soil.

Kirk found himself moved by what Nan had said. Not only had the three men of Apollo 11 returned to Terra safely, but six more flights had followed, and all personnel had returned safely from those missions as well—including a mission that aborted during flight. That perfect record, Kirk reflected, might just represent a bigger achievement than the manned landings on Luna. Kirk knew exactly what it was like to bring a ship and crew home safely.

The archival video faded away, and Nan and Kirk were back on scanner. “Admiral,” Nan

asked, “just what is Starfleet doing to help celebrate the Tricentennial?”

Kirk settled himself in his chair. “Your viewers might recall from history that one of the problems with Apollo-style technology was that it was very wasteful and expensive,” he said. “Booster rockets would be thrown away, and even pieces of spacecraft would be abandoned, all because the technology did not yet exist to retrieve and recycle them. In fact, if you go to Luna, you can see all the descent stages from the original Apollo lunar landers still standing on their original landing sites.”

“That’s right,” Nan said. “There’s a standard tour of the sites, isn’t there?”

“Yes, there is,” Kirk said. “Well, soon after the Apollo program ended, there came the so-called ‘space shuttle,’ which was the popular name for the first ground-to-orbit reusable spacecraft.”

Kirk’s face was replaced by a graphic showing a shuttle in flight. It was approaching a space station still under construction. “The video you’re seeing dates from the late nineteen nineties,” Kirk continued, “and shows the American space shuttle *Challenger Seven* ferrying supplies for the completion of Space Station Freedom.”

The scanners shifted back to Kirk. “Almost all the shuttles are gone now,” he said. “Some were lost in accidents, others were junked, and most of the rest were allowed to deteriorate beyond the possibility of salvage. There is only one space shuttle left. She is, in fact, the oldest existing true spacecraft in the world, and we’re going to fly her for the Tricentennial.”

“Tell us about it,” Nan said.

“Certainly,” Kirk said. “Starfleet has helped finance what we’ve been calling the Dart Project. The ‘dart’ is the space shuttle itself, the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

orbiter. The last surviving shuttle is one that was used only for unpowered glide tests nearly three centuries ago. In those glide tests, the old-time engineers found out so much that the first shuttle became obsolete almost right away. She was retired and never flew under her own power.”

“What’s the name of this spacecraft?” Nan asked, as if she did not know it.

“She’s the space shuttle *Enterprise*,” Kirk said. “We’ve borrowed her from the Smithsonian Institution’s Space Museum at Dulles Park, Virginia, where she’s been undergoing a stem-to-stern retrofitting. She’s getting impulse engines and everything else a modern sub-light spacecraft should have. Outside, she looks just the same as she did nearly three hundred years ago; inside, she’s being completely redone.”

“Why not just restore her completely, though, using all those booster and fuel-tank things they used to have? We’ve all seen those takeoffs in old videos.”

Kirk smiled. “To be frank,” he said, “we couldn’t hope to replicate the kind of technology that was used to fly a space shuttle three hundred years ago. For instance, there’s not a suitable launching tower anywhere on Terra; we haven’t used such things in more than two hundred years. We’re not really willing to duplicate the risk of an old-fashioned shuttle launch, either, especially when there’s no need to assume that kind of risk . . . so we’re going to do even better. We’re going to take the space shuttle *Enterprise* on her first-ever powered flight—a flight for which she’s nearly three hundred years overdue, and one that she richly deserves.”

“How’s the refit going?” Nan asked him. “Is everything on schedule?”

“We’re going to have the spacecraft ready on time,” Kirk said confidently, “and thanks to the impulse engines we’re giving her, the space shuttle *Enterprise* will fly farther and faster than any other such craft ever did. She’ll fly directly from Terra to Luna on Apollo Day. Other old spacecraft—ones maintained and flown by private collectors and enthusiasts—will meet the shuttle on her way to Luna and, together, they’ll all fly directly over the Apollo 11 landing site in the Sea of Tranquility in a great Parade of Spacecraft on the twentieth of July. It ought to be quite a show.”

Nan turned to face the scanners. “You heard it here first,” she said. “America’s space shuttle will fly again on Apollo Day. We’ll have more with our guest, Admiral James Kirk of Starfleet Command, right after this.”

The lights dimmed. “Terrific!” Nan enthused. “Wow! Thanks, Admiral.”

“Was it all right?” Kirk asked. He really didn’t know.

“You’re a natural,” Nan assured him. “Now, when we come back from the commercials, we’ll take some calls, if that’s okay. Are you up for that?”

“Certainly,” Kirk said.

Nan scanned her datapad, waiting for the director to signal her that the commercial break was over. Kirk sat there quietly, looking here and there at the studio personnel scurrying around, keeping things in order. With a sudden rush of nostalgia, he realized that the activity in the studio reminded him of what usually went on in an engine room.

When the lights came back up, Nan smiled warmly at the scanners and said, “We’re still talking with Starfleet Admiral James Kirk, and we’re ready to take your calls at the fonecom code you see at the bottom of your picture.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Remember — audio only, please.” Nan’s prompt bug buzzed again. “Our first call is from a little town called Gruetli, Tennessee. Go ahead, please.”

“Hello?” came a male voice.

“Yes, go ahead,” Nan said.

“Is this Captain Kirk?”

“Admiral Kirk is here, yes,” said Nan.

“What’s your question, please?”

“I’d like to ask Captain Kirk if, you know, he misses the spaceship he used to be on?

Thanks, Nan. I think you’re just great, and I really love the show. Keep up the good work.”

“Thanks, Tennessee,” Nan said. “Admiral?”

“No, I really don’t miss my old ship,” Kirk said. “I’ve got a whole new set of responsibilities, and my job is a very exciting and rewarding one. My old ship, *Enterprise*, has a new captain, and I’m absolutely certain he’s the best man for the job. That’s not to say that I don’t still feel a great deal of affection for *Enterprise*, because I certainly do.”

“Our next caller is from Maryland,” Nan said. “Go ahead, Hughesville. You’re on the air.”

“Hello,” a woman said. “Is this the admiral?”

“Yes, it is,” Kirk said. “Hello there.”

“Hi, Admiral. I was wondering about something. You know, there have been an awful lot of books written about that five-year mission of yours. I was wondering what you thought about all the commotion.”

Kirk grinned. “I’ve read some of the books you’re talking about,” he said. “A lot of what’s in them is just idle speculation, and much of it is just plain wrong. No one’s ever talked to me before writing one of those books, and I know for a fact that no one’s ever talked with my former top officers, either — or has even tried to,

I suspect.”

“Oh, I didn’t think the book about the New Athens bombing was so bad,” Nan said. “Of course, I was in that one, however briefly.”

Kirk smiled. “Maybe so,” he said, “but that guy even managed to get the names of the stars in the local group wrong.”

“Admiral,” Nan asked, “are you going to write one of those books yourself? Set the record straight, perhaps?”

Kirk shook his head. “Not in a million years,” he said. “I really don’t want to add to the fuss, either.”

“Why do you think everybody made such a fuss when you came back?” Nan asked.

“I’ve thought about that recently,” Kirk said. “I suspect it might be only because we did come back after five pretty tough years. We were the first to do it, and we showed it could be done.

However, the *Endeavour* has just come back from an equally long and strenuous mission. As we get more accustomed to star travel, more and more ships will be returning safely from longer and longer missions.” He smiled. “We’re still very new at all this, you know. Give us time. We’re still learning.”

“Admiral,” Nan asked, “do you enjoy being famous?”

“Am I famous?” Kirk asked. “I don’t think so.”

Nan grinned. “Well, Admiral, you’re really the last person in the world who’d know, aren’t you?” she said.

“I expect so, Miss Davis,” he said.

“Admiral,” Nan asked suddenly, “why did you decide to leave your command and accept a job at the Admiralty? Wasn’t the *Enterprise* yours for as long as you wanted her? And didn’t your friends disagree bitterly with your decision?”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Kirk frowned. The question seemed out of bounds to him. “Some of them did, yes,” he answered slowly. “I listened to what they had to say, and then I went ahead and did what I felt I should do. I also don’t believe I could have had *Enterprise* for as long as I wanted her. Starfleet just doesn’t work like that, Miss Davis.

Starships aren’t private possessions. You talked with Bob April here just yesterday morning—”

“The first captain of your *Enterprise*,” Nan mentioned for the benefit of her viewers.

“—yes, and let me say that if a man could hold onto a ship for as long as he wanted to, with no other considerations involved, then I wouldn’t be here at all, because Bob April would still be sitting in the center seat aboard *Enterprise*.”

“I guess that’s true,” Nan allowed.

“Let me add that I like my new job,” Kirk continued. “I’m not responsible for one starship anymore. I’m in charge of more than forty, with more coming. Is that supposed to be a step down?”

Nan smiled. “You surely don’t make it sound like one,” she said. “Next call? Ah, we’re going to hear from Conyers, Georgia. Go ahead, please.”

A gravelly voice with more than the hint of a familiar Southern drawl behind it said, “Why don’t you just ask the admiral there if he’s flat-out happy with his job or not?”

Kirk blinked. There was a faint hum as the caller dropped the circuit.

“Well,” Nan said, “we seem to have lost the caller from Georgia, but his question stands, such as it is. Are you happy, Admiral?”

Of course I’m happy, he thought.

“I’m all right,” he said.

Nan looked at him thoughtfully as her prompt bug reminded her that there was little

time remaining in the segment.

She brought the interview to a close. “Well, Admiral, thank you very much,” Nan said, swinging her seat to face the scanners directly. “I’ve been talking with Admiral James T. Kirk of Starfleet Command about the resurrected space shuttle *Enterprise* and the plans to fly her to Luna on Apollo Day. Now, we’ll be back with a first look at the top-rated competitors in next year’s Winter Olympics, right after this.”

The studio lights dimmed and died. “There, that’s it,” Nan said with satisfaction. People in the studio began relaxing and leaving.

“Jenny?” Nan called. “Sign out a set of portable scanners for me, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Isn’t there more of the show to do?” Kirk asked, puzzled. “What about the, er, Olympics?”

“It’s all pre-recorded,” Nan said, taking Kirk by the elbow and steering him toward the newsroom. “It’s nothing but a string of interviews with ice dancers and hockey players. We did the segment last Monday; it’s what we call an ‘evergreen,’ since it can run anytime. I tagged the show while I was at it, too, so I’m done here for the day.”

Is that a hint? Kirk wondered. *Well, let’s find out.* “Care for some lunch?” he asked. “A little later today, I mean.”

Nan regarded him thoughtfully. “Aren’t you married, Admiral?”

“I said ‘lunch’ and I meant ‘lunch,’ Miss Davis.”

Nan was embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Admiral,” she said. “I was out of line. One of my problems is that I’m forever running into men who don’t mean what they say. In any case, I can’t have lunch with you today—much as I’d like to. I have to be in N’York in a couple of hours.”

“Really? What’s going on back there?”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“I have to interview a Klingon.”

Kirk blinked. “A Klingon? What’s a Klingon doing in N’York?” He smiled. “Not that I’d expect to find one anywhere *else* on Terra, mind you—”

Nan held up a hand. “Not funny, Admiral,” she said. “I’ve heard you have a small-town sense of humor, but I was under the impression it ran to puns.”

“I—”

“There are hundreds of Klingons in N’York,” Nan continued, “and most of them are having a bad time of it. There’s bias against them in the workplace, housing discrimination, street assaults against them by gangs of human youths—you name it, they suffer from it.”

“Really?” Kirk asked. “That’s all illegal, though. Oh, I suppose there are isolated cases—”

“Isolated?” Nan said. “Hardly. The Klingon I’m seeing today is a particularly sad victim of the system... but his isn’t an unusual case. It’s typical. He’s a top scientist and a full Federation citizen who’s been reduced to teaching secondary school classes for a living. The fact that his students routinely rank in the top one percent of the North American pool after a year with him doesn’t seem to matter at all. Admiral, he’s been here on Terra for more than five years. Any human with his outstanding record would by now be no worse than number-three in charge of running the entire N’York school system.”

“Are you sure about all that?” Kirk asked. “After all, there are supposed to be safeguards—”

“The safeguards that are in place sometimes don’t work very well,” Nan said. “People of ill will can get around them fairly easily, and the victim of discrimination has little recourse.”

Admiral, haven’t you ever noticed that it’s hardly uncommon in this supposedly non-racist culture of ours to victimize Klingons in a racist way?”

“I’m ashamed to admit that I *have* noticed that,” said Kirk.

“So you understand what I’m saying,” Nan said. “Look, I’m sorry, but I have to run. My flitter leaves in less than an hour, and even at that I’m going to be late. Nice to have seen you again, Admiral. Perhaps we can get together some other time—”

“Wait,” Kirk said. “Maybe I can save us some time, and we can salvage lunch. I think I’d like to meet your Klingon.”

“You mean you want to come with me?”

“Yes, I would. I’m clear for the rest of the day, and you’ve gotten me interested in this. You know, I’ve never met a Klingon who wasn’t of the Warrior class. I think I’d like to do that.”

Nan nodded. “Well, you’re welcome to tag along, but we’ve got to hurry if we’re going to catch that flitter. I wish I could get the brass to let me charter one, but—”

“Why don’t we beam over to N’York instead?” Kirk suggested. “Then you can be on time, do your interview, and we can have a late lunch afterward.”

“‘Beam’?” she asked. “You mean, use a transporter? Don’t I wish! Non-emergency use has to be booked weeks ahead, though. It makes more sense to fly to wherever you’re going, unless you’re scared to death of flying and can afford to wait—and can afford the transporter fees, too. The brass would never go for it.” Nan paused. “I’ve always wondered why people who are too scared to fly would rather be beamed. Isn’t using the transporter even scarier?”

“I know someone who’d agree with you

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

about that,” Kirk said, “but the reservation rule doesn’t apply to top Starfleet personnel — me, for instance. I don’t have to wait.”

“I thought transporter frequencies in the Terran neighborhood were strictly limited, or some gobbledygook like that. Aren’t they?”

“Certainly they are,” Kirk said, “but they’re all Starfleet’s transporters in the first place, and I have a permanently reserved slot. It’s one of my perks. You might as well take advantage of it.”

“No one’s going to mind?”

“Not at all. Doing small favors for the media fits right in with my job description.”

“Can this be for a round trip, then?” Nan asked. “I’d like to be back here this afternoon, if I could.”

“No problem,” Kirk said.

“Then I accept. Happily.”

“Nan?” Jenny asked. “Just backstopping — are you bringing a tech with you?”

“A technician, you mean?” Kirk asked. “If you want to bring one along, Miss Davis, just say so. We can beam three as easily as two.”

“No need,” Nan said. “According to their contract, I don’t have to use a tech on a weekend. I don’t really need one to set up for a simple interview, either. I can handle everything myself.”

“Fine, then,” Kirk said. “Mr. Riley?”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“Give a shout to the transporter room over at the Admiralty. Book two to N’York and back on my authority. Miss Davis and I are leaving as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir. Returning today?”

“That’s right.”

“Will do, Admiral. Ma’am, may I use that fonecom over there?” Riley pointed to a nearby desk.

“Surely, Commander,” Nan said.

“Thank you.” Riley went over to the desk and, still standing, mumbled a fone code into the instrument.

“Shall we leave for the Admiralty?” Kirk asked. “Generally, we use transporter stages for point-to-point surface travel.”

“Right away,” Nan replied. “I just have to get my equipment. Jenny —?”

“Here you go, Nan,” said Jenny, handing her a polished black case. “And I’ll call your interview to warn — to tell him you’re bringing the admiral along.”

“Mind reader. Thanks.”

“Admiral?” Riley called. “Your transporter time is booked, sir. Just let the N’York operator know when you’d like to return. Here’s your briefcase, sir.”

“Thanks,” Kirk said. “You’re off the clock until Monday morning, Commander; have a nice weekend. Miss Davis? After you.” The newsroom door closed behind them.

“Kevin?” Jenny said, coming over to him. “Is everything all right now?”

“Seems to be,” he answered. “The admiral nearly cut me loose this morning — I could feel it — but you saved my butt.”

“Cute one, too,” she muttered.

Kevin blinked. “Huh?”

“Never mind,” she said. “You were praising me, Kevin. Pray continue.”

“Uh, sure. Well, if you hadn’t found the shaving stuff for me, and if you hadn’t called the Admiralty and charmed that pal of mine into beaming over this uniform, I think I’d be gone with the wind right now. I owe you one, Jenny. In fact, I owe you several.”

“So what was I supposed to do?” Jenny said, shrugging. “Let a fellow Irishman down? I’m a producer; I’m supposed to straighten out

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

people's problems. It's what I do. Besides, you forgot to mention that I lent you my datapad, too."

Kevin smiled back. "No, I didn't forget," he said.

"Tell you what," she said suddenly. "Let's go out and get some lunch, just like the big people."

"It's not lunchtime yet. It's not even nine hundred thirty yet—I mean, it's not even half past nine."

"So let's go for a walk," Jenny said. "A long walk. It's a nice day. Then we'll go eat. Does your appreciation extend to the champagne brunch at the St. Francis?"

"Sure does. Sky's the limit."

"Then you're on. Just let me make that fone call."

Chapter Seven

KIRK AND NAN BEAMED DIRECTLY onto a small Starfleet transporter stage in midtown Manhattan.

"Welcome to N'York, Admiral," the transporter operator said. "You too, ma'am. Good to see you again, sir."

"Thanks, Harry," Kirk replied as he and Nan stepped off the platform. "Same here. Haven't seen you since you were transferred. How've you been?"

"Not bad, thank you, sir," the chief replied. "I like the city."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Where exactly are we?” Nan asked, looking around.

“We’re on the mezzanine level of the Empire State Building,” Kirk replied. “Starfleet leases most of the office space here. There’s a much larger transporter stage at Kennedy Spaceport over in Queens, but we would have had to come into Manhattan anyway. Beaming here saves us a little time and trouble.”

Nan nodded. “Great,” she said. “Actually, the Empire State is pretty close to where we need to go,” she said.

“Where are you going, ma’am?” Harry asked.

“Stuyvesant Preserve.”

“We can take a cab,” Kirk said. “They haven’t done away with those yet, have they, Harry?”

“No cabs today, Admiral,” the operator said regretfully. “The maintenance people went on strike again this morning. The subway’s running, though, and so are the slidewalks.”

“Want to take the subway, Admiral?” Nan asked him. “Have you ever done that before?”

“Uh, yes, I have,” he said.

“Really? How touristy of you. When was the first time you were here?”

“Oh, quite a while ago,” he said. *The first time I was ever in N’York was just about three hundred and forty years ago ... but I try not to think about that too often.*

“We’ve just got to take the subway, then,” Nan declared. “They redid it a couple of years ago to make it even more authentic, but I haven’t ridden on it since I’ve been on Terra. It’ll be an adventure.”

“Okay, then,” Kirk said. “The subway it is.”

“Fine!” Nan said, grinning. “Chief, nice to have met you.”

“Same here, ma’am,” Harry said. “Uh, I

enjoy your news show very much.” He fumbled at his console for a moment and then proffered a stylus and a sheet of writing material. “Could you sign this for me, please?” he asked. “It’s for my wife.”

NAN AND KIRK LEFT THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING and crossed over the Fifth Avenue Strip using the pedestrian bridge. “How do we get to the subway?” Kirk asked.

“Let’s walk down Thirty-fourth Street,” Nan replied. “It’s just as perfect a day here as it is out west, and we only have to go a couple of blocks. To tell you the truth, I don’t get out of the office enough, and it’s nice to find myself with some free time on a beautiful day.”

Kirk reflected that Nan was right. The weather was beautiful; why waste it? He looked up to see the sun past the zenith. Not ten minutes before, he’d seen the sun from San Francisco, and it had been only a bit more than halfway up in the eastern sky. It was three hours later in N’York.

The immaculate Manhattan streets were playing host to a crowd of casual Saturday strollers. Nan was particularly delighted by the number of different races she saw represented among the individuals she passed. Non-humans could be found living in most large cities on Terra, including San Francisco, but N’York had many more of them. That was one of the reasons Nan liked N’York so much. It had become a literally cosmopolitan city.

As in San Francisco, there were preachers and street entertainers and the like lining the sidewalk, and some of them seemed to be doing very well. A short line had formed at the portable terminal set up near the corner of Madison Avenue by the Street Singers Union.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

The terminal allowed appreciative passersby to thumb a credit or two into the pool account maintained by the entertainers who worked that particular block. The system reflected the typically rough-and-tumble way that N'Yorkers had of doing things. Terminals weren't used in more genteel San Francisco because street entertainers there were licensed and paid a per-diem by the city. Both systems worked for the entertainers. They might earn a bit more in San Francisco, but they were freer to come and go as they pleased in N'York.

"This is wild, Admiral," Nan said. "Five thousand kilometers in the blink of an eye. I've never beamed before. You're going to spoil me rotten."

"Oh, no," Kirk said. "Not so."

"Sure you could, if you kept it up."

"No," he said, smiling and waving a hand. "That's not it. I meant that we went considerably farther than five thousand clicks. The transporter works only on line-of-sight, so we were beamed up from the Admiralty to a repeater satellite in synch orbit above the West Coast. That one squirted us over to a similar satellite over the East Coast, which in turn relayed us to the stage at the Empire State. Call it, um, just about eighty-six thousand kilometers."

"Oh," she said. "Well, I was never great at science."

Kirk shrugged. "You don't have to be, just as long as the transporter chief is," he said. "I'd send Harry back there out on exploration duty tomorrow, if he wanted to go. He's very good."

Nan noticed that many of the people she and Kirk passed seemed to recognize her, but none of them nodded or said anything; they did not even look her way for more than an instant. Nan knew how the game of celebrity watching was

played in N'York, and it pleased her that she was already familiar enough to have become prey for its participants. She suddenly stopped and looked back down Thirty-fourth Street to find nearly everyone they had passed staring at her. Satisfied that she had caught them out, Nan gave them a little wave and a smile, and continued on her way.

"What was that all about?" Kirk asked.

"Oh, nothing," Nan replied lightly. "Just a game. Keep doing interviews, and you might be playing it yourself before too long."

"Eh?"

"Never mind. Look, here's Park Avenue." They turned right and walked a block to the subway entrance at Thirty-third Street.

They stood at the mouth of the stairwell, and Kirk sniffed. "Smells pretty bad down there," he said. "Gloomy, too."

"They take great pains to keep it authentic. Come on. It'll be fun."

They walked down the broken concrete stairs and into the darkness.

THE CAREFULLY PRESERVED and maintained IRT local that ran during daytime hours below the streets of the East Side was the very last of N'York's famed subway lines. Over the course of the twenty-first century, the underground routes had been abandoned one by one as the old rapid transit network had finally grown too decrepit to repair. The city had switched to slidewalks rather than expend vast amounts of credit trying to rebuild the underground system, and it had been a wise choice. The subway tunnels themselves still existed, though, and an interesting set of urban legends had sprung up as the result of speculation about who or what might be in them now. The most popular of the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

legends said that the old tunnels were now inhabited by vast herds of blind albino alligators that lived by eating sewage and drinking their fill from long-forgotten pools of toxic waste. Another legend had it that a strange being, half-cat and half-man, lived in the tunnels, emerging only at night to fight evil and recite poetry.

This last of the active subway lines served as a rolling museum, a piece of old N'York, and it had always been popular with tourists. Even many native N'Yorkers took the subway once in a while, since it was at least theoretically faster than the slidewalks and convenient, too: It ran under what was still one of the busiest urban corridors in the world. The old local ran only between City Hall and Fifty-ninth Streets, but that was enough of a ride to give people a taste of what taking the subway day in and day out had once been like. The curators of the subway had gone to great pains to keep it as authentically awful as possible.

“THEY WANT TOKENS,” Kirk said, spotting a sign and an empty booth. “Those are like money—cash, I mean, aren't they? Can we get some? There's no one there.”

“Don't worry about it, Admiral,” Nan told him. “The sign's an exhibit, too; it's part of the atmosphere. The ride's free. Just go right on through the turnstile.”

The subway station was little better than a narrow, covered hole in the ground more than a hundred meters long. It had been floored with rough concrete. Dripping water, filthy with soot, had pooled here and there in cracks and crevasses. The station walls were faced with soiled white industrial tiling. The tiles were regularly interrupted by large signs of intricate blue mosaics that read 33RD STREET. There

were also freshly painted colorful designs that might or might not have represented lettering. Large and colorful in-period advertisements for cigarettes, liquor and theatrical productions were pasted into shallow frames placed at intervals along the long wall. A row of thick and closely spaced square structural columns, each of them tiled like the walls, ran up and down the length of the platform near its edge; each of them bore a black 33 halfway up two of its four sides. The columns were apparently meant to support the enormous weight of the street above.

