

Scotpress

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Stories by

8 Sheila

Clark

A STAR TREK
FANZINE

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS 8

Stories by Sheila Clark

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

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise Incidents 8.

It's been a long time since we printed an issue containing my stories. Not that there weren't any; these stories - in their original form - were all written more than ten years ago. Indeed, I could say that they were among the first STAR TREK stories that I ever wrote. Several of them were written for Janet in the first year I knew her. They were never printed because - even then - I felt that they were not good enough to submit anywhere.

However, they were sitting there doing nothing, and recently I began to feel that it might be possible to do something with them - certainly an edit, and in some cases a rewrite, because the ideas were all right; it was the lack of writing experience that had left them flawed. Much of that first version of at least one turned out to be more of a story outline, and the events of the first half page expanded to ten pages...

These are not the only stories I have from those early days that have never been printed. One or two are so bad that I have no intention of ever trying to rewrite them or even reuse the plots, but there are a couple that - eventually - I hope to get rewritten for inclusion in ENTERPRISE - LOG ENTRIES; plus one that we intend to incorporate in VARIATIONS ON A THEME 9. Eventually.

Unfortunately, we've had to increase the price slightly. Although our new printer has prices that are quite comparable with what we had been paying, he is a little dearer than the old one.

We also have a general apology to make. We've always felt that the standard of spelling in our zines was quite high - but it turns out it wasn't quite as high as we thought it was. We've had a spelling program for some time, which did help to cut down on typos, but just a week or two ago Janet got a new spelling dictionary for her computer, and to try it ran through the files of the two most recent zines - E-LE 73 and this one, for which the masters were already printed... and found at least a dozen mistakes. One of them was a correct variant, one was a possible variant, but all but one of the others were words that either Valerie or I - or both! - had thought were properly spelled. The exception was a typo that had slipped through.

The question of variant spelling, where there are two possibilities either of which is correct, is a difficult one, for it can mean that two writers who have stories in the same zine can spell the same word in two different ways; so we have decided that from now on, when faced with any of those words, we'll stick with one of the choices, probably the one that is in Janet's new spelling program.

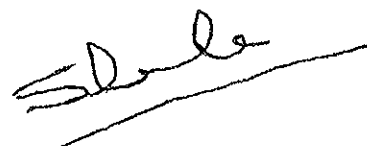
As always, we're looking for submissions for inclusion in ENTERPRISE - LOG ENTRIES or for publication as a single zine. No death of main characters, K/S or movie-based stories, please, or stories about other ships; these are, after all, 'The voyages of the Starship Enterprise...'

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ABDUCTION



The shore leave party on Argelius had visited a number of pleasure houses; and had lost several of their number en route. Now only Kirk and McCoy were left; and Kirk, free at last from the encumbering presence of his junior officers, was feeling like enjoying the chief entertainment offered by the planet.

The two officers paused at the entrance to a particularly opulent-looking establishment. Rhythmic music pulsed inside; through the half-open door they could see the swirl of colour as a dancer gyrated, tantalisingly. A glance passed between them; then by mutual consent, they moved inside.

They ordered drinks, and sat watching the dancers. Before long, one of the girls paused in her twirling dance to sway seductively before McCoy. The surgeon glanced almost apologetically at Kirk, who grinned back.

"Go on, Bones, enjoy yourself."

McCoy rose. The girl caught his hand and led him out. Kirk sat back, to look over the other girls consideringly. Even though none of them had made a move to come to him as yet, he could still invite one of them to partner him. None of them really tempted him, however; he wanted someone a little more... delicate in her approach, he decided, not one so blatantly suggestive as this dance made these girls. He remembered a place he had found once before, and a girl there...

Kirk tossed a coin onto the table, and left unhurriedly.

The various members of the landing party beamed back to the ship in varying states of intoxication; and because there was a change of watch midway through the period when the off-duty officers were returning, it was not until Kirk failed to appear on the bridge next morning that anyone realised that he had not returned.

Spock hesitated for some minutes after Kirk's continued absence was reported to him. It was unlike the Captain to be late, but Kirk would not, Spock knew, appreciate it if a search were initiated to discover that for once Kirk had overslept somewhere on the planet after a strenuous night; yet an instinct that he trusted told Spock that there was a more sinister explanation than that for Kirk's failure to report back to the Enterprise. After thinking about it carefully, the First Officer decided to ask McCoy's opinion.

