

THE NEW CHAPTER 1 (Cont.) & CHAPTER 2 (Beg.)

By Neil V. Young

The pain.

The darkness.

Unable to move.

It was impossible to tell how long he lay there. Robert tried to breath, but every time he drew a deep breath he choked on sand and dust. Robert's head throbbed, and pain shot through his arms and legs. There was pressure, constricting him from all around him. He felt He would have looked around if he could have, but his neck was wedged against something cold and solid. Was he dreaming? What had happened?

He tried to move his arms, with little success. Were his hands there? Yes, and he could move his fingers. He still gripped the gun, but when he tugged at it, it didn't move much, either. Robert released the weapon and began feeling around him. Above his head was more cold stone. At least he thought it was above him. By his feet, he felt only constriction of dirt and metal beams.

There was a sudden shift in the rubble above, sending a shower of rock and conduit filler down to him. He gasped and choked as the pressure on his body began to lift. He could exhale, but breathing in brought only more dust and dirt into his lungs. Finally, a light shot into his face. Someone was digging him out.

"Over here!" the voice shouted.

The way up was clear. For the first time, he pushed with his legs, and they reluctantly obeyed. Several hands took hold of him and lifted him the rest of the way. The light was very intense, and he saw nothing but blurs and spots for what seemed an eternity. He felt the people carry him. When he tried to walk, his legs failed him as his rescuers carried him along. When his sight finally returned, he almost wished it hadn't.

Lycera City, his home, was devastated. Smoke still wafted up from a dozen places, black marks from energy weapons splattered across the wrecked facades of buildings and half-burned trees littered the walkways. It was all real. The invasion. The killing. He looked around, taking in the morbid scene.

"Lay down, son," a soothing voice told him. A Starfleet officer in a blue uniform poured over him with a tricorder. It was the first time he noticed the people with him. There were quite a few of them now gathered around him.

"A little scraped up, but he seems alright," The man in blue said to an older woman, a captain from the pips on her collar.

"Can you tell us your name, son?" The captain asked.

"Robert," he said after a long pause, staring straight out at the smoldering ruins in front of him. "My name is Robert."

"We got five dead Breen over here, Captain." Another man, in yellow, called from a position several feet away. "Looks like there was quite a firefight here. Just like at the town square."

"I got a couple of them," Robert said, some life returning to his face. He stared at the reporting officer and held up his scabbed hands. "I guess I must have."

"You?" The captain replied to his claim in disbelief.

The man in gold fished into the hole they pulled Robert from. He found the Breen gun Robert had used. He held it up in the sunlight. It was banged up pretty good.

"It may sound crazy," the man in gold said. "Several of the Breen were killed by their own weapons fire, we'll know when the lab matches it up against this weapon."

"Alright, do it," The captain ordered. She came back to Robert's side cautiously.

"Robert? My name is Captain Rossa. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"They came in last night," Robert's face stared into nothingness, talking more to himself than actually acknowledging any presence around him. "Strafing the town. Then they landed and started shooting everybody. They tried to loot the town, but I shot them. Then they chased me through the streets. I got more, but they just kept coming. There were so many of them."

"And there?" Lieutenant Commander Rossa pointed to the house where Robert was buried.

"I guess they shot the building down on me," Robert went on. Suddenly, he felt so alone. He knew his family had all been killed. The Starfleet officers did not say it, but he knew. Some things were just too horrific to speak of.

"Son, I know this is hard for you, but we need to know if there is anyone that may have escaped. Someone sent us the emergency signal." The woman had a caring, nurturing voice about her.

"I sent the signal," Robert replied.

"Son," the woman's face lit up with disbelief once again. "The comm center is on the other side of the settlement from here."

"I know," Robert reasserted. "I sent the signal. Look over there and you will find a blasted control panel, an old type II phasor, and two bodies. One of an attacker the other of my friend."

The landing party had indeed found those things at the comm center. When Rossa's ship, the USS Potemkin arrived at Lycera III

the Breen had left, they sent an away team. Could this boy have indeed done all the things he claimed he did?

"The signal was a priority one emergency, set on automatic." Robert rambled off the terms like he was a communications officer at the colony. "It cycled exactly five times before it was cut." He looked to her, his grimy face showing the ravages of the ordeal.

Another man, this one in a tall vulcan in a yellow uniform, came up to them. "We have checked the colony records," he said in a characteristically unemotional tone. "The Breen appear to have taken the industrial replicators and several communications modules. That seemed to be the goal of the raid."

