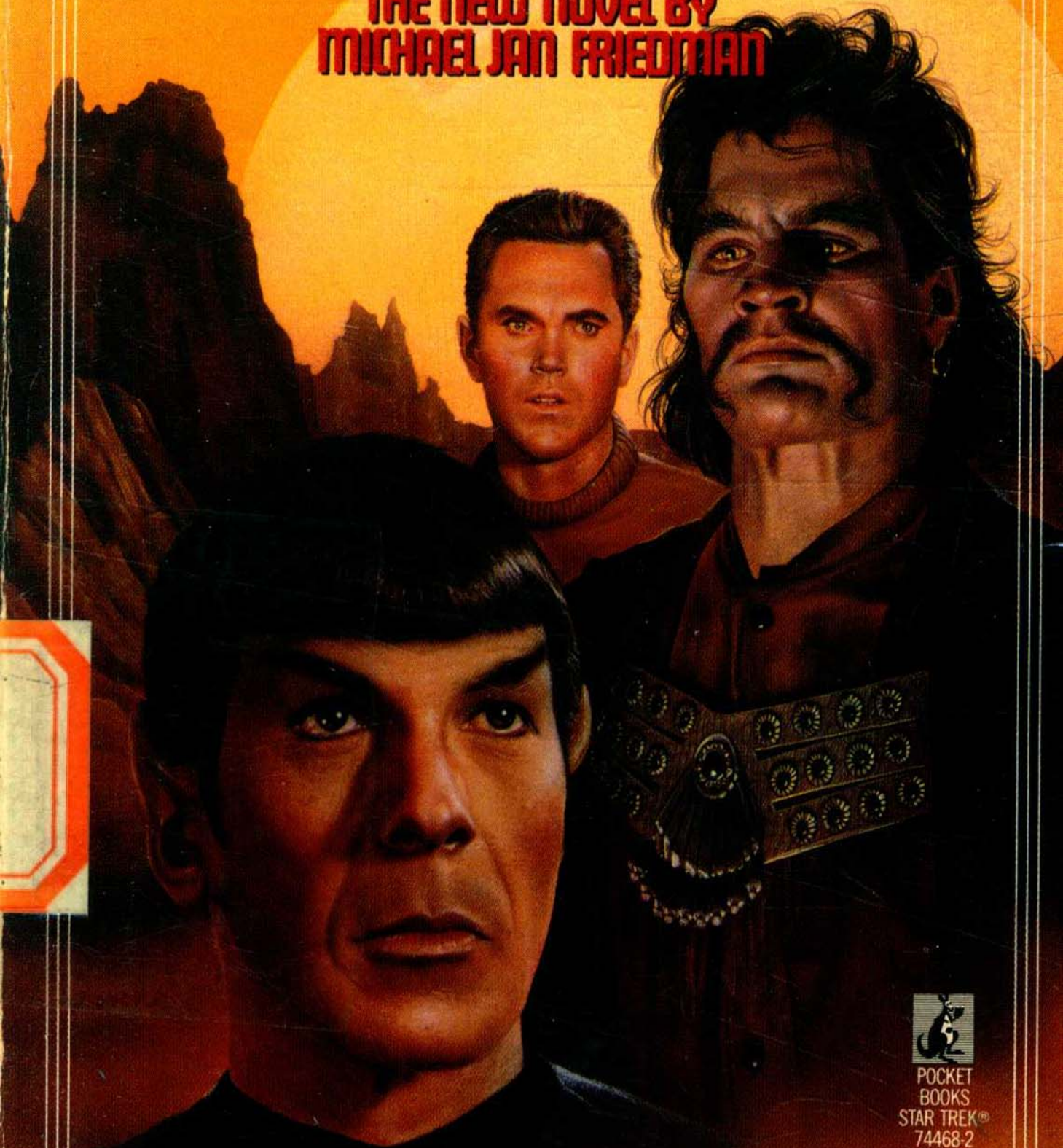


SPOCK FACES A DEADLY FOE FROM THE PAST!

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## SPOCK WAS IN THE GRIP OF SOME TERRIBLE CONVULSION . . .

He looked flushed—feverish—his eyes wide. And he was breathing much too quickly, as evidenced by the rapid rise and fall of his chest. The captain had expected some fractured ribs, maybe internal bleeding. But not *this*.

“Bones,” Kirk breathed. “What’s *happening* to him?”

McCoy scowled. “Something’s gotten into his bloodstream—some kind of poison I can’t identify. It’s accelerating Spock’s vital processes.”

Abruptly, the captain flashed back to the sight of the creature’s tentacle brushing Spock’s shoulder. He cursed, drawing McCoy’s attention. “Bones, I saw the thing touch him with one of its tentacles . . . *there . . .*” He pointed to the juncture of Spock’s neck and his shoulder.

Pulling the material of the first officer’s tunic aside, McCoy exposed three tiny puncture marks, still green with clotting blood. “Damn,” he said. “Jim, I’ve got to get him up to sickbay . . .”