He found the ship's Chief Medical Officer looking slightly the worse for wear, as if he were in need of his own medication, with slightly bloodshot eyes and an obvious lack of energy. The surgeon regarded Spock unenthusiastically, the Vulcan's attitude of buoyant sobriety clearly offending him. But Spock's first words - so different from the ones McCoy had been expecting to hear - quickly shook the last of the liquor fumes from his mind.

"Last night, Doctor - when did you last see the Captain?"

"Huh?"

"The Captain has not returned, but because of some carelessness when the watch changed, his absence was not reported to me until this morning. When did you last see him?"

McCoy gathered his wits together, and gave Spock the required information, adding -

"So I went off with the girl. When I got back to the dance area, Jim had gone. I asked if he was still there, and the attendant said he'd left, alone, a while before. I didn't think anything of it... Spock, you don't think Jim's in trouble?"

"I don't really know what to think, Doctor."

The man lying on the filthy bunk regained consciousness to a throbbing headache. He blinked his eyes open cautiously, wincing as the light, dim though it was, dazzled him. He looked round.

He was in an untidy windowless room lit by a bare light bulb. There was something familiar - yet at the same time utterly unfamiliar - about the unpleasant little room. He looked with distaste at the rubbish littering the floor, his nose wrinkling in disgust at the stale, unpleasant stench that assailed his nostrils. There were three other bunks in the horrible little room, each as dirty as the others, all empty. He shouldn't be here, should he? His brow wrinkled in a frown of bewilderment. With a sudden stab of fear, he realised that he could not remember his own name. Who was he? Where was he? He looked down at himself with the sudden conviction that the sight of his clothes might help him to remember.

It didn't. He was wearing an anonymous grey coverall, as dirty as his surroundings, that he was irrationally certain was not his normal garb.

He was sitting on the bunk, elbows on his knees, his head resting on his hands, when the door was kicked open.

Two men stood there. They were dressed similarly, in grey trousers and dark blue shirts; and one held a length of thin knotted rope in his hand.

The puzzled man in the dirty coverall stared up at them. "Where... where am I?"

The man with the rope showed his teeth in a mirthless grin. "And that's the only question you're allowed, buster. You're on board the Ranger now. I'm Officer Derwent, your boss; and I only tell you things once. If you're clever, you'll learn fast. Otherwise..." He swished the knotted rope meaningfully. "Now - what's your name?"

"I'm... I can't remember." He sounded astonished.

Derwent strode forward. He grabbed the chest of the coverall in one brawny hand, ignoring the involuntary yelp as he caught a fold of skin as well, and yanked the hapless man to his feet. "Don't get funny with me, crewman."

"I can't remember... anything."

Derwent pushed him away roughly, scornfully. "This one won't be much use for a while," he growled, glancing at his fellow officer. "Speaks too grand to be used to working hard. All right, Dummy. We'll see how much good you are. Out!" He nodded doorwards with a sharp gesture.

The man who would now be called Dummy obeyed. There was no point in resisting; and outside this unappealing room he might learn something that would help him remember...

Unhesitating as his obedience was, it seemed that Derwent was not satisfied with Dummy's speed; for as the man passed him, Derwent struck him across the shoulders as hard as he could with the knotted rope. The unnecessariness and unexpectedness of the blow added to its effect.

Dummy gasped at the sudden unexpected pain, a hand clenching involuntarily. The sight of this incipient rebellion pleased Derwent; it gave him an excuse, little though he needed one, to exercise his sadism. The knotted rope fell again across the new crewman's shoulders, and again and again...

A blow - perhaps it was misjudged - caught Dummy across the head, causing a sharp pain out of proportion to the force of the blow, vicious as it was. Dummy cowered away, trying to protect his head, whimpering softly in shock.

The other officer caught Derwent's arm after a minute. "That's enough, Derwent - you don't want to kill him - not yet, anyway. Get our money's worth out of him first!"

Derwent hesitated.

"All right, Varen," he growled. "Now you, Dummy - that's not a fraction of what you'll get if I ever see the slightest sign of disobedience again. Get it?"

