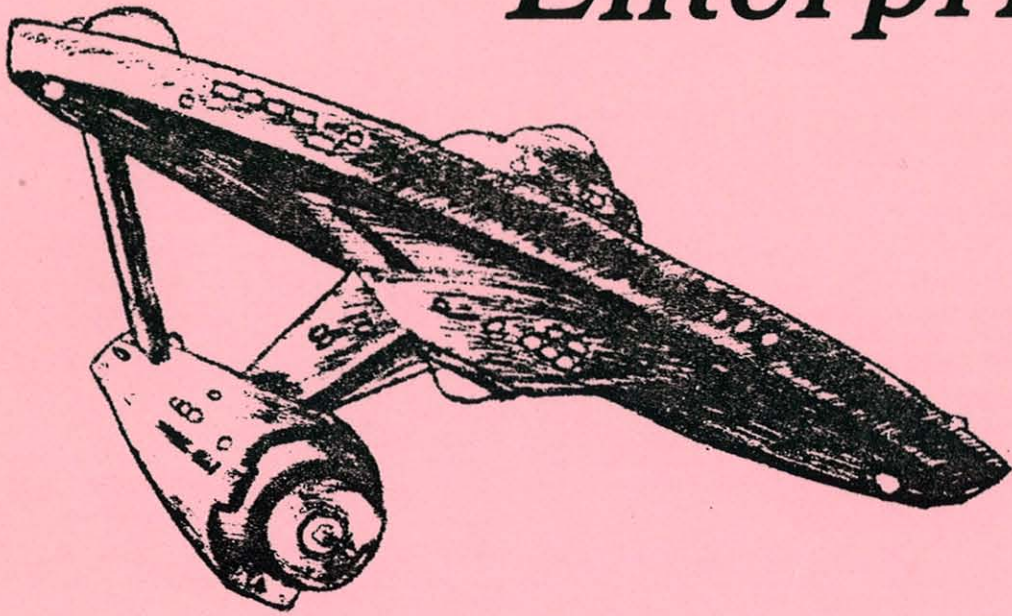


Scotpress

Enterprise



Incidents

5

a STAR TREK
fanzine

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS 5

Stories and Artwork by Lorraine Goodison

Dedicated to my mother, who never understood my fascination for pointed ears, but encouraged me just the same...

"... when the day is come, the Time of Renewal, the winds will cease, and there shall be stillness upon the world. Then, and only then, shall the gods walk among us. Our voices shall be stilled, but our minds shall speak wonders. There will be an Ending... and a Beginning..."

From the legends of the Nekendi.

A Scotpress publication.

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Scotpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

The first story in this zine was originally printed in LOG ENTRIES 33, several years ago now. It has been out of print for at least three years, possibly even four, but since the second story is loosely linked to it, it seemed a good idea to reprint it as there are people buying zines now who are new to fandom since it was first printed.

Both stories are McCoy-orientated, which - let's face it - is a new departure for ScoTpress; all three of us are Kirk/Spock relationship fans, and have a bias towards stories on that theme.

One point that struck me while I was typing this out - twice in the course of the zine, Lorraine uses the word 'outwith'. I had a little discussion on this word, which is in common usage in Scotland, with an English friend some time ago; she thought it was a portmanteau word I'd made up when I used it in a letter to her. So I checked the dictionary. It's listed all right, but as a preposition used in Scotland. So - if the word sounds strange to you - that's why. Whatever word is used outwith Scotland - to a Scot, it's a natural word to use!

We would like to take this opportunity of welcoming Gene Roddenberry and Majel Barrett to Galileo Con 1984, hope they enjoy themselves at the con, and look forward very much to seeing them again. We know that you will enjoy hearing them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive name followed by a long horizontal line underneath.

ECHOES OF PAST AND FUTURE

There was no dawn on the spaceship. No gradual building of light, no bird-song, no awakening of life in the green undergrowth of a perfect world. Day came abruptly, with the sudden surge of power as lights automatically switched on and the ship's computer bleeped the signal that meant it was time to rise. Humans woke and rose in silence, their eyes taking in the time on the chronometers. They dressed and ate, changing places with fellow shipmates in the midst of the bustle and chat that heralded the start of another 'day'.

Deep in the heart of the unmarked ship Dr. Leonard McCoy sensed the awakening and thought of a similar event taking place in another ship at this very moment. He could practically see James Kirk walking down the corridor towards the turbolift and arriving on the bridge only to be told that his Chief Medical Officer and First Officer were still missing. What would Jim be doing now? Still searching, or would he have given up? No, not Jim; but Starfleet Command might have ordered him away, and he could do nothing against that.

Brilliant white light suddenly flooded his dark prison, and McCoy saw the door open to admit a stocky, bearded man carrying a tray. McCoy eyed the two plates of brownish gruel and decided that he was definitely *not* hungry.

The man put down the tray and gestured towards the bed neighbouring McCoy's. "What's up with him?"

"He's unconscious, of course," the doctor replied with all the sarcasm he could muster. "So would you be if you'd been walloped with an iron bar."

The man snorted explosively, which McCoy supposed was a laugh of some sort. "Well, he'd better wake up soon. Our Captain doesn't like people who sleep while he's talking!"

As the cell door closed, McCoy cautiously dipped a finger into the gruel. He grimaced at the taste, and sighed. As a doctor, he knew that he should eat something, but as a man with normal tastes, he found the food the most unappetising he'd ever seen. He was just steeling himself to eat some of the mess when the occupant of the other bed stirred and groaned softly. McCoy dropped the spoon and hurried over.

"Spock, you awake? That was some knock on the head you got."

The Vulcan gingerly felt the back of his head and looked up at McCoy. "My assailant must have had a particularly heavy weapon," he said, wincing as his probing fingers found the point of contact.

"You could say that."

As Spock pushed himself up off the bed a wince of pain briefly crossed his face, a wince that had McCoy reaching out to help him. Spock firmly pushed him away, trying to suppress the sudden stabbing agony in his left shoulder.

"You're hurt!" McCoy protested, his medical instincts coming to the fore. "Here, let me... "

"I need no help, Doctor."

"You're in pain, dammit! At least let me see what's wrong!"

Resigning himself to the logic of the situation, Spock sat in silence while McCoy probed the swollen shoulder. As the Human examined the half Vulcan he sensed rather than felt the tensing of lean muscles as he touched Spock's arm. Was it true, then, about the Vulcan dislike of physical contact? Five months he'd been on the Enterprise, and he still knew very little about Spock. He was learning, though...

McCoy sat back as he finished the examination, a concerned frown creasing his forehead. "It's dislocated - pretty badly, too. I'll have to pull it back into place before it swells up much more. You ready for this?"

"Is there any reason I should not be, Doctor?" Spock enquired innocently. Two piercing blue eyes stared hard at him, then back at the shoulder. McCoy took a deep breath.

"Okay... This is gonna hurt a lot, so if you feel like... " He stopped short, remembering the nature of his patient. Catch Spock yelling...

The bone slipped into place more easily than he had expected, and throughout the painful operation Spock remained silent, much to McCoy's surprise. Most men would have passed out with the agony of the swollen and stretched tendons; but the Vulcan remained fully conscious, only swaying slightly when the bone finally clicked back into the socket.

McCoy watched as Spock looked round the small grey room. The Vulcan rose and began to examine the locked door, gingerly moving his arm as he did so.

"Where are we?"

"On board their ship," McCoy replied mournfully. "I guess they want us as hostages or something."

"The others?"

"Dead, as far as I know. I've only seen a few crewmembers since they brought us aboard. I gather we'll see the Captain in a while."

"Indeed... "

McCoy tried not to be irritated by Spock's manner any more than he could help. Of all the men to be prisoner on a pirate vessel with...

"Captain Kirk will be looking for us," he said brightly. Spock declined to answer as he carefully tasted the food left minutes before.

"Don't eat that," warned McCoy. "It'll burn your stomach out."

Spock's eyebrows rose in mild reproach. "I fail to see how that might come about, Doctor. The food, unappetising as it is, seems edible, and surely it is wiser to gain nourishment this way than... "

"Never mind. Forget I spoke... Remind me never to tell jokes, that's all."

"Was that a joke, Doctor?"

McCoy did a quick double take, unsure what exactly the Vulcan had meant by that. Spock sat down again rather suddenly, and in the silence that followed, McCoy remembered the sequence of events that had brought them here.

Two weeks earlier, in his office on the U.S.S. Enterprise, Captain Kirk had told him of orders from Starfleet to pick up a group of science and medical personnel and transport them to a remote planet recently colonised. There had been reports of a revolutionary breakthrough in medicine and science due to information found in the remains of the planet's once-prolific cities. The scientists were going there to investigate the claims.

"That's nice, Jim," McCoy had murmured. "Sounds interesting."

A wide grin spread across Kirk's face. "Good, because you're going too. So is Spock."

McCoy's face dropped a mile, and Kirk tried not to laugh at the expression of pure horror. The Doctor sat back heavily in his chair, his medical reports forgotten.

"Me go with that... that walking iceberg? Now wait a minute..."

"No 'buts', Bones. Starfleet Command wants you both there, and I'm afraid that's that!"

"For how long?"

"We pick the others up tomorrow, and we should arrive at the planet within forty eight hours. You'll be there for about two weeks while the Enterprise completes this routine mapping job, then we'll pick you up by shuttlecraft."

McCoy was aghast. Two weeks with Spock? At least here on the Enterprise he could avoid the Vulcan for a while, but there would be no chance of that where they were going. In desperation, he appealed to Kirk's better nature.

"Jim, you've got to get me out of this! Two weeks of *him* and I'll go mad!"

Kirk shook his head ruefully. "Sorry, those are the orders, Bones. Spock isn't that bad..."

McCoy smiled grimly as he remembered the conversation. How could they have foreseen the attack on the shuttle as it sped to its rendezvous with the Enterprise?

There had been no warning of the pirate ship's approach: no time to manoeuvre away even if they had had the speed. Within ten minutes the craft had been boarded and all resistance quashed. McCoy had been hustled into the renegade ship along with Spock, and there they had remained. As far as he knew, the shuttlecraft had been left floating in space, dead and useless, and the thought of this gave him a flicker of hope. At least Jim would know they were not dead - yet.

The cell door slid open again, and a group of Humans walked in. The tall negro at their head moved towards Spock, gesturing to the door with his weapon. "Out there, Vulcan! Move!"

Spock rose and calmly walked to the opening, the pirates surrounding him immediately. The blaster was shoved under McCoy's nose. "You, too!"

They were escorted at a quick trot through the twilight corridors of the aging ship, the men prodding them with their weapons if they slowed a fraction. An out-of-date elevator took them to their destination - the bridge of the ship. Once there, all the Humans except the negro and three

other men left silently. Spock and McCoy stood apprehensively as the negro went forward and spoke to a tall, thickset man seated in the command chair.

With typical interest, Spock surveyed the quiet, efficient bridge. The captain obviously ran a tight, disciplined ship - a rare occurrence in the back-biting, treacherous world of renegade pirates. He raised an eyebrow slightly as he noted the presence of some rather sophisticated weaponry - unusual in a ship of this age.

McCoy, on the other hand, was watching the seated captain with a certain amount of puzzlement. He was sure he recognised that figure - the set of the shoulders, the gesturing of the hands - but how could he?

He was still trying to dredge up memories of past acquaintances when the man rose and turned towards them. Black wavy hair fell lankly about a heavy, thick-jawed face. Startling blue eyes, as bright as McCoy's own, opened wide in recognition, and with a disbelieving laugh the pirate captain seized McCoy by the shoulders.

"Len McCoy! By all the suns - how?"

"Hello, Jerry," said McCoy softly, unsure what to say or do. He returned the enthusiastic greeting, and turned to Spock. "Spock, this is Jerry Villion - an old... friend of mine. When I was on Earth - "

"You were my greatest drinking partner!" Villion interrupted. "That is, until you left to join Starfleet and I went on to greater things!"

McCoy let his arms drop and looked at his old friend with troubled eyes. "Jerry - how did you get involved in all this? Last time I saw you... "

"I was vegetating, Len," grinned Villion. "You know me - never could stay still... You've met my second-in-command, Mericus?" He waved a hand towards the negro.

"Quite recently," Spock intoned. Villion ignored him as if he had never spoken, and this somehow troubled McCoy. His friend, the captain of this ship... What would happen now? What changes had Villion gone through since their first days together?"

"Jerry, this is Mr. Spock. He - "

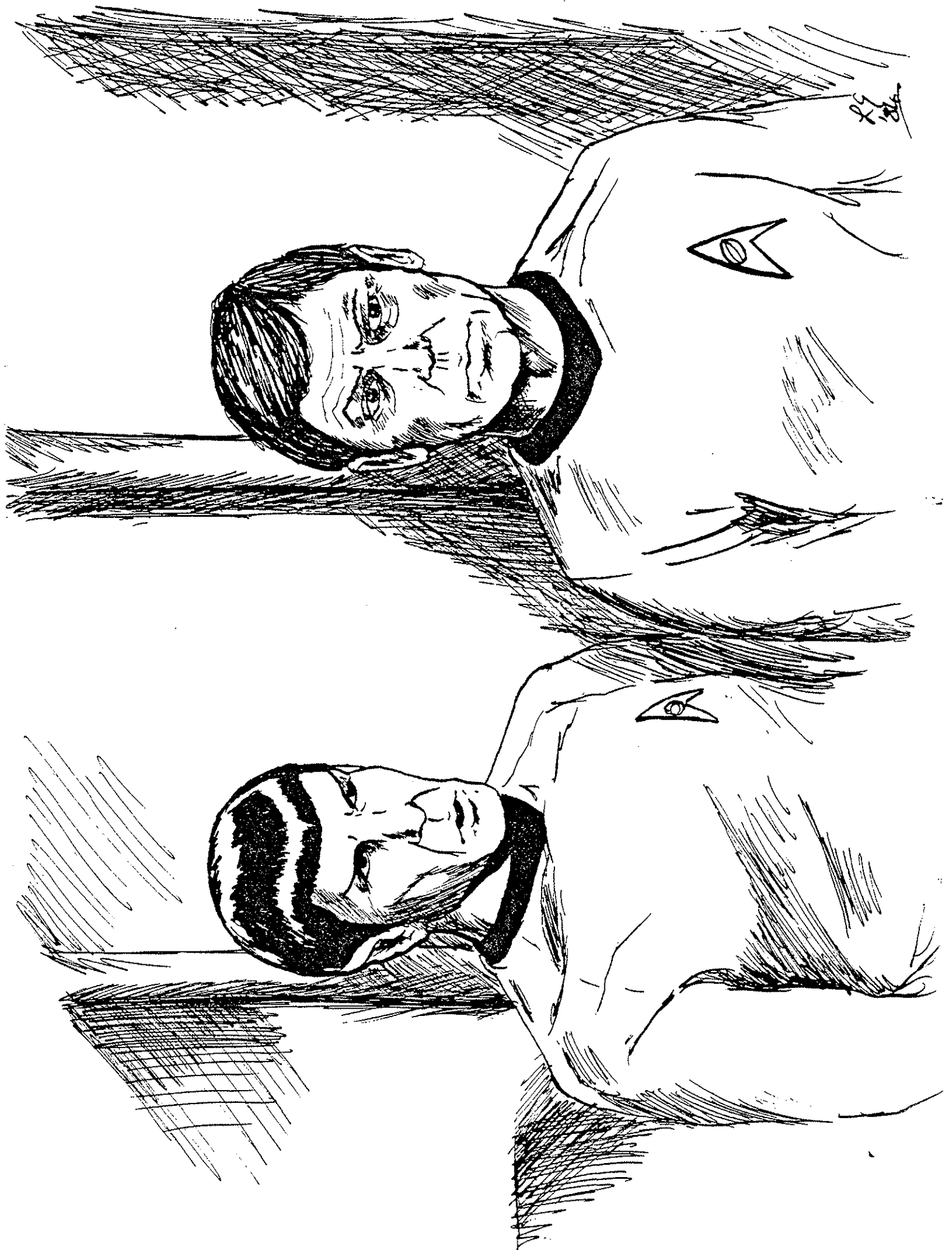
"I believe Mr. Villion already knows who I am, Doctor," Spock interrupted smoothly.