Rossa merely nodded. This was not something she felt comfortable bringing up just now. "Thank you, Lieutenant," she said. "We'll be taking our young visitor to the nearest starbase."

"That's not where I need to go." Robert produced a small data pad from his pants and handed it to the captain.

The captain punched up the pad and cocked an eyebrow. "Mister Mitchell. This is a reservation on an Academy transport."

"Yes ma'am, I know. I was accepted into the Academy two days ago. That is where I need to go."

"Not just yet," Rossa said. "We will need to get you back for some help, first."

"But they need me for the next semester," Robert protested.

"I'll talk to the Academy Admissions Board, son," she said. "I think I can convince them to wait for a little while."

"Rossa to Potemkin," the woman said as she flipped her communicator open. "Three to beam up."

"No!" Robert stood up so suddenly the others thought another attack had started. "Jennifer! My girlfriend, Jennifer! She is alive! She is over in the parts shed. Look in Tool Bay Four! She is there!"

"Get to it," Captain Rossa told the Vulcan. She then stood up straight, bringing Robert with her.

"Hold still," she said. "Potemkin, make that two to beam up."

And with that, they dematerialized from the surface of Lycera III.

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Robert stood at the spot where his feet last stood on Lyceran soil, where he had beamed up twenty years ago. The wind howled again as another chilly blast cascaded over him. On the other side of this house, the Potemkin had buried them.

Ten rows of grave markers heading off into the distance. Robert walked down the rows, nodding to each marker as he went, as if to say 'hello' to them. Finally he came to his family. His mother and father, side-by-side at eternal rest. And Brian and Martin. Everyone was here, where they had been for the last twenty years.

"I would have returned sooner," he said to them as he panned the many markers. "I stayed away, hoping to put this place behind me. But I couldn't. This place was a part of me, is a part of me. I cannot deny that anymore. I returned to apologize for not facing up to my past. Every year I kept hoping I could escape my past, but no man can do that. I can no more deny our colony's fate than I could all the good times we shared here. You are all a part of my life. You will stay that way.

"I promise, to each of you, I will return again. I know this may not make up for all I have failed to do over the years, but it is a token of my feelings nonetheless."

He tapped his communicator badge and instantly a dozen roses materialized on each of the graves, the first tribute to be given at this site in many, many years.

"Alert time eleven hundred hours." An electronic voice announced over his pin. Robert knew he had to leave.

"Mitchell to Runabout Nile," he replied. "Energize."

## Chapter 2

He admired the woman.

She gave so much of herself to Starfleet, brought about long lasting peace for many years to what would otherwise have been very messy situations. Despite these accomplishments, her family was known for the tragedies that accompanied the Rossa name. The veteran admiral had seen the deaths of her husband, both sons and daughters-in-law during her life. A heavy price Robert could relate to. Yet through it all, the woman brushed off the retirement to which she was entitled to pursue her career with a vigor and intensity that would make an officer half her age green with envy. Robert wished she wasn't so enthusiastic just now, however.

Admiral Rossa raised her glass of Saurian Brandy in Robert's direction. "I now call your attention to the man who's rousing speech to the Vrel Assembly not only kept them out of the War, but also kept them from siding with the Dominion, Commander Robert Aaron Mitchell!"



The officers and noncoms gathered around the buffet table began clapping, though Robert was sure in was an attempt to impress the Admiral. A few of them did get carried away enough to shout 'speech,' 'speech.' This was something the dear Admiral was all too eager to exploit.

"Thank you," Robert said almost sarcastically. "We scored one for the good guys today. No need to subject the rest of you to the pain of my voice any longer than necessary."

Despite the joking catcalls and boos, the small gathering subsided and went back to their conversations. Robert for his part was just grateful to be out of the spotlight, figuratively on the ship and literally on the Vrel homeworld. He knew the idea wasn't to embarrass him. Robert could do without all the fanfare. No, what the dear Admiral intended was to do her small part to raise morale. After all she'd been through, she had gotten quite good at it.

Ever since the war had begun six months prior, the Federation-Klingon alliance had suffered defeat after humiliating defeat at the hands of the Dominion. Every morning meant more casualty reports, more death, and more scarred ships lined up for repair or scrap. Defeat seemed everywhere, even on this small starship far from the lines of battle.