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### **Historian's Note**

This story begins on Stardate 5258.7, which would place it approximately four-fifths of the way through the starship *Enterprise's* original five-year mission.

## Prologue

ON THE MERKAAN interstellar ship *Clodiaan*, Acquisitor Hamesaad Dreen considered his reflection in the gilt-edged, freeform mirror that hung on his anteroom wall. Try as he might, he could not make himself believe that the image before him was that of the young stalwart who had commanded the *Clodiaan* ten years before.

*Ten years.*

His eyes, once dark and unflinching, had sunk into the striated flesh around them like large, vicious insects taking shelter in their nests. His cheekbones, at one time his best feature, had lost their definition; the skin around them sagged, flowing into the beginning of jowls at his jawline. And his mane of black hair, in which he used to take such pride, had thinned and lost its luster.

*Ten years.*

Dreen cursed and lifted his goblet to his lips. The tawny Maratekkan brandy—actually better than the overrated Saurian variety—was every bit as chilled as he liked it. But it didn't begin to wash away the bitter taste in his mouth—or cool the heat that climbed into

his cheeks as he thought about the time that had been stolen from him.

If all had gone well, he might have *owned* the *Clodiaan* by now—and a few more like her. He might have been a frequent visitor to the potentate's court, like Gareed Welt and that fat fool Luarkh. He might have been a state *hero*.

Instead, he'd spent a decade redeeming himself, proving he was worthy of leading an expedition again. Ferrying booty from one manor moon to another—or if not booty, then some lord's snotnosed broodlings off to see their aunt on the homeworld. Finally cajoling his way back onto a privateer, where he had to play the subordinate to one pompous, self-important fop after another until the owner conceded he was capable of his own command. And even then, he'd been allowed to pursue few real opportunities—mostly half-empty Dardathian cargo ships and creaking Confaari freighters.

And all through that agonizing time, the memory of his undoing had irritated him as a grain of sand might irritate a Tellarite bloodworm and churned up his digestive juices until they literally ate away at his insides. The result? A couple of years ago, the doctors had been forced to replace his stomach cavity with a prosthesis.

Since the operation, the physical pain had gone away, even to the point where he could indulge his taste in liquor again. But the mental anguish hadn't diminished a single iota.

*Ten years.*

Dreen looked at the mirror again over the rim of his goblet. He considered the scowling, somewhat less-than-dashing figure he saw there. Another man in the same circumstances might have counted himself lucky. After all, he had salvaged his career. He had regained what was rightfully his—command of an acquisition triad, and one of the very finest triads at that. He had beaten the odds.

## LEGACY

But it wasn't enough. It didn't make up for his humiliation, his suffering. It didn't come close to what might have been.

There was only one balm that would soothe his pain: revenge on those who had disgraced him. Not only their deaths, but their complete and utter mortification. Of course, he harbored no illusions about his chances of finding them, much less exacting his retribution.

The Federation was immense. And starships seldom stayed in the same sector for very long.

The acquirer wondered what had become of the hated ones. Had their lives been happy? Had they prospered from his defeat? The very thought made his heart beat faster with rage.

And then a worse possibility occurred to him—that they might not even remember. That if he stood eye to eye with them, they might not even know who he was.

*Hamesaad who? It's been so long, it's hard to recall.*

His fury boiling to the surface, Dreen rose and hurled his goblet at the mirror. Instantly, his reflected image exploded, littering the carpeting with a swarm of prismatic shards.

The brandy splattered over the wall. The goblet bounced once and came to rest among the shards.

A moment later, his *mesirii*—a matched white pair, rare even on the homeworld—slunk into the ante-room from their place in his sleeping quarters, their tiny earflaps erect. Naturally, they'd heard the sound; the acuteness of *mesirii* senses was legendary. There was both caution and curiosity in the way they held their lean, powerful bodies—muscles bunched at the shoulders and the haunches, as if ready to spring—in the way their long black tongues snapped in and out past ridges of sharp fangs and in the cast of their protuberant golden eyes. Without question, they knew something was amiss.

Dreen stared at them and at the ruin he'd created,

shocked by the intensity of his own emotions. Then he swore under his breath.

The mirror would have fetched a tidy sum from some manor lord. Now it was junk. Nor did the symbolism elude him.

He snorted. At least he wouldn't have to be reminded of his age anymore—and his loss. Falling back into his chair, he reached out and pressed the communications plate.

A moment later, his personal servant poked his head into the room. His eyes were drawn to the gleam of broken mirror-glass on the floor—to the goblet, and to the dark spot which was slowly spreading down the wall. Looking past the beasts, he considered the master they had in common.

“Is everything all right, Acquisitor?”

“Obviously not. My mirror has fallen and broken. See to it that the damned thing's cleaned up.”

The servant bowed as he withdrew. “Yes, Acquisitor.”

The sun was hot on his naked back. Raising his head to see over the forearm that was cradling it, he peered at the woman lying next to him on the beach blanket.