Dummy, half-stunned, managed to nod weakly.

Dummy was set to work immediately in the cargo hold of the Ranger. The work seemed to his dazed, half-awake mind to be totally unnecessary, but he was set to join three others who were wearily moving heavy packing cases. Derwent checked the contents, then set the four men to restack the huge boxes, which were almost beyond even the combined strength of the four of them to shift easily, and Derwent's knotted rope was used freely.

Several times it caught Dummy on the head, slashing across the head wound that he had discovered but could not remember sustaining; just as it caught the others direct on various cuts and sores. Other times it fell across their bodies, frequently catching already inflicted bruises, so that movement itself became agonising. Dummy suffered it in silence for a while, but after one particularly vicious cut he turned on his tormentor, fists clenched.

He was stopped by the knotted rope catching him across the face, a blow that barely missed his eye. After that, wisdom prevailed again and he crouched back, trying to protect his head with his arms. Derwent let the rope fall where it would and only stopped when at last his arm was tired. The other three cowered back too, glad that they were not the objects of the sadistic officer's attention, more than glad of a rest. When at last the rope ceased to fall, Dummy's body was an aching mass. He was given no respite, however.

They were lashed back to work.

At last they were released, to stumble painfully and wearily back to the filthy cabin they shared. Dummy looked round it with disgust, now appreciating why it was in such a state; its occupants, after being worked as they were, were in no fit state to do anything but collapse on their bunks in exhaustion when they stopped work. But they could at least keep it tidy, surely.

He made an attempt to clean the floor slightly by gathering all the debris together, but was unable to do more; when he asked, no-one knew where he could dispose of it, and he was told, frankly, that Derwent would not like it if he asked anyone else. Each of them, it seemed, had made such an attempt on first coming aboard - but it appeared that the officers on the Ranger wanted to keep the crewmen living in squalor; it kept them dispirited. The death rate among the crew was very high; none of them had been aboard more than a few months, and the one who had been there longest was a very sick man who frequently vomited blood.

"Don't you get any medical attention?" Dummy asked, puzzled, a faint memory trying to surface.

The sick man shook his head.

When mealtime arrived - they were fed only once a day - Dummy found that for him, there was no meal. Derwent had ordered that for the next week, the rebellious, mutinous Dummy should get no food.

The other officers took no part in the ill-treatment of the four cargo handlers; it was no concern of theirs how Derwent handled his section. They had their own sections to oversee; and while their treatment of their men was less brutal than Derwent's, it was still harsh.

As the week progressed, Dummy, weakened by lack of food combined with the over hard work, became the subject of more and more beatings as he failed to accomplish his workload to Derwent's satisfaction. He was dimly aware that this brutality was not necessary; that it was the result of a sadistic pleasure in causing suffering.

Something in him rebelled at the incessant bullying, and only the realisation that any more defiance on his part would result in increasingly severe punishment kept Dummy from attacking his tormentor. That and the knowledge that the other officers would unhesitatingly support their fellow and that he could not win. His fellow crewmen - they could almost be called slaves - would not help; their spirit was broken.

By now he had discovered where he was. He was on board a tramp freighter, one of the freelance ships that was normally owned by its Captain, and that paid only lip service to Federation laws. Such ships were difficult to crew - Dummy fully appreciated why - and were frequently manned by men kidnapped from the back streets of general spaceports. The discovery cheered him slightly; surely someone, somewhere, knew that he was missing? But even if they did... did anyone care enough for him to bother trying to discover where he had gone? Had he friends or family to worry about him?

On board a Starship now many light years away, several people were worrying quite considerably. Spock had delayed only a few

minutes before yielding to the instinct that told him Jim was in trouble. A thorough search of the town proved blank; the earth might have opened up and swallowed the Captain of the Enterprise. Spock began to consider how to extend the search.

They were handicapped even before they started, however; a man in the uniform of a Starfleet Captain was a conspicuous object, but Kirk had, for once, been wearing civilian clothes.

An investigation of all means of transport out of the city revealed nothing. No stranger had left the city by any of these, and it was unheard-of for anyone to leave on foot.

Spock began to worry about murder.