Villion's gaze rested briefly, contemptuously, on the Vulcan. "Yes, I know who you are, Commander. I know also how valuable you will be to my backers, even more valuable than Len here is going to be to me."

A curious foreboding filled McCoy. He looked from Villion to Spock and back again. "Jerry, what does *that* mean?"

The broad smile that was directed at McCoy did not reach Jerry Villion's eyes. He watched the doctor steadily, almost calculatingly. "Don't worry, Len. I'll explain it all later over a drink. We've got a lot to talk about, you and I."

James Kirk stared, unseeing, at the main viewing screen on the bridge of the Enterprise. His thoughts were elsewhere, centred on the discovery



only four hours ago of the torn shuttlecraft floating lifelessly in space. In the background of his mind he heard the quiet murmur of voices as the bridge crew checked data and correlated facts, but his eyes saw the battered vessel, the bodies of the three scientists, and worst of all, the empty seats where Spock and McCoy - or their remains - should have been.

The dead men had been brought aboard together with the shuttle's log, and then he had ordered the burned-out shuttle blown up lest it become a hazard at a later date. The log had given them few clues, for the pilot had had little chance to record what was happening, but Sulu had picked up a faint trace of energy from a ship's engines leading out into the desolate areas of unfrequented space. Grimly, Kirk had ordered an immediate search along the trail, but all too soon the particles of energy became too scattered for even the Enterprise's sensors to pick them up.

Now they sat and waited impatiently for the reply to Kirk's report. A chilling thought came to the Captain as he sat. The Klingon Neutral Zone was not so very far away... supposing a ship had come out and... Abruptly cutting off that line of thought, Kirk quietly cursed and tightened his grip on the arm of the chair. Where was that damned reply?

At the communications station, Lt. Uhura listened to the impersonal words and turned reluctantly to her Captain. "Captain Kirk, a..." She faltered as she realised that Kirk had not heard her, had not even registered the fact that she was speaking. "Captain? Sir, are you - "

"Yes, Lieutenant?" He swung round in his chair, but his face still had that preoccupied look. Uhura carried on regardless.

"A reply just came in from Starbase 14, sir... Commodore Bryce instructs you to return there with the bodies for further instructions, and - "

"What the... Has he no idea what's happened? What the hell - " Kirk broke off as he realised that he was almost shouting. He ignored the questioning looks and slammed a clenched fist into the arm of his chair. A tired sigh escaped his lips. "Acknowledge the message, Lieutenant. Mr. Sulu, plot a course for Starbase 14."

"Coordinates plotted, sir," said Sulu after a brief second. Kirk nodded.

"Good. Execute. Mr. Chekov, you have the con. I'll be in my quarters if you need me."

The journey to Starbase 14 was short in terms of time and distance, but centuries seemed to pass before Kirk could beam down to the planet and hurriedly go to Commodore Bryce's office. He needed very little guessing to know what Bryce was likely to say, but the implications of the Commodore's statement hit him hard nevertheless.

"You will leave the search for the missing officers, Captain Kirk. I've arranged for another ship to follow your leads."

"Sir, with all due consideration, I - "

"I know what you think, Captain, but a Starship is too valuable and important to use in a search for four men who may or may not be alive. Even if two of them are your men."

Kirk's jaw hardened in simmering anger. "We have not found their

bodies, Commodore."

Bryce sighed, shifting a pile of papers on his desk. These anxious, loyal young captains tired him out at times. I admire your dedication, Kirk," he murmured, ignoring the look that crossed Kirk's face. "However, orders are orders, and the Enterprise has more.. pressing matters to attend to."

"Such as, sir?"

Was there a touch of insolence in that question? Or merely concern for his men over-riding all other considerations? Bryce decided that it was the latter.

"There's been some activity around the Neutral Zone lately. Nothing alarming, but Starfleet Command wants a Starship in that area just in case. Show of strength, if you like. Let 'em know we're watching them."

"And the Enterprise is that ship."

"Exactly. Now, about replacements - "

Kirk's eyes widened. "Replacements?" he echoed.

Bryce barely glanced at him. "Yes, Captain. Replacements. You can't go into possibly hostile space without a Science Officer. They'll be temporary, of course, until Commander Spock and Dr. McCoy are traced... " He handed a thick file to Kirk, who declined to look at it. "As luck would have it, we have a suitable replacement for Mr. Spock here. Mr. De Salle. That's his file. You'll find him quite competent - he's served on the Excalibur, among others."

"I'm sure he'll be quite suitable, sir," Kirk said politely. "And the... replacement for Dr. McCoy?"

"That is a problem. There's a distinct shortage of suitable doctors in Starfleet at the moment. I'm afraid that means Dr. M'Benga will have to take over as Chief Medical Officer. If he does well, he may be permanently promoted to that position."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Commodore," Kirk murmured resolutely.

Bryce frowned deeply. "Don't deceive yourself, Kirk. The shuttle was attacked by a hostile force, and your men may be dead by now. You must accept that."

"I... accept the possibility. May I leave now?"

Bryce wearily straightened the papers once more. "Certainly, certainly, but remember what I told you - don't go off looking for vengeance." He paused, looking straight at Kirk for the first time. "De Salle is waiting outside. He's a good man, Kirk. He has a fine career ahead of him. Don't blame him."

Kirk turned to Bryce with genuine astonishment. "I blame no-one, sir. Least of all a man who has nothing to do with it. I try never to let my personal feelings affect my relationship with my crew. I'm sure Mr. De Salle will fit in just fine."

A tall, fresh-faced man with an air of authority about him stepped forward as Kirk left Bryce's office.

"Captain Kirk? I'm Joseph De Salle, Commander Spock's replacement."

The fair-haired Captain smiled and greeted De Salle cordially, but the new First Officer sensed a tenseness behind the friendly demeanour. The underlying concern for his friends' safety was obvious, and De Salle wondered just what his predecessor had been like. More than just a good officer, that was for sure.

"Your men may be dead..."

The words echoed in Kirk's thoughts as he walked with De Salle to the Transporter Lounge. Dead? Dead, when he was only just beginning to know them? McCoy - so cynical and brusque, sharp and witty... but the best friend a man could hope for. And Spock, that cold, silent Vulcan... He had sensed a loneliness in the alien, a loneliness similar to his own. He had tentatively reached out the hand of friendship, and so far the Vulcan had accepted it, though there had been little response.

Bitterness flooded his thoughts. If Bryce was right, if both were dead, then he would never have a chance to break down the iron wall that closed off Spock from his friendship. To be always alone. Somewhere inside him, a voice was crying in silent anguish...

Jerry Villion raised his glass and grinned at his old friend. "To old times, Len."

McCoy echoed the sentiment faintly, and sipped a little of the drink. He could not feel at ease with this man from his past. He'd always felt slightly wary of him before, but now...

"Where's Spock?" he asked.

Villion smiled and topped up his glass. "Where he belongs," he said. "Back in the cell. You know, Len, when I saw it was you, I just couldn't believe my eyes!"

"Me neither." McCoy's answer was as non-committal as he could make it. Sensing Villion's eyes on him, he smiled and downed the rest of his brandy. "How the hell did you get to be a pirate, Jerry?"

The Captain's eyes closed and he leaned back in his chair. "It's a long story, Len. Too long to tell now. I'll tell you when we've more time. Hey, you never told me how Sarah is. And what about that kid of yours - Joanna, wasn't it?"

"Uhuh. Sarah and me... we... uh... the marriage broke up... I don't see Joanna often - you know how it is."

Silence fell as the two men drank and thought of all that had happened since they parted, then McCoy abruptly broke the quiet.

"Do you do that often?"

"Do what?"

"The shuttlecraft. Attack them like that."

A wide grin spilt Villion's face. "Well, Len, that's my job! Of course if I'd known it was you on board... But in a way that's a blessing in disguise. That's what I want to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, oh." He poured out more brandy and raised his glass, a crafty smile on his face. "C'mon, drink to our partnership!"

McCoy left his glass where it was. "Partnership?"

"Sure. I have it all worked out. You see, the point is, we need a doctor on this ship. You know how men get injured in raids and so forth, and sometimes we can't get back to base in time. We need - I need - a doctor to treat the serious injuries. What do you say?"

McCoy stared at him in wide-eyed incredulity. It took him a while to find words, and Villion's expression hardened as he spoke.

"What do I say? Jerry, I was returning to my post on a Starship! I have a friend on that ship who is probably worried sick! I have my daughter on Earth, patients, responsibilities... and you ask me to give it up to join a shipload of pirates? It's impossible! I couldn't join you - "

"Why not? I'm your friend too," Villion snapped. He pushed the glass at McCoy. "Drink it."

"I'm not thirsty."

Villion slammed a fist on the table. "I need you, Len. I need a doctor, someone I can trust! This job is tailor-made for you. Starship, pirate ship, they're all the same in the end... "

"What about Spock?" interrupted the doctor quietly. "Where does he fit in?"

"He doesn't," said Villion firmly. "Forget him."

"I can't. I have a responsibility for him, too. Tell me, Jerry, why did you attack a small shuttlecraft? There can't be much on them. What were you after?"

"Men. Starfleet personnel. I meant to take all of you alive, but my men got a little... enthusiastic."

With every word Villion said, the sick feeling in McCoy's stomach grew, but he had to find out for sure. "Why Starfleet personnel?"

"Use your head. They're valuable. My backers pay me well for every one I can get."

"And who are your... backers?"

"Klingons."

Now that his suspicions were confirmed McCoy could only sit in stunned horror. His friend was a traitor to all he believed in; a trader in secrets, and in the sanity of the men who knew them. How many men had Jerry Villion calmly handed over to be subjected to the agonies of the mind-sifter and who knew what other tortures?

"I know what you're thinking," Villion said. "So look at it my way. What difference do a few bits of information make? Things change so

quickly around here that the knowledge is out of date before the Klingons get a chance to use it. Klingons, Federation... what's the difference? Both sides have their ways of finding out secrets. Me, I'm a middle-man, that's all."

McCoy turned a look of pure astonishment and anguish on him. "Have you any idea what you're doing? Those men - God knows what the Klingons do to them... How many have you given them? For pity's sake, Jerry - why?"

"Money, mainly. A safe base, weapons, protection, the usual things. Stop looking so horrified! It happens all the time. You'd say nothing if I hunted out Klingons... I'm a survivor, and I've found a way to keep me alive."

"By becoming a traitor to freedom!"

Villion smiled and shook his head, raising his eyes heavenwards. "You don't understand, as usual. Never mind, you will soon."

"I am *not* joining you."

"Yes you are," said the pirate firmly. "The Klingons will be perfectly happy with the Vulcan and the others I've captured, and they'll let you stay with me. It's not often they get a Starfleet Commander." He paused at the door, the half-mocking smile still on his face. "We reach the base in a short while, but you'll have to stay in a cell till then. I'll put you in one of your own... give you time to think. I do hope you make the right choice."

A kind of gloom had fallen over the ship. Nothing a man could put his finger on, but it was there all the same. A sense of... something missing.

During the short while Leonard McCoy had served aboard the Enterprise he had become something of a favourite personality, his forthright, down-to-earth manner making him popular among a crew starved of individual characters. He had made many friends, though only Scott and Kirk knew his background in any detail. Kirk knew they missed him, just as they missed Spock; through not, of course, in the same way.

None of the Humans - save Kirk - could bring themselves to actually *like* the Vulcan, but he had proved his worth in close action time after time, and most regarded him with a respect bordering on awe. Somehow the Enterprise just wasn't the same without stoic, dependable Spock at his station.

Joseph De Salle was deeply aware of this feeling as he reported to the bridge at the beginning of his shift. No-one had actually said anything; everyone, including the Captain, was going out of his way to make him welcome, but still the uneasy feeling of slight resentment persisted. On the Excalibur there had been much the same atmosphere at first - it was only natural - but here it was much stronger.

Maybe, he mused, it's because they think they are still alive. That conviction he could feel too, and as he sat down he remembered words someone had said to him long ago...

"One of these days, Joe, you'll be too perceptive for your own good!" Looked like this was going to be 'one of these days...'

Kirk finished his stint of duty and thankfully handed over command to

Mr. De Salle. All day a slight, nagging headache had thudded away at the back of his head, and now that he was off-duty a soft bed and sleep sounded very inviting. With a qualm of conscience he realised that he had no intention of asking M'Benga for something for the headache, though if McCoy had been in sickbay he would have been heading there at this very moment. He left the turbolift in a depressed mood, wondering at how much he missed his two senior officers. He entered his quarters in a daze, quietly longing for the silent company of Spock as they played a light game of chess.

Loneliness, silence, the solitude of command..

Gradually that very loneliness had been eased by the growing friendship of the two men Starfleet now considered dead. Now he was back where he had started, the Starship Captain; a detached figurehead who dared not relax the rigid standards he set himself. With growing dismay Kirk made his body move enough to change and lie down on the bed. God, he needed a sleep...

"Bridge to Captain Kirk! Bridge to Captain Kirk!"

The urgent bleeping and equally urgent voice of De Salle finally broke through the mist of sleep and galvanised Kirk into rolling over to answer his new First Officer.

"Kirk here. Anything wrong, Mr. De Salle?"

"Unsure as yet, Captain. A Klingon vessel has just crossed the Neutral Zone and is heading into Federation space. At present we're following at a discreet distance."

Kirk nodded in surprised approval. De Salle was as good as Bryce had said he was. At the same time he felt the satisfaction of confirmed suspicions. Now, if they could find out exactly what the Klingons were up to...

"Very good, Mr. De Salle. Continue following, out of sensor range. I want to know where they're headed - and why."

"Understood, sir."

Kirk did not speak the hope that sprang up in him at that moment. If the Klingons *had* attacked the shuttlecraft, then maybe - just *maybe* - there would be a chance to get Spock and McCoy back. A forlorn hope, but it was better than none at all.

McCoy stared at the bowed dark head with a mixture of relief and anger. Relief at the absence of wild accusation that might have come from a fellow Human, and anger at the calm, composed way the Vulcan had heard and accepted his news of Villion's plans for them. He waited for a response, and received none. With a feeling of utter helplessness he sat on the bed's edge and stared at his hands.

"I suppose you think I'll go over to his side to save my skin," he muttered after a long while.

"No, Doctor, I do not. On the contrary, I quite understand your

problem."

McCoy decided to feign ignorance of the very dilemma he knew Spock was meaning. He didn't fancy a logical, cold-blooded breakdown of his thoughts.

"What problems? Who's got problems?"

Spock looked up, one eyebrow raised. "Dr. McCoy, you never cease to astonish me with your persistent habit of denying something of which we are both aware." McCoy's mouth dropped open as the Vulcan continued. "However, that does not alter the fact that you have a difficult decision to make. Your dilemma is this; Villion plans to hand me - and nine others - to the Klingons, presumably for interrogation, then execution or slavery. He also wishes you to join him and thus avoid unnecessary pain and suffering. You are therefore torn between your loyalty to Starfleet and your ties with the past and your friendship. You do not wish to go against your friend, but you also do not feel you can let him continue his 'career'. I do not envy your position, Doctor."

McCoy grunted. "You have a logical answer worked out, I suppose."

"I do, although I do not think you will readily accept it."

"To hell with logic!"

Spock sighed and closed his eyes. "Logic can sometimes help with emotional decisions, Doctor," he murmured, but McCoy was not listening.

For over an hour they had been seated in a rough, bare room where the only entrance was a wooden trapdoor above their heads. Beside them in the room were the other two men from their party - kept separate till now - and seven others kidnapped by Villion over a long period of time. The men were silent, aware that soon they would be prisoners of the Klingons, and as such their lives were not worth living.

Above the dug-out lay the primitive village used by Villion as his base, and a better one would be hard to find. The small red planet lay at the very edge of Federation space, and before their transportation down Villion had informed them that it was a closed world, and thus ideal for him. What Starship would violate the Prime Directive in searching for pirates who might not be there? All modern installations were hidden underground, and to all intents and purposes this was an ordinary native village.

McCoy had to admit it was ideal, but it made him wonder at his friend all the more. Who could tell what effect these men would have on the primitive natives so far removed from the modern civilisation of the Federation?

Without a qualm of conscience, Villion had brushed off McCoy's question. "They'll learn something to their advantage," he had said.