"I wish we could take her on as a counselor," The tall man, Cal, said to Robert, tossing his head in the direction of the admiral.

He had sandy blonde hair and steel blue eyes. Like Robert, he held the rank of commander.

Cal Vrizi was about as hard working an officer as Robert had ever met, even in their academy days when they roomed together. "She's done more for this ship in a few days than I've been able to do since this damn war started."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Robert said calmly, but not entirely without compassion. "Admiral Rossa's been at this a lot longer than either of us."

Cal finished off his Saurian Brandy with one gulp, something of a holdover from his academy days. "Yeah," he muttered as he wiped his lips. "That's why she's an admiral and you and I haven't even made captain yet," Cal laughed as he stared out the observation window, watching the stars sail by at warp. "I think that's the first victory this ship has had in a long time. You should be proud of yourself, Rob."

Robert grunted and tilted his head. "Proud? All I did was research the Vrel culture and find out how to act. Once it became apparent they admired stoicism in the face of debate it was easy to look good against an emotional Vorta ambassador."

"A lot of officers would have missed that," Cal corrected him. "Now who's being too hard on himself? How many worlds have you swayed

from allying with the Dominion? Seven? There's something to be said for that!"

Robert set his glass down on the sill. Both men now faced away from the gathering. "I don't doubt what I've been doing here has been valuable. It's just not where I want to be. Every day I hear about battles and wounded, casualties coming in while I sit in relative luxury playing up to small planets and putting out political brush fires."

"I'd switch places with you in a heartbeat," Cal said.

"You?" Robert looked surprised. "Remember in the Academy? We used to bet who would have his first command? Looks like you won!"

Cal shrugged and tossed his arms about, as if mockingly showing the ship to his peer. "This isn't a command, Rob. This is a packet ship. One of those ships that's bigger than a runabout but small enough to be kept out of military operations."

"Yes, but my point is you're out here," Robert looked directly at the stars, those tiny white lights blurring past as the ship sped on its way. "Closer to the action than I am."

"Oh right," Cal got sarcastic, the way he always did when the two of them argued. "I got a tiny ship with a crew compliment of 35, most of them fresh out of the Academy."

Cal looked across the room. The young crew of the LeMay chatted and laughed. "They're well trained, don't get me wrong," Cal said

after a pause. "But they're green. All the more seasoned ones were transferred to combat assignments long ago. And I just don't feel like I'm pulling my weight with Starfleet."

"Where I'd like to be too," Robert said. "I could do some good out here, Cal, I know I could."

Cal gave his old roommate a supportive swat on the shoulder. "I know," he said. "I keep forgetting your career has been — how do I say this respectfully — unduly influenced?"

Unduly influenced. That was one way to put it, Robert thought. Until a few years ago Robert never really thought much about politics in Starfleet. What he got a lot of was combat, almost from the beginning. He'd seen action against the Tzenkethi just a year after his Academy graduation, against the Cardassians as a junior officer aboard the U.S.S. Indianapolis and even the Borg at Wolf 359.

It was after Wolf 359 Robert found himself decorated for bravery, promoted to Lieutenant Commander and placed in Starfleet Intelligence. Less than a year later he was patrolling the Federation-Cardassian border in the intelligence vessel U.S.S. Elberon. The Elberon was perhaps no bigger than the LeMay and disguised as an old Type R freighter, but its missions were anything but cargo runs.

In his three years aboard that ship, he went undercover to break up smuggling rings that dealt in everything from Romulan Ale to Rigellian phaser rifles, intercepted Orion blockade runners, chased pirates through asteroid clusters, ran afoul of the Orion Syndicate and learned every trick of the trade while he did it. Robert liked his new job a lot. It gave him the chance to play secret agent in real life. The ship's captain, a Commander by the name of T'elek proved to be as detached and logical as any Vulcan, but as a senior officer he earned the respect of all aboard.

Problems arose when the Elberon's Vulcan Captain T'elek was replaced by Commander Prel Dhirkov. If Robert liked Thelek, he hated working with Dhirkov. Dhirkov was inexperienced, arrogant and lashed out whenever the crew offered differing viewpoints. It wasn't long before he and Robert began clashing on nearly everything.