The ship's entire Security section beamed down to make a second intensive search of the back streets and alleys and the surrounding countryside, but it revealed nothing. The crew of the Enterprise became more and more edgy; only Spock appeared to remain his normal calm self, his very calm serving to quieten the anxiety of some of the crew and irritate others. Only in the privacy of his cabin did he permit himself to relax and no-one seeing him then could have doubted that his worry exceeded that of any three of the others put together - with the possible exception of McCoy, who was becoming more and more irascible as hour followed hour with no news.

Jaris of Argelius proved to be another irritant with his quiet, ineffectual, resigned sympathy. Even Hosea, the Terran who had replaced the unlamented Hengist and who didn't know Kirk, was annoyed by Jaris' reaction.

"My job's made ten times harder by attitudes like yours!" Hosea burst out on the evening of the second day after a particularly philosophic comment by the Argelian. "Dammit, if you'd think a bit more about other people and less about having a good time, your whole rotten planet would be better off! O.K., you don't have much crime, but what there is is foul - and what help do I get to discover the criminals? No wonder so many of your crimes are unsolved! Well, this one I do mean to solve.

"Quite apart from anything else, have you thought what the unexplained disappearance of a Starship Captain in your main city will do to your planet's relationship with the Federation? Come down to earth for once!"

Hosea turned to the Enterprise officers. "There have been several other disappearances over the last few months," he explained. "Mostly they were locals - one or two were crewmen off freighters - and I've made inquiries, but this planet has a population of the galaxy's most dedicated defeatists. I've a few ideas, though, and now I can twist an arm or two; there's a big difference between a starship captain and an unskilled general crewman who is shrugged off by everyone as a deserter seduced by the fleshpots of Argelius. I'll find out what happened, all right."

Hosea was as good as his word. It took him four more days, but he eventually contacted the Enterprise. Spock called McCoy in to hear Hosea's report.

"There are a few immigrants living here," Hosea began. "They're mostly dropouts from other worlds. They don't usually fit in here

either - this is a completely hedonistic society but that doesn't mean that a man can just lie back and do nothing. Misfits from other worlds usually find that they can't adjust to a life here either; by definition they'll be discontented with the status quo wherever they go. However, a lot stay for lack of somewhere better to go. Money becomes a bit of a problem after a while for most of them - and that's where most of the criminal class comes from. So I'd a fair idea of where to start looking.

"Your Captain was shanghaied and sold to the Captain/owner of a tramp freighter - like the rest of the people who've disappeared recently. I couldn't find out for certain **which** tramp - but the Ranger left orbit early on the morning Captain Kirk was reported missing, so I'd guess that's your ship."

"What was the Ranger's filed destination?" Spock asked.

"There isn't one, sir. Those tramps are just that; they intercept a sub-space message about a mining discovery or a good grain crop or whatever, and if they reckon it's to their advantage, they divert. All I can tell you is that they left on course four two seven mark three."

"Thank you, Mr Hosea. You have been most helpful. What of the kidnapers?"

"As immigrant Argelians, they are subject to Argelian law, Commander. Argelian punishments are... vicious - the statute books haven't been changed in centuries; it's not been worth the Argelians' while to bother, since the natives are basically law-abiding nowadays, whatever they might have been in the past. These men will suffer far more than if a Federation court tried them, believe me; and even in the name of humanity, the Federation cannot intervene. And frankly, I have no sympathy for them."

The Enterprise swung gracefully out of orbit on to course four two seven mark three, and proceeded at Warp six. At this speed, so much in excess of the fastest any freighter could manage, the Starship soon overhauled a tramp. It could only be the Ranger.

Spock studied the tramp as she hung in the viewscreen. The vessel's once beautiful lines were marred by blemishes where inadequate shielding had permitted tiny meteors to impact and by a carelessly done repair that had, in addition, been left unpainted. It would take very little to destroy this ship entirely. The sight prepared him somewhat for his first contact with the Ranger's personnel.

As the Enterprise matched her speed to the freighter's, Spock glanced back at Uhura.

"Open a channel, Lieutenant."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"Spock, commanding the Starship Enterprise, to tramp freighter Ranger."

The face that appeared on the screen was unwashed, unshaved, and generally gross. It gave the appearance of dissipation and self-indulgence.

"Shira, owner. What the hell d'ye want?"