Her eyes, the color of the ocean, were open. She was looking at him—and had been for some time, probably. She was smiling.

But then, that was nothing new. She smiled a lot. So, come to think of it, did he.

“Don't tell me,” she said, speaking over the rush of surf against the distant shoreline. “Your back hurts.”

He nodded. “Do you think you could douse me again with that lotion?”

Getting to her knees with uncommon grace, Vina reached for the brown plastic container of sunscreen. The late afternoon light caressed her hair, touching off sparks of pale gold as she tossed it back over one firm brown shoulder.

## LEGACY

“You know,” she said, pouring some of the lotion into a cupped hand, “you don’t have to burn.”

“Don’t I?” he asked. “I thought our friends wanted to experience the whole picture.” There was a sprinkling of sand on the blanket, having been deposited by the wind. He brushed it off.

“They do,” she replied. “But not if it causes us discomfort.” Popping the container top back into place with her thumb, she let the lotion slide out of her other hand, onto his back.

It felt like ice-water, which was to say it felt great. He sighed.

“Anyway,” Vina told him, “I’m onto you, Christopher Pike. You invite these sunburns—just to get me to rub this stuff into your back.”

He chuckled. “Interesting theory.”

As Vina worked the sunscreen into his skin with slender, supple fingers, Pike considered the beach house she’d conjured up—a wooden affair, rising against the azure sky on a set of rather ungainly-looking poles. The poles, Vina had informed him, were a protection against storm-driven tides—or so her aunt had told her when she’d visited this place as a little girl.

It was funny how he’d stopped trying to find flaws in the Keeper’s illusions—stopped questioning the benign turn of events that had landed him on Talos IV, the one place in the universe where he could find happiness.

Somewhere, in some other reality, he was a scarred hulk of an ex-starship captain, dependent on a machine to do the work of his crippled organs. And Vina, the survivor of a crash landing, wasn’t in much better shape herself. But in *this* reality, in this world of their own choosing, they were young, whole—alive. They had all two people could ask for.

“Honestly,” his companion said, “it’s not as if you need to *trick* me into massaging you.” Suddenly, her face was pressed against his. She smelled like the

beach blossoms they'd found earlier up by the dunes —sweet and fresh and vigorously alive. "All you have to do," Vina whispered, "is *ask*."

Rolling over, the heat in his back forgotten, Pike drew her to him. Running his fingers through her hair, he kissed her.

Maybe it wasn't a real kiss, but it certainly felt like the genuine article. And that was good enough.

Hell, it was more than good enough.

## Chapter One

MCCOY FROWNED, giving new emphasis to the worry lines in his face. He looked up at the captain, his blue eyes full of pathos. "It's dead, Jim."

Kirk's first inclination was to laugh. But when he saw the look on the doctor's face, he decided against it. "Bones," he said, keeping his voice down so not everyone in the rec room would hear him, "it's just a marrae-marrae plant. It's not supposed to live forever."

No question about it: the Balphasian houseplant McCoy called *Lulu* had seen better days. Its leaves, normally a lusty scarlet in color, had faded, shriveled, and gone brittle.

McCoy held the sorry-looking specimen up to the light. He shook his head in that doctorly way he had. "I know that. It's just that I've had it for so long, I sort of expected it to be around until Doomsday." He sighed. "Besides, it's practically a family heirloom. It's been a McCoy now for—"

"Two and a half years?" the captain estimated. "Including the time your daughter had it?"

The doctor snorted. "Longer. Nearly three."



Ruefully, Kirk glanced at the game of Chinese checkers he'd set up. The original idea had been for him and his chief medical officer to engage in a quick contest—at least, until Spock completed his preparations for their survey of the planet below. And since Chinese checkers were more McCoy's speed than three-dimensional chess, that's the diversion Kirk had agreed to.

But when Bones had entered the rec room with his marrae-marrae cradled in his arms, the captain sensed their game was in jeopardy. It appeared now that his instincts were on the money.

McCoy must have noticed Kirk's glance, because he suddenly looked contrite. "Sorry. We came here to play a game, didn't we?" He looked at Lulu. "Just excuse me for a second, will you?"

Getting up from his seat, the doctor crossed the rec room and deposited the deceased plant in the waste disposal unit. When he returned to the table, his mood had lifted a little—but *just* a little.

"All right," McCoy said, "let's play."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why? Don't I *look* sure?"

"To be honest," Kirk observed, "you look like a pallbearer."

The doctor grunted and sat back in his seat. "It's not so much that the damned thing died on me," he explained, unable to keep an ironic quirk out of his voice, "it's that I never got a chance to say goodbye."

"You know," Kirk said, "I have a feeling you'll get over it. Maybe even get a new plant someday."

"No." McCoy looked the captain in the eye, maintaining a perfect deadpan. "There'll never be another marrae-marrae like Lulu."

"Captain Kirk?"

Recognizing Spock's voice, Jim looked up at the intercom grid. "Yes, Commander?"

"The survey team has been assembled. We are ready to beam down to Octavius Four."