There were several benches placed along the long wall of the station. Actors had been hired to sleep on them, and other actors were circulating among the people waiting on the platform, asking for spare change. Topping it all off, there was a newsstand halfway between the downtown end of the platform and the exit to the street.

The uptown and downtown subway trains ran in a wide trench that ran between the platforms. Kirk could make out the ties and rails, even though they were almost completely buried under garbage. He also saw that a mirror copy of the station he was standing in existed on the other side of the tracks.

“They're very careful about using only authentic reproductions of period trash,” Nan said. “Note the empty cigarette packages, for instance—and see that big rail right down there? That's what supplies electricity to the train. They don't use broadcast power. That'd be an anachronism.”

“Oh,” Kirk said. “Say, what are they selling over there at the newsstand? Those look like newspapers—paper newspapers, I mean.”

“They *are* newspapers,” she said. “Let's go take a look.”

They walked over quickly. A young man

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

wearing a baseball cap was standing behind the counter. He also wore glasses and was dressed in a shiny blue jacket that said METS in flowing orange letters across the front. He was closely surrounded by stacks of newspapers and magazines, and racks of prepackaged candy. There didn't seem to be much room left for him in there. "Hey, whatcher readin', Mac?" he said in a rough, raucous tone as Kirk and Nan approached. "Hey, whatcher readin', lady?"

"Look," Nan said, pointing at one of the newspapers. It was a copy of the New York *Post* for July 10, 1956. The headline read IKE ASKS RED PARLEY.

"Who was Red Parley, I wonder, and what did Ike ask him?" Nan whispered. "At least I know who Ike was."

"I don't know," Kirk said. "I've never heard of old Red, either. Want some candy?"

"No, thanks; I'm fine. Besides, you can't buy anything here, Admiral. The candy's for display purposes only, as is all the printed material. They change the newspaper every day, though; it gives you something new to stare at while you're waiting for the train."

"That's right," the vendor said, his Noo Yawk accent suddenly gone. "You should have seen one of the *Post* headlines last month, when the museum was doing the nineteen seventies and eighties. It was from the early Murdoch period: HEADLESS WOMAN FOUND IN TOPLESS BAR. Pretty good, eh?"

"Very nice," Kirk said politely.

"I thought so myself," the vendor said. "My master's thesis is on the twentieth-century tabloid wars in N'York; I'll have it finished any year now. Excuse me, ma'am, but you look familiar. Do you by any chance go to Columbia?"

"No, I don't," Nan said. "By the way, if

you're doing the nineteen fifties —"

"Yes?"

"Then why are you wearing a Mets jacket?"

"Huh?" the man said, and then he blinked.

"Oh, my God," he said. "I'm out of period! Excuse me." He quickly took off and tossed aside the Mets jacket and, reaching under the counter, withdrew another. This one, a darker blue, said YANKEES in flowing white lettering. "Much obliged, ma'am," he said. "I get college credit for doing this, and those proctors are murder."

"I'm happy I could help."

"Are you a native N'Yorker, ma'am?"

"No, I'm not. We're visiting from out of town for the afternoon."

"Oh," the vendor said. "Well, you sure know your baseball. Enjoy your visit. You, too, uh, Captain. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go back to work. You never know when there'll be a spot check." He began chanting again. "Hey, whatcher readin'?"

"He called you a captain," Nan said as they walked away. "Sorry for the demotion."

Kirk shrugged. "It's no insult," he said. "By the way, how did you know? About the jacket, I mean? Do you keep track of ancient baseball teams, too?"

"Oh," Nan said, and laughed. "No, that was just the kind of dumb luck that enhances one's reputation as a walking, talking encyclopedia. The New York Mets won the World Series only a few months after the Apollo landing. The victory was a tremendous upset, and big news at the time, so I researched the Mets a bit—you know, to add a little color to the retrospective WorldNews is doing. The team wasn't organized until the early nineteen sixties."

Kirk looked around. "You know, I'm very impressed," he said. "This is very much like the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

way it was—I mean to say, the way it must have been.”

“The subway is probably the most popular attraction in town,” Nan said. “It’s lots of fun, too; you meet all sorts of people. I love N’York.”

“Then why are you living in San Francisco?”

“Oh, everybody loves San Francisco,” Nan said. “N’York’s the next step up the ladder for me, though.”

“It is?” Kirk asked. “Tell me about it. I really don’t know how your business works.”

“Sure,” Nan said. “My first on-air job was doing the local news feed in McIverton, back on Centaurus, but the real jobs were all in New Athens. Then New Athens got blown up and McIverton became the temporary capital. Since I was Janey-on-the-spot, NANS—my old outfit, the New American News Service—let me substitute as number-one anchor until it could find a new one. The guy who’d had the job had been in New Athens, of course.”

“I see,” Kirk said. “How did you do?”

“Just fine, thanks, and after three weeks NANS shrugged its corporate shoulders and made me permanent. WorldNews must have noticed—some of my stuff got Federation-wide play—but it took its own sweet time about getting in touch. When it finally did, though, it really moved.”

“It did?”

“With a vengeance. I got a first-class ticket to the Big Blue Marble and an appointment for an interview with the top brass. I was hired at once, and WorldNews is seasoning me, as they call it, in its San Francisco bureau. I’m a probationary hire, though, and I’ve only been working on Terra for three months. In another nine months—less than that, maybe—I’ll either

be given a bigger and better job, or I’ll be let go. You never can tell what’ll happen next in the wild, wacky, wonderful world of trivision news.”

“That bigger and better job—would that be here in N’York?”

“Almost probably certainly maybe of course,” Nan replied. “If I do well with the Apollo anniversary coverage and the feature piece I’m doing about the Klingon, it’ll help my chances. Cross your fingers for me.”

“I will,” Kirk said, “but I still don’t know why anyone from San Francisco would want to live in N’York.”

“For the peace and quiet, of course,” she said. “Besides, if you want to be a star, you have to be in N’York—and I’m going to be a star someday. You just wait and see. Hey, the train’s coming.”

With a terrible racket and a roar of air, the boxy cars of the IRT local banged and clattered their way into the station. There was a gust of wind that sent trash and dust flying, and something entered Kirk’s right eye. He began blinking furiously in an attempt to ease it out.

The antique train came to a screeching halt; the horrible noise set Kirk’s teeth on edge. The four sets of double doors on the side of each car opened, and a crowd of people began getting off the train. The people leaving the train edged past the people attempting to board it and, gradually, the two groups managed to ooze through each other.

Kirk got on the train just as the doors rolled shut behind him. The rubberized edge of one smacked him in the rear end as it closed.

“See?” Nan said, a little out of breath. “Nothing to it.”

The subway car was hot and crowded. “Isn’t there any climate control?” Kirk asked, still

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

trying to blink the speck of dirt from his eye. Nan pointed mutely to the large ceiling fans revolving slowly and uselessly. Kirk sighed and decided that the museum's curators had emphasized the subway's worst aspects for effect. He could not remember it having been this bad.

With a sharp jerk and a muffled explosion, the train started rolling forward. Kirk and everyone else began swaying to and fro as the train picked up speed. Well, he hadn't expected inertial dampeners on a subway train. He just hoped that the behemoth wouldn't crash into anything—a possibility that seemed more and more likely.

The train arrived at the Twenty-eighth Street stop. More people got on and even more of them got off, but the train seemed to be more crowded than ever.

It was horrid, and Twenty-third Street was even worse. The crowding reminded Kirk very much of conditions on the planet Gideon.

At long last the train rolled into the station at Union Square. "Push!" Nan told him urgently. "Push!"

Kirk just made it out before the doors rolled closed. "Well, now, wasn't that fun?" Nan said happily.

"Loads." As the departing train rolled out of the station, Kirk took stock. His uniform was a bit mussed, but his Starfleet insignie and readout buckle were still in place. He quickly brushed his clothing free of dust and dirt while wondering what people who had ridden the subway in the old days did before the development of dirtproof and tearproof fabrics.

"You look fine, Admiral," Nan said, reaching up to brush a spot on Kirk's right shoulder. "Let's go. We'll hit the street and take the slidewalk the rest of the way. Uh, do you

have something in your eye?"

"Yes, I do. Feels like a boulder."

"I think I have a tissue. Wait a minute..."

"Hey, you there," came a rasping female voice behind them. They turned and saw a small, aged lady standing before them. The top of her head came up no higher than Kirk's midriff. The woman looked old enough to have helped built the subway.

"Yes, ma'am?" Kirk asked. "May I help you?"

"When's the next train?" she demanded.

"It should only be a few minutes, ma'am," Kirk said politely. "They run pretty often."

"Don't you know?" the old woman snapped.

"Uh, no, ma'am," Kirk replied, a bit taken aback. "I'm afraid I don't."

"For crying out loud," the woman said, irritated. She tapped his Starfleet insignie with a claw-like finger. "Where do they get you subway conductors, anyway? Podunk?"

"Sorry I couldn't be more helpful, ma'am."

"You're a disgrace to your uniform!" the old lady screeched to Kirk's back as he and Nan climbed the stairway marked TO STREET. "And stop winking at me! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

KLOR TURNED FROM his datascreen console. "I believe I have something here, Superior," he called. "It concerns the subject G'dath."

"And just who is this G'dath?" Keth asked in a bored tone. His back was to his subordinate; the Klingon was standing at the window of the apartment, gazing out idly toward Brooklyn and thinking about nothing at all.

"An emigrant scientist from the Empire, file number—"

"I remember him now. He is unimportant."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Yes, Superior. A neighbor of the subject G’dath took delivery for him yesterday of a chip assembly from a concern named Custom Electronics.”

“So?” Keth said. “Our interest in the traitor lies only in the exceedingly minor role he plays in Earther education—witness his place far down our watch list. The Earthers are certainly not paying any attention to him or his theories, any more than did the Empire. The traitor’s taste in home electronics certainly does not concern us—unless, perhaps, it has something to do with his tutelage of young Earthers?”

“Unknown, Superior.”

“Unknown?” Keth snapped, turning from the window. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“There is not enough information available, Superior,” Klor said, the hint of fear in his eyes. “There is no way at all to tell from the billing records what the purpose of the chip assembly might be. It was a custom design.”

“Hmmm,” Keth said. “Is there any other noteworthy information available about it?”

“Yes, Superior,” Klor said eagerly. “The chip assembly must have been rather intricate. According to the itemized bill, it took several months for Custom Electronics to fabricate it. The bill itself came to a considerable sum.”

“Really? Was it more than the subject G’dath could afford?”

“I will check,” Klor said. He turned back to the datascreen and began interrogating several other databases. “No, Superior,” he soon reported. “However, the amount did nearly deplete his savings. The bill came to the equivalent of several months’ worth of the subject G’dath’s meager earnings from his position as a teacher.”

“So this is no casual purchase,” Keth mused. “This was a chip assembly, you say?”

“Yes, Superior.”

“Can you enter the database maintained by this Custom Electronics and find whatever records apply to the order placed by the subject G’dath?”

“A moment, Superior,” Klor said. “There. I have located the design and all notes associated with the order, including those of the technicians who fabricated the chip for the subject G’dath. Those records are being downloaded to my terminal now. They were hardly protected at all.”

“Typically haphazard Earther security.”

“There is something else, Superior.”

“Tell.”

“The financial records of the subject G’dath show several small transactions yesterday at retail outlets that he does not normally frequent.”

“What kind of retail outlets?”

“There are three listed, Superior, and all seem to have something to do with the care of animals.”

“Animals?” Keth snorted. “Is the subject G’dath again turning his hand to his boyhood vocation of farmer?” He laughed harshly at his own joke.

“The outlets cater to owners of pet animals, Superior,” Klor said. “There are minor debits against the subject G’dath’s account for items appropriate to the care and feeding of a cat. Apparently, he has obtained a specimen.”

“*Panthera leo*? In an apartment?”

“No, Superior,” Klor said. “I refer to *Felis catus*.”

“Oh,” Keth said. “Better ten tribbles in a household than one of *those* things. Worse than Earther dogs, I say. I understand *Felis catus* does nothing but eat, sleep and shed.”

“Yes, Superior.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“I understand that cats can be used for experimental purposes.” Keth scratched his chin thoughtfully. “That might be what the traitor intends. Such experiments might involve this mysterious chip assembly.”

“Perhaps, Superior.”

“This grows more peculiar by the minute. Have you completed the download of that design yet?”

“It has just finished coming in,” Klor answered. He quickly accessed the file and began studying it. “Superior? The subject G’dath apparently designed the chip assembly himself. It is his name on the specifications.”

“Interesting,” Keth said. “The traitor has until now seemed nothing but a impractical clod capable only of the dreaming of vague dreams. It is surprising to see that he has some facility with the practical side of things as well—very surprising. Is there any hint in his notes as to the purpose of the chip assembly?”

“None, Superior,” Klor replied. “The design notes with the file do not address the point, and the function of the completed chip assembly is not obvious and cannot be inferred by the computer. It also appears that a significant fraction of the design is missing—most likely due to an error in data storage.”

Keth shrugged. “No matter. There are those at the Embassy who will know what to make of all this. Prepare a shielded transmission to Geneva.”

“I obey, Superior.”

THE DOOR TO THE APARTMENT SLID OPEN and there stood G’dath, big, brown and thoroughly intimidating—until he smiled. “Good afternoon, Admiral, Miss Davis,” he said. “Please come in.” He stepped aside and allowed

them to enter.

As they did, a gray blur flew out of the apartment, close to the floor, and headed down the hallway toward the lifttube. It startled Nan. “What was that?” she asked.

“That was Leaper,” G’dath said. “My cat.” Kirk blinked. “Your cat?”

“Yes. A kitten, actually. Will you excuse me for a moment? Miss Davis, you may put that case down anywhere you choose.” G’dath hurried down the hall toward a small gray thing squatting about ten meters away. Kirk and Nan watched as G’dath reached down, picked up the kitten and spoke to it softly. The kitten wriggled and then settled itself comfortably over G’dath’s shoulder.

“What’s he saying?” Nan whispered.

“It’s Klingonese,” Kirk replied. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard the language spoken so softly. It’s, um, baby talk, I guess you could call it.”

“The cat enjoys going out into the hallway,” G’dath explained to them as he came back into the apartment and the door closed behind him. “I believe he thinks it is a part of our home that I do not let him enter, which makes him all the more anxious to explore it. I do wish he would stay inside. It would be safer.”

The kitten was looking at Nan with wide eyes. “He’s beautiful,” Nan said. She scratched Leaper’s head in just the right spot between his ears, and the little cat closed his eyes in pleasure and began purring more loudly. “When did you get him?”

“Just yesterday, and it was he who acquired me.” He told her the story.

“Now that’s exactly the kind of thing I’d like to work into the interview, G’dath,” Nan said. “It would help people understand you better, sympathize with you more—”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

The Klingon suddenly looked nervous. “I hope you do not include any mention of Leaper in your story,” he said. “Having a pet is against the rules here. I would not want to cause a conflict with the administrators of the Preserve.”

“Far be it from me to cause you trouble with your landlord,” Nan said. “All right. Where can I set up?”

“Set up?”

“My equipment,” Nan elaborated. “I have two portable trivision scanners in that case I brought with me.”

“Oh,” G’dath said. “What are your needs?”

“Just a couple of chairs and some clear space for you and me to sit in,” Nan said. “The scanners will do the rest.”

“Very well,” G’dath said. He took two straight-backed chairs from the dining nook and set them in the center of the living room. “Will these be all right?”

“They’ll do just fine,” Nan said, nodding. She pointed at the middle of the brightly colored rug. “If you wouldn’t mind putting them down right there, facing each other—?”

“Surely,” the Klingon said, and he did.

“Can I help?” Kirk asked.

“We’re okay, thanks, Admiral,” Nan replied. She bent to open her case. It split apart to reveal two cubes, each about a third of a meter square. Five faces of each cube were of polished black metal; the sixth side appeared glassy. There were also two tripods inside the case; Nan took them and thumbed a switch on each that expanded them. She set the tripods on opposite sides of the room and placed a scanner on top of each. The scanners locked into place.

“Admiral,” Nan said, “I’m going to have you sit on that other chair back in the dining area so you won’t be picked up on video. The nook is out of scanner range.”

“Certainly,” said Kirk.

“Thanks. All right, I’m going to calibrate now; let’s all take our places. G’dath, I’m going to tell the scanners where we are in the room, so they can find us and track us correctly.”

“I understand, Miss Davis,” G’dath said. “Please go on. I find this very interesting.”

“So do I,” Kirk said.

“Quiet, please.” Nan snapped her fingers. “Over here,” she called out. There was the faintest sound of gears moving as both cubes turned this way and that, their glassy square eyes locking onto Nan and G’dath. Nan snapped her fingers and called to them again, but the cubes remained at rest. “That’s it,” Nan said. “We’re all set.”

“Precisely how will we be recording?” G’dath asked.

“Have you ever seen portable scanning equipment before?”

“No,” the Klingon said. “I have only read about the process.”

“Well,” Nan explained, “if we have the luxury of pre-recording an interview, we use these instead of the larger scanners we use at the studio. That glassy face you see in each scanning cube is an omnilens. The scanners store everything that happens within their permitted view from their two separate perspectives. That way I can get full body shots of both of us while we’re talking to each other. Then a computer in our production department will merge the two recordings into true three-dee, with whatever shots and whatever the producer and I decide we need. Any missing shots—profiles, close-ups, whatever—can be interpolated from the audiovisual data stored in the cubes. The net result will be that, when this piece runs, it’ll look as if we’d done this interview in a studio with a full crew on hand.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

G'dath thought about it. "Which do you prefer — pre-recording or working in real time?"

"I pre-record whenever I can," Nan said. "It saves wear and tear on my stomach lining."

"As when the *Enterprise's* command section lifted off later than expected yesterday?" G'dath asked. "I imagine that must have caused some problems for you."

"Yes, exactly."

"Sorry about that," Kirk called.

"You're forgiven, Admiral," Nan said. "Just don't do it again."

"I thought the show went quite well, Miss Davis," said G'dath.

"You saw it?" Nan asked, pleased.

"Indeed I did. I watched it at school with my students. The program was quite revelatory. We had a splendid discussion afterward."

"Thank you," Nan said. "Actually, your classroom work is one of the main subjects I want to cover. I want to give people an idea of what you're really like, as if they were the ones sitting across from you and talking to you. I want them to understand what's happened to you and what your feelings are about it, and how your situation might be improved."

G'dath nodded. "As I told your producer, Miss Davis," he said, "I have been on Terra for some years now, and yet I still do not quite understand how public opinion here is formed. If I can be of help to myself and those of my blood, however, I am more than willing to give it a try." He smiled again. "Shall we?"

Suddenly there was an urgent beeping sound that repeated itself. Nan looked around to see Leaper sitting on top of the scanner behind her. His tail was hanging in front of the omnilens, and the proximity of the tail to the face of the lens was causing the scanner to overload.

"Oh, dear," Nan said, rising. "I'm going to

have to purge the memory of that scanner. Fortunately, we haven't really started yet."

"I am sorry," G'dath said. "I will take care of Leaper."

"Perhaps I could hold onto him for you," Kirk said.

"No, thank you, Admiral," replied G'dath. "He will simply get away from you; trust me on that. I will put Leaper in the other room."

The Klingon walked over to the scanner and, with great care, picked the kitten up in his big hands and stroked him as he carried him toward the doorway to the bedroom. "You will be fine in there, little one," he said as the door slid open at their approach. G'dath put Leaper down on the floor and patted him on the rump until he scampered into the bedroom. The kitten stopped and turned around to look at G'dath just as the door closed.

The Klingon resumed his seat. "I believe we can begin now," he said.

"Fine," Nan began. "Record on. First, tell me —"

There was a scratching at the other side of the bedroom door. "Did you lock it?" Nan asked.

"No," G'dath replied. "There is no need. Leaper is much too small to actuate the close-approach sensor. I believe you were about to ask me a question ... ?"

"Oh," Nan said. "Certainly. First I'd like you to tell me how it happened that —"

There was suddenly a pitiful and repetitive squeaking from the other side of the door. It did not stop.

G'dath sighed. "Miss Davis," he said, "I do not think I can continue with this interview if the little beast continues to cry in this manner."

"I don't think he likes being separated from you," Nan said, smiling. "I can't stand to see the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

poor baby unhappy, either. Look, if you can keep him off my equipment and out of your lap, we can easily edit him out of the data compiled by the scanners. No one will ever see him.”

“That will be fine,” G’dath said. “I will get Leaper.” Just as he rose, the bedroom door slid open and Leaper came trotting out into the living room. G’dath blinked.

“Looks like Leaper found that field you were talking about,” Kirk observed.

The Klingon shook his head in something very much like wonder as Leaper went directly to what had quickly become his favorite spot on the brightly colored rug and settled down for a nap.

“I guess he doesn’t need anyone looking out for him,” Kirk said. “That cat’s able to take care of himself just fine.”

“That field is chest-high—my chest,” G’dath said. “I have begun to wonder if this little cat secretly possesses the ability to fly and has not yet bothered to inform me of the fact.”

Nan laughed. “It looks like we’re finally going to get some peace and quiet now,” she said. “Shall we begin?”

“THE EMBASSY IS REPLYING,” Klor said as his data terminal chimed. He scanned the incoming transmission.

“Well?” Keth barked.

“It is encoded, Superior,” Klor said quickly. “I pray your indulgence for just a moment. The entire transmission must be received before any attempt can be made to decode it. Ah—it is all here now, and I have initiated the decoding routines.”

“Very well. What does the Embassy say?”

“Superior!” Klor said, surprised. “The case of the subject G’dath has been given top

priority! We are to track him most closely, and capture him at our earliest opportunity!”

“Hard copy!” Keth ordered, and Klor had his terminal print the Embassy transmission on destructible stock. He handed the sheet to Keth, who read it quickly.

“I see,” Keth said. “The Embassy is intrigued by the design fragment. It requires both the subject G’dath and either the complete schematic or the artifact itself as soon as possible. The design seems to imply power generation, although the method is most unclear. We are commended for bringing this matter to the attention of the Embassy.”

“Is there a reply?” Klor asked.

“Send them the standard acknowledgment,” Keth said. “Move the subject G’dath to the top of our watch list, in accordance with our orders. Institute level-A surveillance on him at once, and maintain it until further notice.”

“Immediately, Superior!”

“I WAS A PHYSICIST in the Empire, Miss Davis,” G’dath said. “My specialty was the study of the behavior of transluminal wavicles.”

“And you came to the Federation as a result of the Organian Peace Treaty?”

“That is correct,” G’dath said. “I had been assigned to work at an institute on one of the border planets central to the dispute between the Federation and the Empire at the time of the crisis six years ago.”

“A border planet? Seems rather out of the way.”

“I believe my placement there was intentional, Miss Davis. To be blunt, I was considered something of a crackpot.”

“Oh.”

G’dath smiled. “I was considered a crackpot

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

in that I was not given to practical research. Research in the Empire, particularly in physics, is entirely directed by the government, and all work must show a practical result. As I have always been more of a pure theoretician, that did not suit me.”

“What happened after the Organians stopped the war?”

“As you know, one of the provisions of the treaty allowed residents of those disputed planets to choose relocation after ownership, if you will, of the planet was determined by arbitration. I and some thousands of others who lived on border planets formerly within the Empire chose to resettle in the Federation. It is a matter of record that most treaty refugees of all races resettled on Terra, at least initially. Terra is the center of everything in the Federation.”

“You left everything you knew to come here?” Nan asked.

“Yes,” G’dath said. “It was not as hard a choice as you might think, but it was ... difficult. I have—I had—a family.”

“Why did you choose to leave the Empire?”

G’dath grew thoughtful. “In the beginning,” he said, “I considered that I had come only to find a place where I might be allowed to do the kind of research I want to do, with the far better equipment and resources that would be available to me here. After I arrived on Terra, however, I soon found that there was another, better reason to have come.”

“Such as?”

“Freedom,” G’dath said. “I had never before encountered the concept of personal freedom. It departed entirely from everything that I had ever before known. The concept was as foreign to me as elementary transluminal physics had been in my earliest student days. It took me quite a while to understand that not only was no

Federation operative watching me, but that no Federation operative could possibly be *interested* in watching me. I was being left completely alone for the first time in my life. It was shortly after I came to realize this that I applied for Federation citizenship, which I was soon granted.”

“So you chose freedom,” Nan said.

“I had to do so,” G’dath said simply. “I could do no other.”

Nan nodded. “You just said that your specialty was in transluminal physics—”

“That is correct.”

“Are you working in that field now?”

“No, Miss Davis,” G’dath said. “I am not employed as a physicist of any sort.”

“Why?”

“I cannot find a job in the field.”