Dhirkov had made his way up the ladder via the sponsorship of Admiral Dornhecker of Starfleet Intelligence. He was known widely as Dangerous Dornhecker, a man who delighted in terrifying everyone around him. A cruel bastard who wrecked careers and broke spirits just to satisfy his ego. Few officers gained his favor, and Dhirkov had it. Dhirkov had no command experience, but he was a protégé of Dornhecker's, and as such could get nearly anything he wanted. Such political maneuvering was more commonplace in intelligence work,

that shady side of Starfleet most officers wanted little enough to do with. A shady world in which Admiral Dornhecker was a big player.

Then came the Elberon Incident, something that changed Robert's career and nearly ended it for good. Eager to distinguish himself, Dhirkov led the Elberon on a chase after some Takaran hijackers. The Takaran vessel should have easily thought it outgunned the Elberon's façade as a freighter, yet it ran at the site of the intelligence vessel. Robert tried to protest, explaining that a rogue vessel like that would not simply run. Not from a supposed Type R freighter in any case. Dhirkov had already had too many disagreements with Robert and ordered him relieved of his duty.

A younger, less-capable helmsman took over under still more protest, until Dhirkov threatened the whole crew with mutiny charges. Like a knife to their collective back they pressed on under Dhirkov's heavy, eager hand.

The younger pilot kept pace with the Takaran ship, and their quarry led them into a large asteroid cluster. The ship's perimeter alarm went off when the sensors recognized several old style Cardassian mines that suddenly came to life. Dhirkov had lead them into a trap. The Elberon had simply become too good at its job, and a group of highly-organized Takarans decided it was time the vessel was retired - permanently.

Dhirkov panicked and ordered the ship to reverse course. And reverse it did, right into one of the mines. The aft shield was obliterated and several explosions rocked the vessel, sending shrapnel into many of the crew members. Dhirkov was the first down with a large piece of bulkhead into his neck. Robert took over the helm immediately and got the ship out of the death trap, though with the damage the Elberon sustained the awaiting Takaran raiders got in more than their share of phaser shots.

The ship limped along, barely able to make warp 5 and leaking warp plasma badly before their distress signal was picked up by a Federation starship.

That was just the beginning of the nightmare.

Dhirkov died from his wounds despite the ship's doctor's best attempts to save his him. This did not sit well with Admiral Dornhecker. The ship's recorder was severely mutilated in the confrontation, but Dhirkov's personal logs mentioned Robert and their many disagreements on numerous occasions. It didn't take long for Dornhecker to turn his sites on Robert.

A board of inquiry examined what exactly happened in what was becoming known as The Elberon Incident. It was obvious to all that simple inexperience had caused this. Inexperience and ego on the part of Dhirkov, and he and several other crewmen paid for that with their lives. But Dhirkov was not going to be blamed. Dornhecker made sure

of that. No more would his protégé's name be smeared anymore than Dornhecker was going to risk looking bad for granting a command to an officer who never even served on a ship before.

No, someone had to take the blame, and Dornhecker made sure it was going to be Robert. He pressed and pressed, bringing all his resources to bear to make Robert the fall guy. It nearly worked too, but thanks to some last-minute resurrection of some of the ship's logs Robert was saved the worst of it. He was cleared of all but one charge, disobeying a superior officer for not pursuing the fleeing Takarian vessel. The Board of Inquiry did not at first find Robert guilty of anything, but Dornhecker kept up the pressure.

A reprimand appeared on Robert's permanent record. He was not to be dishonorably discharged or spend the rest of his days in some penal colony, but it pretty well tainted his career. His real crime was making an Admiral look bad. Oh, it was never spoken out loud. Things like that rarely were. But Robert was blacklisted. No one would want him under his or her command. Not now.

Robert was headed for an assignment at a remote surplus depot to spend the rest of his operational career screening derelict rustbuckets when Admiral Rossa intervened. Here was one venerable Starfleet Admiral whose reputation and influence were more widely felt than even Dornhecker.



Dornhecker could do little about Rossa. He seemed to take some perverse pleasure in knowing he had pretty well ended any other career path for Robert, especially the one that might lead to his own command someday. Robert wore with pride the fact that he had beaten Dangerous Dornhecker. The young Commander couldn't help but smirk when he thought of that crotchety old soul-breaker reading reports about Robert Mitchell's success at the Alyron Talks, or even the one now with the Vrel. It was some comfort.

