

The Kepler Incident

by Saddletramp1956

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To the woman who makes my heart soar among the stars...

Prologue

Friday, April 11, 2111, 0600 hrs CST

The thin, emaciated man stood before the large, well-stacked pile of wood upon which the dead body of his beloved Lisa lay. Of the 30 members of the expedition that made it to this planet, she was the 29th to go to her eternal destination, leaving him to face an uncertain future alone. He had laid her out as nicely as he could manage and had brushed out her hair tenderly in memory of the spirit that had made this mere flesh so beautiful.

His freshly brushed uniform hung loosely over his frame, but his medals, buttons, and brass shined brightly. His long graying hair, beard, and wrinkles belied his 37 years. He had given up shaving long ago but brushed out and trimmed his beard, wanting to look his best for this event. Lisa deserved far more, but that was all he had to offer.

With tears, he pulled the lighter from his pocket, activated it, and set the kindling ablaze. He watched as the flames licked over the dry timber and consumed Lisa's frail body.

"Goodbye, my love," he managed to force out of his tight, dry throat. "May you rest in peace in a much better place than... this. I'm so sorry I couldn't get us home. I tried as hard as any man could. I love you... More than you will ever know. Thank you for everything, my sweet, sweet Lisa. I suspect that I will be seeing you again... soon... if God and the crew forgive me."

With that, he dropped to his knees, his weak body wracked by sobs. He was alone now and had no pretensions or examples to set for anyone. More than once, he contemplated throwing himself on the funeral pyre to join his Lisa in the afterlife, but something held him back. It was almost as if her spirit was encouraging him to continue.

After several hours, the fire died as the wind blew her ashes over the field where the ashes of his other shipmates now rested. He looked at the scenery around him. It looked so beautiful, so idyllic. Lush green fruit trees lined a crystal clear stream teeming with fish. To the north was a large hill covered with more trees and bushes, all filled with tempting fruit.

But it was all a lie. It was so inviting, but almost all of it was deadly to humans, as he and his crew learned in the three Earth years they had been stranded here. By the time they realized the hidden danger, it was too late. He had ordered the survivors to stay away from the native fruit, which was so tasty and filling.

Most of them had obeyed, but besides being tasty, the local offerings were addictive, almost like a drug. Lisa tried hard to refrain but was unable to for very long. She suffered painfully for months, organ after organ failing due to the alien prions before her body finally shut down.

The red sun set as the last of the embers died out. Wiping his face, Captain James Stewart, Commanding Officer of the USS Kepler, a faster-than-light science vessel, turned and walked back to what was left of the damaged command module. He changed into an olive drab flight suit and walked to the bridge.

Thanks to the solar panels they deployed upon arrival, there was enough electricity to run most of the remaining serviceable systems. He turned his computer on and entered the daily log, noting the funeral of his counselor, soul mate, lover, and partner in life, Lisa Sharpe.

He shut the computer down when he finished to save battery power, then turned to what remained of the communication station. He tried everything he could imagine, think of, as he had so many times over the last three years. But nothing worked. Nothing ever worked.

Frustrated and angry, he stood up and kicked the console. Nothing happened, so he kicked it again, and again, and again, screaming his despair out at the station to work.

“WORK, you stupid piece of shit,” he yelled as he continued kicking. After one particularly nasty blow, he saw an indicator light blink – the only sign of life the console had shown since their arrival. Hopeful, he knelt before the console, his eyes focused on the panel.

“Please,” he begged. “Work for me. Just once.” Hot tears fell down his face as the console remained blank. Sobbing, he beat his head against the panel over and over. “I can’t stay here like this... All alone. So alone... Please...” Then he heard something behind him that instantly shot chills up his spine.

“You are never alone, James Stewart,” a familiar female voice whispered. Surprised and shocked, he whirled around to see who spoke to him.

“Wh... Who... are you?” he asked demanded in a shaky voice, seeing the ghostly outline of a female form.

“I am here for you, James Stewart,” the form replied soothingly. “As long as you remember, you will never be alone.”

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Chapter One

Captain's Log, Thursday, 17 March 2112, 1845 hrs CST

Having delivered Ambassador Kelly and his entourage to the Gingravik home planet where they

will ramp up the new U.S. Embassy, Enterprise has left Star Base Two in the Gingravik system and is on its way to 61 Virginis to catalog and map planets believed to be suitable for human habitation.

Although I am not usually very fond of diplomatic missions, I must admit that I found the ambassador quite personable, even friendly – something I had not anticipated. I was also glad to see my former First Officer, Jim Decker, and his Gingravik wife, Commander Mishita. It seems that Captain Decker has acclimated well to life among the Gingravik.

As always, the ship and crew are performing at top efficiency, and we are all anxious to continue going “where no one has gone before.”

End of log entry.

William Jones, Captain, Commanding Officer, USS Enterprise

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I closed out the log entry application, removed my flight suit, grabbed my acoustic guitar, and turned to see my lovely wife, Kyra.