"We understand you shipped at least one new crewman at Argelius, Mr Shira, and from our information we believe that he may be one of our men, who went missing the night before you left. We... request... permission to board you and search for him."

Every eye on the bridge was fixed on the scowling face on the screen, and the combined expression of shock - and, yes, fear - that passed across the unpleasant face was unmistakable.

"What makes ye think yer deserter is aboard my ship?" It was clearly recognisable, even to Spock, as bluster.

"He is not a deserter, Mr. Shira - we have good reason to believe that he was abducted. As for his being aboard your ship, we have investigated every other possibility."

"I won't have it, d'ye hear me? Ye've no right to nosy about in my ship -"

"If you have nothing to hide, Mr. Shira, why object?"

"It's a... an infringement of my rights -"

"Even tramp freighters are subject to Federation authority, little though you might like it, Mr. Shira. Without us you would not have the freedom of movement that you presently enjoy. I have the right to insist on boarding you to look for our missing officer."

"And if I refuse?"

"We do have the capacity to disable you while we make our search, Mr. Shira. All we need to do is use the ship's phasers to stun everyone on board, then we may look for our colleague at our leisure."

Shira cursed, violently and fluently.

"Do I take it that you have decided to permit us to board?" From a Human, the question might have been slightly mocking; from Spock, it sounded like a straight question - although McCoy, present on the bridge as a matter of course to find out what was happening, knowing his Spock, glanced sharply at him, suspecting sarcasm.

"Yes, damn ye!"

Spock went himself, taking McCoy and ten Security men. The guards scattered through the ship in pairs, while Spock and McCoy requested Shira's company as they also searched.

Their search eventually took them into the cargo area. Packing cases were littering the floor untidily in a hopelessly inefficient muddle; a single ill-tempered looking officer was working there, apparently checking cargo. The Enterprise officers looked round disapprovingly.

Satisfied that there was no-one else there, Spock turned to leave; McCoy hesitated. Something struck him as false here. Then he realised. In the other areas they had seen, there had been one or two crewmen working dispiritedly, at tasks that seemed unnecessary;

here, where it seemed necessary to have someone working, there was no-one. He said so.

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "Well, Mr. Shira?"

"We're... We're short-handed, Commander. We've no cargo handlers just now..."

"Couldn't you put some of the men doing make-work in other areas into here, at least until the cargo is safely stowed?" Spock asked. He looked straight at Shira, as the tramp's owner stammered unintelligibly, and went on, his voice colder than McCoy had ever thought it possible for the Vulcan to sound. "I would be obliged if you would stop wasting our time, Mr. Shira. I do not blame you for the kidnapping, little though I relish your way of recruiting; but I do not intend to continue playing games while you pretend that our missing friend is not on board. I want him - now."

Shira paled. The menace in the hitherto urbane officer's voice was unmistakable and rendered even more deadly by the fact that Spock made no threats. Unlike many bullies, Shira was no coward; but he knew, without any doubt, that on this occasion at least, the time had come to surrender.

The four men in the filthy cabin lay on their bunks, surprised by the unexpected order to knock off and make themselves scarce but glad of the extra rest. Even the fact that they had heard a key turn outside, locking them in, failed to rouse them to curiosity.

Now, when the key grated in the lock again, they sat up wearily, sure that they were being called back to work... and stared in utter bewilderment at the blue and red shirts in the doorway.

"Jim!" McCoy sprang forward, but before he reached his Captain he faltered, realising that Kirk was far from all right. His exuberant greeting changed instantly to medical concern; on the last two steps he whipped out his medical scanner and ran it over the Captain, his lips tightening as he interpreted the readings. "We'll soon have you back on the ship, Jim..."

They also took the three other crewmen; at Shira's objection Spock told him that if he had any complaints, to deliver them straight to Starfleet Command. Shira shut up rather quickly, already worried about what might happen. Little though he cared for the Federation's laws, he realised that he did need them; he had no wish to find his ship black-listed so that no Federation planet would give him trade again, and he had already decided that if necessary he would throw Derwent to the lions and pass all the blame onto him.

Spock and McCoy stood, one on each side of the sickbay bed, staring down at Kirk's naked body, horrified by the mass of bruises on bruises that covered their friend's body. Kirk's eyes were closed in sedated sleep.