"And the Klingons? Where do they fit in?" the doctor had asked.

"This was their idea. Think about it, Len. In a few days a ship will come to collect the prisoners. If you've made the wrong choice, then God help you, because I can't."

The wrong choice... When did a man ever have such a choice as this? One part of McCoy knew he could not stand by and watch ten other men be taken to their deaths, but what of the others Villion would capture in the future? If he stayed here, was there not a chance of breaking away at some

later date and warning Starfleet? He glanced over to where Spock was speaking to one of the scientists captured with them. Life, death, friendship... Where did duty begin - and where would it end?

"Klingon ship changing course, Captain. Veering off on bearing 461 mark 5."

"Follow suit, Mr. Chekov. Just don't let them see us, that's all."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk left his chair and walked over to where De Salle was studying star charts. "Any idea where they're headed yet?"

De Salle confirmed his conclusions through the scanner before replying to Kirk's query. "Well, sir, going by their course and the emptiness of this region of space, my bet is they're headed for the Armethius Delta System. There's a whole collection of planets and space debris there, but only one planet is habitable."

"Its name?"

"Marbenna Three. Class M, with a small primitive culture. It's also a closed world, Captain."

"The Klingons apparently don't think that... Carry on, Mr. De Salle. See what else you can find out about Marbenna Three."

A few minutes after Kirk had returned to his chair, Scott left his console and moved over to the Captain's side. "Captain, this ship may have nae connection wi' Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy's disappearance. The searchers have found nothing, an'... "

"And there's always hope, Scotty," finished Kirk. "I need to follow every clue, every trail, every hunch until I'm proved right or wrong. The trail we followed headed in this direction, didn't it? I have a very strong hunch both ships are connected. A very strong hunch."

Jerry Villion watched impatiently as the glittering pillars of light before him solidified into the shapes of the Klingon Commander and his two officers. As soon as they were safely 'whole' again he strode forward, an ingratiating smile on his lips.

"Commander Klonar. How gratifying to see you again."

The Klingon nodded tersely. He cared little for Humans, and this Human in particular irritated him beyond endurance.

"I regret I cannot say the same, Captain Villion," he said, ignoring the outstretched hand. "Your message said you had some merchandise. I trust this is so?"

"Ten men, Commander," smiled the Human. "One a Starfleet Commander."

"Only *ten*, Villion? Scarcely worth our trouble. You must try to do better."

"Too many disappearances will cause suspicion, you know that," growled Villion, dropping his ingratiating manner. "Starfleet's bound to suspect something if their men keep getting involved in attacks all the time."

"That is your problem, not mine!" snapped Klonar. "Where are they? We cannot wait here for too long."

Villion signalled Mericus and a group of armed men. "Bring them up."

Klonar watched silently as the men were roughly herded out of the cell to stand in a huddled, defiant group. He smiled briefly at the thought of the hours of interrogation each man would provide before he applied the mind-sifter and extracted the information anyway. He was pleased to see a Vulcan among the group. He had heard a great deal about their powers of suppressing pain, and he looked forward to testing some theories he had about these proud people. He turned to Villion with a look of cat-like satisfaction.

"Very promising, Villion. You are improving, even though you cannot count. There are eleven men, not ten. No matter... Payment will be in the usual manner. I'll order my ship to begin trans- "

"A moment, please, Commander," interrupted the pirate captain. "I wanted to speak to you about the eleventh man." He took the Klingon by the arm and led him a little way from the others. "Klonar, I've supplied you with a great many men in the past. A great many useful men, have I not?"

"Come to the point! I have little time for games!"

"Very well, I will. I want a favour. Not much, but I figure you can afford to be a little generous. I want one of them left here."

"Left? Why? You have all the men you need, Villion."

"He's a doctor, and also an old friend. I need a doctor for my ship - I want him."

Klonar disengaged his arm with a growl of distaste. "Then you can want, Villion. Every Starfleet man is handed over to me, those were the terms. If you wish to back out..."

"Of course not! I didn't mean that! All I want is one little favour - one man. He's been a good friend in the past, Klonar. Surely one doctor isn't all that important?"

"All of them are important to my superiors."

"Klonar... "

The Klingon rounded on him, his face displaying the contempt he felt for the Human. "I shall take all of them, Captain Villion, do you understand? I give no favours to such as you! If you wish to remain alive, you will forget your 'friend'."

"Commander!" One of the Klingon officers came hurrying up, a communicator in his hand. He saluted and relayed his urgent message. "Commander Klonar, our ship reports a Federation Starship heading towards this quadrant. Request immediate instructions."

With a roar of rage Klonar pushed Villion to the ground and marched towards the beam-up point. "Get the prisoners on board! Quickly!"

However, before the aliens could begin hustling the Starfleet men

away, Villion seized Klonar's shoulder and pulled him round. "Just a minute, Klingon! I've never asked anything of you, I've always delivered on time. I've never asked any questions. Well, now I'm asking. Leave McCoy here!"

A few yards away the object of the argument was watching with a mixture of hope and fear. A Starship - could it be Jim? If Jerry kept the Klingons talking, kept them on the planet's surface, he and Spock and the others might have a chance.

A nudge from Spock broke his attention on the argument. The Vulcan nodded silently towards Villion's men, who were also watching the two leaders with avid attention. So avid, in fact, that they were neglecting to keep a proper eye on the prisoners.

Swiftly, a hastily-prepared plan of action passed round the small group, and Spock waited until all the pirates were watching Villion and Klonar before yelling,

"NOW!"

Blessing the fact that in their arrogance the pirates had neglected to bind them, the eleven men leaped on their guards, seizing their weapons and quickly running to the shelter of a large hut behind them. Angrily, Villion called to his momentarily-paralysed men, ducking behind a wall as the Starfleet group opened fire. Klonar ran with his men to the beam-up point, breaking into atoms as chaos erupted on the planet's surface.

There was sporadic shooting for a while, then silence fell as both groups saved ammunition and sized up the situation. On the Starfleet side, Spock took advantage of the quiet to assess his fellow officers.

Most of the men were fairly young - the scientists excluded - and the other seven were junior officers ranging from lieutenants to a technician found by one of the pirates on a drinking spree during shore leave. As a Commander, Spock held the highest rank, and was thus in command. Realising this, McCoy turned to him with an air of confidence and asked what they were going to do.

"That should be obvious, Doctor," said Spock. "We wait."

Typical! thought McCoy. Aloud, he asked, "What for?"

"For the Captain of the Starship to deal with the Klingons and beam down here. Villion has a greater number of men than we, he knows this area, and he knows our numbers. Therefore it is logical to wait and fend off the pirates until help arrives."

McCoy started to ask what would happen if help *didn't* arrive, but one look at the technician's pale face closed his mouth for the moment. No point in panicking people needlessly...

Over at the other side of the village, Villion was studying the hut and making plans of his own. He turned to Mericus and made a motion with his hands. "You take some men and work your way round the back. Once you're in place, I'll start a diversion here - "

"I'd cancel that plan, if I were you."

Villion looked round to find a line of red-shirted men with phasers readied behind him, and a Starship Captain staring him in the eye. He made a movement towards his weapon, but was phasered unconscious before he could reach it.

Signalling to the security guards, Kirk cautiously walked out into the centre of the village, unsure just who was in the hut Villion had surrounded. He watched warily as the hut door opened, and gazed in astonishment as the Starfleet men hurried out. The two scientists greeted him with cries of relief, the younger officers standing to the side, but Kirk had eyes only for the two men he had missed so much in the last weeks. McCoy's grin was wider than Kirk's when he reached his Captain, and it grew even wider as Kirk shook his hands in amazed delight.

"Didn't think you'd see us again, did you?" the doctor teased.

Kirk nodded numbly, trying to figure out what, exactly, he was feeling at that moment. He left McCoy for a moment and turned to Spock, undeterred by the cold Vulcan mask. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Spock. Ready to take up your duties again?"

"As soon as you think me fit, Captain."

That was it - an ordinary greeting to some, but to Kirk it conveyed a great deal more than was apparent on the surface. For a moment their eyes met, and Kirk saw Spock's acknowledgement of their growing friendship in that brief glance. The Captain nodded slightly in satisfaction, then turned to the task of transporting their prisoners to the brig.

Dr. McCoy collected his tray and deftly weaved his way through the tables to where Kirk and Spock sat, deep in conversation.

"Mind if I sit down, gentlemen?" he asked cheerfully.

Kirk smiled a welcome. "Of course not, Bones. Here... " He pulled out a chair and waited as McCoy sat down.

Spock nodded slightly to the Human. "Doctor."

With a slight feeling of surprise McCoy returned the greeting, and turned to the Captain. "I never did find out how you found that planet. What were you doing in that sector?"

Briefly, Kirk told them of the search, and of Bryce's orders to leave it and patrol the Neutral Zone. He skipped quickly over the Commodore's insistence on 'replacements' and said nothing of his own feelings through all that time. When he came to the part where the Enterprise followed the Klingon ship to Marbenna Three, McCoy could not resist an interruption.

"But how did you know we were on the planet?"

"I didn't," admitted Kirk. "I was playing a hunch all the time, and it paid off."

"If I may say so, Captain," remarked Spock, "a 'hunch' is not a very solid premise on which to base a decision of importance."

Kirk's eyes twinkled as he turned to the Vulcan. "Mr. Spock, sometimes a 'hunch' has proved invaluable in the planning of a course of action, and I for one intend to continue paying attention to them." He got a raised eyebrow for his trouble, and with a grin continued his explanation.

"When we showed up, the Klingons headed out of there at Warp Three, and I was going to follow when De Salle reported activity on the planet's

surface and the presence of machinery of some sort. Well, there was an old crock of a ship orbiting the planet, and I knew if I concentrated on the Klingons the pirates would have time to move out. I also knew that the chances of proving the Klingons were doing anything wrong were practically nil - you know the kind of excuses their Head Office makes - so I opted for getting the pirates. You know the rest."

McCoy smiled. "That news from Klonar's officer made my heart leap, I can tell you. I've never been so relieved in my life.. So, it's dropping the pirates off at Starbase 14 and then back to work, huh?"

"More or less," Kirk confirmed. "Of course, Villion's got a lot to answer for, and so have the Klingons, though they'll deny all knowledge, of course. I hate to think what damage they've done to the development of that planet's people, too... By the way, Bones, didn't I hear someone say you knew Villion once?"

McCoy lowered his eyes, and was astonished to hear Spock say, "Dr. McCoy told me he knew another man of the same name, but totally different personality-wise from *this* Jerry Villion. A most amazing coincidence."

"Yes," murmured McCoy, looking in mute gratitude at Spock. "Really strange coincidence."

Kirk shrugged. "Must have heard wrong," he said.

Spock skilfully changed the subject. "Captain, what is to happen about Mr. De Salle?"

"Oh, that's quite straightforward. He was on his way to another ship when he was assigned to the Enterprise. He'll just continue his interrupted career. I'm commending him highly in my report. Very bright young man - should make a Captain one day... "

"Indeed."

McCoy watched as they talked ship's business, and he watched the Vulcan closest. There was more to this man Spock than he'd given him credit for, and McCoy knew he'd have to readjust his opinions somewhat. Not much, just a little...



THE TIME OF RENEWAL

On P'treel, the Festival of Antara the Stormbringer was the single most important event in every native's year. The time chosen to honour the planet's single, all-powerful goddess, the Festival also provided a chance for the nomadic people to gather in one place. During the Festival's twenty days, P'treelans took the chance to trade animals and goods, create new laws, debate old ones, swap gossip or simply re-meet old friends unseen during a year of wandering across the planet's vast oceans.

They met on P'treel's largest island, home of a single tall temple dedicated to Antara. A mushroom city of tents sprouted around its salt-bitten walls within minutes of the first arrival. About the island's shores, a multitude of strong, wide rafts bobbed shoulder to shoulder, the homes of complete families. Children ran giggling from one to the other until it seemed they would lose their home in the colourful hubbub of a floating city. Shriill women's voices added to the noise, swapping news in a sing-song tone which was more akin to chanting than normal conversation. Older natives, skin burned black by the young sun, gathered in groups, chewing seaweed as they relived younger years. The men laughed and shouted rude jokes, preparing the heady wines and beers consumed during the Festival. They shepherded the goat-like koonakas onto the unfamiliar steady earth, boisterously bargaining against each other for the highest price.

Inland, the scene was just as chaotic. Between groups of tents, stalls brimming with goods had been set up, stall owners bawling lustily the bargains they had. Children scurried everywhere, elbowing their way through the chattering people. Above their heads, flags fluttered in the sea breeze, noise and scents bombarding the senses without respite.

Along one such crowded avenue, a man standing head and shoulders above the P'treelans moved with easy superiority through the astonished natives. They parted before him as water parts before a ship, gathering in his wake to gossip excitedly about this latest newcomer. Outworlders were rare on P'treel, rarer even than the uniformed men and women who came every Festival to speak with the Elders. They stared curiously at him, the bards among them filing away details of him and his two alien companions to be included in a tale of mystery and foul deeds.

The man called N'Kern ignored their reaction, accepting it as his due. Even among his own race men stepped aside for him, respectful of his height and muscled bulk. His firm, silent stride illustrated his supple, lithe strength, while large calloused hands implied the ability to snap necks as easily as a twig. Those hands were at this moment hooked into a wide belt hung with lethal weapons he rarely found the need for. One glimpse of the underlying threat in his deep-set grey eyes generally discouraged any resistance. Those who were not wise enough to move on soon learned their mistake.

N'Kern halted, the silent shadows behind doing likewise. His gaze swept the noisy crowd, settling at last on a brown-haired Human head. With a grunt of satisfaction he moved off, the crowd parting once more.

"You honour me, noble lord. I serve you?"

Dr. Leonard McCoy jumped, startled by the voice apparently coming from a precarious stack of cloth bales. One of the green-skinned P'treelans appeared from behind it, his single eye gleaming with anticipation of a

good sale. A long skinny arm snaked out, lifting the hem of the flame-coloured dress McCoy held.

"Veery fine, lord, veery fine. Good buy - cheap! You buy?"

McCoy hastily replaced the garment, wary of being coerced into buying something he did not want. At least this planet wasn't one where to pick something up meant an instant sale. He had acquired a few unwanted items that way. Not that he was entirely positive about what he wanted in any case. Joanna's birthday was coming up soon, and for once he had remembered it. The arrival of the Enterprise at P'treel was an ideal opportunity to actually give her something other than belated apologies. The only difficulty was in finding the proper gift. It was becoming something of an ordeal.

Lost in thought, McCoy swung round, just managing to prevent himself from walking into the large figure standing behind him. He stared stupidly at the leather-clad chest before raising his eyes to take in the square jaw, orange and black striped hair, shadowed grey eyes. The stall owner unobtrusively melted into the crowd.

"You are Dr. Leonard McCoy?" rumbled the giant.

He nodded dumbly, swallowed, and confirmed his identity. "Yes. I'm McCoy."

A wide smile cracked the browned, bearded face. "Good. We thought so. We've come to take you to an old friend of yours - one you have not seen for some time. He is extremely anxious to see you."

Uneasiness churned McCoy's stomach, but he continued to face the giant calmly, though with a slightly sore neck.

"Oh. Well, uh, I've only got so long down here, and my time is nearly up. Could we leave it till later?"

A slow shake of the head confirmed his worst fears. "Sorry, but he really does want to see you - *now*."

The gun nozzle pressing into his side emphasised the point, and the indigo-blue alien wielding it offered McCoy no hope of backing out of the invitation. He considered using his communicator, but the giant looked capable of crushing it in one hand - when it was still on his wrist.

With no clear avenue of escape, McCoy was about to move off with his unwanted bodyguards when the communicator came to his rescue with a call from the Enterprise. Keeping one wary eye on the three aliens, the doctor instantly answered. N'Kern and his companions exchanged glances.

"Uhura here, Doctor. Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock are already back on board, and we're ready to leave orbit. I'm afraid your shopping spree is over."

McCoy looked up just in time to see the tall stranger turn on his heel and disappear into the milling crowd. One of the blue aliens stared long and meaningfully at him before following his companions. McCoy breathed a heart-felt sigh of relief.

"Dr. McCoy? Are you still there?"

Suddenly aware that he was keeping Uhura waiting, McCoy hastily reopened the channel. "Yeah, I'm here, Uhura. Just... day-dreaming, that's all."