“And why is that?”

“I am told there are no openings.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

“I suspect it is not.”

“What are you doing to survive?”

“I am employed as what is colloquially referred to as a high school teacher,” G’dath said. “I have been hired by the N’York public school system to preside over and conduct an experimental class. It is good and worthy work, and I like it and am grateful for it.”

“But it isn’t your real work?”

G’dath hesitated. “Without wishing to offend either my employers or my students,” he said slowly, “I must say that teaching high school is not my real work. I would very much like to get back to my physics.”

“What are your credentials as a physicist?” Nan asked him.

G’dath began reciting his degrees, and after a moment Nan held up a hand. “I’m not quite following you,” she said apologetically. “Are

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

those the equivalent of doctorates? I think I've heard three go by so far."

"Two are the equivalent of doctorates," G'dath said. "The third degree is one level beyond that, and there is no equivalent to it within the realm of standard Federation education. I understand, however, that Vulcan institutions of higher learning bestow a degree somewhat similar in prestige."

"What's the difference between your degree and the one the Vulcans have?"

"My degree is more difficult to obtain."

"Oh," Nan said. "I suppose, if I supposed anything, that the Vulcans were the scholars of the known galaxy—"

"—and the Klingons were the warriors?" G'dath finished for her.

"Um, yes," she said.

G'dath nodded. "My race has that reputation," he said. "It is a stereotype and, like all such, it is vicious in essence." His expression turned stern. "I am no Warrior," he said. "Most Klingons are not. My family are—were—peaceable farmers. My parents worked hard to get me admitted to the—I think you'd call it 'the ranks of the scholars' for want of anything better—and to keep me there. It is true that I served in the Fleet at one time when I was younger, because a term of military service is compulsory even for those not of the Warrior class. I was an assistant warp-drive engineer aboard a *K'tala*-class ship—similar in size and capability to a Starfleet scout, I believe."

"Close enough," Kirk said, nodding.

Nan turned in her seat. "Admiral—" she began, wagging a finger.

"Sorry, Miss Davis," Kirk said, his expression contrite. "Shop talk. It won't happen again."

Nan tried to hide a smile but did not quite

succeed. She turned back to address G'dath. "Did you fight?" she asked him.

"Often," G'dath said. "We fought pirates operating on the fringes of the Empire. I was only technically a combatant, however. Only career officers were allowed the actual glory of battle—determining strategy, pushing the buttons to actuate the weapons, and so forth."

"Was it glory, even for you?" Nan asked.

"Glory? There is nothing inglorious about protecting one's own kind from those who would just as soon kill or enslave them as not. We fought pirates and destroyed them. I am proud of my service with the Fleet."

"Did your ship ever have a confrontation with a Federation vessel?" Nan asked, and Kirk's ears picked up.

"No, it did not," G'dath said, his expression wry. "I think we would have been quite surprised to see a Federation vessel in that sector; we were about as far from the common border as a ship could possibly be yet still remain within the Empire." He paused a moment, thinking. "We were also about as far from the center of the Empire as a ship could possibly be," he said. "It was lonely duty."

"What happened after you left the service?" Nan asked.

"I went back to school, as you might put it," G'dath said. "I received my third advanced degree, went to work as a researcher, and was eventually assigned to the border planet I have already mentioned."

"What did you find when you arrived on Terra?" Nan asked.

G'dath looked sad. "I found a common belief that I and my fellows were all bloodthirsty villains and, without exception, savage. I found that I myself was considered likely to go mad at any given moment because

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

the impulse to do so was ‘in my blood,’ as I believe someone once put it. It took me nearly three years to secure my present teaching position; during that time, I worked at odd jobs to supplement my Federation refugee grant. The N’York school authorities met with virulent opposition when my hiring was first announced. To its credit, the school board stood fast on my behalf, relying on both the letter and spirit of the anti-discrimination laws. Since I have not gone mad and killed anyone, the controversy has died down, and I think the results I have gotten with my students justify my employers’ faith in me.”

“You told me that you didn’t think your present job was your real work,” Nan said. “What have you been doing about trying to secure another position?”

“This very morning, Miss Davis,” G’dath said, “I dispatched my five hundred sixty-first application for an entry-level academic position in an institution of higher learning; I have long since given up seeking something more suited to my curriculum vitae. I have tried everywhere from Harvard, Oxford and the Sorbonne to community colleges in the American Midwest. I have, without exception, been told that there are no suitable openings for me—that is, I have been told that when the institution has bothered replying to my query at all. Miss Davis, I do not wish to whine, and I do not seek pity, but I have two doctorates and a degree that is superior to a doctorate, and yet I am told repeatedly that I am not qualified for a beginning position that is generally staffed by someone still working toward a bachelor’s degree.”

“What do you want?” Nan asked him. “What do you desire most of all? What do you want to tell the people of Terra?”

“I want to contribute,” G’dath said simply. “I chose freely to live and work here among

you. I am one of you now. I can contribute a great deal to our common good. Why won’t you let me?”

“HAVE YOU ESTABLISHED A LINK into the subject G’dath’s quarters yet?” demanded Keth impatiently. “It has been some time since I gave the order.”

“It is almost done, Superior,” Klor replied quickly. “I am echoing standard signals over the maintenance lines into the subject G’dath’s apartment to carry our surveillance traffic. Our link will be nearly undetectable—”

“Fool!” barked Keth. “Do you actually think the farmer has thought to institute a multilayered defense against electronic surveillance? Run a probe into his quarters immediately, over his standard communications lines. We will watch and listen to the farmer over his own fonecom.”

Klor blanched. “At once, Superior!” The Klingon rapidly entered a series of codes into his computer and waited.

“Well?” Keth said.

“Done, Superior,” Klor answered, and there was a note of relief in his voice. “We now have a hard link into the quarters of the subject G’dath.” He typed another command, and a speaker buried inside the computer sputtered to life. “On audio, Superior.”

“I hear voices,” Keth said. “Enhance them.”

“At once, Superior.” As Klor entered string upon string of commands, the voices became clearer. “There are two voices, Superior,” Klor reported. “The computer identifies the deeper one as that of the subject G’dath. The other belongs to an unidentified human female.”

“Are those the only two people in the apartment?”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Unknown, Superior,” Klor replied.

“Visual,” Keth ordered.

Keth typed another command, and the computer screen lighted up. “The source of the voices is in another room, almost certainly adjacent to the one at which we are looking, Superior. I believe this is the bedroom of the subject G’ dath; that object at the bottom of the screen appears to me to be the edge of a sleeping mat.”

“Is there another fonecom unit anywhere in the apartment?”

“No, Superior. In fact, this view is from the audiovisual pickup of a personal computer. The subject G’ dath must use his computer as a fonecom sender-receiver.”

“Ah,” Keth said. “We are inside his computer? Then might we examine the contents of the computer’s memory?”

“Certainly, Superior. Gaining such access is trivial.” Klor typed another series of commands. “Downloading now.”

“When you have completed the download,” Keth said, “compress the file and relay it to the Embassy for further analysis. Meanwhile, maintain surveillance.”

“Yes, Superior.”

“I THINK I HAVE ENOUGH,” Nan said. “G’ dath, there’s something else I’d like to do.”

“And that is?”

“I’d like for us to go outside so that I can get some shots of you walking around the neighborhood. It’s just the sort of thing I’ll need for visuals.”

G’ dath nodded. “I understand.”

Kirk stood and stretched. “Interesting interview, Miss Davis,” he said. “G’ dath, I’d like to talk with you myself sometime soon

about those pirates out on the Imperial fringe. We may have a few things in common; I pulled similar duty early in my career.”

“Certainly, Admiral,” G’ dath said. “I will look forward to our talk. In turn, you might favor me with a discussion of your five-year mission. Your name was well known in the Empire, but I fear I did not receive an unembellished view of events.”

Kirk grinned. “I’d be glad to, G’ dath.”

“A THIRD VOICE, SUPERIOR!” Klor exclaimed. “It is referred to as ‘Admiral’!”

Keth blinked. “An officer? Of Starfleet, perhaps? Can we make an attempt at identification?”

Klor nodded quickly. “There is his rank, and a reference to a five-year mission. The Embassy has files on all important Starfleet personnel. I will try for a voiceprint match, although it may take some time. I have already linked into the Embassy computer.”

“Might we also identify this ‘Miss Davis’ the one called ‘Admiral’ addressed?”

“Unlikely, Superior, unless the Embassy has her voiceprint on file as well. She might also be a Starfleet officer. Shall I try?”

Keth shook his head. “The admiral would have referred to her by her rank if she were anything more than a junior officer. No. Give your full priority to identifying the voice of the one referred to as ‘Admiral.’ I sense we have little time.” The Klingon thought for a moment. “Alert the human members of the covert assault team,” he said. “They are to gather at Point B and await orders — and they must not be seen.”

“Yes, Superior. At once!”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“IT IS CERTAINLY A PLEASANT ENOUGH DAY for a walk,” G’dath observed. “I am glad to get outside. I fear that, sometimes, I lose myself in my work, particularly on weekends.”

“Work?” Nan asked. “What work is that, G’dath?”

The Klingon smiled wanly. “My studies, I mean. I still dabble in physics, Miss Davis. I try to keep up, but every day there is more and more to learn.”

“Can I carry something?” Kirk asked. “I’m beginning to feel fairly useless around here.”

“Sure, Admiral,” Nan said. “In fact, I’ve got a job for you.” She stopped and set the case containing the portable scanners down on the walkway. Opening it, she handed Kirk one of the scanners. “Just keep the business end of this pointed at G’dath,” Nan told him, “and the cube will do the rest. I’ll handle the other cube.”

“Don’t you want to be in the picture, too?” Kirk asked.

“No,” Nan replied. “We’ll just walk along and shoot G’dath. Just hold the cube as steady as you can, Admiral; that’ll help later, when I have to process the shots.”

“Got it. Do I get paid for this?”

“I’ll buy lunch.”

“Deal,” Kirk said. “How do I start this thing?”

Nan reached over and touched a spot on the top of the cube. “It’s started, Admiral. Now just keep about two meters ahead of G’dath as he walks along the pathway. I’ll shoot him from his left. That’ll give the processors plenty of data to compose the other shots I’ll need, and it’ll keep each of us out of the shots the other is making.”

“This seems like a great deal of fuss,” G’dath said.

“It’s show biz, G’dath,” Nan said, smiling. “You learn to live with it. Shall we get started?”

They walked along for a while. Kirk felt the cube humming in his hands as he kept it trained on G’dath. The Klingon simply walked forward, looking to his left or right at Nan’s direction.

“Jeez, G’dath,” Nan called. “Lighten it up a little, will you? Smile or something.”

The Klingon smiled.

“No, not like that,” Nan said. “Smile as if you meant it.”

G’dath laughed. “I was never very good at smiling for a camera, Miss Davis,” the Klingon said. “You might take a look at the hologram on my citizenship papers.”

“I did,” Nan said, “and you have a point. Just try to think of something pleasant—yes, that’s better. Makes you look more, uh—”

“Human?” Kirk supplied.

“Friendly,” Nan said.

“It would be most difficult for me to look human,” G’dath observed. “I will settle for looking friendly. Actually, Miss Davis, that brings up something we did not discuss in the interview.”

“Which is?”

“I often wonder what it must be like to be human,” G’dath said. “I have observed your people at close range for some years now. We are different in some ways, but they seem unimportant. For instance, I see better than you do in the dark. Your reaction time is swifter than mine. I am stronger. Your average life expectancy is greater. My sense of smell is more acute than yours. Your sense of taste is more subtle than mine. None of these differences seems very significant, however. I am struck instead by our many similarities, all of which are emotional in nature. We laugh and cry at, and are outraged and pleased by, much the same things. We even understand the point of many of each other’s jokes, particularly the

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

scatological ones. I think it is this shared emotional life, more than anything else, which permits our races to have anything to do with each other at all.”

“How do you mean?” Nan asked him.

“I will take an example from Terran history,” G’dath said. “Back in the twentieth century, humans came to realize that they were not the only intelligent species on Terra. Work was done with some of the higher primates, and humans began to communicate on a primitive level with specially trained gorillas and chimpanzees. At around the same time, humans also realized that dolphins and whales were intelligent but, despite endless attempts, no true communication was ever achieved with those species. I understand attempts are still being made with the dolphins, but to no avail.”

“Why do you think that is?” Nan asked.

“Dolphins are a truly alien species, Miss Davis,” G’dath said, “even though they share our planet. You and I have much more in common than either of us have with them. We do not have even the beginnings of a dialogue with the dolphins. We do not even know if they want to talk with us; it may not be important to them. They swim and they play and they eat and they procreate and they die, and that seems to be about the extent of it. There is no dolphin art or dolphin literature. There are no dolphin buildings or dolphin statuary. They do not even seem to have names for each other.”

“Maybe they don’t need them,” Kirk mused.

“Perhaps not,” G’dath said. “If so, that would be another indication of how very different they are from humans. I have heard a human philosopher say that dolphins are what humans would be if Adam and Eve had never eaten of the forbidden fruit. Are you each familiar with that myth?”

Kirk and Nan nodded. “We have a similar legend involving our first ones and a chest full of treasure,” G’dath continued. “It is basically the same tale. We too have sentient lifeforms in our seas, and the same notion has occurred to our own philosophers. It is... intriguing.”

“WE HAVE A VISUAL COMING IN from one of the covert team members,” Klor reported.

“On screen,” Keth snapped.

A picture swam onto the small screen of the computer monitor. There were three figures in the foreground.

“This is coming in live, Superior,” Klor said. “It is being taken from a distance of fifty meters by the leader of the covert team.”

“One of those people is in Starfleet uniform,” Keth observed. “That must be the admiral. Zoom closer; I want to see his features.”

“Yes, Superior.” Klor ordered the computer to process the incoming image in a way that would magnify the face of the man in uniform. The picture pixelated and reformed.

“*Z’breth!*” Keth cried. “James Kirk, late of Federation starcraft *Enterprise*, and now the prime architect of Starfleet’s secret war policy! No need for an Embassy identification on *him!*”

“The female appears to be the reporter we saw on trivision yesterday morning, Superior,” Klor said. “The late trivision listings indicated she was to interview Kirk this morning on an unannounced subject. It turned out to concern a celebration of a pivotal event in Earther history. I took the liberty of recording that feed for your later perusal.”

“Indeed?” Keth said. “Excellent.” The Klingon scratched his chin. “I do not think we want our friend talking to someone such as

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Kirk. Order the covert team to take the subject G'dath into custody immediately. I want him alive. No energy weapons are to be used, even to stun; the authorities would detect their use instantly."

"What of the two humans?"

"Capture the admiral—if possible. Kill the female. In any event, there should be no witnesses."

"WELL," NAN SAID, "I think I have enough—"

"Wait a moment," G'dath said, holding up a hand. "I hear something. It sounds very much like four people running toward us."

Kirk instinctively ducked as he heard a footfall behind him. As he turned, crouched, a fist holding a blackjack sliced through the air over his head. Kirk dropped the scanner cube and scampered backward, putting some distance between himself and his attacker.

"Nan!" Kirk cried. "Watch your back!"

Nan turned just as a second attacker appeared behind her. Without thinking, she swung the scanner she was holding, catching the thug in the stomach. Unprepared for the blow, the attacker dropped to his knees, the wind knocked out of him. Nan raised her cube and smashed the man over the head with it. The attacker collapsed.

"Backs to each other!" Kirk cried. "Quick!"

"What the hell is going on?" Nan demanded as the three of them fell into a defensive posture.

"Occasionally there is hooliganism here," G'dath said. "It is a sad fact of life that, sometimes, outsiders come in to attack residents of the Preserve. They are usually captured by law enforcement officials and are made to pay for their anti-social behavior, but first they must be captured."

"That particularly ugly one there is wearing a Barclayite button," Nan said.

"Oh," Kirk said sourly. "Them."

"What are these Barclayites?" G'dath asked.

"They don't like non-humans," Nan said.

"They don't even like most humans. The movement started on Centaurus years ago. I didn't know it had spread to Terra, though. In fact, I would have bet against it."

"A social aberration?" G'dath asked. "If so, it will die out soon enough."

"Will it die out in the next two minutes?"

Nan asked. "If not, we may have a problem here. They've got knives and clubs."

"We have us," G'dath rumbled.

"You bet your ass we have us," Kirk said.

His eyes narrowed. "Let 'em come."

Nan cleared her throat. "Uh, Admiral, not to spoil your fun, but can't you just call your friend Harry to beam the three of us the hell out of here? This *is* an emergency, after all."

"Oh," Kirk said, a note of disappointment in his voice. "Well, I suppose we could do that, all right." He began to reach under the flap of his jacket for his communicator—

—which was precisely when the three remaining thugs rushed them.

G'dath roared and, with one swipe of his mighty arm, two of the attackers went down. Kirk tackled the third. Nan picked up the scanner cube she had used against the first attacker and, standing over the two wrestling men, attempted to bash Kirk's foe over the head, but there was too much movement back and forth as the men fought.

There was suddenly a muffled "ulp" from behind her. Nan turned to see G'dath holding the revived first attacker by his collar. His feet dangled several inches off the ground. The man wriggled in the Klingon's powerful grip. "Let

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

me go, you alien bastard!” the man cried.

“You are a loathsome little noise,” G’dath said. “Miss Davis, you should always watch your back most carefully in these situations. As for you, noisy one, go to sleep.”

“Huh?” the man said.

“Good night,” G’dath said, hitting the man on the head and letting him fall to the ground. “Admiral, are you about done?”

“One moment,” Kirk said. He was sitting on the chest of his own opponent. “You going to behave now?” Kirk asked him.

“Go to hell, alien lover!” the man hissed. Kirk socked him on the jaw.

“Effective,” G’dath said approvingly.

“You didn’t do so badly yourself,” Kirk said, rising. He tasted blood and wiped a thin smear of it from his lip. “I’m glad you’re none the worse for wear, Miss Davis.”

“Well, thanks, Admiral. Um, your uniform’s a little dirty.”

“It’ll brush off,” Kirk said, grinning. “These new tearproof fabrics are a godsend. Time was when I would use up at least one uniform per month. How are your scanners?”

Nan bent to inspect them. “The one you were carrying is fine,” she reported after a moment. “The case on mine is dented—can’t imagine how *that* happened, heh heh—but its memory is intact. They’re still scanning, too. Not only didn’t we lose anything from the interview or the walkabout, but I think we may even have some great shots of the fight.”

A crowd was beginning to gather around them. “Do you mind if we end this meeting now?” G’dath asked. “I do not particularly wish to be so conspicuous. If it is all right with both of you, and if we are done for the day, I would just as soon return home.”

“That’s a good idea,” Kirk said. “Enough’s

enough. The local cops are bound to show up soon. Our friends here have been paid in kind, and I don’t want Starfleet Command tied in with all this.”

Nan nodded. “I don’t need to spend a couple of hours filling out police reports, either. Okay, then—let’s scam.”

Kirk grinned at her. “You said you’d buy lunch—and I seem to have worked up an appetite.”

“Know what? I have, too. G’dath? Care to join us?”

G’dath shook his head. “I think I shall forego food and take a nap,” he said. “Until the next time we meet, my friends.”

“ASTONISHING,” SAID KETH, almost to himself. “That was a highly trained assault team. There is more to our farmer boy than I thought.”

“Superior?” Klor said. “Are there any orders for the covert operations chief?”

“No,” Keth said. “The team has been taken into custody by the local authorities, but their cover stories will hold against routine police interrogation.” He smiled without humor. “Inform the chief that the efficiency of his team members—and he himself—will be the subject of a rather lengthy report I plan to file tonight with the Embassy. Meanwhile, you and I must make some plans.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter Eight

I FEEL SORRY FOR HIM,” Nan said as she dug into her calamari over linguini. “He’s a good person, Jim. He deserves a break.”

“I guess he does,” Jim said distractedly. He had barely touched his veal marsala.

“I’m going to give him one, too,” she said. “He’ll make a wonderful sidebar on Apollo Day—you know, a feature piece related to the main story. It’s human interest, if that expression’s not inappropriate. G’dath should be everyone’s idea of the plucky, ne’er-say-die immigrant who pulls himself up by his bootstraps and carves out

a life for himself in a new land. The difference is, he’s a Klingon—and that shouldn’t be a problem, but it is.”

“Uh-huh.”

“*Plus* he’s got a cat,” Nan said. “Now, how righteous can you be? I’m going to have Jenny do a shoot over at his school sometime late next week; I’m going to need it for the story.”

“Hmmm.”

“I’ve got two cats of my own, you know. Their names are Lois and Jimmy.”

“Oh.”

“What else would a newsperson name a couple of cats?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I adopted them from the FSPCA when I moved here; I’ve always had a cat or two around since I was a kid.” Nan looked at the shoulder of her jacket and picked a long white hair off the material. “Lois sheds like crazy. If I collected what she throws off, I could probably knit myself a brand-new cat every three months—not that any sane person *would*, of course.”

“Hmmm.”

Nan put down her fork. “Jim?”

“Eh? What is it?”

“What’s the matter, Jim? You’re a million miles away.”

“I’m all right,” he said. “Really.”

“Let me help,” Nan said, and Jim winced. He tried to cover for it by picking up his knife and fork. “Let’s eat,” he said, digging in briskly. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m in a mood.”

“Jim?” Nan suddenly asked. “Just what is the problem?”

He shrugged and decided to answer. “My wife left me last night,” he said. “The term actually expires around the end of the year, but she left early. She’d had enough.”

“Oh, no,” Nan said, distressed. “I had no

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

idea.”

“It’s not your problem, Nan.”

“No, but I’m embarrassed. Back at the office, I thought—”

“You thought I was a married man on the prowl.”

“Yes.” She looked at him carefully. “But you’re not, are you? That’s not why she left.”

“No,” Jim said. “I feel more than a little beaten up right now, Nan. I don’t think I’ve ever felt quite this *helpless* before. I feel acted upon when I should be acting.” He gestured helplessly. “Everything’s out *there* somewhere, spinning off in all sorts of random directions, like the wreckage of a ship that’s been blasted apart. I used to feel—hell, I used to be in control. Now I’ve lost my marriage and I’ve been saddled with a job I don’t want—” He stopped.

“Was the interview *that* bad?” Nan kidded him.

“No,” Jim said, shaking his head slowly. Nan thought he looked rather surprised. “I didn’t mean that at all. I wasn’t thinking of public relations; I was thinking of Deployment. Funny.”

“I hesitate to say this,” Nan began.

“—but you think I made a mistake in taking the desk job,” Kirk finished for her, waving a hand. “That’s all right, Nan,” he said sourly. “Everybody thinks that. It makes me feel confident about my ability to make a decision.”

“You knew that caller from Georgia, didn’t you?” Nan asked. “I could see it in your eyes. It was your friend McCoy, wasn’t it?”

“I recognized his voice,” Jim said, nodding. “It’s the first time I’ve heard from him in a year.”

“He still cares about what happens to you, Jim.”

Jim shrugged. “It was a toll-free call,” he said casually, renewing the attack on his veal. “He couldn’t care all *that* much.”

Nan remained silent.

“That was a lousy thing for me to say,” Jim finally grunted.

“Want to talk about it?” Nan asked. “As friends, I mean. I’m not working now.”

“I think I’d like that,” Jim said.

He began by telling her about some of the things that had happened during those five years that were part of the public record. In doing so, he began to allow himself to recall how he’d felt—the fear that crept up on him during a crisis and nibbled at the base of his brain, the exhilaration that came after its resolution, and how necessary it had been for him to hide both fear and joy from everyone around him because that was, after all, what a captain did.

“Didn’t you ever let go?” Nan asked him.

“Never,” Jim replied. “Once we were at a place called Omicron Ceti III. We had thought the colony there dead from inimical radiation from the local star, but we found everyone alive and much too healthy.”

“Much too healthy?”

“Yes,” Jim said. “They had been affected by spores alien to the planet. The spores formed a symbiotic relationship with the human body that kept the colonists alive while blunting their instinct to compete. The colony was three years old, yet nothing at all had been accomplished by the colonists.”

“I see,” Nan said. “What happened?”

“We got there not knowing the spores existed,” Jim said. “We had no idea we needed to take precautions, so all of us were infected.”

“Including you?”

“Including me,” Jim said, nodding, “but there was a big difference.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“And what was that?”

“I was the only person who got angry about it.”

“You were?”

“I was, and the charge of adrenaline I got from being mad neutralized the spores and returned my mind to normal. The spores had no tolerance for adrenaline, so they numbed the emotional responses that cause its production in the body, allowing it to exist only at biologically necessary levels. I had to get pretty mad to overcome that.”

“So what happened?” Nan asked.