"Someone has been beating him regularly," McCoy said, clinically impersonal. "Someone who knew a fair amount about the Human nervous and muscular system. See these concentrated patches of bruises. All

are covering areas where any movement - walking, lifting, even getting up and sitting down - will cause pain, if the muscles are strained or bruised. His body's going to be a most uncomfortable thing to live in for a few days, even with painkillers to help him. In addition, there's the head injury. It's been aggravated some way. The other three are in much the same condition," he added parenthetically. "And one of them has a stomach condition that I may not be able to cure, it's so far advanced. But even if all I can do for him is make his death easier, I've accomplished something. I'd like to get my hands on the man responsible for all this," he added, indicating the bruises.

"The Captain did not know us," Spock said, tension noticeable in his voice.

McCoy nodded. "An amnesiac condition probably caused by the head injury. With rest it should improve."

Kirk's eyes blinked open. McCoy smiled down at him. "Easy, Jim. You're safe now. You'll be on your feet again in a day or two."

Kirk's lips moved in a faint responding smile. He looked on past McCoy to Spock. The Vulcan, realising that something concrete was needed here to reassure his friend, permitted himself to smile slightly as well; unnecessarily, had he known. The warmth already in his eyes was all the reassurance Kirk needed. Even although Kirk could not recognise them, he could recognise their obvious concern.

His eyes moved on round the room. There was a haunting familiarity about the place, although he didn't stop to think about that; what was of more immediate importance was the simple fact that everything was clean. It all looked clean and - wonder of wonders - it smelt clean. It was with a strange feeling of physical well-being caused by the pleasantness of his surroundings that he closed his eyes and slept again.

Kirk lay still for a minute when he awoke, delaying opening his eyes, glad to be awake. That had been some nightmare! It had even left him with a residual headache. A hand caught his, and he opened his eyes, surprised.

He was lying in sickbay; his First Officer, sitting beside him, was holding his hand.

"Spock?" he asked.

Visible relief passed over the Vulcan's face. "How do you feel, Captain?"

Kirk made a face. "As if a herd of stampeding buffalo had charged right over me."

"I'll call Dr. McCoy to give you a painkiller." The voice was quiet and very gentle.

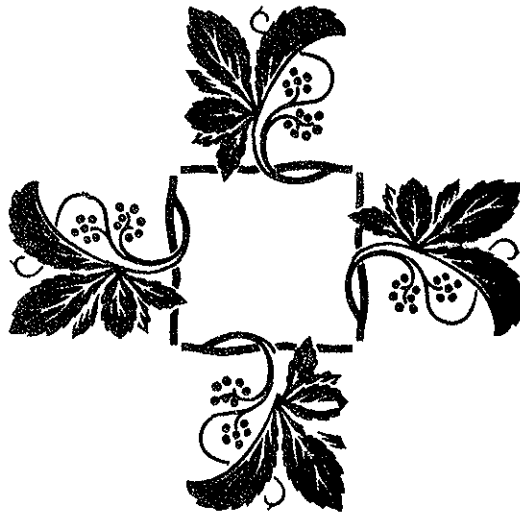
"No, wait. Spock... I dreamed that I'd been kidnapped and made to work on a cargo ship..."

"You didn't dream it, Jim. It really happened. It took us almost a week to find you." He took a deep breath. His grip on

Kirk's hand tightened slightly for a moment, then he released it. "I'll get McCoy - he's checking the other men we rescued from that hell-ship."

Under the peaceful influence of the painkiller, Kirk drifted off to sleep again, lulled by the memory of the warmth in his friends' eyes.

Of course he had friends to worry about him...



THE FALCON INCIDENT

"Captain Leibstein! There's been an explosion in the engine room!" The voice from the intercom, urgent but not panicked, rose above the wail of the alarm.

"How serious?"

"Don't know yet, sir, but we're losing power. We'll have to heave to for a while to check out the damage."

"I'll be right down. Mr. Dawson, come with me."

The Captain and First Officer of the U.S.S. Falcon, the starship recently commissioned to replace the Constellation, made their way to the engine room with a tired resignation. The Falcon was still on her shakedown cruise, and so far practically nothing had gone right.