"I wouldn't do that too often, sir, you might find yourself in a ring of security guards one day. Did you manage to find anything?"

"Hell, no - you know how bad I am at choosing presents. I'll just have to send a stargram. Ask those guys to beam me up gently, will you? I feel kinda delicate."

"Gentle beam-up as ordered. Uhura out."

Six P'treelan children goggled in surprise as the Human turned into a pillar of sparkling light before finally disappearing, and across the street an aged bard filed it away for inclusion in a future ballad.

"The P'treelans are a fascinating people, Captain," Spock remarked. The only response was a half-hearted grunt from the command chair, but he continued undeterred. "Apparently they possess no written records of any kind - the planet's entire history is instead recounted to each apprentice bard in the form of stories and prose, each bard then adding to his songs the major events affecting the family raft he belongs to. At Festival the bards gather to retell the year's events to each other, thereby - "

There was another grunt from the chair's direction, and then Kirk swung it round, swearing softly. Before Spock could raise an enquiring eyebrow, he rose, looking apologetic.

"Sorry, Spock. I know it's interesting, but I've got too much on my mind at the moment. I think I'll get off the bridge for a while. You have the con."

The Vulcan nodded silently, then turned back to the library records on P'treel.

For a moment, Kirk stood in the lift, unsure where he was headed. Then he remembered McCoy's trip to the planet and asked for sickbay. Maybe listening to Bones' mumbles about the trials of present buying would ease the rapidly growing irritation he felt.

He found McCoy preparing a checklist of drug supplies, but the doctor laid it aside as soon as he arrived. A wide smile dawned on his face.

"Afternoon, Jim. I certainly hope you're here on a social visit?"

Kirk slowly returned his smile. "Well, yes, I guess I am. Why?"

McCoy rubbed his hands together and unlocked a wall cupboard just behind his desk. As the door slid open he deftly removed two glasses and an ornate bottle filled with an orange liquid. "I was seriously thinking of creating an epidemic to get you down here," he said, uncorking the bottle. "I haven't seen you since yesterday, and I certainly wasn't gonna sample this alone."

"What is it - or is that a stupid question?"

"That's a stupid question. Scotty recommended it to me 'way back - real potent stuff, he said - so when I saw the bottle on P'treel... "

Kirk took the proffered glass, sniffed warily at the spicy aroma.

Across the desk, McCoy raised his glass.

"Go on, drink up. I ain't getting drunk alone!"

"Okay, Bones, but if this is as potent as you claim, I hope you're prepared to explain my drunken stupor to Spock."

"Of course," replied McCoy with mock seriousness. "I'll get him drunk too. If anything can do it, this can."

They both grinned at the thought before downing the drink in one. Kirk successfully managed to conquer the coughing fit which threatened to follow the fiery effect on his throat, and whistled in appreciation.

"My God," he gasped. "What's in that stuff?"

"Don't ask me, but it makes one hell of a drink, doesn't it? Scotty said it was pretty rare - probably banned for the well-being of the drinkers... "

"I can believe that. It puts Saurian brandy alongside milk shakes."

"Good, gut-rotting booze," McCoy murmured happily. He lifted the bottle. "Want any more?"

"Are you trying to get me demoted to ensign or something? No, I'll settle for watching you burn your brains out."

The doctor sighed regretfully and corked the fiery brew. "Nope, it's no fun drinking yourself half blind without company. I reckon I'll re-introduce Scotty to it tonight."

Kirk perched himself on the desk top, watching as McCoy reverently locked away the drink. "Talking of purchases, did you find a present for Joanna?"

McCoy shook his head and smiled ruefully as he seated himself. "No - not that I thought I would. I guess I'm just not the present-buying kind."

"You should have taken Uhura with you, get the woman's touch."

McCoy managed to look thoroughly outraged at the very idea. "If I'd done that, who would have got me out of the tight spot I was in down there?" Seeing Kirk's enquiring expression, he elaborated further, describing the incident with the three aliens.

A puzzled frown furrowed Kirk's forehead as he digested the story. "To see an old friend? Any idea who, Bones?"

McCoy shrugged. "Beats me. I sure as hell don't know anyone on P'treel, and why a friend should send a bunch of heavies to 'persuade' me... "

"Yes, it is strange," Kirk mused. "And worrying."

"You're telling me. When I turned round and saw this walking mountain... I was never so glad to hear Uhura's sweet voice as then."

Kirk nodded slowly, replaced the glass he had been turning in his hand. "Well, unless they turn up again, I guess we'll never know. I'll issue instructions to look out for them next planet-fall."

"There's no need for that kind of trouble, Jim," protested McCoy, but

Kirk was adamant.

"Maybe, but if they managed to trace you to P'treel, they may well find you again, and somehow I get the feeling that their intentions aren't entirely honourable."

McCoy shrugged. "Guess you're right. Talking of planet-fall - where are we headed next?"

Kirk's expression soured. He stared hard at the opposite wall as if he could somehow see through it by sheer force of will. A few moments passed, then McCoy repeated the question.

A long sigh hissed through clenched teeth. "Bones, right now I couldn't care less where we're headed."

McCoy pushed himself up in the chair and tried to hide the disquiet stirred by Kirk's apparent listlessness. "Oh? Any particular reason why?"

"I'm not here for a psychoanalyst session," bristled Kirk.

"I'm not offering one. Just curious, that's all."

The irritation was replaced by a sheepish grin. "Yeah, I know. Sorry, I seem to be on edge at the moment. All this inactivity, these penny-ante jobs Starfleet rustles up for us... It's getting to me."

"Well, life can't always be full of god-machines and dangerous villains," McCoy said mildly. "There are always dull spots, you know that."

"Sure, but this particular dull spot has lasted too long."

"Take it easy. They obviously want you on these missions, that's all."

Building tension would not allow Kirk to sit still any longer. With a sudden jerky movement he stood and strode to the other side of the office, one tight fist almost - but not quite - striking the wall. "Dammit, what does a pen-pushing, smart-ass admiral know about Starship missions?"

"I seem to remember yourself in that position not so long ago," McCoy remarked laconically.

The Captain glowered, stabbing a finger in his direction. "Don't remind me. I'll regret it for the rest of my life. Bones, you know what I mean... "

"Sure. You resent being off on patty-*cake* missions that any greenhorn could carry out when you should be out there saving the universe."

"Yes. No! Hell, that's *not* what I meant... "

"But that *is* what you feel."

"Maybe," Kirk admitted. "I just know this pussyfooting from A to B and back again is frustrating me, and it bores the crew. Why completely rebuild a starship only to send her on milk runs?" He began to pace to and fro. "I almost feel ready to call the whole thing off."

"They'd like that," muttered McCoy. "Then they could say they were right all along to allow you captaincy only on a trial period. You can't cope, so trot back to Earth and your job as official figurehead."

"Perhaps that's all I am."

"You know that isn't true."

"Isn't it?" asked Kirk dully, but he had already answered that question long ago. While on Earth, it had been true for a while; it was so no longer. On this ship, on the gleaming, vibrant Enterprise, it was a crazy dream with no roots in the reality of his return to the life he loved. He had lost the freedom of space once; he would not be foolish enough to do so again.

Seeing the expression on McCoy's face, he spun on his heel and flung himself into a chair. "Sorry."

"What for?"

"Pacing like that. I know it's irritating." He fell silent, absently chewing a knuckle. The next moment he was on his feet and pacing. "Hell, don't they trust me with their precious new ship? Nogura said 'a short trial' was all they wanted - see how I worked out. Six months later I'm still kept waiting like a kid expecting pats of approval from his elders."

"Six months isn't all that long," McCoy said reasonably. "New Captains are tested longer."

"I am *not* a new captain."

"Then stop acting like one."

Kirk halted, looking at him incredulously. McCoy hastily raised a hand in apology. "Okay, my turn to apologise. I didn't mean it that way. Just - just stop fussing over nothing, will you? After all, you could still be a pen-pusher yourself!"

"Heaven forbid," laughed Kirk, reaching out to acknowledge a call from the bridge. "Kirk here."

"Captain, we have just received a distress call from Nekendor. Governor Tavener reports extensive seismic disturbance, causing wide-spread destruction across the entire main continent. He requests urgent medical assistance."

His own problems pushed aside by the need for instant decisions, Kirk racked his brain. "Nekendor... let's see... that's about eight days from here, isn't it?"

"Five at Warp Ten," Spock replied instantly. "The Potemkin is also in the vicinity and closer than we, but with our improved warp capabilities we can still reach the planet ahead of her."

"Advise her Captain of the situation anyway. If the 'quakes are planet-wide, there may be more casualties than we can deal with. Have Lt. DiFalco plot a course. I'll be up directly."

"Acknowledged. Spock out."

As the screen faded, Kirk turned to McCoy. "Well, Bones, it looks as if we're back in business."

The doctor sighed. "Just when I was getting used to it, too. I'll alert the medical section to prepare for the worst. God knows what we'll find when we arrive."

What they found was a population desperately trying to restore some semblance of order to their devastated world after the sudden cessation of the crippling tremors. Kirk lost no time in beaming down to the small colony of archaeologists and sociologists stationed on Nekendor to study this little-known civilisation. Although the Nekendi possessed no space technology, they had accepted the overtures of the Federation willingly, welcoming the newcomers with child-like acceptance. The colonists had merged into the local life, their alien settlement outside the planet's sole city largely ignored by most natives. Now, in the midst of chaos, the colonists found a new role to play in the placid society.

As soon as the transporter effect had dispersed, Kirk glanced round the crowded hall, his eyes alighting on a small, sprightly man dressed in torn, dusty clothes. At the same instant, Dr. Jay Tavener, colonist leader and old friend of Kirk's, spotted the new arrivals. He hurried across, wiping his dirty hands on equally dirty coveralls. He stared wide-eyed at the familiar face for a moment, then grasped Kirk's hand warmly.

"Jim Kirk! It is you, isn't it? My God, imagine meeting here! I only wish it were in better circumstances."

Kirk nodded sadly, noting the hastily laid mattresses crowding most of the floor space. "Yes, it's unfortunate that this happened. However, my medical section is ready to begin helping, and another ship is on the way."

Tavener's tired features managed a relieved smile. "That is the best news I've had in days. It was so sudden, you see, and we simply could not cope with what resources we had."

"You won't have to any more," Kirk assured him. He gestured towards his companions. "This is my First Officer, Mr. Spock, and Chief Medical Officer Dr. McCoy. He's the man you can rely on to tend your injured."

"There are plenty of them, unfortunately," sighed Tavener. He drew a weary hand across his brow, then smiled as a woman, blonde hair streaked with dirt, joined them. He put an arm round her shoulders, hugging her briefly. "My wife, Roz. She's been invaluable."

Kirk raised his eyebrows in mock astonishment. "Married? Is this the man who swore he'd remain a bachelor all his life?"

"That's news to me!" smiled Roz. "Anyway, Jay credits me with too much. All I do is order people about. The real workers are those still digging out the remaining victims."

"There are Nekendi still trapped?" asked McCoy worriedly.

"Unfortunately, yes. As you can see here, our quake-proof buildings stood the test, and for some reason this area wasn't badly hit; but many houses have been flattened in other areas. We divided into groups, each team travelling to the worst hit areas, but thirty seven people don't go very far, and the medical supplies are exhausted. You got here in the nick of time. I've never seen such a sudden quake."

Her husband broke in then. "Yes, well - too much talking. Jim, you said everything was ready?"

"No need to worry, Jay. While we've been talking, the first teams have already beamed down. The field hospitals will be set up within the hour."

"That news is music to my ears. Uh - would you mind coming over and

speaking to Aarneta? He's the Head Chieftain of his people, and I want him to realise that help is really here."

As Kirk followed Tavener, he reflected on how a few days ago he had been wishing for more action. He had got his wish, though not quite in the way he had imagined.

By the time Nekendor's pale sun slid below the horizon, the true extent of the damage was known. Eleven towns were flattened or so severely damaged that many of the buildings had to be considered unsafe and marked for demolition. Rescue teams worked night and day to reach those still trapped, though after so long, very few were still alive. Field hospitals sprang up at every major site to tend injuries as soon as possible. A round-the-clock shift was established in the transporter room ferrying personnel and supplies within minutes of urgent requests. The medical supplies of the Enterprise were stretched to the limit, but held out until the Potemkin arrived two days later. Her Captain, a young Andorian not long qualified, handed organisation of his ship's resources to Kirk, thereby preventing possible difficulties and ensuring that aid was sent directly to the needy areas.

It seemed that every inch of land held crying, fearful Nekendi still frozen in the after-shock of this unheard-of occurrence. To a people totally inexperienced in such movements of the ground, the earthquake seemed a judgement of the gods. The once-familiar landscape was torn apart, stunted trees uprooted and dying, jagged fissures cracking pallid earth. They stared wide-eyed at rocks suddenly risen to alter the countryside, and crouched in groups along the main by-ways, clutching whatever they had managed to salvage from their homes. They headed towards the city, miraculously clear of damage, huddled round makeshift shelters. Some sat motionless or wandered in an unseeing daze, deaf even to their closest kin, while others raged or wept, cursing their gods for this cruel desertion. Large violet eyes stared at the strangers among them, three-fingered hands reaching in confusion for comfort and help. It was given three-fold.

On board the Enterprise, data concerning the earthquake was fed into the main computers, enabling them to predict the possibility of more tremors. More importantly, it showed up a curious anomaly.

"There should not have been an earthquake of any kind," Spock stated emphatically. Beside him, Kirk glanced at the science console screens even though the details made only vague sense to his untrained eye. He frowned slightly.

"What are you saying, Spock? Did one occur for none of the usual reasons, or what?"

"I am saying that it should not have happened because on this particular planet, such an occurrence is largely impossible."

"Explain."

The Vulcan leaned back, steepling his fingers in a familiar gesture that brought past recollections to Kirk's mind. Cool brown eyes regarded the Captain for a moment before he answered. "Captain, on most planets the crust is made up of plates, sections if you will. It is the movement of these plates one against the other which is largely responsible for earthquakes, tidal waves and similar natural phenomena. However, Nekendor has no such plates. This planet's crust is one solid mass covering the magma beneath."

"Then - with no plates to move - " finished Kirk, "why this sudden

earthquake?"

"Exactly. There were also no early warning tremors." He paused, one eyebrow lifting slightly. "If I were given to conjecture, I might say it is as if the planet suffered one massive internal convulsion."

"Like a giant hiccup, eh?" mused Kirk. He smiled as the eyebrows shot skywards.

"Not the description I would have used, " Spock replied drily, "but a slightly similar one, yes. Of course, this is only a theory loosely based on the data available - "

"Sure, I forgot," Kirk teased. "Vulcans never guess."

"To do so when one can easily gather all relative information and arrive at the correct conclusion later would, I should think, be an illogical waste of time."

"Oh, of course," grinned the Captain, half laughing at the indignant look on Spock's face. He turned to go, the grubby state of his uniform only now sinking in. He had come straight from beaming up, and the exhaustion of working among the ruins was beginning to return. "Well, carry on, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan looked scathingly at him before returning to work.

"I want him dead, N'Kern. I want him to feel the fear, the despair, the hopelessness... " The rasping voice faded into a bout of dry coughing which echoed painfully in the ears of the man listening. When it was past, one wasted hand left the rough covers to grip the calloused paw of N'Kern weakly. Sunken blue eyes strained against their failing vision, but their owner saw nothing but a dark shadow where his friend stood.

"We'll get him, Jerry," the big man promised.

"I know you will. Bring him here, face to face. I want him to see what he did to me."

"He will - and then he'll wish he'd never been born."

N'Kern gently squeezed the crippled hand before turning away, sickened by the pain of a man he called brother. The silent figure waiting in the outer cave stood as he emerged from the partitioned area, reading the anguish in N'Kern's face.

"We go now?"

"Yes. " The word was a savage whisper. "I know where we can find him. There will be no lucky escape this time."

With a tired, irritated sigh McCoy mopped the perspiration from his brow with his already saturated sleeve and delicately fused two nerve-ends his eyes could scarcely make out. He seemed to have been standing at this operating table for days, the passing hours marked only by the arrival of another patient or a reviving cup of coffee. He supposed he must have slept at some time or another, but he had no idea when. As he closed up

the wound he found his concentration wandering and had to force his eyes to remain open until he had finished. The Nekendi was quickly wheeled away, another with white bone cruelly jutting through bruised blue flesh immediately replacing it.