“I cured my people, got them back aboard, and kept my command,” Jim said. “I was literally incapable of doing anything else.”

“And the moral of this little tale, Jim?”

Jim paused. “When Lori left last night, I didn’t do a damn thing to stop her. I just let her walk right out of my life, and I felt relieved.”

“I see,” Nan said.

“You know, it’s funny,” Jim said. “My closest confidant and the person who knows me best are two different people, and neither of them is my wife -my ex-wife, I mean.”

“McCoy and Spock.”

“In that order,” he said, draining his glass. “Want some more wine? The house red is pretty good.”

“I’ll pass for now,” Nan said. “Jim, tell me about Lori. Isn’t she a little older than you are?”

“She is and she isn’t,” Jim said.

“Eh?”

“Early on, I pulled duty aboard a series of sublight patrol craft out on the fringes of Federation space. The tour lasted eight months, but that was subjective time; more than four years went by outside. I’m thirty-six years old, but I was born forty-one years ago—a month or so before Lori was, as a matter of fact.”

“How did Lori fit into your life?”

“I’m beginning to see that she didn’t,” Jim said. “It’s ironic.”

“What’s ironic?”

“What’s ironic is that one of the reasons I married Lori was that she had nothing at all to do with the five-year mission. She hadn’t even been in Starfleet when we departed. That made her very attractive to me when we met. I’m now beginning to realize that if she *had* been along, we might have understood each other better. The marriage might have lasted. She helped me a lot, Nan, but there was a limit to what she could do.”

“And now all three are gone from your life,” Nan said. “Spock, McCoy, and your wife.”

“Yes.”

“What do you think about that?”

Jim considered it. “It’s lonesome. I wish Bones hadn’t withdrawn after the death of his fiancée ... but it was his choice to make, and I’ve respected it. I haven’t tried to get in touch with him, much as I’ve wanted to.”

“And what about Spock?”

“I guess I just assumed a year ago that Spock would tag along and join me at the Admiralty,” Jim said. “It shocked me when he left Starfleet. I had no idea he was going to do it, and he was one of my two closest friends. When I finally came to realize that Spock was leaving because of his personal problems—the eternal conflict he felt between his human and Vulcan natures—I felt as if everything that had put me in the center seat of a starship had crowded out those things that made me human. I should have seen the crunch coming, but I didn’t. If I’d been more sensitive, I might have.”

“Was that the problem, Jim?” Nan asked.

“Were you worn out by the burden of command?”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“My God,” he suddenly blurted. “No, that wasn’t the problem at all. Everybody’s been telling me it was, but they’ve been wrong. Command wasn’t the inevitability I was avoiding.”

“What was it, then?”

“It was the inevitability of giving it up,” Jim said in wonder.

“Even with all the pain it brings?”

“Even with that.”

“Then you’ve got to get it back.”

“No,” he said. “I have a job to do. Hy Nogura trusts me.”

“Hy Nogura doesn’t have to live with it,” Nan said. “You do.”

“I will.”

“Are you happy, Jim?”

“I’m all right.”

“That’s what you said on the show,” Nan said. “It didn’t answer the question. It still doesn’t.”

“The food’s getting cold,” Jim said. His expression was bland. “After we’re finished, I’ll call Harry at the Empire State to tell him we’re heading back.”

These plates don’t let food get cold, Nan thought, but she kept her silence.

G’DATH WONDERED IF HE HAD DONE WRONG in not telling Nan Davis and Admiral Kirk about his globe, and then decided that discretion had probably been the wisest course. He certainly would not lack for publicity when he announced his accomplishment. G’dath thought, however, that he might offer the story to Miss Davis first, because she had been so kind to him and attentive to what he had had to say. She had also cheerfully joined with him in his conspiracy to keep the presence of Leaper in the apartment a

secret.

The Klingon retrieved the globe from the closet and examined it for the hundredth time. Its surface was unmarred. He opened the access panel and flipped the relay. The interior lights glowed, and G’dath could feel a hum of power through the tips of his fingers. The globe still functioned perfectly, even after its repeated voyages of the previous night.

G’dath had been forced to believe the globe’s star scans after its fifth trip. The data had been consistent with the globe’s initial direction of travel. It was the distance traveled that proclaimed the revolution.

The globe drew power seemingly from nowhere, and that had been revolution enough, certainly. The reservoir of power the globe tapped into had certain characteristics that could be studied, measured and put to work. That was what made it science and not magic.

When he had first begun investigating the subject many years before, G’dath thought that he might have reached into warp space without any need for the complicated technology and massive amounts of energy usually required. That in itself would have been enough to guarantee the Klingon a prominent place in the history of science. However, G’dath soon satisfied himself that, whatever it was that he had tapped into, it was not warp space, but something beyond it. Whatever it might be, it was a somethingness that warp space—and, by implication, normal space itself—was contained *within*. There was no reason to believe that it stopped there, either. Wheels within wheels ...

G’dath’s findings were quickly leading him to a theory of cosmology that would make everything presently known about the universe obsolete. He would do for present-day physics

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

what warp-space pioneer Zefrem Cochrane had done for the physics of Einstein—that is, obliterate it.

Redefining physics for all time to come was indeed a worthy achievement for a mere high school teacher.

G'dath continued examining the globe closely. On its first flight he had intended it to travel to Luna, circle, take some readings from the stars to confirm its position, and return. Instead, it had shot past Luna and continued on to a point in space just under a thousand light-years away. It had then come back directly to his window. The globe had made the round trip in just under six-point-seven seconds.

G'dath had calculated the percentage of error involved in the globe leaving a particular point in space, traveling a thousand lightyears, and then returning to virtually the same spot, while allowing for the various motions Terra itself had made through space in the intervening time. His preliminary figures showed an accuracy in navigation to one part in sixty trillion—but he certainly had not designed the globe for *that*. Then again, he had not designed the globe to travel at nearly three hundred lightyears per second, either ... but it had.

G'dath had also calculated the energy expenditure required to transmit an object a thousand lightyears and back in not much more than several blinks of an eye. Expressed as heat, the energy should have been enough to vaporize the Terra-Luna system—but the energy was not heat. All of it had been realized as motion. G'dath knew that much without having to measure or calculate. Even if an insignificant fraction of that awesome energy had been turned into heat, at a minimum the globe would have exploded with the force of a large thermonuclear device, with all the consequences

to N'York that implied. G'dath shuddered. If he'd known of the potential risk to others, he would have never attempted the test; he would have given the globe to Federation authorities directly for testing far, far away from any inhabited area.

There were many unanswered questions about what had happened, not the least of which was just how the globe had caused no more than a relatively minor clap of thunder upon its departure and return. Its speed through the air must have been many times that of light for it to have made it to point X and back so quickly. The globe could scarcely have taken the time to dawdle at escape velocity during atmospheric travel.

None of his data made very much sense. The Klingon knew that he had a great deal more work to do before making any sort of announcement. He was disappointed that he could not go public immediately, but he had been waiting for quite a while for recognition—and this was much too important for anything but his best efforts. He knew it would be best for him to wait a little while longer. He would sort out the theoretical work, and then give the globe to the Federation for further—and safer!—testing.

Besides, there were other implications ...

G'dath noticed that Leaper was standing next to him. The little cat was looking up at him with bright, inquisitive eyes. The Klingon bent to stroke him.

“Leaper,” he said, “do you understand what is meant by the term ‘balance of power’?”

Leaper squeaked.

“No?” G'dath replied. “Then permit me to explain. Postulate two rival political entities. Each is large and powerful; each has its own sphere of influence. The friction between these

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

two entities occasionally erupts into open hostility but, generally speaking, full-scale warfare is prevented because each entity enjoys a rough equivalence with the other. Since neither enjoys a clear advantage, neither is willing to risk the peace that exists between them. Am I being clear?”

The kitten began to buzz.

“Excellent,” said G’dath. “Well, then. The balance of power is easily preserved when each side possesses at least a rough equivalence to the other in terms of wealth, resources and technology. There are other factors, of course, but these three are the most important. Now, if a serious imbalance exists between the entities in any of these three areas, friction increases, and the possibility of warfare becomes much greater. The ‘have-not’ entity tends to become more aggressive in securing for itself that which it does not have. For instance, it expands its borders in a search for wealth and resources, and it generally backs that expansion by force of arms. This negates the political stability upon which the balance of power depends. Do you understand?”

Leaper blinked at him.

“I wonder what my globe means, in terms of this,” G’dath mused. “I had intended it as a portable source of freely available energy. Instead, I seem to have created something that has the potential of being the most terrible weapon yet invented—a bomb of unknown power that not only can be built cheaply, but is able to deliver itself to its target at nearly incalculable speed and with absolute accuracy.”

The Klingon sighed. “Perhaps I should destroy all my notes and simply set the globe to travel far, far away from here, never to return,” he said. “Then again, that would not solve the underlying problem. It is always possible that

the existence of the globe could prompt mature behavior by the ... entities ... concerned here. It might force a true peace. It might mean war. One cannot know. Do I have the right to take the chance?” He rubbed his eyes wearily.

“What do you think, Leaper?” he suddenly asked the kitten. “What should I do, eh?” The little cat looked at him inquiringly for a moment more, and then trotted into the kitchen, where he began walking to and fro and *meeping*.

“I see you think it is time to eat,” G’dath said with a small smile. “Actually, you are correct. All right, little one. From now on, I will settle the big questions, while you keep track of the little things, such as when to eat and when to sleep.”

The kitten purred his wholehearted agreement.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter Nine

THE FONECOM BUZZED in Kirk's office the first thing Monday morning. *Lori?* he wondered as he ordered the unit on.

"What is it, Mr. Riley?" he asked.

"Admiral Nogura, sir. Line one."

"Thanks." Kirk activated it. "Good morning, Admiral."

"Good day, James. You did a very nice job on Saturday."

"Thank you, sir," Kirk replied. "It was almost a pleasure."

"I trust your trip to N'York afterward was

more pleasant?"

"Yes, sir," Kirk said. "Um, I wasn't aware that you knew about that."

"I know everything I need to know," the old admiral said softly. "I hope you are all right, James."

"I'm fine, sir."

"James? Do you require leave? It is yours, if you wish."

"No, sir," Kirk said. "No leave. Not at this time."

Nogura nodded. "You do appear to be fine," he said. "That is well. I need you now, James."

"Rarin' to go, Admiral," Kirk said with a heartiness that was not altogether false. "What's the next job?"

"Timothea Rogers and I are getting together a proposed schedule of public appearances for you to make beginning tomorrow morning."

"How *is* Timmie?"

"She is more perturbed that I had hoped she would be," Nogura said. "I am afraid I misjudged the depth of her reaction to your appointment."

"She's trying, though," Kirk said. "Timmie called me at home Friday night to invite me out for a turnover drink. I guess you knew that, though."

"I did," Nogura said. "I admit I, er, suggested that she do so. How did it go?"

"Badly," Kirk admitted. "I don't think it was my fault... but I didn't help matters."

"That is what she told me," Nogura said, nodding. "She is an honest woman, James. She admitted to me that she picked a fight with you. Her honesty is one of the reasons I value her presence on my staff. I think you will understand me when I tell you that she is, in a way, my Vulcan."

"Yes, sir," Kirk said. "I certainly do

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

understand that.”

“I will endeavor to keep you two out of each other’s way as much as possible, as I told you last week,” Nogura said. “When it is unavoidable that you work together, however, I expect you to do so smoothly and without rancor.”

“Of course, Admiral,” Kirk said. “I’ve signed on for the duration.”

“I thought as much,” Nogura said, smiling for the first time. “As to that, Chief MacPherson says he is ready to assume all administrative duties concerning the *Endeavour* refit. The Chief is a good man, and there is no real reason to run the administrative end of things from the Admiralty.”

“I agree, Admiral.”

“Very well, then. Later, James.” The old admiral broke the circuit.

Kirk’s door slid open and Riley entered. The commander was as neat in his person as the Starfleet manual would have him be. Kirk decided that if Riley had decided on Saturday to mend his ways, that decision had remained in force through the rest of the weekend. For Riley, that showed amazing perseverance.

“Admiral?” Riley said. “Whoops, sorry—I thought Admiral Nogura was still on the line, and I didn’t want to buzz you. Nan Davis is on line two. Will you take the call?”

“Certainly,” Kirk said. “Thank you.” Kirk thumbed the switch again, and Nan’s face appeared on the screen. “Hi,” he said, smiling. “Long time no see.”

“Hi,” Nan replied. She seemed hesitant.

“Look,” Jim began, “I think I came off a bit badly on Saturday. Things were bothering me, and it made me lousy company. I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” Nan said hastily. “I pressed you too hard. Jim, I was a psych major in college,

and from time to time I can’t help but play shrink. It’s one of the less endearing aspects of my personality.”

“Well, then, call we call it even?”

“Please, let’s do,” she said, and she was smiling now. “I’m glad that’s settled, because there’s something else.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. The big bosses in N’York liked my interview with you so much that they’ve assigned me to the Apollo story through the anniversary.”

“Oh,” Jim said. “Well, that’s good, isn’t it?”

“Good?” she almost shouted. “It’s *terrific!* It’s the kind of story that should really go to the top feature person in N’York, maybe even the top news person. I’ve got it instead. It’s my shot, my big chance, and it came a lot sooner than I’d hoped.”

“Well, congratulations,” Jim said, genuinely pleased for her. “Look, if there’s anything I can do to help—”

“Ah,” Nan said, holding up a hand. “You’ve smacked the proverbial nail on its noggin, Admiral. Generally speaking, I’m to follow you around wherever you go and cover whatever you do for the next week. I’m supposed to pull together other aspects of the story, too, in my copious free time—but that’s what producers are for. Jenny’s going to be a lot of help to me on this. She’ll be places I can’t.”

“I see,” Jim said. “So what do you need from me?”

“A list of your scheduled activities up to and including Apollo Day.”

“They’re getting that together now upstairs,” Jim said. “I’ll send you a copy. They’ve already promised me that I’ll be pretty busy. I’m hitting the road starting tomorrow morning.”

“Then so will I,” Nan said. “Um, I’ll also be

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

needing your man Riley, at least part of the time.”

“Riley?” Jim said, puzzled. “Why?”

“I need him to work with Jenny,” Nan elaborated. “She needs a Starfleet contact person of her own, and your chief of staff will do fine. I understand Kevin is going to hold the fort at the office while you’re on the road?”

“He is?” Jim said. “First I’ve heard of it.”

“I talked to Admiral Nogura a little earlier this morning.”

Jim laughed. “That explains it,” he said. “The Admiral hasn’t yet gotten around to telling me what my plans are for Mr. Riley. I assume he’ll do so before too much longer.”

“Confidentially,” Nan said, “I think Jenny’s developed a thing for Kevin. She helped bail him out on Saturday, you know. Found him a razor, uh . . .”

“*She’s* the one who arranged for the uniform to be beamed over?” Jim asked, surprised.

“That would be telling, Admiral.”

“Oh, there’s no trouble about that,” Jim said hastily. “I’d simply thought Riley had arranged that all by himself. That Jenny is an impressive young woman.”

“I think so, too. Um, Jim, there’s something else.”

“What is it?”

“This is, uh, an uncomfortable subject for me.”

“Well, plunging right ahead might help.” He smiled.

“God, this is awkward,” Nan said. “Okay. Well, just in case it comes up, I really can’t see you—socially, I mean—while I’m working on the story. Much as I might like to, I mean. It’d be a conflict of interest.” She smiled hesitantly. “Uh, do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” Jim said. “Nan, I hesitate to

point out that my wife just left me for reasons I still don’t fully understand. About all I’m in the mood for is a slow game of cards. I think we’ve made a good start on a friendship, though.”

“So do I,” she said, and she looked relieved. “All right, then. Get me that schedule as soon as you can, and I’ll put Jenny in touch with Kevin—on an official basis, I mean.”

“Fine,” Jim said. “See you soon, then.”

“Later.”

TIMOTHEA ROGERS HAD HAD a terrible weekend. She knew that her turnover drink with Jim Kirk at that awful Presbyterian place on Friday night had been a disaster of her own making. No sooner had she arrived than she forced a fight with Kirk, who—at least initially—hadn’t offended her at all; in fact, he had been rather sweet to her. He had counter-attacked, of course, and with sufficient force to devastate her and send her packing. That was, after all, the way Jim Kirk did things.

Rogers knew that everyone, including Heihachiro Nogura, considered her to be nearly emotionless. It had long since gotten back to her that the admiral occasionally referred to her as “his Vulcan”—not in any mean way, she knew, but the reference always made her squirm somewhere deep down inside.

To be completely honest, it hurt.

She liked and respected Admiral Nogura, and she assumed that he knew it without her having to demonstrate it. Timothea Rogers was far from emotionless. She felt things keenly; she was simply very good at hiding those feelings. She did not envy the Vulcans their somewhat innate, somewhat trained ability to squelch strong emotion even as it arose, although she sometimes reflected that it would certainly be

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

more convenient if she *could* do that.

The spitting match with Kirk had opened an old and painful wound. She had been Number One aboard *Enterprise* in those days when there had been a slot for first officer in the ship's table of organization. Jim Kirk's rewritten T.O. had combined the duties of the first officer and science officer into one. That had caused some controversy at Starfleet Command, but Kirk had given the job to the tireless and utterly capable Vulcan veteran, Spock. It had worked; *Enterprise* had come home safely. Q.E.D.

Rogers thought that she and Spock might have one thing in common, despite their many differences. Like him, she had kept no souvenir of her years aboard *Enterprise*. She had not even kept the hard copy of her separation document. After all, the only record that really mattered was floating around somewhere in the innards of Starfleet's personnel databanks. Those of her medals and citations that she had not lost or turned in for recycling were in storage, and she was not quite sure where—in some stasis-protected locker siomewhere within a fifty-lightyear sphere of Earth, she thought. She took a perverse pleasure in eschewing all her many decorations whenever she wore her dress uniform. Regulations left the wearing of decorations optional, and she chose to keep the jacket of her dress uniform as bare as that of an Academy plebe.

The only real souvenir she had from her eight years aboard *Enterprise* was indelibly engraved on her soul. She had loved her last captain, Christopher Pike, but she had had no idea how to show him that she did... and so she'd said and done nothing, and of course nothing had ever come of it.

She had had what amounted to a rival for Pike's affections, a silly slip of a girl named

Colt. Colt was a yeoman who, upon leaving Starfleet at the end of the Pike mission, immediately entered an established contract marriage consisting of two men and three other women. Colt had seemed quite happy when she'd made the announcement. Rogers had no idea whether the marriage had lasted, and she did not care.

Pike had taken a position as fleet captain and was assigned an office in the Admiralty, although he could only rarely be found in it. Pike was the kind who had to go places and see things for himself. Timothea Rogers had also been assigned duty at the Admiralty, and she was content to see Pike come through the building whenever he'd touch base on Terra. Sometimes they'd have lunch together.

Rogers had been in her office the day word came of Pike's accident. He had been conducting a routine inspection of a cadet training vessel, an old ship named the *Buckley*—the *Bucket*, to her cadets. Inspection tours were the kind of duty that irritated Pike the most, much as he like cadets; he would rather be teaching them something useful, rather than have them wasting their time holystoning a ship for his benefit.

Pike had not been in the *Bucket's* engineering section for more than a minute when a baffle plate ruptured. One large, jagged piece of it neatly decapitated the Starfleet officer in charge of the cadets. Pike had immediately ordered everyone out, but there were four cadets sprawled on the deck, out cold but still alive. The engineering section had become a sea of deadly delta radiation; to remain in it for more thna a few seconds was to invite disaster.

Pike dragged the unconscious cadets out of the room one by one, repeatedly exposing

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

himself to the delta rays. Despite his heroic efforts, two of the four cadets he rescued died later that day, and less than a week later he himself was in a life support chair. The handsome, vital Pike had become withered, paralyzed and mute. His brain was as active as ever, but it was trapped inside a completely useless body. Pike was retired and placed on permanent disability.

Not long after that, Pike disappeared. The details were highly classified. Rogers had kept her ear to the ground and so she knew some of what had happened, but not all of it. She did know that, whatever it was, it had involved Kirk, his friend Spock, and an unprecedented exception to General Order Seven, which prohibited travel to Talos IV upon pain of death—the last death penalty remaining on the Federation’s books. Had Christopher Pike been taken to Talos IV by Kirk and Spock and left there? It appeared so.

Rogers knew that what Kirk had charged her with the other night was true enough. She did indeed resent him because he had replaced Pike in the center seat aboard *Enterprise*, and she had long since decided that she and Kirk would never get along because of that. For Kirk to have brought up the matter so publicly, however, was in extremely bad taste... but he had done so in no little heat, and she had goaded him.

She hated him anyway. It just didn’t show.

The only thing in her life that meant anything was her work for Heihachiro Nogura. It would have to be enough.

Chapter Ten

ON WEDNESDAY, KEVIN RILEY and Jenny Hogan met in front of the WorldNews building for lunch. It was, again, a beautiful day in San Francisco—much too nice to sit inside somewhere but, given the weather, all the sidewalk cafes around Union Square were chockablock with diners. They wound up buying burritos and tacos from a curbside stand and eating them as they strolled south on Powell Street toward Market. Kevin took it as a promising sign that it didn’t seem to matter to Jenny where they went.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Market Street was playing host to a lunchtime crowd of thousands. Sidewalks had long since replaced the buses and trolleys, and private ground traffic was banned, so pedestrians were in sole ownership of the street.

"I'm glad you could make it," Kevin told Jenny. "I know how busy you must be."

"Well, you, too," she replied. "You haven't exactly been twiddling your thumbs up Presidio way, either."

Kevin shrugged his shoulders. "I keep hearing that when the cat's away, the mice are supposed to play. Fat chance. I've got just about as much as I can handle."

"I'll bet," Jenny said. "You really don't need any more trouble with Kirk, do you?"

Kevin nodded. "Oh, damn," he suddenly said.

"What's the matter?"

He was looking down at a red stain on the front of his uniform. "I just proved that you shouldn't try to eat a taco while walking," Kevin said. "El squirto."

"No problem," she said. "I've got some tissues, and there's a drinking fountain over there," Jenny said. "We'll get you fixed up."

Jenny went over to the fountain, wet a tissue, and folded it over for strength. "Hold still, now," she said. "I know this fabric is stainproof, but that's no reason to let this blotch start spreading and dripping all over the place." She quickly wiped Kevin's white bib clean. The excess water from the tissue beaded up on the fabric, and she collected it with a dry tissue. "There," she said. "You're perfection itself again."

"You did that well."

"Producers do all sorts of things well, Commander."

"Oh?"

"It's in our genes," she said. "Yes, evolution has brought us producers to this point. We're like those funny-looking birds that eat little bugs off the backs of rhinoceroses so they don't itch."

"Isn't it 'rhinoceri'?"

"No. 'Rhinoceroses.' I told you, producers know everything. Hey, look! A bench. Grab it!"

Kevin did, and they sat down. "That feels good," said Jenny, sighing. "Besides, now you can finish your taco in peace. Here's a tissue, just in case."

"Appreciate it," Kevin said. He took a bite while Jenny nibbled at her burrito. They ate for a while in silence, a certain nervousness in the air between them.

"Is this a date?" Kevin asked.

"I guess."

"Good," he said. "I hate having to guess."

"Where did you spend last Friday night, Kevin?" Jenny suddenly asked. "You came into the bureau looking like the last guy out of Tehran before Khan Noonian Singh blew it up."

Kevin shrugged. "I just overslept, that's all. Insomnia. I've been having a terrible time with it lately."

"Oh."

"I was alone, Jenny."

"None of my business," she said.

"I'm beginning to think that it is your business."

"Oh. So what's the matter? Your job? Jim Kirk doesn't strike me as being some sort of anxiety-producing monster."

"He's not," Kevin said. "No, it's me."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Look, Jenny, I was married once—"

"I know. Research, remember? Contract marriage to Anab Saed, ethnic Somalian. Nice lady, from what I could tell."

"We'd signed for a year," Kevin said. "She

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

pulled out after six months and took a deep-space assignment. I thought once that she might come back. She didn't, though. The contract lapsed, we divided the little community property we had, and I haven't heard from her since. Uh, I'm not over it yet."

"You're not over her?"

"I'm not over *it*," he said. "The leaving. Look, Jenny, all my life people have been splitting on me almost as if they couldn't wait to get away. Sometimes they die on me. The first time I ever led a shore party —" He stopped suddenly, and Jenny saw that he was fighting for control.

"I know about that, too," Jenny said.

"You're a pretty thorough researcher," he muttered.

"It's my curse," she said, giving him a wan smile. "I'm compulsive that way. Look, I'll listen to whatever you want to talk to me about, Kevin. Now or anytime."