At first sight, there was very little damage. The engine room crew, to a man - including personnel who would normally have been off duty - was checking out everything, each man doing a check - or back-up check - of the equipment he normally handled, despite the fact that only one component showed any real sign of damage.

"Anyone hurt, Mr. Lun?"

The Chinese Chief Engineer said quietly, "Two men were slightly injured, Captain. I've sent them to sickbay."

Satisfied on that score, Leibstein went on. "What caused it?"

"Difficult to say, sir. This is one of the units that's given us most trouble. It appears that a component here - " he indicated a fused lump of metal " - short circuited. That caused a surge of power to here -" he indicated a shattered piece of metal difficult to identify as machinery " - and it couldn't take the load."

"Any idea what caused the short circuit in the first place?"

"No, sir. I'll get this replaced and run a few tests. That might give us a clue. But seriously, my recommendation now would be that we abandon the cruise, head straight back to Earth and get the whole thing taken out and replaced. They used to speak about Monday morning cars a couple of hundred years ago - vehicles that never ran properly, no matter how much work was done on them. I think this is a Monday morning engine."

Leibstein grunted. "I'll take that as a recommendation, Mr. Lun. Any other damage?"

"Not as far as we can see, Captain."

"Carry on, then. Call me when you're ready to start the tests."

Leibstein turned to leave, the First Officer at his heels, as Lun began to disconnect the fused unit. They had taken only half a dozen steps when the machinery on which the Chief Engineer was working blew in a tremendous explosion.

On the bridge, the Communications Officer stiffened in agony as a surge of power shot through his equipment, electrocuting him before it short-circuited the board. The helmsman screamed once, and slumped, dead. Every officer who was touching equipment died in the vicious surge of power that shot through the Falcon then failed, leaving the ship virtually without power and with most of its officers and all of its engineers except the two in sickbay, dead.

"Captain," Uhura said sharply, "I'm picking up what appears to be a distress signal in old Morse code.

"Morse?" Kirk exclaimed. "That was scrapped years ago."

"I know, sir. This is just the three letters, S.O.S., repeated on an automatic signal. Even if there was more, though, I doubt I would be able to understand more than a fraction of it. We had to learn the old codes at the Academy, but you do forget things you never need to use."

"Yes, I know. Can you pinpoint its position?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give Mr. Sulu the bearings, then. Warp six, Mr. Sulu."

"Warp six, sir."

"Mr. Spock. Are there any other Federation vessels known to be in this area?"

Spock thought for a moment. "The Falcon could be fairly close, Captain. Her shakedown cruise took her from Earth to Bracco, returning from there to Starbase Fourteen. She should be in this sector by now."

"And that's the only one?"

"The only Federation vessel, Captain."

"Well, I shouldn't think a Starship would be sending out a Morse S.O.S."

"It is possible that it could be another old sleeper ship, like the Botany Bay," Spock suggested.

"Are there any more of those ships unaccounted for?"

"There was no record of the Botany Bay, if you remember, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "I had forgotten that," he muttered, ever so slightly sheepishly.

"However, the probability is that it is an old ship," Spock continued. "The signal is automatic - most likely the crew is all dead."

"If that is the case... well, the ship is still a hazard to other vessels. Lieutenant Uhura."

"Aye, sir?"

"The Falcon should be in the area. See if you can contact her. If she's nearer the signalling vessel than we are, Captain Leibstein can deal with it."

"Aye, sir." She turned back to the communications board. After a few minutes, she said, "I can't raise the Falcon, sir."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other.

"The Falcon?" whispered Kirk. "It isn't possible."

Two anxious hours later they moved into sensor range of the derelict, and discovered that he was wrong.

"Can you raise them yet, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked.

"No, sir. There's just the automatic S.O.S. still being broadcast. If they could hear us, you'd expect them to do something, even if they just cut transmission."

Kirk glanced at Spock, who nodded.

"I fully agree with Miss Uhura," he said. "The conclusion must be made that they have no communications at all, and that whatever happened the survivors have jury-rigged something to transmit the Morse impulses."

"We'll beam over." Kirk flicked on his intercom. "Mr. Scott, Dr. McCoy, meet me in the transporter room immediately. Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Mr. Spock - " He headed for the turbolift, the Vulcan at his heels.