As McCoy moved to examine the damage, a gentle hand took his arm. He glanced blearily at Dr. Chapel. She sighed, cursing yet admiring the determination which had kept him here, tending people others could see to. He was supposed to be on board the Enterprise, running operations and supplies, but Leonard McCoy was too dedicated a doctor to sit while others worked. That was why she admired the man more every time she watched him at his favourite job - saving lives.

"I'll do this one," she told him, overriding his weak protests. "You're too tired to do the job properly and we can afford to slow the pace now. Go on, get outside for a minute."

He looked at her for a moment, stubborn concern arguing that he should stay, but he saw her determination and suddenly felt too tired to be bothered arguing. In a weary daze he weaved a path towards the scrubbing-up room, stripping off his coveralls and flopping into a chair positioned just outside the operating theatre.

With his eyes closed, he lay back, listening to the familiar sounds of a busy hospital. Behind these sounds wailed the wind which blew constantly across Nekendor, audible through even the stout grey walls of the hospital. As he relaxed, the tingling grew in his tired body, adding to the blessed relief of propped-up feet.

It had been a long time since he had done such work. *Two years on Earth have made me soft*, he thought. *I must be getting old*. A quiet doubt found its seeds in that idea. Was he too old for this life now? Many Starfleet doctors retired at his age, or moved to other positions, making way for the younger ones who were perhaps more suited for the hectic life. *Hell, I make it sound like I'm Methuselah!* Anyway, the tide of casualties was slowing to a trickle now, so he could afford to ease up a little. It didn't seem like a week since they arrived here.

It came to him that he had not yet mentioned a curious coincidence to Jim Kirk. In the hurried bustle it had been pushed aside, but the fact was still there - the two aliens with the man who stopped him on P'treel were Nekendi. He had realised this as soon as he set eyes on the natives, but perhaps it wasn't so very important. After all, they could hardly question every Nekendi here, could they?

He slowly became aware of soft footsteps approaching his resting place. He reluctantly opened his eyes. The stranger and he looked at each other for a minute, then the doctor said testily, "Well, are you gonna tell me what you want, or are you practicing to be a statue?"

The Vulcan blinked, decided to ignore the sarcasm. "Dr. McCoy, I have a message for you from Commander Spock."

McCoy yawned expansively. "Tell him I can't see him. My appointment book's filled up."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind, never mind. Just give me the message."

"Very well, You are urgently required at a village near here. Captain Kirk is injured."

Growing exhaustion disappeared as he jumped to his feet. "Jim's hurt? How badly? What happened?"

"I do not know. I was instructed to take you to him, but no details were given."

McCoy blinked rapidly, trying to push away the tiredness. "Sure, sure," he muttered, cursing his sudden inability to think clearly. "Just hold on a minute. I'll need a medikit, hypos - "

The Vulcan quickly stopped him as he turned to the door. "That will not be necessary, Doctor, there is medical equipment there. Now, shall we go?"

"Uh - sure... "

They left the building, walking into the full blast of the wind. Close to the walls was a tooma, a low vehicle possessing one thin sail and three runners which supported a light wooden body. This was the only form of transport on Nekenor, one which made full use of the constant wind. It was as McCoy awkwardly stepped into the shuddering tooma that he realised that the Vulcan was not wearing Starfleet uniform, nor did he ever recall seeing him before.

There was someone sitting in the driver's seat. A broadly-built man with short striped hair and a smile which widened as the recognition dawned in McCoy's eyes.

"We meet again, Doctor. You had to leave us last time, but the invitation remains open."

McCoy looked wildly round, seeing no-one within range to call to. A strong hand clamped down on his shoulder, holding him in his seat. The giant nodded to his companion.

"My friend here is known as Sherak. I am N'Kern. You will grow to know us... quite well, Dr. McCoy."

Sherak tightened his grip very slightly, and McCoy flipped back unconscious. The Vulcan glanced back at the hospital. "We should go."

"Yes, we should," N'Kern agreed, loosening his grip on the taut sail. "After all, why delay the meeting of two old friends?"

"... and out of the entire population, two thousand three hundred and eighty nine were injured, one thousand seven hundred and thirty two killed instantly or have died since."

Kirk nodded slowly as Spock finished his report, looked at the sombre faces seated around the briefing room table. Next to him, Jay Tavener ran weary fingers through his hair. "Well, I guess it could have been much worse, but I can't help wondering what this will do to the Nekendi as a race."

"What do you mean, Jay?" Kirk asked.

"The Nekendi are a dying people," the colony leader explained. "Only a few centuries ago they were a thriving population, expanding, on the verge of spaceflight. Then disaster happened. We think an unauthorised trader landed, spreading a virus which, while harmless to him, was lethal

to the Nekendi. It's happened that way before, more's the pity. Either way, it must have spread like wildfire, because within a short time two thirds of the population were dead and the survivors left in chaos. Their civilisation collapsed, and today's remnants are all that's left." He sighed, lifting one hand in helpless resignation. "And now this. They will never recover."

Kirk heard the sorrow in his friend's voice, and deeply sympathised. He had felt that total helplessness too often not to know the frustration it brought. Carefully changing the subject, he asked Spock for more information on the unprecedented earthquake.

The Science Officer looked faintly apologetic as he answered. "Regrettably, we know little more than when we arrived. I have been unable to discover any acceptable reason for the tremors. Also there is still the fact that for some unexplained reason, this city avoided major damage, while no other settlement across the entire continent escaped the effects. It is most puzzling."

"Ach, well, we all know how good ye are at solvin' puzzles, Mr. Spock," put in Scott from across the table. "I'm sure ye'll find the solution soon."

Spock eyed him severely but said nothing, causing Kirk's mouth to twitch with the beginnings of a smile.

"I'd agree with you there, Scotty," he said, receiving a duplicate stare from Spock. He returned it with just a glimmer of a grin. "Is that all, Spock?"

An inaudible sigh escaped Spock's lips as he met the humour in the hazel eyes with a totally business-like reply. "Although the exact causes have not yet been ascertained, the earthquake did originate from a central point close to the planet's core. Again, we cannot determine the reason. Extensive scanning has revealed nothing."

"Then it looks as if speculation is all we have to go on," remarked Kirk. "Unless one of you gentlemen has any further thoughts to put forward?" The negative headshakes were what he had expected, but it still irked that they were no nearer to finding a reason for the quake.

Captain Sooleeve spoke from alongside Spock. "Captain Kirk, new orders arrived from Starfleet this morning. If no new evidence is found, I am ordered to depart. As I see it, this mystery is not likely to be cleared up in the immediate future, am I correct?"

"You are, Sooleeve. I only wish you were wrong."

"I know the feeling," said Sooleeve, rising from his chair. "However, this means that I must leave. We have done all we can."

Kirk stood, walking over to shake hands with his fellow captain. "Your help here has been invaluable, Sooleeve. Many more might have died without your crew to help."

"It has been a tragic disaster," the Andorian replied. He glanced round the standing men. "Unfortunately, I must go. Good fortune to you, gentlebeings." The Potemkin Captain and his First Officer left, prompting the others to do likewise.

Jay Tavener paused in the doorway. "Now that things are a little better, I'd welcome your company at my home, Jim. We've a lot of time to catch up on."

"You go on ahead, Jay," Kirk told him. "I have one little thing to take care of first."

As the door slid shut Spock lifted an eyebrow at his captain. "Is the 'little thing' a certain Dr. McCoy?"

Kirk grinned. "Right as usual. I want him to meet us at the colony hall. He refused to come along to this meeting - said he was too busy - but Chapel tells me he's been working himself too hard again. Pointless, when the flood of patients has slowed so much. It's up to us to persuade him to ease up, delegate some work to lesser mortals - "

"Persuading the good doctor to do anything against his will, " Spock remarked drily, "is, as I recall, extremely difficult."

At that moment a reply came from the planet, but not, as they had expected, from McCoy. Kirk listened with growing concern as Chapel described the doctor's disappearance and the resulting negative response to all attempts to contact him.

How long has he been gone?"

"Nearly four hours - " Chapel began, but Kirk quickly interrupted her.

"Four hours? Why didn't you contact me before this?"

Rasping static drowned the response, but finally cleared enough for them to pick out some of what she was saying. "... contact... couldn't... through..." The static crescendoed to a screeching howl which all but burst Kirk's eardrums before he altered the volume.

"Dr. Chapel, are you still there? Chapel?" His only reply was a buzzing which gave no signs of letting up. Angrily, Kirk contacted the bridge - or tried to.

"Interesting," commented Spock as the self-same howl shrieked on every channel Kirk tried. Finally the Captain gave up, thumping the comm in frustration. He raised a hand to stay Spock's inevitable remark.

"I know, it won't help any, but it sure made me feel a little better." He frowned at the unassuming board. "What in hell's name is going on? Uhura never reported any malfunctions, and where is McCoy?"

"Might I suggest we find out on the bridge?"

Kirk was just about to reply to that typical dry statement when, in the wink of an eye, all light and power about them ceased. A deadly, ominous silence suffused the Enterprise's throbbing heart, broken only by the cries of engineers as they tried fruitlessly to halt the drain on the power banks. Moments later - almost an eternity to some - the ship surged into life with the same suddenness. A collective sigh of relief was heaved throughout the Enterprise.

The Captain and First Officer arrived on the bridge to be met by a barrage of questions and reports. Spock went at once to his station, punching in a query direct to the main computer. While listening to the various section reports, Uhura gave Kirk all the information she could, finishing with the news that engineering reported a forty percent drain on the power reserves.

"Any ideas what caused it?" asked Kirk, his mind running over the hows and whys of the incident.

"None, sir," answered Uhura, her brown eyes troubled. "The drain was instant."

"It took precisely ten point four seven seconds, Lieutenant Commander," broke in Spock, eyes still on the screens. Kirk moved to the science station, watching the rapidly changing diagrams and charts.

"What about the computer, Spock? Any results?"

Spock flipped a switch before turning to answer. To Kirk, the seemingly impassive face held just as much worry as his own. "Although the absence of power lasted for an extremely short time, something of immense strength 'reached out', as it were, and drained the Enterprise of considerable power. For what reason, we can only speculate."

"Then what was it?"

"Unknown as yet. However, the sensors did pinpoint its origin." He hesitated, one eyebrow barely lifted. "The force came from the same area from which the earth tremors originated, close to the centre of Nekendor."

The taciturn Vulcan leaned back in his chair and glanced through slit eyes at his nervous companion. "Frustration against the whims of Nekendor's weather will not change matters, Orgon."

Anger sparked in Orgon's round turquoise eyes. "I will please myself how and what I feel, Vulcan, and not pander to your whims! If you do not like it, you can leave."

Casually, the Vulcan slid a small dirk from his belt and directed its finely-honed point at Orgon's vulnerable neck. "My name is Sherak, small one. I would advise you to remember it, for if anyone leaves this room it will be you - as a corpse."

N'Kern's huge hand clasped down on Orgon's as he made a grab for his disrupter. "Enough, or I will carry out Sherak's threat for him."

The Nekendi capitulated, pulling himself loose to join his twin by the room's single window.

"You guys sure are good buddies, aren't you?"

N'Kern turned to smile at the man trussed up in the corner. "Business partners occasionally experience differences of opinion, Doctor. Orgon has a... hasty temper, something of a rarity on this placid world. He is merely anxious that our presence does not affect the reputation of anonymity and integrity he and Orgo have built up in this city. If... certain persons were to find us here, a drastic reorganisation of business interests would have to be carried out. The sand storm which forced us to return here was unfortunate, but there is little chance of our presence being noted."

McCoy realised the truth of that remark all too well. With the city still in turmoil, the presence of a few strangers would be ignored by the Nekendi. He thought of the Enterprise orbiting, so near and yet so far. His absence was bound to have been noted by now, but would Jim instigate an immediate search of the city? More to the point, would he have any men to spare? Even though the earthquake was well past, a great deal of work remained to be done, and the ship had been ordered to remain until relief teams arrived in three days' time. The Enterprise people would be recalled

then as others set up for the months of reconstruction and rehabilitation ahead, but he sensed it would be too late for him. No, there was not much hope in that direction of thought.

With a grunt of irritation he tried to ease his cramped limbs into a more comfortable position, and thought again of his 'friend'. Even since he had wakened from Sherak's neck pinch in the stuffy, darkened room, he had racked his brain for clues to the person's identity, but so far, no dice. Questions put to N'Kern brought only a noncommittal answer that he would know soon, and Sherak afforded him nothing more than a tight-lipped stare. The twins ignored him altogether.

Moving had little effect on his strained muscles, only reawakening feeling in numbed areas. As pins and needles tingled along his left leg, he muttered angrily, glaring at Sherak.

"Who is this so-called friend, anyway?" he growled, tapping his foot to ease the sensation. "Some friend - keeping me trussed up like a thanksgiving turkey! What did I do to him?"

The Vulcan smiled thinly. "Before long you will find out, and then you will wish the question had never been asked."

Over at the window Orgon waved his hand for silence. N'Kern swiftly moved to his side, peering through the hole scarcely larger than his head. He glanced back to Sherak, who slipped the dirk back into its sheath and came to his feet.

"Starfleet men. Three... no, five."

"Searching?" snapped Sherak.

"Not yet, but that's probably what they're here for." He lightly touched Orgo on the shoulder. "You slip outside, see if you can get close enough to find out what they're up to."

The Nekendi nodded, slipping into the half empty alley almost before N'Kern had finished speaking. Back in the room, McCoy's hopes rose a notch.

Kirk worriedly scanned the alien faces about him, his eyes flicking away as they failed to locate the one face now foremost in his thoughts. Chattering in their own tongue, the Nekendi wove round and ignored the two men as though they did not exist. They had troubles enough of their own without bothering about more strangers. Milling to and fro in the crowded street, they hurried by like frightened sheep, a race lost in the stream of time. Survival, that was what mattered, not other beings' problems. None would stop long enough even to listen to Kirk's urgent questions.

Finally the Captain halted, leaning with one palm on a cool stone wall. "Dammit, Spock, we're getting nowhere like this. Nowhere at all."

Spock's face mirrored his captain's frustration, but in a way that only Kirk could see. He replied without taking his eyes off the crowd. "I agree, but it is the only method open to us at this moment. With most of the crew deployed across this planet and the transporters not functioning at full strength, searching on foot is the only alternative open to us."

Kirk glared moodily at nothing. "I know, but it takes too long. McCoy could be anywhere on Nekendor, anywhere. What worries me just as

much is this mysterious energy drain.

"It is somewhat... disturbing." Spock replied, his gaze lighting on the familiar stocky figure approaching. "Perhaps Lt. Chekov has discovered something of note."

Kirk looked with anticipation at the young Russian, but Chekov's glum expression did nothing to alleviate his worry. "Anything, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing, sir." He looked back the way he had come. "I met some of Dr. Tavener's men, but they'd seen nothing either."

Two security men arrived then from a street close by, but Kirk listened to their negative reports with only half his attention. *All this fuss about nothing*, his inner self argued. *Bones could have been called away by an emergency and couldn't get back because of the storm.* Somehow that idea didn't ring true.

The memory of the men on P'treel suddenly came back to him. The chances of their following the Enterprise's doctor to Nekendor were slim, but so was their being on P'treel at that precise time. If they had managed to find out he was there, then why not here? There could be a connection.

Still musing on this new consideration, Kirk ordered the men to go on searching, although in his heart he felt that it would do little good. As they merged again with the crowd, Spock lightly touched Kirk's arm, drawing his attention to the dim alley a few metres away, half hidden by passing Nekendi. He thought he glimpsed a figure darting back into the shadows, but could not be sure. Spock, who had noticed the observer earlier, was.

"At least one Nekendi seems to be interested in our actions," he said.

Kirk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Then I'd say it's our duty to enlighten him further. Let's go."

When they had weaved their way through the natives, the narrow, dead-end passage was empty. Further on into the gloom, two doors led into the alley. Cautiously, they made their way towards them, conscious of the small dark windows opening like eyes long the dusty walls. The first door resisted Kirk's wary shove.