Kevin watched the passersby on Market Street for a few moments. Jenny sat silently by him, waiting. "I was always worried about her," he finally said, looking off in the distance somewhere. "Anab, I mean. I thought she was something permanent in my life — someone I could depend on to be there for me. I only took the job with Kirk just so I could stay on Terra with her. I thought that, if I stuck close, I could protect her — or, rather, I could protect *myself*. I could protect myself from being deserted again. I wound up smothering her; I know that. I forced her to leave." He paused and then continued almost in a whisper. "I guess it really didn't matter who she was. All she had to do was be around."

"You learned something important, Kevin — but you still don't know all of it."

"Oh, really?" he said, suddenly annoyed.

"So how does the rest of it go? You know, somehow I just can't believe I'm going to have all my personal problems straightened out right in the middle of Market Street."

Jenny ignored his tone. "You're punishing yourself for deserting your parents, Kevin," she said.

"Oh, really? Gee."

"It doesn't matter to you that you were only four years old. You're tormenting yourself for not having protected them. You think you let Kodos get them. You're also hurting yourself for not sharing their fate."

"Uh-huh."

"It's survivor's guilt, Kevin. You lived when a great many others died. You won't let yourself win, because you don't think you deserve to — and I know that I'm way out of line for talking to you like this."

He looked at her. "You know," he mused, "maybe being alone isn't such a bad thing after all."

"Kevin, I'm only telling you all this because I —"

"Because you what?"

"Because — oh, never mind," she said miserably.

Kevin stood. "I'll walk you back to work," he said in a tone that made it sufficiently clear he would rather not.

She looked up at him. "No, that's all right," she said. "I have to go somewhere first." *Say you'll come with me. Please.*

"Fine," he said. "I'll call you, then."

No, you won't, she thought as she watched him turn and go.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter Eleven

NAN DAVIS LOOKED AROUND the Elks meeting hall. “Are we set up yet, Eddie?” she asked her technician. “They look like they’re about to start.”

“I guess we’re set up,” Eddie said, shrugging. “Jeez, Nan, you’ve been running me ragged all week. Look, these scanners are more than twenty years old, and we’re wearing ’em out. They were using ’em during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Fourth, for cryin’ out loud. I betcha we blow a relay before the night’s over, and don’t you go blaming *me* if we do.

Say, I hope General Kirk up there doesn’t get too close to the scanner up front. He’ll overload the thing for sure if he does. There’s no damn memory buffer at all in that antique piece of—”

“Anything else, Eddie?” Nan said wearily. She had been listening to his complaints for three days running.

“Yeah. I get a lunch break in an hour.”

“Right.” It would be Eddie’s third scheduled lunch break in the past eight hours, while Nan hadn’t had a minute to herself all day. She wished she had a union like Eddie’s.

Nan had spent all of that Thursday following Jim Kirk around North America. If Nan had been spoiled by the transporter jaunt to N’York the previous Saturday, the thirty-four trips she and her technician had made since then had probably ruined her for life.

With less than a week to go until Apollo Day, Kirk was a busy man who was getting even busier. Fortunately, the admiral had been getting a lot of help back at the ranch: Kevin Riley was keeping things at the office under control, and Alec MacPherson had reported no problems in readying the Navy Yard to receive the command section of *Endeavour*. Kirk had been left free to concentrate on his public relations work for Hy Nogura.

The admiral was speaking that evening to the Seattle Chapter of the Society of Surak. It would be Kirk’s toughest challenge yet. The Society was one of the leading groups in the “new human” coalition, and so it was one of Starfleet’s main political opponents. Kirk knew that he probably could not convert the Society to his own way of thinking, but its membership had politely given him the opportunity to make his case, and he would do his best.

Nan looked toward the front of the hall. She saw that Kirk was seated onstage in an

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

uncomfortable-looking chair. Seated before him were approximately five hundred quiet, unsmiling people. Everyone in the audience was dressed simply and was wearing his or her hair closely cropped, with bangs cut short and brushed forward. The only piece of jewelry any of the members of the audience wore, and all of them were wearing one, was an IDIC symbol set in semi-precious stones. Each piece was identical to the next, as if mass-produced, but each had actually been handmade by master craftspeople to exact specifications.

Not a single sound was coming from the audience—not a murmur, not a shred of muted conversation, not a cough nor a giggle nor a sneeze. There was not even the soft rustle of involuntary movement. About all anyone was doing was breathing and blinking and looking at Kirk, trying to take his measure.

For his part, Kirk could see Nan in the back of the hall with that technician fellow, the one who always seemed to be at lunch. The technician—Eddie?—had erected two tripods and had set a portable scanner on top of each. One was on the stage near Kirk and another had been placed against one of the long walls of the hall. Eddie was complaining about something; his was the only voice Kirk could hear in the entire hall.

It seemed to Kirk that Nan could have set up the scanners by herself, but he acknowledged that did not know the mysterious ways of the journalism business, and he had no real appreciation for the art of featherbedding. When, during the five-year mission, Kirk had found someone aboard his ship with little or nothing to do, he had either reassigned him or transferred him dirtside. Kirk did not think he would be able to get away with that sort of thing in Nan's business, and in that he was quite

correct.

Nan's job was easy; all she had to do was watch him. *He* was the one who had to try to convince this gathering of the merits of his case. *He* was the one who had to talk about Starfleet to more than five hundred humans who were fairly fanatic about conducting their lives in what they considered to be a logical, Vulcan manner.

Most people thought the Society of Surak was nothing more than a collection of not-so-genial eccentrics. Others saw in the Society a valiant and worthy attempt to explore aspects of an alternative lifestyle that, although alien, might be made to work for humans. Skeptics said the entire concept was flawed, because it didn't make sense for humans to act as anything but human; it was, in a word, illogical to expect humans to act as Vulcans. This, the skeptics hastened to add, was not to say that there weren't good things about the way Vulcans lived their lives. It simply wasn't the way humans themselves were meant to live. It was in the nature of the Society for its members to debate the question endlessly, even as they continued to explore their own way of doing things. So far, it was working.

Apparently no one from the Society was going to bring the meeting to order or bother to introduce him. Well, that fit. They all knew he was going to be there, and so there he was, conspicuous among them in his penguin grays. He was scheduled to begin speaking at twenty hundred, so at precisely that time he cleared his throat. He stayed in his chair; Riley's research had turned up the fact that it was the custom within the Society to remain seated while addressing the group. *At least I'm sitting up on stage*, he thought. *That gives me a little altitude, anyway.*

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Good evening,” Kirk began. “I don’t have a speech or an opening statement. I believe time is a resource that should be conserved. A speech would waste it. I’ll simply answer any questions you care to put to me.”

A man sitting in the front row began. “Admiral, permit us to doubt the sincerity of your statement about time,” he said. “We know that what you have said is merely a restatement of what Surak himself wrote in *Ponderings*, chapter ninety-three, line six: ‘The river of time cannot dam itself, or cause itself to be dammed. The river of time is a precious commodity that —’“

“—we will wish had been left to us in greater supply the instant we have drunk its waters to the last drop and are left thirsting on the sands of opportunity,” Kirk finished for him. “I always did like that quote; it shows Surak’s more poetic side. Do you have a question?”

The young man blinked. “Uh—” he said in a most unVulcan way.

“If I may,” Kirk said to his audience, “I would not want any of you to think that I did not mean precisely what I said about not wanting to waste your time. It seems likely to me that at least some of you are familiar with my work in the refitting of the Federation heavy cruiser *Enterprise*, the starship I formerly commanded. I would point out to you that my work centered on making the refit much more efficient, thus making it take less time. If I have a bias at all, it is in favor of efficiency.”

A young woman on the other side of the room spoke up. “The bias we are concerned with here is not one in favor of efficiency,” she said in clear tones. “It is one that favors force over reason. Saving time so that more efficient use of force can be made is not a virtue.”

“That’s a legitimate concern,” Kirk said. “I’m here to talk about whatever might be worrying you—that is, whatever is of concern to you.”

“We are concerned about the continuing use or threat to use force to achieve the political goals of the Federation,” the woman said. “More starships, each of them heavily armed, are being sent out each year. They serve as a provocation. You, Admiral, are largely responsible for this. It is your job to send those ships on their way.”

“No one has anything to fear from us,” Kirk said.

“On the contrary,” the woman said, “there are two major interstellar nations and several dozen minor ones that are quite worried about what we might do next. Thus, they contribute more than their fair share to the continuing arms race. The process feeds itself. It smacks of a preoccupation with violence as a legitimate means to an end, and it is a preoccupation that our observations suggest you share.”

“I’m not preoccupied with violence,” Kirk said, genuinely puzzled. “What makes you think I am?”

“Your first loyalty is to an organization that deals in unimaginable violence,” the woman said. “One of your heavy cruisers—indeed, the very ship you yourself commanded—can destroy an entire planet in a short period of time and with little trouble.”

“We wouldn’t do that.”

“But you could. Violence is your fallback position; the threat of it is always there. You may be wearing a velvet glove, Admiral, but it sheaths an iron fist. The rest of the known galaxy sees that iron fist, and it continues to react against it. Hence, the implied threat of violence breeds overt violence.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Not so,” Kirk said. “For their size and range, and given the dangers they are likely to face, our ships are lightly armed. There are many times that I myself have sought an alternative to confrontation — and found it, I might add.”

“You have not killed?” came a male voice tinged with a permissible amount of sarcasm.

“You know I have,” Kirk answered, “but I have never done so unnecessarily. It makes a difference.”

“Not to us,” called several in unison.

“It should,” Kirk insisted. “Self-defense is quite permissible under certain circumstances, according to Surak; take another look at *Contemplation*, chapter sixty-six. Cloudy thinking is what is impermissible. The guiding principle is to act with intelligence, rather than to react by instinct. Acting carefully to save lives is acting with intelligence — and regret, perhaps, but intelligence nevertheless. Acting to secure vengeance is acting from instinct. That is impermissible, even by most human codes of conduct; we don’t need the wisdom of Surak to tell us that.”

“What do you know of Vulcan philosophy?” a older man asked.

“Quite a bit, actually,” Kirk replied. “I had a good tutor.”

“We know of your tutor,” the first woman said. “He is on Vulcan now, working to expunge the human half of his being. He is not content.”

“No, he is not,” Kirk said, nodding his agreement slowly. “However, he does what he feels he must — as do I.”

The woman nodded. “We, too, Admiral,” she said. “The Society is trying to find a way. We are all headed for inevitable disaster unless we *do* find a way. We have nearly had that disaster once, with the Klingon Empire. It took

an almost miraculous intercession to save us.”

“I know,” Kirk said. “I think we learned something from that.”

“We learned a little, yes,” she agreed, “but not nearly enough. Centuries ago we as a race had hoped to keep weapons out of space. Within a generation of the first manned launch into orbit, however, the space near Terra was filled with weapons and defenses against them. Our every instinct is to corrupt, Admiral.”

“Perhaps, and perhaps not,” Kirk said, his expression one of quiet amusement. *It’s odd how you fall into the pattern these people set for themselves*, he thought. *Maybe they do have something here.* “Can we agree that the exploration of space is a desirable and worthy goal?”

A middle-aged man in the front answered him. “You will find disagreement in this room even on that point, Admiral,” he said politely, “but I believe the majority of us would agree with that statement.”

“All right, then,” Kirk said. “My question to you is, if we are to preserve our program of — peaceful! — space exploration, how do we best accomplish this goal and calm this fear of us that you say is felt by other races in the known galaxy?”

“We have thought about that,” the woman said. “It would not be logical to raise objections without suggesting alternatives.”

“I agree,” Kirk said. “What are your suggestions?”

“We have one,” she said. “We believe the fear of us would best be calmed by sending civilian families along on these missions of exploration. They would be passengers — supercargo, I believe you might call them.”

Kirk looked thoughtful. “We have long considered increasing the civilian presence

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

aboard our cruiser-class ships,” he said. “There are civilians with skills that we need—”

“No, Admiral,” the woman said, raising a hand. “I am speaking of civilians without skills who are simply along for the ride. I am speaking of children. Some of these civilian passengers would probably be the close relations of Starfleet personnel, but some could be skilled workers under contract, and others could simply be passengers. It would remain to you and your colleagues to work out the details.”

“But that would put non-combatants in harm’s way unnecessarily,” Kirk said. “They would, in a way, be held hostage.”

“Not unnecessarily so, however,” a man in the back observed. “The civilians aboard would in effect be hostages, yes, but they would be hostages that we ourselves were holding ... and do not forget that the civilians would *want* to be there. The presence aboard ship of those civilians would guarantee our good conduct in the eyes of others.”

A gray-haired woman spoke next. “All races know that the Federation would not turn aggressor with its ships loaded with civilians,” she said, “and all races also know that we would fight fiercely if attacked, in order to protect those selfsame civilians. In addition, Admiral, allowing civilians aboard as supercargo means that your personnel could bring their families with them. This would, we believe, permit deep-space exploration missions far longer than the five uninterrupted years you and your people spent aboard the *Enterprise*, given the need for family exhibited by many races, including human and Vulcan.”

“We tend to think of it as the approach of the next generation in the exploration of space,” the first woman said. “It is an idea that has many positives and few if any negatives. We

urge its consideration.”

Kirk blinked. He had been ready to dismiss the entire idea as harebrained, but the more he thought about it ...

“I see a day coming,” Kirk said at length, “in which we’ll have the luxury of being able to accommodate large number of civilians shipside. I must tell you that, right now, virtually the entire crew compliment is needed to run a cruiser-class starship. This will change, though. We are getting better at the automatic control of shipboard systems.”

They watched him closely as he continued. “I must also assure you that how our conduct appears to others is important to us, because we know that whatever we do largely determines what others will be doing themselves. If we appear to be building a new weapons system, for example, the Klingon Empire will take note and lay plans to counter it.”

“Perhaps, then,” an old man said, “the Klingons and the Romulans would notice the presence of civilians aboard our ships and do the same.”

“Frankly, I doubt that, particularly where the Klingons are concerned,” Kirk replied. “Everything in their ethic is keyed against it; I suspect that the Klingons would not bring non-combatants aboard their warships. Also, their ships are more labor-intensive than ours—that is, they need more of their people aboard to run them because they have fewer reliable automatic systems. They can’t afford deadheads. The Romulans are presently using battle cruisers purchased from the Empire, and so they suffer from the same limitations.”

“This should not stop *us* from adopting the policy, however,” the young woman observed.

“I agree,” Kirk said. “I’ll take this back with me to San Francisco.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“The time has expired,” someone called. “The meeting is concluded.” The members of his audience rose almost as one and, without so much as a glance at him, they began filing out of the hall without any commotion at all. In his travels, Kirk had quickly come to learn that a few members of his audience always lingered to say hello and thank him for coming—but not here.

That went pretty well, Kirk thought, pleased. I thought they’d nail me to the wall, but we talked. We actually talked—and productively so. Nogura’s going to want to hear about this idea about taking civilians along on extended missions. It may be the key to everything we want to do in space from here on out. He allowed himself the ghost of a smile. You did pretty well tonight, Jim old boy. Pretty good for a guy who used to out-think supercomputers for a living!

Kirk rose from his chair and hopped off the stage. He watched, amused, as Nan hurried to one of the exits and began interviewing some of those departing the hall. Apparently few were in such a rush to leave that they were willing to pass up a chance to see themselves on trivision. Kirk watched one man surreptitiously pat his hair into place. Meanwhile, Eddie the technician had removed the scanner placed against the long wall from its tripod and lugged it back to the exit where Nan had stationed herself. Eddie was holding the scanner cradled in his arms, its omnilens aimed at the reporter and her first subject. The scanner was a little heavy; the expression on Eddie’s face would have curdled milk.

Suddenly Kirk felt a presence behind him, and he turned around. Standing there was the young woman who’d initiated the questioning. “I imagine you think us rude, Admiral,” she

said.

“Not really.”

“You are kind. We have not yet learned to strike a balance between emotion and simple politeness, so out of caution we tend to do nothing. However, we appreciate your having come here to talk with us tonight, and that you listened to what we had to say.”

“Thank you for having me,” Kirk replied. “Actually, the ideas I heard expressed here tonight are very much worth considering.”

“We hope so. They are not part of the ‘new human’ agenda, as it is most frequently stated. We try to temper our ideas of perfection with the needs of reality. ‘The true goal is not to create perfection overnight, but to steer reality in its direction. Given persistence, perfection and reality will meet.’”

“Surak again. *Contemplations.*”

The woman nodded. “Yes, it is,” she said. “You seem quite well grounded in the writings of Surak.”

“Only in translation, I’m afraid. I can’t read Vulcan and I speak precious little of it. What little I do know of the language I gleaned from my association with—a friend.”

“You mean Spock.”

“Yes.”

“Your friend is in great pain, Admiral.”

“Eh? How do you know that?”

“My name is Claudia Grayson. I am first cousin to Spock.”

“Amanda Grayson—Spock’s mother—is your aunt?”

“That is correct.”

“Well, I’ll be dipped,” Kirk said. “There’s a touch of resemblance there, after all.” He raised his hand in the Salute. “Live long and prosper, Miss Grayson.”

“And you, Admiral,” she replied, returning

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

the gesture with, again, that subtly familiar suggestion of a smile. “‘Dipped’ or otherwise.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Kirk told her. “Forgive my surprise. I’m afraid I tend to think that, except for Amanda, all of Spock’s relatives are Vulcan.”

“That is not—”

“—logical. Yes, I know. Tell me, have you heard from Spock?”

“Only once,” Claudia said. “It was almost a year ago. He informed us that he was severing relations with our half of the family.”

Kirk sighed. “What’s making him do it? Do you know?”

Claudia paused. “Spock has finally been forced to face his dual nature,” she said. “It might have been better for him if, long ago, he had chosen to walk the path of his mother rather than that of his father—but no matter. As it is, he is something entirely new: half-human and half-Vulcan. There is no other like him, and so he is made lonely by his very nature. He was made more so when you relinquished starship duty, accepted your promotion, and took a position at the Admiralty.”

“What? How could a thing like that have affected Spock so badly?”

“You did not inform him of your decision beforehand,” Claudia said. “He would not admit it, but he was relying on your stated determination to seek command of the *Victorious* upon your return from the five-year mission, which the implication that he would serve under you again as first officer and science officer. No doubt he believed that you should have informed him of your change in plans. Spock took this as rejection, and he could not understand it. Spock was in a fragile mental state as it was; this imagined rejection caused him to choose the way of *kohlinahr*.”

“Oh, my God,” Kirk said. He was heartsick. “Look, Miss Grayson, I’m not sure just what’s going on here with, with this *kohlinahr*, but I’ve got to talk to Spock. I’ve got to try to straighten this mess out.”

“You cannot.”

“You don’t understand, Claudia. Spock’s my friend; I owe him my life a thousand times over. I certainly owe him an explanation of my conduct.”

“No, Admiral,” she replied calmly. “It’s you who don’t understand. You already appreciate that Spock was having difficulty recovering—there is no other word for it—from your five-year mission. You could not know the extent of that trouble, because Spock kept it well hidden from you. Under the circumstances, your breach of etiquette was understandable, and Spock knows this. However, it was also enough to drive Spock to seek the solace of oblivion.”

“Oblivion?”

“Yes,” Claudia said. “A full-blooded Vulcan approaches the ritual of *kohlinahr* to buttress the already considerable control he exerts over his mind. Spock is pursuing *kohlinahr* to murder his humanity. He is intent on expunging his human half, and he will not be denied. He has had enough of it; it is causing him nothing but continuing pain. He has never really learned how to deal with it, so he is having it amputated. It is an emotional decision that Spock has made, but it is perhaps the one such that the masters of *kohlinahr* look upon with favor. It serves their ends, and the masters are nothing if not pragmatic.”

“Claudia, I’m sick about this,” Kirk said miserably. “I had no idea.”

“I know. You are blameless, Admiral. I myself regret that Spock is turning his back on himself. He has always attempted to accentuate

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

his Vulcan half to the detriment of his equally innate humanity. In doing this, he has not been operating in a logical manner. He has, in short, been wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes,” Claudia said. “Spock is both human and Vulcan. He should not try to be merely Vulcan; he should instead try to come to terms with both his natures. If he did, he would be able to teach us all the logic of the Vulcan, tempered with the mercy and love of the human.”

“A potent combination.”

“Yes, indeed, and even we of the Society have need of it. I must go now, Admiral. If you hear anything of my cousin, please contact me. I’m listed in the Seattle directory.”

“I’ll do that—and you can reach me at the Admiralty.”

“Very well. Good night.” Claudia turned and departed.

Suddenly Nan was standing next to him, interrupting his thoughts. “That’s it for the day,” she said wearily. “I’m finished. I don’t know how you do it, Admiral.”

“I take coffee intravenously,” Kirk replied. “Let me know when you’re ready, and we’ll head home. Actually, I’m a little tired myself.”

“We’ll be ready in a minute,” Nan said, pointing toward the back. Eddie was trotting toward them with the scanner he’d been holding, its tripod, and a pack full of other equipment he’d brought with him.

“He’s certainly working faster than usual,” Kirk observed.

“He’s got a lunch hour coming up,” Nan told him. “I told him he could knock off for the night and take the hour at home if he got us out of here in two minutes flat.”

Eddie leaped onto the stage in a single

bound, grabbed the other scanner, pressed a button on the tripod to collapse it, and jumped back down to the floor. He placed the second scanner on top of the first. “Ready,” he said. “C’mon, c’mon, let’s get *outa* here.”

With a small smile, Kirk took his old communicator in hand and flipped open the clamshell. “Kirk to Admiralty,” he said.

“Transporter chief here,” came a tinny voice. “Good evening, Admiral.”

“Hello, Chief. Three to beam over.”

“Locked onto you, sir,” the chief said smartly.

Kirk suddenly noticed that several members of the Society of Surak were standing in the back of the hall, watching them. Well, watching people beam out was a fairly rare sight on Terra, outside of Starfleet.

“Energize,” Kirk ordered, and as the sparkling shimmering of the transporter effect began to replace his vision, he made out that the faces of the watchers were breaking out in amazed smiles and, in one case, undisguised open-mouthed astonishment. Kirk noted wryly that the Society’s program of study in mind discipline still had a ways to go.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter Twelve

NAN WAS AWAKENED by the insistent buzzing of her household computer after only a few hours of fitful sleep. She was still tired; her energy level was down considerably from all the work she'd been doing. Nan was not looking forward to the next several days... not at all. She again promised herself a vacation—sometime soon.

It was now the wee hours of Friday morning, with only four days to go until Apollo Day, and Jim Kirk would be making an early start of it—as he always did, Nan thought

foggily. Kirk was going to Dulles Park to inspect the rebuilt space shuttle the first thing this morning, East Coast time. It would be her exclusive, too; no reporter had yet been permitted to see the completed shuttle. After that, she and Jenny would shoot G'dath in his classroom for the sidebar story that would run on Tuesday. It would be a long day.

Nan parted the curtains of her bedroom window and peered outside. God, it was dark out, except for Luna, just past full, searing the sky to the south with silver light. Punchy with fatigue, she bared her teeth at Luna and growled... and then smiled sheepishly at her own foolishness.

“What time is it?” she called.

“Three thirty-one,” came the flat voice of the household computer. It was a rental unit, and so it had no personality. If—when—she moved to N'York, she planned to buy one and have it engrammed.

Nan and Eddie were to meet Kirk at the Admiralty transporter stage at four-fifteen. “Start the coffee,” she said miserably as she got out of bed and stumbled toward the shower.

Nan dialed for cold water; it attacked her skin like needles, bringing her fully awake. She dialed for warmer water and began going over the things remaining to do to get her story finished. She was still trying to wangle seats for herself and Eddie aboard one of the old spacecraft in the parade that would pass over Tranquility Base, the Apollo 11 landing site, on Tuesday. The problem was that almost all the spacecraft in the parade were small, with no spare room for media types... and the organizers of the parade weren't allowing press charters to fly with the antique spacecraft. Nan had not yet hit on Jim Kirk for a seat aboard the shuttle *Enterprise*, but there was still plenty of time for

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

that. She might ask him about it today, during the inspection. It probably wouldn't do any good, though; the shuttle was already set to carry a full complement of Very Important People—including the secretary general of the Federation and his old friend, the president of the United States—in a passenger module to be carried in her cargo bay.

Nan's fonecom buzzed as she was drying her hair. It was the Klingon, G'dath. "Good morning, Miss Davis," he said. Nan thought he looked disturbed. "I hope I have not awakened you."

"No, not at all," she said, smiling. "I was up anyway. How are you, and how's little Leaper?"

"We are both quite well, thank you," G'dath said. "Miss Davis, I have given matters a great deal of thought, and I have decided that I must go public, as you would put it, with what I have discovered. It occurred to me that you are the best person I might talk to about it."