“Would you care for some hot chocolate?” she asked. I loved Kyra’s hot chocolate, and even after 12 and a half years, I couldn’t get enough of it.

“I’d love some, sweetheart,” I told her with a smile. Just as she turned, however, my wrist communicator beeped. “Shit,” I mumbled. Knowing how often that beep usually preceded my leaving our quarters, Kyra stopped and patiently waited. I pressed the “incoming” button. “Jones,” I announced.

“Captain, I apologize for interrupting your evening, sir, but we have an incoming flash comm with Admiral Simmons,” my executive officer, Commander Elizabeth Travers, announced. There goes my evening, I thought.

“No problem, Number One,” I told her. “I’ll be there in a couple of minutes. Captain out.” I looked at my wife and shrugged my shoulders. “Sorry,” I told her.

“No problem, sweetheart. It comes with the territory,” Kyra said. I took her in my arms and gave her a much-deserved kiss. We were both used to this, but I still felt bad when it happened. “Now, you’d better get dressed and find out what the Admiral wants.”

“Yeah, I’d better,” I sighed, wondering what could cause the admiral to contact us on an emergency flash channel. I had known Alan Simmons for a long time, having served as his weapons officer aboard the USS Armstrong nearly 15 years earlier.

That was the mission that changed my life. I learned that my first wife, Tabitha, had been cheating on me with Bull Travers, the executive officer of the Armstrong. He and Tabitha had

conspired to kill me if I refused to go along with their cuckolding of me. Still, thanks to my knowledge of Grav Tac, a martial art form designed for low gravity, Bull was jettisoned into open space over Mars instead of me.

I filed for divorce from Tabitha and was cleared of wrongdoing by a board of inquiry. Afterward, I was sent to Advanced Spacecraft Operations School. I was assigned to the Enterprise at the end of my training, having been promoted to Lieutenant Commander.

Tabitha was stripped of her rank and imprisoned for conspiring with Bull. She was later released and joined a group of lesbian space pirates. I ran across her one last time after my return from Alpha Centauri. Kyra and I had just ended our honeymoon. We were on our way back to Enterprise when Tabitha and her cadre of pirates stopped the transport ship we were on and took us captive.

Her plan was to ram a tiny shuttle into Galileo Station, killing me, Kyra, and the more than two hundred souls aboard humanity's first interstellar ship. Tabitha and her pirates had somehow gotten a nuclear device and set it to detonate upon impact.

Again, my knowledge of Grav Tac saved us – along with the assistance of my new wife, Kyra. Tabitha's neck was broken in the struggle aboard that shuttle, but a dead-man switch Tabitha had arranged activated a countdown on the nuclear device. Kyra helped me strap Tabitha's dead body to the device. We jettisoned it and her into open space, where it detonated, causing a lot of excitement but no further damage.

The remaining pirates were defeated in a short but intense battle. Although not a trained Space Corps officer, Kyra acquitted herself well, defending our little craft from the pirates as I piloted the ship. All that went through my mind in the few minutes it took me to dress and return to the bridge.

"Captain on the bridge," the duty Marine announced when I stepped.

"As you were," I stated. I knew the Marine was only doing his job. I understood discipline was necessary, but I wanted the bridge crew to focus on their jobs and not jump to attention every time I walked onto the bridge. Elizabeth, who, by the way, was Bull's niece, approached me.

"The Admiral's comm is being routed to your ready room, sir," she told me.

"Alright. Why don't you join me?" I asked. Elizabeth turned the conn over to the operations officer on duty, then followed me to the ready room. I poured each a cup of coffee from my dispenser, somehow knowing it would come in handy. Then I sat behind my desk and waited for the beep indicating the connection had been made.

"Captain, Commander, it's good to see you," Alan said with a wry smile.

"Good to see you as well, sir," I replied.

“We don’t have much time as the comm window is quite short, so I’ll get right to it. Are you familiar with the USS Kepler, Captain?”

“I recall reading about it in a brief, sir. That was nearly four years ago if memory serves me right,” I replied. According to the briefs I had seen, the Kepler, a science and survey ship with about 50 people on board, had dropped off the grid without any warning or explanation.

“Yes, it was. As you know, we conducted a thorough search at the time, but found nothing. At 0300 this morning, we received a transponder signal. Star Fleet Communications confirmed the signal was from the Kepler,” Alan said.

“I take it they were able to pinpoint the source of the signal?” I asked.

“Yes, we were able to pin down the location of the signal’s source – give or take.”

“Give or take? That doesn’t sound too promising, Admiral,” I replied.

“I know, Bill. You have to understand we only received a single packet. Star Fleet Comm confirmed it was sent in April 2111, and it almost got overlooked. At any rate, here’s the closest location we could come up with.”