Spock exchanged a brief glance with him, then moved forward to the remaining entrance. The handleless panel swung easily open, revealing deeper shadows but no signs of life. Spock warily slipped in, Kirk close behind.

"Curious... "

Kirk peered into the gloom at the Vulcan's back, a grey shape in the dark. "What is?"

"There appears to be no-one here," came the reply. "It's a single room - ah, a rear entrance... "

Spock walked further into the room, totally unprepared for what happened next. Kirk saw only a flash of red light, briefly illuminating Spock as he fell heavily against the inner wall. Thankful of the caution which had led him to issue phasers, Kirk crouched, firing towards the blast's source. Someone toppled forward unconscious, but before he had touched the floor, Kirk was darting round Spock, firing at the other figure shown up by the harsh beam. This time the phaser beam narrowly missed its target, but it made the Nekekdi drop his weapon and scuttle behind a chair.



From his position behind the door, Kirk strained to see his opponent. His eyes had adjusted to the dimness, yet he could see no sign of anyone. Glancing at the rear door, he watched in disbelief as a part of the doormoved to merge subtly with the wall. Only then did he remember the Nekendi ability to change colour, much like a chameleon. The alien would be able to move right up to him before he even saw him!

Even as this thought occurred, part of the wall surged into life, a glittering blade slashing down at the Human. Kirk blocked it with his phaser, losing the weapon in the process, but he had managed to grip the thin wrist and twist the knife away until it was dropped. In an instant he was behind the Nekendi, one arm around the alien's neck while the other held his assailant firmly. The other grimaced, struggling to get free, but Kirk merely tightened his grip.

"Who are you?" he snapped. "What have you done with McCoy?"

His captive spat, his skin colour slowly returning to a normal shade. "You think I tell you? Break my neck, Human - I never talk."

"Most commendable..." commented a deep voice. The butt of a gun clipped the back of Kirk's skull, sending him into unexpected oblivion. N'Kern nudged the unconscious man with his boot, glaring at the gasping Nekendi. "That could have been you, Orgon. You're slipping."

"He caught me by surprise," Orgon gasped, rubbing his arm. "I would have thrown him in a moment."

N'Kern smiled sardonically. "As always, I underestimate your competence." He looked out of the window. "It's still clear. Quickly, let's go."

"What about them?"

The big man paused halfway through the rear door. "The Starfleet men will be left with an unsolvable mystery when they wake up, that's all. It means switching operations to another planet, but we have done that before."

"I think I killed the Vulcan," Orgon said flatly. "Oorgo is still unconscious."

"Then leave him. If he is found before he comes round, he'll be blamed for the killing, leaving you free of suspicion." He smiled at the frown on Orgon's face. "What's this - sudden brotherly concern?"

"You insult me! I care nothing for that weakling. Come, before others arrive."

A blink of filtered light, then the door and darkness closed on the room and its occupants.

It was curious, thought Spock, that every awakening from sudden unconsciousness brought the same bewildering moment of disorientation, no matter how many times it had previously occurred. He had to admit, however, that in this particular instance more pain than usual accompanied his return to awareness. His skull pounded with the rush of his blood, while crackles and high-pitched whistles played a noisy counterpoint in his inner ear. Putting one area of his mind to work on controlling the pain, he slowly opened his eyes.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," smiled Kirk, relief clear in his eyes.

"I was not aware I had left it."

"Let's just say it was pretty close." A hardness entered Kirk's voice, brought on by the worry and self-recrimination which had plagued him in the past hours. "Why the hell weren't you more careful? You should have waited for me to join you. Waltzing in by yourself, no caution... didn't you remember they can change colour?"

"No," Spock replied honestly, and knew by Kirk's expression that he hadn't either.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Kirk rejoined, staring hard at him. "And it's come close to killing my science officer once too often. Curb it next time, Mister." His voice was commanding and firm, but behind was the memory of his fear when he awoke to find Spock still unconscious, an angry flare of burned cloth marking the beam's passage across his side. The fear had subsided only when he found his friend still breathed, and faintly remained until he had found Chekov and Spears. Afterwards, when Chapel had pronounced the Vulcan badly hurt but recovering, the fear was gone, leaving the memory. No mention was made of his agony, but he saw in Spock's eyes that the Vulcan knew, and understood his anger.

"We are not in sickbay?" questioned Spock, his gaze taking in the unfamiliar surroundings.

"No. This is the main hospital in the city. However, we have Dr. Chapel to take care of you, so there's no need to worry... "

One Vulcan eyebrow rose sharply at the mere suggestion, causing Kirk to chuckle. He settled himself onto the edge of the bed, frowning at the stab of pain the movement had brought from his head. Whoever had hit him packed one hell of a punch. He was just musing over that again when he became aware of Spock's infinitely patient expression. He hastily continued, explaining that Spock had been brought here because another mysterious power drain had prevented them from beaming up immediately. He grimaced, gingerly touching the bump on the base of his skull. "I wasn't lucky enough to be phasered like you, I only merited a battered head!"

"Which needs to be taken care of just the same, Captain," Dr. Chapel murmured reprovingly as she passed the bed.

"Yes, Ma'am," quipped her senior officer. Chapel smiled, scanning the monitor before moving away to her other patients. Kirk watched her go. "I still can't get used to the fact that she's a doctor now..."

"Really," Spock said in a voice which made it plain he wasn't particularly interested. "The attack... Are there any clues as to who it was?"

Kirk shot him an apologetic grin, and got back to business. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I managed to phaser one of them, a Nekendi. He came round a while ago, but refuses to talk. I'm sure he and some others are connected with McCoy's disappearance. Bones only gave me a sketchy description of the man who spoke to him, but Uhura is running that and one of the prisoner through the files. She may come up with something."

At that moment Lt. Chekov entered the ward, his expression more cheerful than it had been for a while. His smile broadened at the sight of Spock awake and sitting up. "Mr. Spock! I'm glad to see you are all right."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Captain, Mr. Scott just called from the Enterprise," the Russian reported with unusual eagerness. To tell the truth, he was bored with waiting around on Nekendor, and Scotty's news had heightened his spirits considerably. "He said enough power has been generated to beam up, but only one at a time."

Kirk returned his smile. "Very well, Mr. Chekov, you and the security men can begin beaming up immediately."

"Sir, what about the prisoner?"

"He's still keeping silent?"

"He told us his name, Captain, but that is all."

Kirk nodded, rising from his perch on the bed edge. "I'd better see him. It might be better to leave him in custody here... I'll be back in a minute, Spock."

Captain and junior officer left the hospital, crossing the street to the small prison, one of the sound buildings left in the city. Behind a crackling blue forcefield the Nekendi sat in sullen defiance, his eyes fixed on the smooth floor.

"So his name is Dorgo. Well, that's a start, at least,"

There was no appreciable reaction to Kirk's voice, but as one of the security men beamed up behind him, he saw the Nekendi start and glance quickly in the direction of the sound. Apparently he did not care for the process, and Kirk suddenly recalled the Nekendi reputation for superstition.

"Mr. Chekov - I think we'll take him to the ship, see if we can't get some answers there... "

"No!"

They both turned surprised eyes on Dorgo, who had abruptly risen from his chair to watch Kirk with frightened eyes.

Kirk folded his arms and gave Dorgo a quizzical look. "Changed your mind about speaking?"

The Nekendi turned to face the wall. "I will not betray my friends."

"Have it your own way. Mr. Chekov, beam the prisoner up to the Enterprise."

Panic appeared anew on Dorgo's face, and he backed away as Chekov flicked off the field. "No! No! You will not take me in the devil light! Please!"

"All you have to do is talk, Dorgo."

Stubbornness and fear competed for dominance, then the alien snarled in disgust. "I will speak, if you leave me here on Nekendor."

"Well... I suppose we could, for the moment."

Over in the corner of the room, another of the security party disappeared in the familiar bright haze which had terrified Dorgo so much.

Within seconds he was back aboard the Enterprise. Lt. Rand glanced at the panel as he left the room, a tiny frown creasing her forehead. Between the last and this beam-up, several anomalies in the readings had begun to appear, were increasing even as she checked. One eye on the surging energy readings, she reached to contact Engineering, but the words never left her lips. She was caught in mid-movement as the console erupted into flame and brilliant light, throwing her against the grey wall. Alarms shrieked throughout the Enterprise, but Rand was oblivious of their warning.

Mere minutes later, Uhura had contacted Kirk and reported the incident. Typically, Kirk's first thought was for his crew. "Is Rand badly hurt?"

"She's on her way to sickbay now, sir. First reports indicate she escaped with burns and cuts, but we don't know how deep the burns are yet."

Kirk sighed and asked to speak to Mr. Scott. His sudden feeling of events moving outwith his control was echoed in Scotty's reply to his question.

"I dinna ken where it came from sir, but an enormous energy surge recoiled through the entire system, explodin' through the main transporter circuits. They're totally burned out. I canna transport anyone up for some time."

"All right, Scotty, I know you'll do your best. Just get to work and contact us when it's repaired."

"Aye, sir. Funny how it only affected the transporter, though. Scott out."

The same thought had occurred to Kirk, and it led him to wonder if whatever drained the power had also done this. However, there was little he could do about that line of reasoning down here. He looked at Chekov's and Spears' stunned faces. "Well, gentlemen, it seems we have no choice. Here we stay until Mr. Scott repairs the damage."

McCoy stumbled over scattered stones, half falling through the narrow crevice. Instantly the wind's force was cut, leaving him slightly deafened and dizzy. N'Kern pushed him forward into a wide tunnel, which finally emerged into a natural cavern widened by cutting tools. Filling the cool space were the accoutrements necessary to enable two men to live in relative comfort. The rear of the cave was partitioned from the rest by a wooden screen. When McCoy came to an uneasy halt beside one of the fold-up bunks, N'Kern steered him towards the partition.

There was a strange putrid smell in the cave which became stronger the nearer he walked to the rear. Slowly he edged round the screen, his nostrils filling with the stench. A few years ago he had been part of a medical team aiding a plague-ridden planet. The smell brought that memory vividly to mind.

There was a small light burning in the corner, banishing the gloom and causing McCoy to squint as he approached the bed which occupied the space.

"Oh, my - " The words died on his lips at the sight of the disease-ridden man lying, barely conscious, beneath the blood-stained blankets. Fighting to keep his anger under control, he spun on the giant standing at his back. "You - how long has he been like this? For God's sake, why did you let it progress this far? Of all the stupid, cruel... I

hope you realise it may be too late to help him?"

In his fury, McCoy did not see the anguish in N'Kern's eyes, nor hear the pain-filled reply. "I know that, Doctor. All too well."

The medical officer turned back to the bed. "I don't even know what's wrong with him..." He lifted the covers, dropping them instantly as he felt the bile rise in his throat. "My God - it's eating him away! How long has he been like this?"

"It has developed over eight years, growing inside him," N'Kern replied slowly. "Only recently has it emerged like this - the last stages."

"I have you to thank for that, Len McCoy..."

McCoy jumped at the rasping, yet familiar voice, his eyes widening in horror as the sick man painfully raised himself, dull, red-rimmed eyes glaring in fevered accusation from a ravaged face.

"Don't you recognise me? Sure, I've changed, but I always remembered you, what you did..."

"No - it can't be..." McCoy heard the words and thought of the man he had known before. A strong, capable man, a leader of men in a life where leaders were all too often cut down by ambitious minions. The leader was still there, but only in personality. His thick black hair had long since fallen out, the disease drawing the tanned skin around the skull into hollows and strained cracks. Once well-muscled arms were wasted and stringy, the skeleton jutting through yellowed parchment. One hand rubbed feebly at the stump of the other.

"Can't believe it, can you?" continued the rasping, nightmare voice. "Well, look close. You probably figured you'd got rid of me for good."

McCoy stared with amazement at his old friend. "Jerry! Jerry, I... I never dreamed..."

Volatile anger blazed from Jerry Villion's eyes. "You never... Stop the patronising apologies, Len! If I had known when I attacked that shuttle that you would betray me, bring me to this... I should have handed you over to Klonar with your pointed-eared friend. I've always remembered you, Len. Remembered and hated. I swore you would pay for this, and now..."

He lapsed into a fit of dry coughing which racked his frail body with convulsive shudders. McCoy reached out to help, but before he could do anything N'Kern lifted him away bodily, pushing him into the cave.

"He doesn't need your help. Get away from him."

In hurt confusion McCoy stumbled away, obeying Sherak's unspoken gesture towards one of the beds. He sat gratefully, unsure if his legs would hold him much longer. The shock of finding his one-time friend like this had left him dazed and horrified, but even more worrying was the fact that Jerry Villion blamed him for the disease. Why?

Wearily, McCoy closed his eyes and leaned against the cold stone wall. Eight years, N'Kern had said. That meant Jerry must have contracted the disease, whatever it was, soon after he had been sentenced and sent to a penal colony. He had good reason to hate McCoy for that, because it was McCoy's evidence which had helped prove his guilt.

He had not seen Jerry Villion since the pirates had been left at

Starbase 14 to await trial and sentence; because the Enterprise was ordered away, his evidence had not been given in open court, but his taped deposition had been left for the court.

The whole episode still had something of a nightmare quality for McCoy; on the rare occasions he had recalled it, he still found it hard to believe that his old friend could have been guilty of such treachery.

N'Kern emerged from behind the screen, his expression weary and resigned. To Sherak's unspoken question he answered, "He's sinking fast. It won't be long now."

Aware that his questions would not be appreciated, but needing to know nonetheless, McCoy sat forward on the bed. "How did he get this way?"

"What in hell's difference does it make to you?" growled N'Kern angrily. "You were the one who put him there."

"If I could have prevented it, I would have, believe me," McCoy replied sincerely. "Please - tell me."

The giant turned his back on him, lying down on the other bed with his eyes closed. Orgon returned McCoy's questioning look with a hostile glare, but Sherak at least appeared to think the doctor deserved some sort of answer.

"The disease ran unchecked through the colony soon after Jerry was sent there," he said finally, his face and voice devoid of any emotion. McCoy was suddenly reminded of Spock when he was doing his utmost to hide his feelings, but any comparisons between him and this Vulcan were pointless.

"We heard through... various channels... of his capture," Sherak continued. "We helped him escape, but not before he caught the disease. He knew that he had a limited number of years to live, but he is not the kind to leave rotting on one planet."

McCoy nodded his agreement, remembering the restless nature of his friend when they knew each other back on Earth. "You knew him well, then?" he asked.

"He saved my life." This came from N'Kern, who now rested an arm across his temple.

"He saved mine also," added the Vulcan, staring candidly at McCoy. "Now we cannot return the favour, but we can make sure that his last wishes are carried out."

There was a cackle from Orgon's direction. McCoy looked round to see him brandishing his sharp dirk. "He's had a long time to plan his revenge, oh, yes. You will die, painfully."

Alarmed, McCoy glanced from the giggling Nekendi to the Vulcan, but Sherak only inclined his head in confirmation of Orgon's assurance.

"You will be staked out on the plain," he said in the same tone of voice Spock used to explain mathematical calculations. "There is a creature native to this area called the orngner. The name means 'he who sucks', and that, I am told, is exactly what it does. Any injured, helpless creature left alone on the plains is soon found by the orngner. I am assured by Orgon that the death is not... pleasant."

"It will suck your blood until you are empty as a shrivelled rennen

berry, Human," hissed Orgon with obvious pleasure. He sidled up to press the dirk to McCoy's neck. "You will feel your life ebbing with every suck, and you will still be alive when it begins to crack open your bones."

"It'll be stoned drunk by then if it tries my blood," answered McCoy with a flippancy far from his true feelings.

A grim smile touched Sherak's thin lips. "Jest if you wish, Doctor. It does no harm to lighten your remaining hours with harmless jokes. I have always thought that a condemned man's last hours should be savoured."