"You've discovered something?" Nan asked, puzzled. "What do you mean? You didn't mention anything about a discovery in our interview."

"Forgive me for that," G'dath said. "I was keeping certain matters from you and the admiral. Look at this." The Klingon held up a small, clear globe. Lights blinked on and off inside it.

"It's pretty," Nan said.

"Yes, it is pretty, is it not?" G'dath said. "Please watch." She watched as the Klingon probed inside the thing with a stylus. More lights inside the sphere went on.

"Where's the power source?" Nan asked. "I don't see one."

"There is none," G'dath told her. "There is no receptor for broadcast power, either."

"It's solar-powered?" Nan asked. "I don't

see a pickup. Besides, I can see you're indoors and not near a window."

"No, Miss Davis," G'dath said. "The globe is powered by nothing—nothing I can identify, at any rate. It simply works." He suddenly let go of the globe, and Nan watched wide-eyed as it bobbed in mid-air and then hovered steadily.

"I've never seen practical anti-gravity in a device that small," Nan said.

"It is not anti-gravitational," the Klingon said. "It is something entirely new, Miss Davis. My globe can do far more than hover. It can travel through space for great distances under its own power. I am beginning to suspect that it can travel through time as well, but I have not attempted to have it do so yet."

"My God," Nan said. "How fast can that thing go?"

"I do not know if this is a maximum," G'dath said, "but the globe has maintained an average speed of just under three hundred and fifty lightyears per second."

"What's that in terms of warp factors? I understand warp factors."

"Putting it in those terms does not really make sense," G'dath said, "because the globe does not travel in warp space. However, I suspect you could state its approximate average speed as warp factor sixteen-fifty."

"Warp sixteen-fifty?" Nan said weakly. "Do you mean warp sixteen and a half?"

"No. Warp one thousand six hundred fifty. Approximately."

"Oh. I was afraid that's what you meant."

"I state it that way only to suggest that a starship traveling at that speed in warp space for time T would arrive at point P in normal space simultaneously with my globe. As I said, my globe does not travel through warp space, so it is irrelevant to consider warp factors."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Oh.”

“I would like you to document the existence of the globe,” G’dath said. “Could you come over after school this afternoon? Say, sixteen o’clock in this time zone?”

“I’ll say,” Nan said. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come over right now?” *I can call Jim Kirk and tell him it’s no go for the test today, she thought, and that I can catch up with him tomorrow. If that globe can do the things G’dath says it can — wow!*

“No,” G’dath said. “Not this morning. It will take some hours to show you the capabilities of the globe, and today is a school day. We will do the shoot at the school, as scheduled, and we will come here afterward. Is that acceptable?”

“Certainly,” Nan said. “See you later.”

“I am looking forward to it. Goodbye, Miss Davis.”

Unfortunately, their conversation had been monitored.

“I KNEW IT!” blazed Keth. “The traitor is the son of traitors! The *grandson* of traitors! Treachery runs in his veins!”

“Superior?” asked Klor, worried. “What do we do now?”

“We take him, you fool!” Keth raged. “No assault teams for us! We do it ourselves—him *and* his stinking device! Too bad the contents of the traitor’s computer memory turned out to be insignificant; otherwise, we might have simply been able to dispose of the turncoat. Now we need him. That globe belongs to the Empire, Klor! That our of our kind could even *consider* giving such a thing to the enemy—oh, my blood boils!”

“If we are to take the traitor, Superior, we are going to have to do it quickly,” Klor warned.

“This is too serious a matter for delay.”

“Do not worry,” Keth said, suddenly calm. “We will have the traitor and his globe, and be on our way to the Empire, within the day. We will be covered in glory.”

“We are going home?” Klor asked, his eyes wide.

“Yes, we are going home,” said Keth. “We will have revealed ourselves, and there would be no point in our remaining here. We will go home.”

“To go home,” Klor said fervently, “I would dare anything.”

Keth laughed. “You are no fool, after all,” he said, “for so would I.”

“Do we take the traitor now?” Klor asked.

“No,” Keth said. “We will search his quarters first. We have all day to take him.” He smiled. “We know exactly where he will be at any given moment.”

“I will notify the Embassy,” Klor said, reaching for his keyboard.

“Stay yourself!” barked Keth. “We will notify the Embassy when we have something to tell them. When the traitor and his device are in hand, *then* we will notify the Embassy—and receive our reward.”

“As you order it, Superior,” Klor said, humbled by his master yet again.

KIRK, NAN AND EDDIE THE TECHNICIAN shimmered into existence on the tarmac directly in front of the Dulles Park hangar leased by the Dart Project. A long time before, Dulles Park had been an airport—that is, an installation that required vast amounts of land for paved strips called runways. That had been back in the days when hurtling aircraft relied largely on the friction of wheel against pavement and brake

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

against wheel to come to a halt. That haphazard way of doing business took no small amount of room. Eventually, though, aircraft no longer needed runways to land, so Dulles had been closed, landscaped and reopened as one of the largest recreational parks in eastern North America.

But there was still one hangar doing business ...

The first person they saw as they entered was Alice Friedman, the shuttle pilot. She was dressed in a painstakingly exact copy of a late twentieth century NASA-issue jumpsuit. "Greetings, everyone," she called. "Welcome to the Dart Project." Hands were shaken all around. "You'll forgive us if we don't lay on much of a welcome for y'all," Alice said, "but time's pretty short and everybody's kinda busy. I'm only the pilot, so I have some time to spare." She smiled.

Kirk returned it. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said.

"Yes, indeed," Nan said. "Thanks for having us, Captain Friedman."

"Likewise," grunted Eddie.

"Want to see our baby?" Alice asked them. "I think she's finally fit for company."

"Lead the way," Kirk said, and together the three of them entered the cool dimness of the hangar.

KIRK KNEW WHAT HE WAS GOING TO SEE, but the sight nevertheless took his breath away. Even the jaded Eddie gasped and began scanning without having to be asked.

It was Orbiter 101, the original space shuttle, appearing as fresh and new as she had when she had first been rolled out from a hangar at a U.S. Air Force plant in California. She had

been named *Enterprise* because one of the project managers for Rockwell International, the builder of the vehicle, had lost a brother stationed aboard the aircraft carrier of the same name during the recently concluded World War. She had pioneered a new era in the exploration of space. She had then been tossed aside callously, consigned to a museum storage building, and allowed to deteriorate over the decades ... until someone had come along and cared for her as she deserved. Now she stood on her landing gear, proudly restored, the gleaming whiteness of her insulative tiling unscarred and unblemished by time or trauma.

She was *gigantic*. The space shuttle *Enterprise* was perhaps eight times the size of a shuttlecraft carried by a starship cruiser. She had been the queen of her era, short as that era had proven to be: The development of the impulse engine near the beginning of the twenty-first century had doomed her and all like her. The shuttle could not even make re-entry under power; she depended instead on atmospheric braking and a limited ability to maneuver aerodynamically to land. The craft had been accurately described as a flying brick. Kirk decided again that there had indeed been people of great courage pushing hardware through the skies in those days so long ago.

Her original markings had been restored, right down to the sans-serif black lettering that read UNITED STATES and ENTERPRISE. There was only one difference: The identifying American flags painted on her hull had been updated to the proper fifty-six stars, and they had been paired with the red and silver standard of the United Federation of Planets.

"Did we do good?" Alice asked, smugly sure of the answer she would get.

Kirk said nothing, but merely nodded

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

slowly, drinking it in. Finally he said, “Let’s go aboard.”

“Right this way,” Alice said.

The four of them clambered up a temporary accessway that led to the access hatch and entered the ship. If the outside of the shuttle represented the faithful restoration of the work of twentieth-century artisans, its interior had done away with that original work ruthlessly. Everything inside the skin of the shuttle was on the cutting edge of twenty-third century technology.

They entered the cockpit, and Kirk looked at the newly installed controls. They seemed about a thousand times simpler than the originals he’d seen pictured. “Now those look familiar,” he said, pointing. “They look like something I’d see on a standard shuttlecraft.”

“They’re exactly that,” Alice said, nodding. “Using standard controls saved us a little time and expense. We didn’t have to change things much to make ’em fit, so we used ’em.”

“You’re using standard impulse engines, too?” Nan asked.

“That’s right,” said Alice. “We’ve installed a cluster of class-two impulse units right where the old engines used to be. Their thrust is directed through the old engine outlets.”

“Those old outlets can take that kind of heat?” asked Kirk.

“Oh, sure,” Alice replied. “Compared to what those outlets were designed for, impulse thrust temperature is just a fairly warm breeze. They used to fill this sweetheart up with liquefied gases, and then they lit a match. Now that kind of business can get *hot*.”

“Why didn’t you try to fly the whole launch assembly?” Nan asked. “You know, the tanks and boosters as well as the orbiter itself—the dart, as you call it?”

“We could have done that, I guess,” Alice said, “but the tank and SRBs—the solid rocket boosters—wouldn’t contribute anything to the impulse configuration of the dart, so we forgot about ’em. We would have had to manufacture replicas in any case, because there aren’t any tanks or boosters around anymore—and doing that would have cost even more. So why bother?” Then she grinned. “Besides, she looks neater and cleaner this way, don’t you think?”

“I do,” Nan said. “When are you planning to take her up, Captain?”

“We ought to be ready to go this afternoon, right after lunch,” Alice said. “I’ll just raise and lower her a few meters off the tarmac so’s we can balance the class-twos for true flight. I expect to take her up on her first checkout flight at the crack of dawn tomorrow. It’ll be a milk run up and down the coast at maybe five thousand meters. If everything goes okay, I’ll take her all the way up and out tomorrow afternoon. That’ll be a figure-eight around Luna and back at one gee. Call it six hours. That’ll give us more than two days after that to nail down glitches before we head out for the Parade of Spacecraft on Tuesday.”

“Do you expect any problems?” Nan asked.

“Nope,” Alice said. “This is a sweetheart we’ve got here, I can tell you. She’s been waiting a very long time for her day to come. She *wants* to fly.” She patted the console. “Don’t you, honey?”

“I agree,” Kirk said, nodding. “This lady’s going to be a sweetheart, all right. Ladies named *Enterprise* always are.”

KIRK AND NAN LEFT THE HANGAR soon afterward, leaving Alice and her people to complete preparations for the afternoon test.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Now, Miss Davis,” Kirk said, “there’s still one thing that we haven’t done.”

“Oh?” she said. “What, pray tell, is that?”

“I haven’t taken you to see the Apollo 11 site yet,” Kirk said. “Ever been to Luna?”

“No,” Nan said. “I haven’t taken any vacation time yet. I’ve always wanted to go to Luna, though. Is it nice there?”

“It can be,” Kirk said. “Like anything else, it’s what you make of it. Want to go? It won’t take long.”

Eddie cleared his throat. “I get triple-time and two extra lunches for having to travel off-planet with less than twelve hours’ notice,” he pointed out. “Union rules.”

“You can wait here, Eddie,” Nan told him. “I don’t need you along for this. We’re not shooting.”

“Oh,” Eddie said, looking disappointed. “Well, I guess I’ll find me some shade and take a nap, then.” He walked off in search of a tree.

“Now, then,” Kirk said to Nan. “Luna City, here we come.” He opened the clamshell of his communicator.

THE MAXIMUM RANGE OF A TRANSPORTER was approximately forty thousand kilometers, given favorable conditions. It was also apparent that the sheer volume of passenger traffic between Terra and its moon justified transporter service between the two. Even civilians made heavy use of the service, as expensive as it was, because the same considerations that made it uneconomical to use a transporter to go from point to point on a planetary surface made it very economical for use in travel through space.

Unmanned relay stations located between Terra and Luna received and amplified the space-to-space transporter signals and sent them

along. The total distance was about as far as transporter signals could be relayed without being irredeemably weakened. What worked to get people to Luna and the L4 and L5 space colonies would not serve to get them to Venus or Mars.

What was important is that Kirk called the transporter operator at the Admiralty, issued his instructions, and approximately a minute later he and Nan were standing on a transporter stage at Starfleet Headquarters in Luna City.

JIM AND NAN SPENT A COUPLE OF HOURS walking through the underground warren that made up ninety percent of Luna City, and eventually wound up, as all tourists did, at Old Dome. They stood at a railing that ran around a non-reflective hemisphere of transparent aluminum fifty meters across. The building they were in had been built around the dome and rose to about half its height. The top of the dome was open to vacuum in order to preserve what was inside.

The crowds around Nan and Jim were quiet. Occasionally a child would begin to cry, or someone would say something loudly in an language unknown to Jim, but none of the noise proved especially bothersome. What was before them was simply too overwhelming to allow the intrusion of petty annoyances.

They were looking at Tranquility Base.

Inside the dome stood a squarish thing that had been scored deeply by hot flame. It stood on spider’s legs and appeared fragile. There were pieces of equipment left here and there, and the entire area was marked by deep footprints left by thickly soled human feet. An old fifty-star American flag, its top edge stiffened with wire, stood proudly to the side. Blinding white

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

sunlight lighted everything around them brightly, but it could not drown out the stars. A crescent Terra dominated the sky, and at its left hand shone a bright beacon that was not a star, but another planet—cloud-shrouded Venus, the third-brightest thing in that endlessly black sky.

Jim knew that the first landing party to return here had found the flag lying on the ground, where the exhaust from the engine in the lunar module's ascent stage had flung it. There had been no little debate on whether the flag should be set aright if it was found on the ground; Tranquility Base was, after all, an important historical site that some thought should remain undisturbed for all time. The commander of the landing party had ended the debate simply by picking up the flag and replanting it where the original explorers had intended it to be.

That same commander had also turned the first spadeful of dirt for Luna City. That had been early in the twenty-first century, when humans returned to Luna after an absence of nearly forty years. This time, though, they had come to stay. Years later, the open dome was fashioned and placed over the Apollo 11 landing site. Luna City had grown up around it.

Each of the items visible on the site was diagrammed and explained by a series of engravings placed around the railing by the Sons and Daughters of Apollo Historical Society, but the landing site was best appreciated as a thing complete in itself. It needed no explanation. Two men had landed here and, with daring, had put the mark of humanity on soil that had never before known it. From where they stood, Jim and Nan could see the commemorative plaque on the descent stage of the lunar lander, although it was not possible to read the engraving at that distance. It didn't

matter. There were duplicates of the plaque mounted at intervals along the railing.

There was something else, a small memorial of lunar stone, that was placed in a small nook off to one side of the dome. The memorial was a simple one that bore the name of a man and, under that, the dates of his birth and death. Both had been back in the twentieth century, and the memorial indicated that he had lived a respectable number of years for that era. There was also a bas-relief of what looked like a ticket or a baggage tag; a small knife or dagger pierced it through. Eight lines of verse were engraved under the bas-relief; Nan read them.

*Under the wide and starry sky
Dig my grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die
And I lay me down with a will!
This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be,
Home is the sailor, home from the
sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

Centered below the poetry was a line written larger than the rest: FOUNDER OF LUNA CITY.

"Jim?" Nan asked. "How could this man have been the founder of Luna City? He died, uh, more than twenty years before it happened. Did someone make a mistake?"

Jim shook his head. "No, there's no mistake," he said. "He was a writer and philosopher whose works of speculative fiction were so compelling that they made the founding of Luna City inevitable. They passed a law here that made him the official founder, even though he was long gone by then. They even fire a small cannon—that one right over there—every year on his birthday, which was a week

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

ago Wednesday. Hey, look, I skipped breakfast; how about something to eat?"

"I could go for something. Breakfast?"

Jim looked at Terra and saw that the terminator was crossing the Hawaiian Islands. "These folks are on Greenwich minus four," he said, "so it'd be lunch."

"Lunch at lunchtime? What a concept. Are you buying, Admiral?"

"Oh, no," Jim said, shaking his head. "Not this time; we'll split the tab. An old tradition strictly forbids treating another person to lunch in Luna City. I'm not sure, but I think they can throw you naked out of an airlock for it."

Chapter Thirteen

KETH HAD QUICKLY NEUTRALIZED the doorkeeper in the lobby—it was child's play for a trained operative—while Klor had dealt with the security block in the lifttube by shorting out the voice recognition system. They took the 'tube to the fifty-first floor.

"Quickly," Keth ordered, pointing to G'dath's front door. Klor took a small instrument from his pouch and, crouching, began neutralizing the security sensors embedded in the doorframe. The designers of the system had not thought it necessary to

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

construct the device to withstand Klingon espionage methods.

The door across the hall opened.

“I thought I heard someone out here,” Mr. Olesky said, smiling. “Are you friends of G’dath? I think he’s at school—”

“Kill him,” Keth ordered casually. Klor instantly rose and caught Mr. Olesky with a sharp blow to the side of the neck. There was a sharp, snapping sound. The old man’s eyes rolled up, and his body crumpled to the carpet.

“Complete your task,” Keth said. “I will dispose of this.”

“Yes, Superior.”

Keth picked up Mr. Olesky by the collar of his shirt and flung his body back inside his apartment. It landed some three meters inside with an ugly, heavy sound, and the door slid closed.

“The killing may not go unnoticed by the building security system,” Keth said. “We will have to hurry.”

A second later, Klor cracked through the security field covering G’dath’s own door. It slid aside smoothly. Keth and Klor entered the apartment.

“There is much here,” Keth said, seeing the bookshelves and the squares of RAMspam. “We will take with us what we can.”

“Can we not have the Embassy simply transport the entirety of this material to Geneva?” Klor asked. “Some of it may be of value.”

Keth looked at him in a dangerously casual way. “Are you questioning my actions?”

“No, Superior! Never! I was merely seeking information.”

“Very well,” said Keth. “Each building in this complex is shielded against the environment—lightly so, but enough to prevent transport.

The shielding causes a subtle scrambling of the carrier beam. This is something you should have realized without asking.”

“Yes, Superior,” Klor said, abashed. “I thank you for the lesson.”

Suddenly their sensitive ears detected a tiny rustling and the padding of small feet. “What is that?” Keth rumbled as Leaper came into view. The kitten sniffed at the air in the direction of the two Klingons and stopped.

“It must be the specimen of *Felis catus* kept by the traitor,” answered Klor.

“An insignificant monstrosity,” Keth observed.

Leaper quickly backtracked and stood near the far wall of the living room. The baby cat hissed as fiercely as he could manage, but he kept his distance.

Keth walked into G’dath’s bedroom. “Here is the computer owned by the traitor,” he said, picking up the several squares of RAMspam scattered on the desk. “Download the contents of its memory into your tricorder. It will serve as a check on the contents of our tap.”

“Immediately, Superior.”

The globe itself was not hidden very well, as Keth knew it would not be. He easily found it on the floor of the bedroom closet, almost an absurd place for it... but Keth knew to expect no better cunning from the get of a farmer. The Klingon hefted the globe and, somewhat to his surprise, found that it weighed very little. *This is the pebble that will crush the mountain of the enemy*, he thought, and he bared his teeth in pleasure.

Keth left the bedroom and walked around the apartment. He decided that it was a fit enough place to live in. It was sparsely furnished, and despite his disdain for the traitor, he approved of his tastes. At least the farmer

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

boy had not succumbed to an Earther desire for comfort.

Keth walked over to the *shimi-shan* and contemptuously kicked it to pieces. Some of the fruit G'dath had placed in the small offering receptacle before leaving for the school that morning bounced and rolled to the other end of the room. Leaper scampered farther out of the way.

Keth began picking through the RAMspam squares on the bookshelves. He saw that some of them were marked with the names of popular and trivial Earther periodicals—but G'dath just might have hidden important information within them. If so, Embassy specialists would quickly ferret it out. There was a refuse sack hanging on a hook in the kitchen. Keth took it, dumped its contents on the floor, and began loading it with RAMspam squares. There seemed to be hundreds of them.

"I have completed the download, Superior," Klor said, returning to the living room. "What now?"

"Now we look for anything we might have missed," Keth said. He began by dumping scores of books onto the living room floor with one sweep of his beefy arm. Several of the volumes went flying across the room, nearly hitting Leaper. The little cat dodged out of the way and began howling at them in the warrior's chant of his own species.

"It has become very noisy," Keth said distractedly. "Crush it."

"I obey, Superior."

SHORTLY AFTER FINISHING LUNCH ON LUNA, Kirk and Nan again materialized on the tarmac in front of the Dart Project hangar.

"Thanks for the trip, Admiral," Nan said.

"Me for N'York, now; I'm running a little late."

"Of course," Kirk replied. He flipped open his communicator. "Transporter chief, Empire State, this is Admiral Kirk."

"Harry here, Admiral."

"Lock onto Miss Davis, please. She's two meters from my location. Beam her to your coordinates. Then call her a cab."

"Locked on. Just give the word, sir."

"Energize." A moment later, Nan disappeared in a sparkle of gold.

A hearty voice hailed Kirk from inside the hangar. "Glad you could make it, Admiral," Alice Friedman said, motioning for him to hurry inside. "That sleepyhead technician fella is already aboard, and we're all set to conduct the lift test. C'mon, people—it's time to fly!"

JENNY HOGAN WAS FASCINATED. More remarkably, so was The Wrong Ralph, the technician from the WorldNews N'York bureau who was standing in the back of the room and scanning G'dath as he taught his class. Jenny had never before run into a teacher who was so astonishingly skilled at the art of presentation. The sound of G'dath's voice and the rhythm of his lecture almost made her forget her troubles. She was glad Nan needed this footage; the job let her take her mind away a bit from the Apollo anniversary, which meant Luna, which made her think of Starfleet, which meant—

It had been two days since Kevin had left her sitting on that bench on sunny Market Street. Since then, they'd kept things between them on a purely professional basis.

Two whole days.

It felt more like two years.

All men were bastards.

Every minute that passed without him

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

seemed to weigh a ton.

What an idiot he was!

Why hadn't he called her?

The door of the classroom suddenly opened and Nan stepped inside. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "Please, go on."

"There is a seat in the back for you, Miss Davis," G'dath said politely.

"Thank you." As she made her way to the back of the room, Nan caught Jenny's eye, and the producer gave her a thumbs-up. *Good stuff*, Nan thought. *Well, fine—but doesn't Jenny look a bit peaked?*

G'dath began pacing in front of the Class. "Consider the development of nuclear weapons," he told his students. "Every sufficiently advanced culture faces the dilemma of what to do about them. We know of no spacefaring culture that does not at least know how to build such weapons. Whether they do or not is another matter—as is the decision about whether to use them."

G'dath looked out the window. "There are a limited number of scenarios," he said, "and examples of each are available for our inspection. Here on Terra, for example, a brief, one-sided nuclear war was fought to end the greatest conventional war ever known up to that time. A general nuclear war has in fact never been fought, although extensive preparations were taken to do precisely that—indeed, the nations of Terra, rich and poor alike, nearly spent themselves into bankruptcy paying for it.

"On Vulcan," he continued, "several general nuclear wars were fought in succession, and civilization had to be rebuilt after each one—each time in an increasingly hostile physical environment, and without the benefit of those natural resources consumed during the previous cycle. It was in one of those inter-atomic

periods—the final one, thankfully—that the teachings of Surak were formulated and became popular. Because of this, no nuclear weapons were constructed upon the rediscovery of nuclear fission in the post-Surak era. It was a fortunate choice; it spared Vulcan further agony.

"Now, on Klinzhai—"

The Class would never find out what might have happened on Klinzhai, because at that moment the door to the classroom sprang open, and Keth and Klor came barreling inside, their knives drawn.

G'dath felt utter despair; he saw that Klor was carrying the globe, as well as a small sack. Some part of his mind noted that the other Klingons each bore a large number of fresh scratches—deep ones—on their hands and faces. There was also drying blood on their clothing. G'dath immediately thought of little Leaper... and his heart fell.

"You are ours, traitor," Keth hissed at G'dath. "You will come with us—else these here will pay."

"Please," the teacher said calmly, holding up a hand. "Do not hurt anyone here. There is no need. I will come with you."

"I will decide the need to hurt," Keth said. "You, there, in the back."

"Me?" answered The Wrong Ralph.

"Yes," said Keth. He threw his knife with deadly accuracy; the technician gasped once and fell. "Now, then," Keth said. "Do we understand each other, farmer?"

The members of the Class began shouting in confusion and fear as Jenny hurried over to The Wrong Ralph. "*Silence!*" roared Keth in a voice much louder than any G'dath had ever used. Several students rose from their seats and made ready to rush for the door, but Keth moved swiftly to block it, and they fell back.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“He’s dead,” Jenny said dully.

“Of course,” said Keth. “Klor, fetch my knife.”

Jenny backed away as Klor put down the globe and the sack and came over. She turned her head as the Klingon bent over the body.

It was about then that every alarm in the school building went off.