The screen split in two, and we could see a star map with the signal source highlighted with a flashing red dot. Alan continued his explanation: “As you can see, it’s in the vicinity of Wolf 437. I’d like you and Enterprise to investigate the matter, and recover what you can, if possible.”

“Do you think there might be survivors, Admiral?” Elizabeth asked. “After all this time?”

“I doubt it, but stranger things have happened, Commander. Still, there are at least 50 families here who deserve closure, one way or another. I’ve already sent the coordinates so you should have them by now. This is top priority, Bill. See to it,” Alan said.

“Yes, sir, we’ll get right on it,” I assured him.

“Good. I look forward to your report. Admiral Simmons out,” Alan said before the connection ended. I looked at Elizabeth and saw the stricken look on her face.

“Are you okay, Number One?” I asked her, concerned.

“I was assigned to a ship that was part of the search effort,” she said quietly. “If only we had gone out a half parsec further, we might have found them.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. There’s a lot of space in a half-parsec,” I told her. To be precise, 1.63 light years – and that covers an awful lot of space. “And there’s still no guarantee you would’ve found them without some kind of energy signature.”

“The logical part of me says you’re right, Captain. It still galls me to think we couldn’t go further

than we did,” Elizabeth replied.

“I don’t understand how we went all this time without a single transponder signal. I’m sure the comm folks will have an answer for that. How much longer do you plan to be on station?” As the Executive Officer, Elizabeth’s job was to coordinate the bridge crew’s schedule.

“At least another hour,” she replied.

“Good. Let’s get this show on the road.” I stood, Elizabeth followed, and we left the ready room. I stood next to my chair and pressed the inter-ship comm button. The duty officer wordlessly stood and took her position at the operations console.

“All hands, this is the Captain. Stand by to drop out of warp,” I announced as the other bridge officers looked at us, surprised. “Our orders have changed.” I looked at the Helmsman. “Drop us out of warp, helm.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the lieutenant answered. I steadied myself as the ship deftly slowed and dropped out of faster-than-light mode. Looking at my console, I saw Alan’s promised coordinates and forwarded them to the navigator.

“Navigator, plot a course to those coordinates. Let me know when that’s finished.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” the female lieutenant replied. I pressed the inter-ship comm button again and announced as the course was being plotted.

“Attention, all hands. Our orders have changed. We are no longer heading for 61 Virginis. We have been directed by Star Fleet Command to investigate what may be the last known location of the USS Kepler, lost approximately four years ago. We will re-enter warp speed as soon as the new course has been plotted. Stand by.” I pressed the button to close the connection and looked at the navigator.

“Best course plotted and laid in, Captain,” Lt. Carlyle said. “ETA at maximum speed 332 hours, 25 minutes.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” I replied. Nearly two weeks. I sat in my chair and motioned for Elizabeth to take her station. After strapping ourselves into our chairs, I activated the inter-ship comm again. “All hands, stand by for launch.” Deactivating the comm, I turned to the bridge officers and began the launch sequence. I have to admit, this is my favorite part of being the master and commander of this technological marvel.

“Status, Number One?” I asked Elizabeth.

“All stations report ready for launch, Captain,” she replied.

“Ops,” I called out.

“All systems go for launch,” the duty operations officer replied.

“Engineering!”

“All systems nominal and within normal parameters. Go for launch, Captain,” said the duty engineer.

“Weapons!”

“All systems calibrated and locked, sir. All weapons accounted for,” the Weapons Officer stated.

“Comm!”

“Communications five by five, Captain,” the duty Communications Officer replied.

“Navigation!”

“Course laid in and locked, Captain. ETA to Q-Point 15 minutes,” Lt. Carlyle replied, referring to the point where Enterprise would transition to light speed.

“Number One!”

“All personnel present and accounted for, Captain. All systems and stations report go for launch,” Elizabeth replied.

“Take us out, helm,” I commanded.

“Aye, aye, Captain,” the duty helmsman replied, pushing a series of levers forward. Enterprise smoothly moved forward, quickly gaining speed as the warp bubble formed.

“Engineering... status,” I stated after about five minutes.

“All systems nominal, warp bubble forming,” the engineer said.

“Set vector for Q-point,” I told the helm.

“Aye aye, sir,” the Helmsman replied. “Now at max-Q,” the lieutenant announced a few minutes later.

“Very well,” I said.

“ETA to Q-point one minute, sir,” Lt. Carlyle said.

“Thank you, Navigator,” I replied as I pressed the ship-wide comm button on my panel.

“All hands, this is the Captain. Stand by for light speed,” I announced.

“Warp bubble formed, light speed at your command, Captain,” the engineer announced.

“Thank you,” I replied. I saw the countdown timer on my console and waited for the right moment.

“10...9...8...7...”

“Stand by, helm.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“3...2...1...”

“Engage,” I commanded. The Helmsman pushed the drive levers forward, and we all felt the initial g-forces as the light engines engaged.