Savoured? thought McCoy. *When I've a fate like that waiting for me? Jesus, I never thought my return to active service would end like this...*

"Repair work is continuing on the damaged transporter circuits, but Commander Scott tells me the first tests cannot begin for another five hours. How soon beaming up can begin after that depends on the speed of recalibration of the instruments. Communications are still badly affected, at times blanking out completely. When functioning normally, sensors indicate the interference originates from a mountain range to the east of the city, but they are unable to locate the exact source. On Nekendor itself, communications are completely inoperable, leaving us no way to contact the Enterprise teams across the planet. That this mysterious blanking effect should wipe out contact on the planet, yet conveniently allow messages, however garbled, to reach the Enterprise, only serves to convince me more that this is more than coincidence. I have come to the conclusion that an outside force is manipulating the planet, and us, for some unknown motive. Whether Dr. McCoy's disappearance is linked in some way we have yet to find out, but at present, I would settle for simply finding him."

The words of his log report returning to the back of his mind, Kirk flicked off the forcefield and faced the one person with any idea of McCoy's whereabouts.

"Dorgo, you've sat dumb long enough. It's time you told us what you know - or do you want to be beamed aboard our ship after all?"

The alien visibly shuddered. "No, I will tell you, tell you everything."

"Good. That's all I wanted, just a little cooperation. First you can tell me where McCoy is being held, and why."

"It is time."

In the stillness of the cavern, Sherak's words fell like a weighted stone.

"What's so special about now?" McCoy asked with a casualness he did not feel.

N'Kern's deep tones spoke as a death-knell from across the cave. "The orngner favours late afternoon and evening for its hunting, Doctor. You shouldn't have too long to anticipate your death."

McCoy shot him a look that would have turned milk. "Thanks. Nice to know you considered my feelings."

N'Kern executed a mock bow as he rose from his bed. "Stand up, Doctor. Orgon, get the stakes and rope."

There was no answering movement from the seated Nekendi, and Sherak strolled over to prod him with the point of his boot. "N'Kern gave you an order, Orgon. Obey it, or I will 'persuade' you with the point of my knife."

Orgon ignored him - unusual in itself - and stared wide-eyed at N'Kern as he took his hands from his head. "I hear my brother's thoughts."

"I've known for years about the empathy between you," growled N'Kern. "Now stop wasting time, and do as I say."

Orgon stood, his brow furrowed in concentration. "No, you do not understand! I hear him as if he were speaking, as if he were in my mind!"

"Telepathy?" questioned Sherak, glancing at N'Kern. "I cannot believe it should suddenly appear now."

"Neither do I. Orgon, if you - "

The Nekendi was deaf to the veiled threat in N'Kern's voice as he slowly backed away, trying to cope with the newly-awakened talent. "We are one... " he whispered. "His thoughts are mine... He plans to betray us! He is on his way, with two others, to rescue McCoy! I must stop him!"

"No! Come back, you fool!" N'Kern's hand grasped empty air as Orgon eluded his grasp and darted outside. With a curse, the Zendron hurried after him, leaving a momentarily forgotten McCoy standing bewildered in the cave. Sherak returned his questioning gaze with a gesture towards the bed.

"It seems that your execution is postponed, Doctor. Sit down there, and do not move."

McCoy went to obey, but as he did so, the floor shifted beneath his feet, showers of sand trickling from cracks lacing the ceiling. Sherak stared at them, eyes widening as another tremor opened them a fraction wider.

A dull rumbling echoed in the distance, testimony to the destructive power of the earthquake. In the cave, a stack of food containers toppled, taking in their wake the screen shielding Villion's quarters. Sherak glanced at them and back to the entrance, worried that N'Kern might be in trouble.

The next tremor made up his mind for him. He ran outside, leaving McCoy to decide whether to run or try to save Jerry Villion. He hesitated a second too long.

With a tremendous crack and rumble, the cave ceiling gave up its unequal struggle against the heaving mountain and broke, rock and sand pouring in to fill the space.

There was a legend among the Nekendi that when the great planet-wide winds ceased to blow, on that day their world would end. Watching the taut sail strain at its ropes, cloth stretched to its bulging limit, Kirk could well imagine the panic there would be if such a part of everyday life ceased to be.

Coming up on their right side was one of the few mountain ranges on Nekendor, once the home of a cave-dwelling race until the foreign virus wiped them out. Wind erosion had savagely blasted the grey rock, carving weird sculptures in the ancient stone. The foothills stood closely packed as if huddled together for protection against the wind. In such sheltered valleys and slopes as they could provide, stout vegetation grew defiantly. It was here that Dorgo said McCoy was being held.

As the tooma slid into the leeway of the hills, Kirk grasped Dorgo's arm, shouting against the howling wind. "Stop over there behind that outcrop, Dorgo. I don't want your friends to see us too soon."

The Nekendi seemed preoccupied, his eyes wide and staring, but he did as ordered, the vehicle sliding to a halt in the shelter of a rock shelf. The passengers disembarked, Kirk keeping a tight grip on Dorgo's arm.

"Show us the cave - no tricks."

Dorgo tremblingly wiped sweat from his temple, only partly registering Kirk's words. In his mind he could hear whispering voices, words skittering like spiders through his thoughts. He led them along the stone walls, finally indicating a narrow fissure high above.

"That is it. Behind... behind is a wide cave... " His voice trailed off, eyes vacant as he whispered, "O - Orgon?"

As he spoke, the earthquake struck, tearing Dorgo from Kirk's grasp. The earth about them trembled, rocks tumbling down from the heights. The wind screamed, its voice a counterpoint to the heaving ground.

Strangely enough, it never once occurred to Leonard McCoy that he might be dead. One would have thought it might, when his eyes opened on total darkness; when, without warning, he began to move down a long passageway of light, his destination hidden by a blinding glare. Then there came the voices, whispering, barely audible as they spoke in sibilant tones, but McCoy watched and listened with a slight detachment.

He reached the tunnel's end, and the calm accepting mood held him still. A strange warmth seeped through his body, growing even as the light spread, diffusing into grey twilight at the room's edges.

Room?

Yes, it was such, round and cossetting like a mother's womb, and in the twilight, bright jewel eyes twinkled and moved. The whispering ceased.

For an interminable period, nothing moved. The room's silence fell like a shroud, covering the stranger in its midst. McCoy breathed in sweet perfumed air, watching as the jewels moved from the grey into the light.

These bright jewels revealed themselves to be multi-faceted eyes, each one attached to its own purple stalk, weaving to and fro around the round head they belonged to. Below the head grew a transparent body, hovering gracefully above the floor with the aid of manta-ray wings spread paper-thin on the air currents. Three gills pulsed regularly on each side of the neck, four spindly arms moving under the wings. Through the cloudy pulsing organs and round, legless body, McCoy could faintly trace the shape of a long tail. Never in his life had he seen such beautiful, delicate creatures.

Six, seven, finally nine of the creatures hovered around him, their eye stalks interchanging in order to study him from every angle. McCoy returned their scrutiny, his ease slowly replaced by a vague fear common to all creatures in similar situations. The whispers began again, though these creatures possessed no mouths, and once or twice he thought he recognised a word or two. Was that not Klingonese? Or Andorian? A vague snippet of Vulcan, some Nekendian, and then -

"You are Terran?"

He had no way of telling from which creature the question came, so he directed his answer to the one directly before him.

"Yes, I am. My name is McCoy - Dr. Leonard McCoy, uh - Ma'am... "

There was a faint hint of surprise in the high-pitched voice. "Titles of gender are not necessary, Doctor. As time has passed, we have ceased to differentiate between male and female. We are one, all, neither one nor the other. We are the Khrell."

Nodding slightly, McCoy looked about him at the room, a sudden concern striking him as he recalled the immediate past. "My friend - the other Terran - where is he?"

"There was no other."

One of the Khrell floated forward, four of the eyes directed at another Khrell. "Forgiveness, Mentor, but there was another Terran who was crushed under the stones within the cave."

McCoy closed his eyes in pain. For all that had happened, Villion had still been his friend, and although his sudden death prevented a lingering, painful demise, it still hurt.

"No matter. We have one who is suitable. You may take him for Absorbence."

The words shocked him from his grief. "Absorbence?"

Three eyes regarded him. "Yes. Absorbence. Terran, you are fortunate. In avoiding certain death, you have instead become destined for a greater goal. We welcome you, and your contribution to The One."

"Admiral - your shuttle is waiting."

Your shuttle. Yes, and after this short journey would come the confrontation with Nogura, one he was determined to win. He felt the thrill of motivation and the sure knowledge that he, not Decker, was the man to command the Enterprise.

No - wait. Something was wrong... That was past!

Disorientation was overtaken as Kirk pulled himself back into the present. He blinked, mildly musing over the strange return of memories.

Funny how the mind plays tricks.

What the -

He pulled his legs from a mound of earth and stones and looked round,

recognising the shelf of rock he had fallen under during the 'quake. Crawling out into the open, he discovered that apart from a liberal coating of dirt and a few abrasions, he was in one piece. So far so good.

"Captain!"

A surge of relief flooded Kirk as he saw Spock approaching from a rock cleft. It was not until the Vulcan was closer that Kirk remembered that that cut in the mountain had not been there before.

"Well - glad to see we both survived. That was some tremor."

"Indeed. A seismic disturbance of some intensity."

The stoic comment caused Kirk to grin widely. He patted his sleeve, coughing heartily as a cloud of dirt rose up. "Yep, the shit will hit the fan when my tailor sees this."

Spock gave him a customary bland look, but Kirk only shrugged. "Sorry, I should have altered that statement - I forgot your delicate sensibilities."

The Vulcan shot him an insufferably superior look before saying, "I can find no sign of Dorgo."

"Damn." Kirk looked around him at the altered landscape. "I guess we'll have to extend our rescue expedition to include him as well as Eones. I just wish I knew what was behind all this."

"As do I."

The Captain smiled, squinting in the sun's renewed strength. "I thought you enjoyed solving impossible problems, Spock."

"On occasion, but there seems to be little logic in this sequence of events, and I become convinced that they are more than coincidence."

"Same here," murmured Kirk. "Something - or someone - is manipulating us and this planet."

When there was no answer from Spock, he glanced round to see the Vulcan gazing about him, intent on something.

"What is it?"

"Have you not noticed, Jim? The wind has died."

Spock's statement alerted Kirk's senses to an awareness of the total absence of wind, breeze or zephyr. Nekendor was silent, as though some mighty giant had halted the winds with a wave of his hand. Nothing stirred. The planet held its breath.

Everywhere across the globe, natives halted and stared fearfully to the skies. Armageddon had come. One by one, they left their tasks and moved to obey the call throbbing through mind and soul.

Kirk likewise stared at the skies, the still trees, the silent mountains. "What... What's happened? How can the winds stop?"

"Unknown as yet," Spock replied, wishing that he had not lost his

tricorder along with the buried tooma. "However, I would deduce that the force or entity which has interfered with our ship has also caused this phenomenon."

"But why? And what kind of being has such power? Only a - Get down!"

A high-powered phaser beam split the rock beside them, sending splinters of stone showering across both men. Kirk whistled softly, risking a swift glance round the boulder they'd taken shelter behind.

"That was close. If the sun hadn't glinted off the phaser... Are you all right?"

Spock nodded. "Where did the shot come from?"

Kirk was about to point when he thought better of it. "Up the mountainside; in among that ridge of rocks. Looks as if there's only one."

"No. Two or more," differed Spock, gazing at a point not far from the first. "Another metal flash. We seem to be pinned here."

Up on the rocky slope, Sherak's narrowed eyes picked out a head ducking behind a recumbent boulder. So, they had been noticed. However, from what he had seen, the Federation men had no weapons, so there was little cause for concern in that direction. No, the concern lay here, as N'Kern gritted his teeth against the pain of a broken leg. He had been struck by a flying boulder, its weight neatly snapping the tibia in two. Well, at least they were both still alive, but of Orgon there was no sign.

"What's... happening now?" ground N'Kern, too weak to do anything more than direct his phaser in the correct direction.

"The men Orgo brought are still pinned down. They have no weapons." The Vulcan looked anxiously at his friend. "Your leg... "

Pain-filled eyes closed briefly. "Damned sore, Sherak... All right as long as I... don't move. Jerry... the cave... "

"Buried, and Jerry with it. I think McCoy was also caught."

"Saves us some trouble... I hope Jerry died quickly."

"Quicker than he would otherwise," Sherak replied, his calm voice concealing his feelings. "N'Kern, these men... "

"Kill them," the Zendron replied firmly. "Get down there and kill them. I don't want witnesses... "

"Then we leave here, and find you a doctor."

A chuckle grated its way past N'Kern's lips. "That's ironic, my friend. A doctor, and there we were, about to stake out one of that noble profession."

"He made Jerry suffer. It does not matter who or what he was." Sherak rose, firing a volley of shots to keep curious heads down. "Can you cover me?"

"Stupid question," retorted N'Kern, but his friend was already gone.

"Looks as though they're coming to finish us off," remarked Kirk, his eyes on the tall figure approaching from their left.

"It would seem so."

"Any ideas, Spock?"

"Regretfully, none, Jim."

"Lucky I made out my will."

N'Kern sighed and resisted the temptation to close his eyes against the pain. Every tiny muscle sent agonising fire through his frame, and he raged at his helplessness. In his time he had killed countless men, pulled Sherak out of as many traps, and now he was rendered useless by one broken bone.

The scrape of stone against stone broke the silence. He knew Sherak was still making his way downhill, so perhaps the Federation men were not as helpless as they had seemed. He tensed, suddenly twisting his upper torso and phaser towards the sound.

Brilliant white light dazzled his senses, sending him tumbling into catatonic shock. Two members of an ancient and legendary race levitated his body and made their way back towards the tunnel they had emerged from.

In the same way, the three others were swiftly dealt with and transported from the upper world. As the aliens and their captives suddenly disappeared, two Nekendi looked at each other and smiled. Orgon and Oorgo entwined their minds, content to await the arrival of their people.

"This is getting to be a habit," growled the Captain of the Enterprise as his First Officer helped him up.

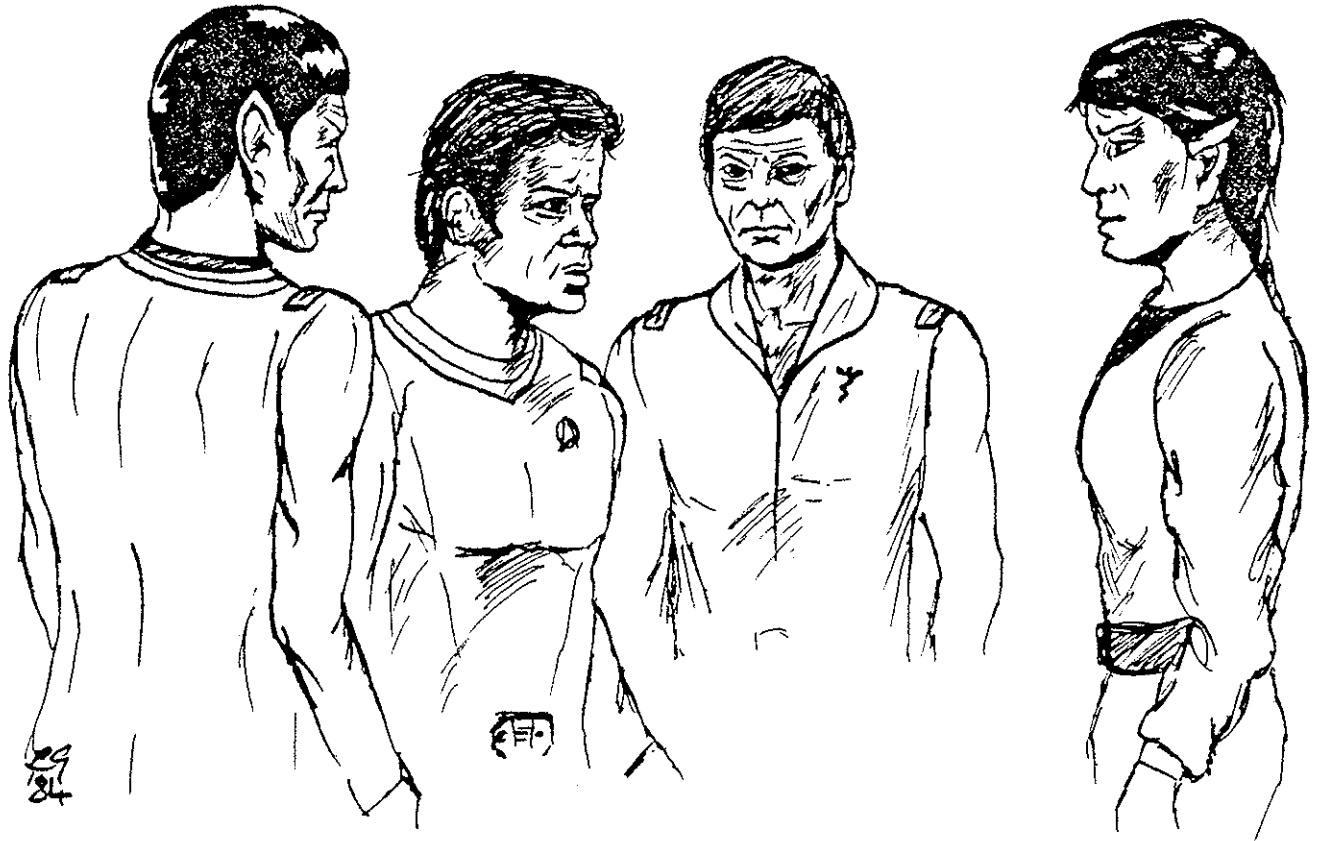
"It seems to be," agreed Spock.