But inside he knew the man had taken away his greatest dream. He wanted so badly these past years to obtain a command assignment. First officer, helm, anything. He'd have even taken a drop in rank for the chance. At first he could tell himself he was doing a lot of good for the Federation, and he was, but always the desire to be out among the stars lingered. When the disputes with the Klingons started it was all he could do to fight the nagging questions of where he'd be and what he'd be doing if only he had a shipboard assignment. Now the Klingons were again allies, but a new and far more dangerous foe had emerged from the other side of the galaxy. Now it was war. No border disputes but a full-scale war that threatened to drag every major power in the Alpha Quadrant into it.

Now those questions nagged him with more intensity than he ever thought possible.

"Hey!" Cal's face loomed directly in front of Robert's. "Stop daydreaming, pal! We got a war to win!"

"Yeah," Robert relaxed as he snapped back into the here and now. "I'll talk the enemy to death if you take me there!"

"I think you've been hogging the toast of the party long enough, Cal," Admiral Rossa smiled as she patted the LeMay's commanding officer on the shoulder. It was her polite way of wanting to speak with Robert alone. Even men who had never met the woman before knew what that meant.

"It's hard to believe this man in front of me is the same animated, charismatic speaker that wooed the Vrel Assembly," she said to Robert. Her tone was simple — Talk to me.

"Being out here," Robert said. "I almost forgot how much I missed it." Rossa's stern face was all the response he got. "I know," Robert went on. "It's just the morning casualty report. And the report before that," he paused. "And the report before that!"

"And you think if you were out here, on the front line, you'd be able to save everyone, right?" Rossa's tone held a bit of truth. It always did. "No one could do that, even you. Though I have no doubt you'd try!"

"We might not be on the front lines, but we are making a difference." The Admiral patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"We are making a difference here," Rossa repeated as she walked away, not even looking back at the young commander. That was the end of that, he knew.

"Okay," Robert said to himself. "Enough of this self-pity I suppose."

Robert got exactly three feet before the decks shook violently. It took nearly everyone in the rec room by surprise. Everyone but the Admiral, Robert and Cal. They remembered that jolt well. Someone was firing on them.

"Bridge," Cal shouted as he touched his badge. "What the Hell is going on?"

"We're under attack sir," a young, unsure voice replied. "We didn't see them! They came out of nowhere! I ..."

"Worry about the explanations later," Cal cut the young voice off. Now was not the time. "Go to red alert! Shields up! All hands to battle stations!"

Another blast shook the LeMay. This one was not as violent, reflecting the skill of the LeMay's bridge crew or the inaccuracy of the attacking forces. Robert feared it was the latter of the two.

"I think you could use a hand on the bridge," Robert said as he and his fellow commander bolted down the corridor.

"I always said I'd be your captain some day, Rob," Cal quipped. How he could find opportunity for humor right now was something Rob

did not get, but then again this was Cal, who found humor where others dared to tread.

"Command me, oh Captain my Captain," Robert said between breaths. Just keeping up with the man was a strain. As they exited the turbolift another jolt hit. This one brought a shower of sparks from the overhead panels.

The bridge faired worse, though. The small, cramped brain of the LeMay was bathed in smoke. Young crewmen rushed to flaring panels with extinguishers. Inexperienced officers shouted to one another, often in unison, further adding to the confusion.

"Report!" Cal shouted to the almost cadet-aged officer who frantically worked the tactical station. With the same motion, Cal pointed Robert to the helm.

"Two Jem Hadar fighters," the tactical officer read from his panel. "Bearing 330 mark 15."

"How did they get this close without being seen?" One crewmen, a young human working the navigation station said, almost in protest to Robert as he sat down.

"Not at all uncommon from what I hear," Robert replied as he took the helm, getting a feel for the controls.

The viewscreen showed the attackers. Two purplish, beetle-like craft were fast approaching, firing their white polaron beams with alarming accuracy. Worst of all, they were gaining.

"Engineering," Call called out. "Can't we get any more power?"

"We're trying sir," Came the response from another young officer.

Problem was, being only a milk-runner, the LeMay was dead last on the list for engine overhauls at Starfleet, and it needed one pretty bad before the war. Now it was unlikely the ship would ever get one. What that meant was a sluggish acceleration that might just lead to their total destruction.

"We can't outrun them," Cal said. "Is there at least somewhere we can hide?"

"I'm reading the Yandala System bearing 126, mark 20," The navigator responded aloud to his instrument readings.

Robert called up the new system on his panel, then pivoted to face his academy mate-turned-captain. "We might not be able to outrun them, but I might be able to lose 'em in the rings of that seventh planet." He tossed his head at the viewscreen.