“What is that?” barked Keth.

“The needless death of the human has been detected by the sensor system,” G’dath said bitterly. “The school computer almost certainly thinks there has been an accident. A medical team has been alerted and will arrive here shortly. The police will also come.”

“Warn them away.”

“I cannot.”

“Must I again make a point?” Keth asked. He raised an arm, ready to point to another victim.

“It is out of my hands,” said G’dath. “The system is automatic.”

Keth shrugged. “Then we are about to be detected,” he said. “This ought to be interesting.”

“But, Superior,” Klor said, “I thought we were to transport away—”

“Quiet, fool!” hissed Keth. “We cannot involve—certain parties—at this point. If we transport, the Earthers will surely know that they must have been involved.” More loudly, he said, “Our hostages will gain us time. The humans are sentimental.”

“You need no hostages, Warrior,” G’dath said. “I give you my word that I will not cause you any trouble.”

“Your kind is incapable of causing me trouble, farmer,” Keth said. “It is the Earther police I shall wish to ... persuade.”

I’m crazy, Nan thought as she rose, *but I*

already knew that. “Taking children hostage these days, are we?” she spat at the Klingon obviously in charge. “Why not let ’em go and try somebody more your own speed? Me, for instance—if you think you’re up to handling a woman.”

“Nan—” Jenny began.

“Klor!” Keth shouted as his outraged underling raised a powerful arm to strike Nan down. “Be still! We need no one else here dead—yet.”

“Miss Davis,” G’dath said, “I think you should sit down and remain quiet.”

“Be quiet yourself, farmer,” Keth ordered. “You, there, woman. Since you desire to join us, you shall—as will your friend there and some of these so-called children, who are each of them more than old enough to hold officer rank in the Imperial armed forces, given enough courage.”

“I knew you turtleheads were strictly warp zero,” Stoller said. “Cripes, if *I* was in your wimp army, I’d be a general already.”

“Ira,” Siegel whispered, “*please* shut up.”

“That is excellent advice under the circumstances, Mr. Stoller,” G’dath said softly.

They all waited for the authorities to arrive.

AN HOUR LATER, KEVIN RILEY was sitting at his desk at the Admiralty, losing himself in work. He wondered when he might start feeling better about Jenny. He knew that there was only one honest answer: Never.

Riley did not see how he could fix things. He was sure Jenny hated him. She knew him all too well; how could she not hate him or think him foolish? She had seen through the shell of Riley’s banter and peered deeply inside his soul, into all the secret, hidden corners, and she’d

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

seen clearly. Even Anab could not have done that, because he had never allowed it, and her will had been no match for his. However, Jenny had broken through all his walls without effort ... and she had trusted him enough to tell him the absolute truth about himself. He had responded to that trust by turning away from her and treating her with undisguised contempt.

He had acted like a complete fool, and he had known that since two minutes after he left her sitting there on the Market Street bench. He had done nothing to try to make it up to her. She could never forgive him, never, and he knew it.

He let his fonecom buzz twice before he answered it.

Seconds later, his chair crashed backwards as he ran out of the office, bound for the transporter stage. A plan was forming in his mind even as he did so.

“I WOULD SPEAK to you, traitor,” Keth said.

“I am no traitor,” G’dath said. “I merely prefer freedom to slavery.”

Klor laughed harshly. “A lot of good it has done you,” he said. “You know the use this world has for our kind—none.”

Keth held up his free hand for silence. “The security forces outside the building are swelling in number; I sense we may not remain in control of this situation for much longer. Now, farmer, you have in that globe a powerful and previously unknown force.”

“Do I?”

“Shall I kill one of the hostages, Superior?” Klor asked. “It might loosen the traitor’s tongue.”

“Not yet,” Keth said. “Farmer, hear me. Cease your pretense. Either answer me quickly and correctly, or these here will begin to die,

one by one. I have nothing to lose.”

“The authorities here do not look kindly on murder,” G’dath said. “There is no need to take another life.”

“Life has already been taken,” Keth said. “One dead or all dead, it is the same to these Earthers. They exact no harsher penalty for additional victims.” He sneered. “They are ... progressive.”

“Very well,” G’dath said. “I will tell you what you need to know.”

“Don’t tell him anything, G’dath!” urged Nan.

“Quiet, woman,” Keth said. “You have spirit. I would regret ordering my associate to snap your neck, should you show me any more of it. Farmer, the motive force I speak of is harnessed in that globe, correct?”

“That is correct.”

“A careful examination of the design specifications for this object suggests that it might be harnessed with little trouble to power, say, a flitter.”

G’dath sighed. “I should have been more careful in my security practices as regards my designs,” he said, almost to himself. “I am afraid I have grown too used to living in freedom.”

“I require a direct and immediate answer,” Keth said. He walked over to Nan and placed his hand almost casually at the point where her neck met her shoulder. She did her best not to shudder.

“I am not stalling,” G’dath said. “The answer is yes. The mechanism inside the globe generates an enveloping field. Securing the globe against the chassis of the flitter would be sufficient to extend the field around the vehicle, if the flitter itself is not grounded. The flitter must be outside the atmosphere and in no more

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

than a microgravitational environment, however, for the scheme to work.”

“You are telling me the truth? Swear it on the lives of these hostages.”

“I swear on the lives of these hostages that I am telling the truth.”

“Good,” Keth said, “because several of them are coming with us. It would be a shame if anything were to happen to them.”

“The local security forces are continuing to arrive,” Klor said, seeing a blue and white N’York Police Department flitter flash by the window.

“Excellent,” Keth said, looking out the window. “There are now enough of them outside for us to conduct meaningful negotiations. We will, of course, initiate talks by supplying some fresh deaths to show our serious intent. Three should do. You, you and you,” he said, selecting two girls and Stoller, who gulped. “Klor, your knife. We need not make this painful—unless they resist.”

Suddenly there was a familiar hum, and a swarm of sparks quickly coalesced into the form of Kevin Riley. The Klingons whirled and made ready to use their knives, but the Starfleet officer had beamed in with his hands up.

“Kevin!” Jenny cried.

Riley ignored her. “I’m unarmed,” he told Keth tersely. “You can kill me—but if you do, no deal.”

“Speak,” said Keth.

“I figure that, no matter what, you want transportation.”

Keth shrugged. “Obviously. So?”

“All right. There’s a Starfleet flitter due to land on the roof of this building in three minutes. Once the pilot leaves, it’ll be empty. There’s no tracer aboard; you have my word as a Starfleet officer on that. Let these others go,

and you can have me and the flitter. I’ll take you anywhere you say, or you can drop me and go off by yourselves. Or you can kill me.”

Keth smiled. “I’ll take the flitter—with five hostages.” He looked around the room. “You and you,” he said, pointing to two more of the boys. “You and these others will come with us.”

“Everyone remain in your seats,” G’dath said. “I will not have this, Warrior. I will force you to kill me first.”

“That may yet happen,” Keth said, shrugging. “We have the device.”

Riley looked at Keth with contempt. “These are children—by our standards, anyway, even if not by yours. There is no honor in taking them or these non-combatant females. I, on the other hand, am a lieutenant commander in Starfleet—”

“—and, as a Starfleet officer, you might be considered expendable by those seeking to capture us,” Keth said, rubbing his chin. “No, Commander... but I’ll do a deal with you because I admire the kind of courage it took to transport into this room. The children, as you call them, can remain behind. You and the two women will accompany us.”

“The women stay here,” Riley said.

“You need not appear so impersonally concerned about the younger one’s well-being, Commander,” Keth said. “It was obvious from her reaction to your sudden appearance that you know each other quite well... and I believe her presence aboard the flitter will serve to keep you under control. Certainly the presence of non-combatant women will keep your police and other security forces at bay. Now search the commander, Klor—and do not bother being gentle.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

BALANCING THE NUMBER-TWO IMPULSE UNITS aboard shuttle *Enterprise* was proving to be a touchy job. What with one delay and another, the shuttle had not yet risen even a centimeter off the floor of the hangar. Kirk was seated in one of the passenger seats in the cockpit. Next to him, Eddie the technician had dozed off again.

“I think that’s got it now,” said Alice Friedman. “Control, what do you think?”

“We think so, too,” came the voice of the test director. “Let’s try a little lift, Alice.”

The roar of barely constrained impulse engines filtered through the insulation of the cockpit, and there was the sensation of movement.

“Yeah!” Alice cried. “Awright! Control, I read us balanced to nine nines.”

“We confirm that,” Control said. “All right, pilot, goose her a little.”

“Will do,” Alice said. “Coming to ten meters—we’re there. Everything’s in the green. Heck, we can fly this baby on up and out anytime, far as I’m concerned.”

“Well, maybe so, Alice,” said Control, “but how about some thruster tests first?”

“All right, all right.”

Kirk’s communicator beeped for attention. He frowned at the interruption, and frowned even more deeply when he discovered that, because of the confined din from the engines, he had to hold the communicator to his ear to be able to hear anything from it.

“Stand by to beam me over there,” he said. “Kirk out. Captain Friedman? I’m sorry, but I have to leave right now. Starfleet emergency.”

“Can’t argue with that, I guess,” Alice said, thumbing her radio switch. “I’m shutting down, Control,” she called, even as she began hitting switches. “Admiral Kirk’s got to leave directly.”

The shuttle settled easily on the hangar floor as the roar of its engines died away. “What’s wrong, Admiral?”

“I’ve just been informed by the Admiralty that my chief of staff and two women are being held hostage by a party of Klingons up in N’York. They’re all aboard a Starfleet flitter, heading for God knows where.”

“What?”

“It also somehow involves a Klingon scientist—rather, an Terran scientist of Klingon extraction—named G’dath. I know him. They’re all aboard a Starfleet flitter able to leave the atmosphere, and that could be extremely bad news. They might head anywhere within the Solar System, and there’s no other Starfleet craft in any reasonable position to pursue.” Kirk frowned. “My chief of staff acted rather precipitously.”

“Admiral? We’re sitting in a Starfleet craft, aren’t we?”

Kirk nodded. “I guess she *is* one, at that. So?”

“Well, just how bad do you want these hombres, anyway?”

Kirk looked blankly at Alice for a moment, and then he gave her exactly the same kind of smile that had helped make Captain Kirk a legend in his own time.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter Fourteen

WE ARE GETTING AWAY CLEANLY, Superior,” Klor reported, studying the readouts before him. “Our altitude is now such that the last police craft has been forced to fall back and away. There are no other craft within troublesome range.”

“Excellent,” said Keth from the pilot’s seat. “It was good of you, Commander, to have supplied us with a flitter capable of leaving this planet’s atmosphere.”

“Don’t mention it,” Riley said. He was sitting next to Nan and Jenny in the rearmost of

the flitter’s three long seats. “I figured you wouldn’t buy a deal that offered anything less.”

“Your instincts were correct.”

G’dath was in the middle seat by himself. He turned to talk to the three hostages. “Are you all right?” he asked them.

“We’ll do,” Jenny said.

“They will not be hurt, farmer,” Keth said. “I regret the necessity of taking them hostage in the first place... but I had to force you to act for your Empire. If you continue to behave, they will be repatriated quickly.”

“Even a Starfleet officer?” Riley said sourly, and Jenny looked at him, eyes wide.

Keth did not answer.

G’dath broke the thick silence. “One of the women is under stress,” he said. “Let me help her. There is a medikit secured under the console at the co-pilot’s position. I might find something in it to calm her nerves.”

“Klor,” said Keth in a bored tone, “retrieve the medikit and examine it.”

Klor did so. “Its contents appear harmless, Superior. Pills and such.”

“Then give it to the farmer.”

“Thank you,” said G’dath, taking the ’kit. He rose and sat on the bench between Riley and Jenny; they moved to each side as far as they could to make room for him.

“Say nothing,” G’dath said as softly as he could. “They might hear, even above the sound of the engines. You understand that I cannot let them have the globe?”

Nan nodded.

“Are you finished with the Earther female yet, farmer?” Keth called. “If so, return to your seat. Make certain your globe is ready—and no tricks.”

“There will be no tricks,” said G’dath.

“Can somebody please explain that round

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

thing to me?” Riley asked. “I don’t know a thing about it, except that it seems to be important.”

“Proceed, farmer,” said Keth, amused. “You can tell them nothing that the Earthers do not already know, thanks to your conversation early this morning with the female, Davis.”

“So,” G’dath said tiredly. “I had wondered what set this chain of events into motion. You monitored my fonecom call to Miss Davis.”

“Indeed we did,” Keth said, “and it is well for the Empire that we did so.”

“Damn it to bloody hell,” Nan muttered.

G’dath shook his head sadly. “I will tell you, Commander Riley,” the scientist began. “I lucked upon a certain discovery, although calling it luck seems somewhat inappropriate under these circumstances.”

“You can say that again,” Riley observed.

“What I discovered was a way to tap into a reservoir of great power contained in a realm other than the continua we know,” G’dath continued. “That realm has its own scientific laws, its own logic, and I spent years puzzling it out. The globe was designed to tap into that power but, upon testing, its performance was beyond my every expectation. I was going to use my discovery to secure a place of honor among you ... but at times I also thought that perhaps I should put the globe aside, destroy all designs associated with it, and try to forget that it ever existed.” He sighed. “I should have known that one cannot put the djinn back into the bottle, if he does not want to go. If it were not I who had discovered the principle of the globe, it would have been another.”

“Enough,” Keth said. “Klor has, as you advised us to do, wedged the globe between the base of the front seat and the inside wall of the flitter. I ask you again: Is that sufficient contact with the frame of this vehicle for it to be moved

with the globe?”

“It is more than sufficient,” G’dath said.

“And our destination?”

“The Empire, as you instructed. The globe has been programmed to take us in the direction in which the flitter is heading at the time I activate the globe—again, as you instructed. You must make certain that we are traveling in precisely the proper direction as I trip the relay.”

“You know I cannot check your work,” Keth said. “I have your word on every one of these points? Things are as you say?”

“You have my word. I need only trip the relay.”

“Very good,” Keth said. “Farmer, make ready to—”

“Something is approaching us from behind, Superior,” Klor said, looking at his readouts. “Something very big—and very fast!”

Keth turned around to look out the rear window of the flitter, and his eyes bulged. Jenny was nearly as surprised as Keth was, but Riley had long since learned not to be surprised by anything that might happen whenever James T. Kirk was around—and this had James T. Kirk written all over it.

“We’ll be all right now,” Riley whispered to Jenny. “My boss is here.”

“WE’RE DOING JUST ABOUT four hundred thousand clicks an hour, Captain,” Alice reported. “I’m not sure we can keep this up for too long; this kind of speed is ’way beyond our design specs.”

“Can’t we throw a tractor beam on them?” Kirk asked. “I’m afraid they’re going to get away just as we’re about to nail them.”

“We can try,” said Alice. “Hey, this is funny.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“What is?”

“I’m reading an unknown sort of power surge aboard the flutter.”

“Can you identify it?”

“Never saw anything like it before. It’s not from the engines, though. Even warp engines don’t show a profile like that, much less impulse jobs. Oops—audio-only message coming in on the main ship-to-ship, Admiral. It’s from our friends up ahead.”

“This is Keth,” came a voice. “You in the ghost ship. Break away. We hold three hostages. Desist, or they will die.”

“Hey,” Eddie the technician said worriedly. “Is this getting dangerous?”

“What do I do, Admiral?” Alice asked.

“You’re running this show.”

“Maintain pursuit,” Kirk said. “Killing the hostages won’t gain them anything at this point, and they know it. How’s that tractor beam coming?”

“Still charging,” Alice said. “I’m circuiting its power through the engines a few times to strengthen it. Damn supercharging is slowing us down, too; you don’t get something for nothing.”

“Understood,” Kirk said. “Can you let me talk to the flutter?”

“Sure,” Alice said. “Just talk. Everybody in Starfleet will hear you. You’re on the main channel.”

“THE GHOST SHIP is not breaking off pursuit,” Klor said. “May I kill one of the hostages now?”

Keth sighed. “No, you idiot. Be still.”

“Attention, up ahead,” came a strong voice.

“This is Admiral James T. Kirk of the, uh, space shuttle *Enterprise*, ordering you to cut power and heave to for our approach. We intend to

take you in tow.”

“Get us out of here, farmer,” Keth ordered.

“Do not do anything foolish, else the lives of the three hostages are forfeit.”

“I will do nothing foolish,” G’dath said. *I would certainly do nothing so foolish as keep my word to one such as this*, he thought. He took another look aft, toward the shuttle. It was very near to them and drawing nearer every second, and so it would probably be caught in the detonation of the globe. More innocent lives would be lost. However, G’dath did not know if he would get another chance... and he simply could not let the Empire gain possession of his discovery.

Without further hesitation, G’dath reached to jab a finger inside the glowing globe. He prepared to meet those who had gone before him. He hoped that, when he met them, they would pronounce him worthy.

“THEY’RE NOT STOPPING,” Alice said. “They’re not even slowing down. This is very bad.”

“Damn,” Kirk muttered.

“Tractor beam not available yet—wait!”

Alice said. “Green on the board!”

“Latch on!” ordered Kirk.

A brilliant shaft of blue light speared through space and hit the flutter squarely. The shuttle rocked back and forth as the strain equalized.

“Cripes!” cried Eddie.

“Latched!” Alice reported. “Wait—”

Everything went black.

A FEW THOUSAND KILOMETERS AWAY, in a certain spacedock in low terrestrial orbit, other ears were listening.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Have you lost them, Lieutenant?” Captain Decker asked from his command chair.

“No, sir,” Uhura responded. “No one’s transmitting on ship-to-ship at this time. There’s no traffic of any sort from those coordinates at all.” Her tone was worried. “I’m tied in to the science officer’s sensor board. What sensors we have operating show that the shuttle tractor beam was on for a brief period of time—less than half a second—and then failed, overwhelmed by a sudden flash of power from the flitter. The type and source of that power is unknown.”

“Unknown?”

“Yes, Captain. Now everything’s quiet.”

“What’s the course?”

Uhura blinked. “They’re headed for Luna, sir. Both craft, I mean.”

“ETA?”

“Less than an hour, sir. They’re slowing, too—enough so that they’ll go into lunar orbit.”

“Life signs?” asked Decker.

“Yes, sir—unchanged from before.”

Decker nodded. “What about other craft?”

“I can’t tell you much, Captain; I’m afraid our sensor arrays aren’t up to the job yet. There are some small space-capable craft in pursuit of the flitter, but they’re far behind. The space shuttle is the only craft in position to do anything about the situation, as nearly as I can tell—except for one, sir.”

Dossie Flores, dressed in coveralls, was crouched on the floor of the bridge at the helmsman’s position. She’d been working on helm circuitry, and several chip assemblies lay scattered at her feet. Quietly, she began replacing them inside the helm console.

“Are you finished your circuitry work, Miss Flores?” Decker asked.

“Finished enough for now, sir.”

“I see.” Decker paused and thought for a moment. Then he said, “Uhura, where is Mr. Scott?”

“I’ll find him for you, Captain.”

Flores seated herself at the helm position and ran the self-test routine. Lights glowed green, and she smiled.

“I take it you could do something if you had to,” Decker observed.

“Aye, aye, sir,” Flores responded.

“Mr. Scott on two, Captain,” Uhura said.

“Scotty?” Decker said into the air.

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“Departure routine. How soon?”

“Eh, Cap’n?”

“I want us to make a short trip. Can do?”

“Cap’n—”

“Mr. Scott,” Decker said, “I don’t have time to listen to a dozen reasons why we’re not able to do something we are damn well about to do anyway.” His tone grew firm. “Miss Uhura, send a printout to the chief engineer summarizing the situation. Attach a transcript of the communications traffic you’ve been monitoring. Mr. Scott, you can read all that later. I ask you again: What is our status? Will we go when I say ‘go’?”

“Oh, we’ll go, Cap’n,” Scotty replied. “Not far and not fast, but we’ll go. We have impulse power, all right, but our top speed won’t be much—maybe point-zero-five lightspeed, maybe less. I dinna expect to have to pull out o’ spacedock for some time ta come yet. Most of our hull plating is attached, and the parts o’ the ship we’d need the most have environmental integrity. Some areas o’ the ship I’d like to have available, though, don’t. We’re lightly staffed, but there’s enough good people aboard, and we’ll go. O’ course, much depends on how *far* ye want ta go.”

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“I want to go to Luna.”

“We can do that,” Scotty replied. “Fuel’s at minimum, but it’s enough, and our batteries are good. Environmental systems, aye; transporter, aye; sensors, maybe; weapons, nae; warp drive, nae.”

“Helm, aye,” said Flores.

“Communications, aye,” Uhura said.

“Captain, Chief DiFalco is not aboard at this time. I could sit in as navigator—”

“No,” Decker said. “I want you right where you are, Uhura; I’ll punch our course myself. Get us a clearance from Starfleet Traffic. Mr. Scott?”

“Standing by, sir.”

“One more question: When?”

“Just give the word, Cap’n,” Scotty said.

“Outside work crews are either back inside the ship or well clear.”

“Fast work, Scotty.”

“I passed the order the moment ye said ye wanted ta go, sir. I’ll nae argue past the point o’ sweet reasonableness.”

“Noted. Lieutenant Uhura?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Resume the flight log.”

“Yes, *sir!*” A moment later, she reported, “Starfleet Traffic wants to talk to you, Captain.”

“Tell them I’m busy. Do we have clearance yet?”

“Uh, no, sir. That’s what they want to talk about, sir.”

“Put them on audio, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, aye, Captain. Here they are.”

“*Enterprise*, this is—”

“Traffic, this is Captain Decker. I am requesting clearance, emergency priority one, for twenty seconds from mark. Mark. Better keep everybody out of our way, Traffic. Decker out. Uhura, clear that frequency.”

Decker went to the navigator’s position and seated himself. He studied the board briefly. “Ten seconds. Uhura, tell the spacedock master to cut all teepee beams.”

“Teepee beams off, sir. We’re free to move.”

“I guess someone’s listening. Miss Flores, thrusters at stationkeeping.”

“Thrusters at stationkeeping, aye.”

Decker punched in a course. He wondered briefly what Admiral Nogura might have to say when he found out about all this ... but he knew that it would be better for all concerned if the old man found out what was going on only after the fact.

“For what it’s worth, Captain,” Uhura said, “we just received our departure clearance.”

“Ahead dead slow, Miss Flores,” he said, and he could not help grinning. “Take us out of here.”

KIRK WAS THE FIRST ONE aboard the shuttle to come around. Still groggy, he peered out the front port. There was Terra, all right, and not much time had gone by, either; the terminator had not moved very far.

But Terra was so *small*. Kirk looked out one of the starboard ports and saw Luna. It was close.

Kirk looked at the instrument panel. They were in lunar orbit. *How the hell did this happen?* wondered Kirk hazily. It must have had something to do with the shuttle being tied to the flitter ... but how had a flitter managed to drag along a multi-ton spacecraft in its wake?

The flitter had not moved relative to them; it was still hanging in space about fifty meters to port.

Blarily, Kirk studied the console. The

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

shuttle's tractor beam had been completely drained. He set it on recharge, but it would take a while.

The others began to stir. "Are you two all right?" Kirk called, and there were slow murmurs of assent.

"I feel like hell, if anyone cares," Eddie the technician said. He looked out the port. "Hey, that's the moon out there," he said, brightening. "Triple-time and two extra lunches."

Alice shook her head to clear it and winced. "Ouch," she said. "Shouldn't have done that. What happened?"

"We latched onto the flitter, all right," Kirk said. "There was some sort of power feedback, as near as I can tell. We've been out for a little less than an hour."

Alice looked out the window. "Those uglies are still out there," she said. "Lemme — whoops, never mind. No tractor beam. Damn. Wish I had me a big long rope."

"Very clever, ghost ship," came a rasping voice over the intercraft channel. "However, you will not stop us for long."

"Identify yourself," Kirk snapped.

"No need for that, ghost man," the voice said.

"Let me talk to the hostages, then," Kirk said.

"Why not?" the voice said. "You, there, speak up. Be cautious; your lives depend on it."

There was a brief pause. "Admiral, this is Riley."

"Kirk here, Commander. What's your situation?"

"Stable, sir—I think. We're unhurt. The Klingon teacher, G'dath, is also unhurt—as are our two captors."

"Understood," Kirk said.

"Admiral," Alice said, "I'm getting

incoming traffic from Starfleet Command. It's Admiral Nogura."

"Stand by, Commander. Alice, cut the line to the flitter and put the Admiral on."

Nogura's voice filled the cabin. "James, what is happening?"

Quickly, Kirk briefed the old admiral.

"Can we talk to them, James?" Nogura asked. "Can we make them see reason?"

"We can try, sir," Kirk said.