They stood together, Kirk uneasily surveying the same underground room McCoy had encountered before them, sensing as McCoy had the calm atmosphere. As his eyes played over the surroundings, Kirk turned to gaze suspiciously at the two aliens half hidden in the soft twilight.

"Our assailants, I presume."

The large man, who was obviously in some pain, smiled thinly. "You presume correctly, although at the moment, since I am incapacitated and we have no weapons, you needn't worry."

"I had no intention of doing so," Kirk replied softly. "I am curious about the reason for your unfriendliness, though. It wouldn't have anything to do with my Chief Medical Officer, would it? Or am I being overly suspicious?"



N'Kern read the deceptive mildness correctly and exchanged a glance with his companion. Sherak rose from his crouch beside N'Kern's seated form and stood in a relaxed, but threatening, pose.

"Then our interests coincide, although I fear the matter of Dr. McCoy is now a moot point..." Before Kirk could demand a further explanation, the giant continued smoothly, "I am N'Kern, and at my side is the only man in this mad universe I dare trust; Sherak."

The alien moving cat-like from the twilight possessed all the physical characteristics of a Vulcan, his black hair pulled back into a short plait. His lean face was disfigured by a scar on his temple, and deep blue eyes met Spock's.

"You are Spock. I know of you."

"Regrettably, I cannot return the compliment, Sherak," replied Spock. "But since you know me, you have undoubtedly heard of my senior officer Captain James Kirk."

"Ah, of course, the remarkable James Kirk," interjected N'Kern. "I should have guessed that you would come after McCoy."

Kirk strode angrily over. "McCoy is a good officer and friend, Mister! Now I want to know where he is!"

"Safe, Terran. Safe and well."

From the greyness which concealed an entrance floated a member of the Khrell, and beside it walked the very man Kirk was worried about.

"Jim!" cried McCoy, grinning broadly. "I don't believe it! Hell, I don't believe any of this."

"I'm beginning to doubt my sanity too, Bones," smiled Kirk as he greeted his friend.

Spock allowed a warm smile to curve his lips fleetingly as he greeted the doctor with, "It is most gratifying to see you alive and well, Doctor."

"Likewise, Spock... although I don't know how long any of us will stay this way."

"Don't be so pessimistic, McCoy. Maybe your death will be easier than the one we had planned."

McCoy swore and was about to stride across to N'Kern when Kirk stopped him. "We'll sort it out later, Bones. Right now I want to find out what's happening here."

"Jim, you don't know what they were going to do to me!"

"I can guess it wasn't too pleasant, but I've a feeling there is something much more important going on," Kirk told him firmly. "Right now they're in the same situation as we are. We can deal with them when we get back to the Enterprise."

There was a short bark of laughter from N'Kern. "If you get back, Captain. If Sherak's guess is right, none of us have much time left."

"Explain!" snapped Kirk.

"The Time of Renewal," Sherak began evenly, meeting Kirk's direct stare. "It is called that in the ancient legends of the Nekendi, but I have always considered it a curious description for the destruction of the planet.

"According to legend, the winds will cease to blow, and gods will walk among the Nekendi. An Ending will come, and... a Beginning."

"What kind of fool explanation is that?" flared McCoy.

"I am only repeating legends. I do not attempt to explain them."

"Some things... are better left unsaid. To attempt to describe them in words is foolish and time-wasting." Emerging from the twilight hovered four Khrell who joined the one which had remained hidden in the shadows after leading in McCoy. "Outworlders, we welcome you in the name of the One. Your essences will greatly enrich us. Absorbance will commence shortly."

As the others exchanged startled looks, Kirk strode towards the delicate aliens.

"Now wait a minute! I want to know what's going on here. Who are you, and what do you mean by 'absorbance'?"

"We are the Khrell, and once Absorbance has begun, you will become part of the One," replied a gentle voice. "The joining draws near, and our cousins gather. The Time of Renewal is almost here."

"Maybe so, but from what I can gather, we aren't likely to enjoy being part of your 'renewal'. I want to know - "

"Still your voices!"

Another Khrell entered, making its way through the group as its

companions separated in deference. It settled before Kirk, all eyes directed towards him.

"Time passes swiftly, The Joining has begun. The One has spoken and you are not for Absorbence. We will return you to your people. Take those not of this world and go. The One will not prevent you. It regrets its previous actions against your vessel, and has restored that which it took. In the throes of Renewal, confusion troubled the One."

On those words, the Khrell turned as one to leave, but Kirk was not prepared to leave it at that.

"Wait! Can't you at least tell us who, or what, is the One?"

"We have no knowledge of the Khrell," added Spock. "We wish to know more of what is happening. Can you not tell us?"

The one which had spoken paused, its eyes and arms shifting gracefully as it considered. Finally the sibilant voice whispered, "The One cannot be spoken of to Outworlders. We Khrell have dwelt here since the last beginning, protecting our world, tending the One as it grew. Our earth cousins regard us as gods, but we are all of the same beginning.

"Now the Time of Renewal draws close, and all of Nekendor must aid the One. All must join in rapport to be Absorbed. Now you all must leave us."

"And that's it?" interrupted McCoy. "Is that all you're going to tell us?"

"We cannot explain that which cannot be put into words. Now go."

With those words ringing in their ears, their senses were dazzled into unconsciousness as the cavern's light exploded.

When all five came round, they found themselves atop the earth, standing close to the summit of a rocky hill. Kirk blinked at the bright sunlight, glancing towards his First Officer.

"Spock... explanations, if any?"

"None," Spock replied simply, one eyebrow raised.

"Somehow I figured you'd say that... "

"My God... "

They turned to see what had prompted McCoy's hushed exclamation, and found themselves somewhat lost for words.

Across the desert, in ragged lines and scattered groups, the Nekendi strode as one towards the mountains. They did not speak, nor did they pause in their steady progress, but kept determinedly walking towards their goal. Among those who stood at the edge of the foothills were Orgon and Oorgo, side by side.

"Like lemmings... " breathed Kirk. "Single-mindedly marching here. Why?"

"To Join - to be Absorbed," Sherak murmured, captivated by the sight of a planet's children joined in rapport.

Spock nodded slowly, his long face expressing his awe. "You said 'single-minded,' Jim, and that describes it perfectly. They are of one

thought, becoming a multiple mind to give their strength to 'the One'."

"But what is it?" Kirk asked again. "What can command such... commitment?"

As he spoke, a slight tremor ran through the earth; dislodged stones rolled down the slope.

"It would seem we are soon to find out," Spock remarked.

Kirk recalled the Khrell's warning, and raised his communicator. The channel was clear, and open. "Kirk to Enterprise! Five to beam up."

The vista of silent, gathering Nekendi was replaced by that of the familiar transporter room, and Kirk bounded across to where Scott stood, confusion written across his face.

"Captain! I canna understand this! Just afore ye called, we found the transporter circuits had somehow repaired themselves, we're suddenly back to full power, and - "

"I know, Scotty, I know," Kirk said as he interrupted the flow. "I haven't any time for explanations, but take my word for it that the systems are working perfectly. I want you to contact all our people on the surface and all the colonists. Commence beaming them up immediately, no arguments, no ifs or buts from them. I'll be on the bridge should you need me."

Bemused and bewildered, the Chief Engineer prepared to do so, while the Captain and First Officer left the room.

"Do you think we have enough time?" asked Spock as the door slid back."

"Let's hope so, Spock. Let's hope so... "

Scott looked from the panel to McCoy for some sense in the confusion. "Leonard, what's going on?"

"Don't ask me," shrugged McCoy. "I'm just a simple country doctor. Put a call to Medical for some medics, will you, Scotty?"

Commander Scott gave up expecting a logical answer and turned to obey his orders.

"Captain, what is happening here? I had to leave my patients, medical equipment, everything! Why were we evacuated without prior warning?"

Kirk held up his hands to quieten Chapel's strident queries, ones which had been repeated constantly throughout the past thirty minutes. "Dr. Chapel, everything will be explained soon. Meanwhile, watch. Lt. Commander Uhura, is everyone off Nekendor?"

The Bantu woman turned towards him, her eyes expressing the same questions and concern as others on the bridge. "Yes, Captain. The last group just beamed up, but Dr. Tavener demands to speak with you."

"Tell him later, Uhura. What's about to happen will explain itself. Lt. DiFalco, take us as far from Nekendor as possible while allowing the scanners and sensors full recording capability. I have a feeling we are about to see something... unforgettable."

Silence settled aboard the great Starship as she held her position at a safe distance from Nekendor. Every being stilled their activity, even those in the midst of the chaos caused by the sudden beam-up. Drawn by a calling outwith their hearing, they gathered round the viewscreens in anticipation of something they could not define. Planet and ship... waited.

Colours first. A changing of Nekendor's atmosphere, a blending of auras rippling outward from the inner core. Then a heaving and tearing of the planet's crust as something strove to be free. The colour changes increased with the convulsions, each one stronger than the last. Renewal!

From within Nekendor came an increasing light, palpable in its brilliance. With the light came an aching, unbearable emotion which touched the souls of all on board. None could describe it, none would feel its intensity again as long as they lived.

Freedom! Sensations, wondrous, fantastical sensations... and all the time the light and colour and emotion bombarded every sense. It called to them all, touching each mind fleetingly with an immensity of love and a brief glimpse of its purity. Some cried out, others wept, and some stood silent in the glory.

Renewal, rebirth, freedom, hope, love... And then - it was gone.

EPILOGUE

"... The experience is impossible to describe. It was certainly unforgettable, yet my limited Human mind even now has dimmed the memory. The One was born, renewed, whatever the scientists may wish to call it. In return for the soul-essence of the Nekendi and Khrell, it has somehow recreated Nekendor as it was many centuries ago. I have no doubt that on that new planet we shall find Nekendi, Khrell, and, within the core, the first beginnings of another... entity. Certainly this is not the first such occurrence. I feel privileged to have been a witness to this, and more than a little over-awed."

Kirk flicked off the switch of his log recorder and sank back into his chair. It was still a little difficult to believe, but he knew it had happened. Even V'ger's transformation paled beside this. Of all his mixed emotions, the one he could firmly pinpoint was humility before the One's majesty.

"Ah - a visitor. How gratifying to realise that we are of interest after all."

N'Kern's light sarcasm fell on deaf ears as McCoy entered, having assured the guard outside that he was not likely to be accosted. He stood close to the door, leaving a barrier of empty space between him and the two prisoners.

It was N'Kern who broke the silence. "A social visit, McCoy? Or one to inform us - unofficially - of our fate?"

"That depends on you," McCoy replied cagily.

"Come to the point, Doctor. I tire of cryptic conversation."

The Enterprise's doctor looked from one to the other. "You two kidnapped me on Nekendor, and if the One hadn't got in the way, you would have left me to die. If I press charges, you could both finish up on a penal colony. If I don't... you might either disappear from my life, or try to finish what you started. I want to know which it's going to be."

"Why not press your Federation charges and be done with it," Sherak retorted.

"Because I've already caused the death of one man, dammit!" snapped McCoy. "Do you think I want to incarcerate his friends too?"

"We don't know," murmured N'Kern. "Do you?"

McCoy sighed, stepping across the invisible barrier to N'Kern's bed. "I knew Jerry Villion too," he said quietly. "I knew him before he got mixed up in a criminal life. When I discovered him trading in men's lives, I couldn't believe it. He offered me a way out; join his crew - but I couldn't do that, knowing that Spock and the others were being transported to some Klingon hell-hole to be tortured for their knowledge. As things turned out, the decision was taken out of my hands." He paused, staring at an image from years gone past. "Starfleet pressed for a trial. I was the key witness; Jerry had told me the whole operation... "

"And you condemned him to death!" N'Kern interrupted angrily.

"Do you think I *wanted* that? How could I have foreseen that happening? Come to that, if you hadn't rescued him, he might have been treated in time... Jerry was my friend. I didn't want him to go to prison, but there was no way I could prevent it. If I'd known it was to finish the way it did, I... " His voice trailed off as he looked to them both for understanding. "I had no choice. I kept trying to find another way, but there was none. I *couldn't* condone what he was doing."

Silence followed his words, but at last from Sherak's direction came a quiet, firm declaration. "I understand. We all have painful choices to make, whether for duty or honour." He looked to his friend. "N'Kern, I think that in his own way, McCoy too has suffered."

The Zendron reluctantly nodded, his grey eyes on McCoy's revealing expression. "We have all lost a good friend. Maybe that is enough. Dr. McCoy, you have our word we will not attempt to carry out Jerry's request."

McCoy smiled and drawled, "Well, I'm sure glad to hear that!"

"I, too."

All three cast surprised eyes to the Vulcan standing in the doorway.

"Just settling a few differences, Spock," murmured McCoy.

"I surmised as much." The First Officer walked in. "I happened to be passing, and wished to satisfy my curiosity on a small point." He looked at his fellow Vulcan. "Sherak... your records show you have a distinguished career in the world of criminality, but nowhere is there mention of how you came to begin such a career. I would be interested to know of your beginnings, if I may."

Sherak gave him a frosty glare, then shrugged lightly. "Why not? After all, when I am dead, who will care?"

"I wished a woman, T'vel, for my wife, but she was promised to another... "

"She challenged at Kal-i--far?" interrupted Spock."

"That is so. I was her champion. I won - but her parents did not consider me a suitable husband. Her father had considerable influence... I escaped with my life, and this... reminder." He traced the scar with one finger.

"There are ways to fight such injustice," Spock said mildly. "T'vel was, by law, yours."

"And I was poor, of low rank, and of... dubious upbringing." Sherak smiled bitterly. "In the end, perhaps I would not have given T'vel the life she deserved. In fleeing Vulcan, I discovered my true talents."

"Which are many and varied, if the records are to be believed," Spock murmured drily.

"Oh, they are," N'Kern assured him laughingly, and he and Sherak exchanged a knowing look.

Kirk was wakened from a light doze by a buzz at the door. *Probably Bones or Spock*, he thought. "Come."

McCoy entered, clutching his Saurian brandy in one hand and two glasses in the other. He smiled widely. "After an experience like the One, there's no excuse not to have a drink!"

"How true... " Kirk cleared room on the desk for the bottle and glasses and watched McCoy's expression as he uncorked the brandy.

"Bones, about Sherak and N'Kern. Do you want - "

"No." came the firm reply. "I don't want to press charges. Jerry Villion is dead now, and all three of us have lost a friend. I don't want them to live the same death as Jerry because of me."

"What if they come after you again?"

"They won't," replied the doctor, handing Kirk a full glass. "We had a talk, and I think they have enough sense not to spend their lives avenging a ghost for the sake of past loyalties."

"I hope you're right... " Kirk murmured. He raised his glass. "A toast! To the One - whatever he/she may be."

"I'll drink to that. And another toast - to the best damn Captain Starfleet ever had."

Kirk frowned. "Bones... "

"Shaddup! If they don't realise by now what they're messin' around with, then we'll just have to put them straight!"

"Uh - pardon?"

McCoy's eyes twinkled as he sipped his brandy. "Why, Jim-boy," he drawled. "If Starfleet don't reinstate you immediately, you've got friends

in high places. No-one is going to argue with the One!"

"I'll drink to *that*," laughed Kirk.