"How do you account for your presence in lunar orbit?"

"I can't, Admiral," Kirk replied. "All I know is that I've never before experienced a power feedback of such magnitude."

"I see," Nogura said. They heard him sigh. "I am sending you what little help is available on such short notice, but ... it looks as if it is going to be entirely up to you, James."

"Aye, aye, sir." Kirk knew what that meant.

"IT WILL NOT BE LONG NOW," said Keth. "The lights inside the globe are slowly beginning to reappear. We will try another jump with the globe long before the ghost ship can grab onto us again." He smiled at the hostages. "Soon you will be guests of our Empire."

"Gosh," Riley said, batting his eyes. "Thanks."

Keth turned to speak to G'dath. "Farmer," he said, "it may yet be that you will be acclaimed a hero by the Council—posthumously, of course—for your invention of the globe. It has saved us from capture and disgrace once already; it pleases me greatly to contemplate your device installed aboard a warship deep within Federation territory—a warship able to enter, strike and flee without penalty."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Horrible,” said G’dath.

The lights within the globe continued to brighten.

“We appear to be nearly ready,” Keth said. “Perhaps the Emperor himself will see fit to name this device for you, farmer boy. The Globe of G’dath—the discovery that destroyed the Federation at last and won the galaxy for the Empire.” He laughed harshly until, suddenly, there was the whine of a transporter beam and the three hostages began to disappear.

THE SHIP-TO-SHIP FREQUENCY was blaring. “Attention, you there aboard the flitter. This is Captain Willard Decker of the USS *Enterprise*. Stand down, heave to and prepare to be boarded.”

“I knew it,” Kirk breathed. “I knew she’d show up. She always does, just when I need her the most.”

“I’m reading another power surge aboard the flitter,” Alice reported. Her tone was worried. “Looks just like the one I saw before we wound up here.”

SCOTTY WAS WORKING FAST AND FURIOUSLY at the console of the main transporter room. “Damn it to hell!” he muttered. “It was easy enough sortin’ human from Klingon aboard the flitter, but now —” He quickly switched transporter circuits, but to no avail.

“Cap’n,” he called, “I’m suddenly gettin’ a vast amount o’ unanticipated interference from somethin’ aboard the flitter. I’ve never seen anythin’ like it, but it’s buildin’ fast. We canna push a proper beam through it, and I’ve got a bad power drain here. I may lose our people in transit.”

“Do your best, Scotty,” came Decker’s voice.

“Aye, Cap’n,” Scotty breathed.

A moment later he was still working fast—and available transporter power had dropped to a mere two-thirds of normal. Cursing at the necessity of it, Montgomery Scott did what he knew he had to do.

Two figures formed on the transporter stage. Safely.

He sent the third back to the flitter.

“*ENTERPRISE!*” KETH HISSED. “No!”

The flitter lurched violently as several tractor beams leaped from the starship and clamped down on its hull.

“Superior!” Klor said. “Do we try to escape?”

“We do,” Keth said, “but not quite yet. Let the Earthers grow comfortable with our seeming capture—”

“But we have lost our hostages!”

“Quiet, idiot,” Keth said. “We still have the globe, its maker, and this worthy craft. The globe makes us a match for any enemy—even one as large as a starship. What need have we of hostages?” *A hostage might have kept the farmer under better control, Keth thought, but I will not give voice to that opinion. Why give the farmer ideas?*

Suddenly there was, again, the carrier hum of a transporter beam. *They have locked onto the farmer, Keth thought in despair, but he was wrong.*

A figure was forming. A human. Keth smiled in something very much like triumph. He would have his hostage after all.

G’dath grimaced.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“ADMIRAL KIRK?” DECKER CALLED.

“*Enterprise* here. We have retrieved two of the three humans aboard the flitter.”

“And the third, Will?”

“Nan Davis is still on the flitter, Admiral. Her beam-out was aborted by massive electronic interference, source and type unknown. Admiral, your chief of staff wants to talk to you.”

“Go ahead, Kevin.”

“Admiral,” Riley said, “there are some things you and Starfleet need to know about what’s aboard that flitter.”

“Wait one. Admiral Nogura, are you listening?”

“I am here, James. Please go ahead, Commander.”

Quickly, Riley briefed them on the globe and its capabilities.

“What are our chances of retrieving the globe and the Klingon scientist by transporter, Captain Decker?” Nogura asked calmly.

“Nil, Admiral,” Decker said. “Something—the globe—is generating a fierce interference pattern, and we don’t have enough sensor capability to crack through it. We can’t possibly tell the difference between one Klingon and another—and now the interference is so great that we can’t get a lock on anything inside the flitter—or within a kilometer of it, as a matter of fact.”

“I understand,” Nogura said. “Hold them out there as best you can, Willard. I pray it is enough.”

“SUPERIOR,” KLOR SAID, “it appears to me as if the pattern of lights inside the globe is the same as it was before. See? They now shine

undiminished.”

“So they do,” Keth said.

What do I do now? wondered G’dath. *I cannot easily sacrifice the scores—hundreds?—of people aboard a starship, yet I may have to do just that. The ship is much too close—as the shuttle still is. Everyone aboard the starship, the space shuttle, Miss Davis here ... so much blood on my hands. So much.*

“Superior?” Klor said. “This is very odd.”

“What is?”

“I detect an accelerating decrease in the efficiency of the tractor beam impinging on our hull.”

“The beam is weakening?”

“Yes, Superior. We are coming free.”

“Fortune smiles on us, Klor! And what of the ghost ship? Can it throw another tractor beam onto us?”

“They have insufficient energy to do that at present, Superior.”

“Excellent!”

“WHERE’S OUR TRACTOR BEAM ARRAY gone to, Mr. Scott?” Decker demanded.

“Drained, Cap’n,” came Scotty’s voice. “I’m throwin’ everything we’ve got into it, but somethin’ is drainin’ the mains! Batteries now at forty-five percent. Cap’n, if this keeps up, power to the environmental integrity interface will be lost in ten seconds, mark. We’ll be breathin’ vacuum three seconds after that.”

“Damn,” Decker muttered. “Cut the array, Scotty. Do I still have power to the impulse engines?”

“Nae, Cap’n. It’ll take about an hour to charge up enough for re-ignition. You don’t even have thruster control.”

“I see,” Decker said, sighing. “Admiral

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Kirk, Decker here. We've been forced to cut the flitter free, and we can't move. We're out of it for now."

"SUPERIOR!" KLOR CALLED. "The tractor beams from the starship are completely gone."

"Are we indeed free?" Keth asked.

Klor tried the thrusters. "We are moving without restraint, Superior."

"Excellent," said Keth. "Move us away from the Federation craft at our best speed. Make certain our vector is for the Empire."

"I obey, Superior!"

Keth turned to G'dath and Nan. "Will you make ready to launch us to the Empire, farmer? Or must you be... persuaded?" He looked at Nan and bared his teeth in a mirthless grin.

"I am already persuaded," G'dath said with a heavy sigh. "I cannot allow harm to come to Miss Davis. There is, in any case, no reason for me to remain here in the Federation any longer. I must go home. It is the only way now."

"G'dath, no!" Nan said. "Don't help these people!"

"Quiet, woman," Keth ordered. "Farmer, why should I not suspect the motives behind your sudden change of heart?"

G'dath shrugged. "I am yours in any case. The globe is yours. You hold my friend hostage against me. All I can do is accompany you, in the perhaps vain hope that I will be allowed to continue my work. All you have in your possession are the globe itself and incomplete specifications for a chip assembly that regulates the working of three independent modules inside it. You need me."

"Suppose we do need you," Keth said. "What of it? How do you account for your sudden desire to return to the Empire?"

"I have been lecturing my students year after year about the growing arms race between the Federation and the Empire, and the continual threat to peace that it poses," G'dath said.

"Without me, the globe is merely an unavoidable excuse for war. With me, the globe gives both cultures a chance to strike a peace and survive. I will do what I can in that regard, and the globe will give me a louder voice than most in Imperial circles. It is that simple."

Keth nodded slowly. "Cooperation with us now would certainly benefit you later—but I make no promises as to how much, or to what point."

"I seek no assurances," G'dath said. "I simply know that I want to work for peace, and that I must return home to do so. Peace can be made to happen, if we want it badly enough... and I want it badly enough to risk everything for it."

"There is Klingon blood in your veins, after all," Keth said approvingly. "There may indeed be a welcome for you in the First City. Let us depart, scientist."

JAMES KIRK MADE A DECISION. "Alice," he said quietly, "I don't have very many choices remaining. I'm afraid we're going to have to ram the flitter."

"Damn," the pilot replied. "Now I was afraid you were going to say something like that."

"Huh?" Eddie the technician said. "Ram it? You mean, like *collide*? On *purpose*?"

"Quiet, you," Alice said sharply. "Jim, are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then let's do it. I got an idea how important this is."

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

“Are we gonna crash?” Eddie asked. “Hey, what’s gonna happen to the hull?”

“Who the hell knows?” Alice snapped, knowing full well what would happen. “Now shut up, you weenie. Food and money, that’s all I been listening to since you crawled aboard. Admiral, I got full impulse engines again. Still zippo on the tractor beam—and that surge aboard the flitter is building fast. Standing by.”

“On my signal,” Kirk said. “One, two, three—now!”

The shuttle leaped ahead... and suddenly came to a crashing halt well short of the flitter. It was as if the shuttle had hit a brick wall in space. Everything inside the craft went dark.

“CAPTAIN,” DOSSIE FLORES SAID, “the space shuttle’s in trouble. Her impulse drive is blown, and she’s adrift. Damage to shuttle systems appears heavy.”

“Status of those aboard?”

“Alive, sir. They still have hull integrity. Apparently the shuttle’s light shielding protected the craft somewhat—but it’s out of action.”

“*Enterprise*, this is Kirk,” came a voice.

“Go ahead, Admiral,” Decker replied.

“Will, I’m afraid we’re out of it. We hit what must have been some sort of protective field generated by the globe. Never even touched the flitter. Can you pursue?”

“Negative, Admiral,” Decker replied. “Scotty’s doing his best, but we’re adrift until we can get things sorted out.”

“The flitter is fifty clicks out, distance increasing rapidly,” Flores called. “I see other craft attempting to give chase, but no one’s in proper position. One hundred clicks now.”

“Dammit,” Decker breathed. “They’re going

to get away.”

“WE ARE THIRTY-FIVE STANDARD UNITS from the Federation craft, and distance is increasing rapidly,” Klor reported.

“I will activate the globe when we are at fifty units,” G’dath said. “I do not want even the relatively slight mass of the two Federation ships affecting our trajectory. Any error at the beginning of our journey could mean disaster at its end.”

“As you say, scientist,” Keth said.

“Fifty units,” Klor called out.

G’dath looked at Nan. She returned the look, and saw in his eyes what he intended. She gave him the barest nod, and in her gaze there was infinite understanding.

G’dath relaxed. He poked into the globe with his stylus. There was just time enough left to form a single thought: the closely held memory of a tiny gray kitten who had been his friend for much too short a time.

My little Leaper, the Klingon thought sadly. He closed a relay.

The universe erupted in light.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Chapter Fifteen

KEVIN AND JENNY ARRIVED at G'dath's apartment building around sunset, only to find Federation Security personnel and representatives of the N'York Police Department swarming in and around the building like bees around a hive. Kevin's Starfleet credentials got them past the doorkeeper. There was a sour-faced NYPD patrolman standing guard at the lifttube access point.

"We're going up," Kevin told the cop in a tone that defied him to do anything to prevent it.

The cop shrugged and waved them through.

"Fifty-one," Kevin said. He and Jenny rode up in silence.

There were more police and Security people inside the apartment. The place had been thoroughly trashed, and it was hard to tell where the Klingon spies had left off and the investigators had started.

They entered the bedroom. Nothing. "This is very bad, Kevin," Jenny said. "They must have killed the poor little thing. All that blood on their clothing—and I don't see the kitten around anywhere."

"Shhh," Kevin said, holding up a hand. "Listen."

They heard a soft mewling from the closet. Kevin slid the door open. The contents had been trashed by the Klingon spies and gone through quite thoroughly by the authorities... but no one had spotted a tiny gray cat hiding behind the scraps of an empty box in the dim recesses of the very top shelf.

"Let me," Jenny said. "I'm good with cats." She reached up and allowed Leaper to catch her scent. After a moment, Jenny took the kitten in both hands and carefully lowered him to the floor, whereupon he ran to the middle of the sleeping mat and stood there watchfully. The little cat appeared unharmed.

"Those spies were pretty scratched up," Jenny said, her eyes moist. "Good for you, Leaper, getting in those licks. They were about the only ones our side got in today." She bent down. "Come on with me, young fella. We're going to go home now." She cradled the kitten in her arms and walked into the living room.

There was a Preserve security guard standing at the front door. "Hey," he barked, "no pets allowed! Give that cat here!"

Kevin stopped and froze the man with a

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

look. “Come anywhere near us or this cat, mister, and I promise that I will maim you. Believe me, I have had a *day*.”

The security man blinked. “Well, just get it out of here,” he blustered. “No pets allowed.”

“Don’t worry, we’re going.” He activated his wrist communicator. “Empire State transporter control, this is Commander Kevin Riley. Lock in on this signal. Two people and a cat to beam directly to transporter stage, Admiralty Building, San Francisco.”

“A cat, Commander?” Control asked. It was Harry.

“That’s right. A cat. A VIP cat. Is there a problem?”

“Not at all, Commander.” There was a brief pause. “All ready, sir. Awaiting your word.”

“Thank you very much, Chief,” Riley said. “Energize.”

IT WAS ALMOST seventeen. There was a knock on Kirk’s office door. “Come,” he said quietly.

The door slid aside and Riley entered the room. He stopped in front of Kirk’s desk and stood at attention, looking straight ahead at a point on the wall. “Reporting as ordered, sir,” he said crisply.

Kirk remained seated. With his forefinger, he lightly tapped a single square of black RAMspam on his desk. It bore the silver insignie of Starfleet’s prosecutor general. “You know what this is?” he asked.

Riley knew what it must be. “Yes, sir. It’s a court-martial brief.”

Kirk nodded. “I’ve just been through it. First of all, I must tell you that Admiral Nogura has decided to offer you the opportunity to resign before formal charges against you can be made. That would end the matter, as far as Starfleet is

concerned.”

“No, thank you, sir,” Riley said, his eyes still straight ahead. “I’ll take whatever comes.”

Kirk let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Very well, then. There are several charges contemplated against you, but they boil down to two. You stole a Starfleet vehicle and, without consulting higher authority, you subsequently engaged in actions that endangered the lives of innocent civilians. You broke some local laws in so doing, but the N’York authorities have decided to leave the matter in Starfleet’s hands. In turn, the prosecutor general has left it in mine, to be handled—quietly. This entire matter is classified ... or as classified as it can be, with a score of witnesses to the kidnapping.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Those witnesses have made it clear that your actions interrupted the planned murder of three hostages by the Klingon spies,” Kirk said.

“I didn’t plan it that way, sir,” Riley said. “It was just a matter of luck.”

“Whatever,” Kirk said, waving a hand. “The fact is that it mitigates the theft of the flutter—and no one can hold you responsible for ... the events that followed.”

Kirk fell silent. *What I cannot tell you, Kevin, is that what you did is exactly what I would have done, if I’d had the chance. If it was luck that prevented the deaths of those children, then it’s the same kind of luck that let me bring my ship home again after five grueling years. I’m glad you’ve discovered the stirrings of something like it within yourself, and that you had the personal courage to go ahead and follow your instincts, regardless of the potentially deadly consequences to yourself. Given all that, I’ll be damned if I’ll let Starfleet lose you now. We need you out there. I just wish*

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

that, between us, we'd had enough luck to save G'dath and Nan Davis. Good people like that shouldn't die.

After a moment or two, Kirk picked up the black RAMspam and inserted it into the security slot on his desktop. There was a small electronic noise as the slot wiped the RAMspam clean. "You're dismissed," Kirk said briskly.

ADMIRAL NOGURA'S PUBLICITY MACHINE, as directed by Timothea Rogers, generated a censored and sanitized version of the events surrounding the kidnapping of the Klingon G'dath, the taking of the hostages, and the deaths of all those aboard the flitter. Gratefully, initial public reaction turned out to be sympathetic to the scientist—who, in the official version of the story, was simply a innocent victim who'd gotten in the way of an ill-conceived Klingon espionage gambit. It had been decided to keep the existence of the globe confidential. Neither the Federation nor the Empire had any useful information about it. Further experiments might be made on the basis of the few scraps of information available about the globe, but the secret of the device would remain a secret for the foreseeable future.

Nogura's publicity machine did not fail to direct public attention to the role the space shuttle *Enterprise* had played in the G'dath affair, nor did it neglect to mention the central role played by Admiral James T. Kirk... who, after several years of relative anonymity, found himself once again in the spotlight, and found once again that he disliked the spotlight intensely. He stayed in his office for the rest of the day and refused all calls from outside the building, which drove the people running the publicity machine to distraction. Timothea

Rogers herself was uncharacteristically silent about the matter, though.

The Federation sent a stiffly worded note of protest over the N'York incident to the Klingon Embassy in Geneva. The note was rejected. "We are not responsible for the independent actions of criminals," said a spokesman.

The students in the Class were informed that the school year was over. They did not celebrate.

WorldNews executives planned a special feed on the short life and brief career of reporter Nan Davis. They also began looking for a replacement.

The world, as did all the rest of the worlds, spun on.

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Epilogue

IT WAS, AT LAST, Apollo Day.
Kirk's fonecom buzzed. "Jenny Hogan on line one," Riley said.

"Thanks," Kirk said. "Hi, Jenny. How are the cats doing?"

"Tearing up the place," Jenny said. "I'm still trying to find someone to adopt Leaper and Lois and Jimmy, but it looks like I'm going to be left holding the cat bag."

"Sorry."

"You don't want a cat, do you?"

"Uh, no. No, thanks."

"Just thought I'd ask. Besides, the little beggar kind of grows on you; I really don't want to give him up. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you for a second, Admiral. The latest opinion polls are out, and you seem to be scoring big with John Q. Starfleet's approval rating has picked up twelve percent since you started doing your thing last week. The depth interviews show that people want to see more of you."

"Great," Kirk said, in a tone that suggested it was far from great. "How are you doing, Jenny?"

"Not too badly," she said. "I'm supposed to be assigned to another reporter by the end of the month." She paused. "I'm thinking of resigning, though."

"You are?"

"Yeah," said Jenny. "I don't much care to be around here anymore. I'm taking some time off to think about things, though, before I do anything drastic. A week in the Bahamas won't hurt—me and the cats on the beach, me getting a tan, them pulling in sharks for food. It'll be fun."

Well, that explains the sudden furlough request I received from Kevin this morning, Kirk thought. "That's a good idea," he said, almost to himself. "Lie in the sun and relax."

"I thought it sounded like a plan, yes."

"Fine, then," Kirk said. "Have a good time. Talk to you soon."

"Bye."

Kirk leaned back in his chair and gazed out the window at the bridge. It had again been draped in tri-colored bunting. He still hated the sight of it.

He swiveled in his seat and, thinking of Nan, ordered the trivision unit to turn on and tune itself to the WorldNews feed of the Parade of Spacecraft. The Parade was nearing Luna and

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

would overfly Tranquility Base in less than an hour. The picture shifted here and there to show some of the scores of ancient and modern spacecraft participating in the historic flight.

Suddenly, there she was, and Kirk's breath caught. Whatever scars the shuttle had suffered a few days before did not show; she looked magnificent, her hull a glaring white against the infinitely deep blackness of space. She was at last in the place where she was always supposed to be, and Kirk trusted that the civilian VIPs aboard were having the time of their lives.

Nice job, Scotty, Kirk thought. *Another miracle from the miracle worker*. The shuttle's blown impulse engines had been replaced hastily by a complaining yet secretly gleeful Montgomery Scott after the shuttle had been towed to Spacedock Four at Kirk's order. Scotty had ripped the impulse units out of one of the shuttlecraft already aboard starship *Enterprise* and had stuffed them into the aft section of the space shuttle. Since the jury-rigging had been done by Montgomery Scott, it worked just fine. To guarantee it, Scotty was aboard the shuttle even now, babying the engines along. The units fit like a size-eleven foot in a size-nine shoe, but the shuttle flew. It also seemed right and proper to Kirk that the younger *Enterprise* had contributed something of itself to the older.

Kirk watched the shuttle cut through the hard vacuum of space, and thought of the resolute courage of the men and women who had flown aboard her, and other craft just like her, so many years ago. That kind of courage had not died out, either; it was as real as today. He knew it could be found any place where one cared to look—in the soul of a peaceable Klingon, or that of a young WorldNews reporter, or even that of an errant chief of staff. It might even be found in the fuzzy, soft soul of

a feisty gray kitten.

Kirk suddenly had a feeling that the future—his own future, humanity's future, and the future of all the races he knew as well as those yet to be discovered—was secure, thanks to such courage. They were, all of them, heading somewhere. There was purpose to it all. Nan Davis and G'dath had not died in vain.

Kirk did not know where the road to infinity would lead. No one could. He knew that, sometimes, there would be sadness along that road, and friends would be lost... but there would be great joy as well, and love would be found.

Kirk stood up from his chair and, still looking at the space shuttle, saluted. He then ordered the 3V to turn itself off, gathered his things, and left his office for home. The lights dimmed and died as the door slid closed behind him.

THE END

An Afterword follows...

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

Author's Afterword: Five Years Later

AND SO THERE YOU HAVE IT.
Finally.

A Flag Full of Stars was the fifty-fourth novel in the *Star Trek* series. The published version had my name on the cover, which might have led you to think that it was my book.

Well, it was and it wasn't. Mostly, it wasn't. But *this* version is mine. For better or worse, it's all mine.

I first proposed *A Flag Full of Stars* to Pocket in 1986, a few months after my first *Trek* novel, *Crisis on Centaurus*, appeared. I wanted to do a novel set on Earth during the three hundredth anniversary of the first manned lunar landing. That original proposal, which was for a book set during the five-year voyage, had Captain Kirk and a refugee Klingon scientist defeating an Imperial spy ring that had gained knowledge of an important new source of freely available energy discovered by the scientist.

I wanted the book to explore the non-military aspects of Klingon life. I thought that the war machine maintained by the Empire must require massive logistical support from civilians. Surely, I thought, there must be Klingon farmers, scientists, merchants, engineers and others who were not at all like the hormone-bloated oafs whom we saw in the Klingon military. My Klingon would be powerful, but he would be gentle. He would be a thinker, a maker, not a warrior.

A year later, Pocket Books came up with an ambitious plan: They would do a series of three important novels set in the "lost years" between the end of the five-year mission and the first *Star Trek* film. It was thought that, with a little tweaking, *A Flag Full of Stars* would work as the second book of this new Lost Years series.

However, after work on the books was well under way, Gene Roddenberry suddenly let it be known that he no longer wanted the "lost years" to be written about at all. To this day, no one really knows why he changed his mind.

However, Roddenberry's objections were more than enough to derail the Lost Years series. The first two books were so far along that they would be published anyway, but they

A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version
BY BRAD FERGUSON

would have to be drastically revised. The new rules and requirements were a moving target, almost impossible to hit squarely.

I delivered the manuscript of *A Flag Full of Stars* — substantially the book you see here — to Pocket Books on March 31, 1989. That wasn't the end of it, though, because there then followed a raft of revisions.

I revised *A Flag Full of Stars* from heel to toe fully four times between April 1989 and August 1990 — and, in the end, it was not enough. Pocket was disappointed at my fifth and final version of the novel and told me that *A Flag Full of Stars* had been turned over to another writer, J.M. Dillard, who'd written the first book in the Lost Years series.

As disappointing as that fourth revision may have been, what came back was worse: The rewritten *A Flag Full of Stars* was bland, badly handled and poorly crafted, but that rewrite is what was published under my name. I was stuck with it — until now. I am glad to have had the chance to correct the record at long last.

Five years have passed since the rewritten *A Flag Full of Stars* was published, and much has

happened. Roddenberry died in 1991. The third installment of the Lost Years series has since been published — and so has a fourth! As for me, I happily returned to the fold to write a well-received *Star Trek* novel, *The Last Stand*, which Pocket published in August 1995. This time, working with Pocket was a trouble-free and altogether pleasant experience, which is exactly the way we all wanted it to be, and the way Pocket had wanted it to be all along.

I hope you enjoyed *A Flag Full of Stars: The Original Version*.



Brad Ferguson
March 14, 1996

Star Trek is a registered trademark of Paramount Pictures.

The officially published version of *A Flag Full of Stars*
is Copyright © 1991 by Paramount Pictures.

All rights reserved.

For Ed Sentner