The four men materialised on the bridge of the Falcon. A man in science blue was watching a girl who was working on the wiring behind the communications panel. He swung round with an exclamation as the party materialised, and they saw that he was in the medical department.

The sound made the girl look up from her work. A slanting eyebrow lifted.

"Spock!"

"T'Mara," Spock said, obviously surprised. He recovered himself instantly. "This is Captain Kirk, Chief Engineer Scott and Doctor McCoy of the Enterprise." He turned to his crewmates. "Ensign T'Mara is one of the few Vulcan women in Starfleet."

T'Mara nodded a combined acknowledgement and greeting.

"This is Dr. Ericson."

"Where is Captain Leibstein?" Kirk asked.

"Dead," T'Mara replied.

Dead, Kirk thought. Poor Axel. He hasn't lived long enough to captain his first command on active service. "Mr. Dawson?" he continued aloud.

"Also dead. All the command grade officers were killed, Captain. As ranking ensign, I am acting commanding officer."

"You? But Starfleet regulations do not accept women - " It was out before Kirk could stop himself.

Vulcan though she was, she gave what, in a Human, would have been called a rueful smile. "Captain, there was little alternative. Captain Leibstein had a..." Unusually for a Vulcan, she hesitated, appearing to search for the most appropriate word. Finally, she managed, "A chivalry that forbade him to permit women to do anything that might endanger them. He had managed to get most of the women originally assigned to the Falcon replaced. There were no women aboard above the rank of ensign. As a result, it was only men who were checking the equipment when the accident happened, and all the senior ensigns who survive are women. They all looked to me as the most senior. What else could I have done but take command?"

Kirk had liked Leibstein at the Academy, but he could remember him as a male chauvinist who frequently spoke out against having women 'in the male world of exploration', and he mentally applauded the tactful description. "I'm sorry," he said, anxious that she should not classify him as a chauvinist as well. "I didn't mean..." He hesitated, unsure of how to continue, and decided to leave the awkward topic. "What happened?" He changed the subject back to the more important question.

"The engines have been giving trouble since we left Earth. Nothing major, but they did need constant readjustment. Finally, there was an explosion in the engine room. The Captain and Mr. Dawson were checking the damage with Mr. Lun, our Chief Engineer, when there was a second explosion. Everyone in the engine room was killed, and everyone throughout the ship who was handling instruments was electrocuted. Most of the officers were checking their instruments for any damage caused by the first explosion - that's why the death rate was so high. Secondary life support systems are working - barely. I managed to juryrig the communications board to transmit a pulsed distress call - you picked it up?"

Kirk nodded. "How many casualties?"

"A hundred and six dead, another eighty three injured, some of them severely," Ericson answered. "There's very little I can do for them, bar sedation, at the moment. I came to ask Miss T'Mara if there was any chance of getting more power."

"Very little," T'Mara replied. "But I'm not an engineer. Mr. Scott may be able to help. Meanwhile, Captain Kirk, as acting commander of the Falcon, I must ask you if it is possible for our injured to be transferred to the Enterprise."

"I was about to suggest it. Bones, arrange it with Dr. Ericson."

"Right, Jim." The two medical officers went out through the jammed-open bridge door that led to the emergency stairs.

"What condition are the engines in?" Scott asked.

"In my opinion, unrepairable," T'Mara answered. "Also I consider that there is at least a seventy nine point eight percent chance of another serious explosion within the next sixteen and a half hours. I could be wrong - as I said, I am not an engineer."

"I'd like a look at the engine room," Scott said.

"Of course, Mr. Scott." T'Mara started towards the emergency exit.

Kirk said seriously, "I think we should transfer all but a skeleton crew to the Enterprise as soon as possible. It'll make us a bit crowded, but under the circumstances it might be best."

The engine room door was also jammed open, and bore all the signs of having been forced. Not until he saw it did Kirk realise fully just how complete the loss of power was.

Inside was a shambles. Kirk and Spock looked at each other and then back at the twisted wreckage, Kirk trying not to register the dark bloodstains that covered everything and the bodies trapped under chunks of metal too heavy to lift. Scott looked round, acute pain on his face at the ruin of all this beautiful machinery.

"You're right, Ensign. These engines'll never work again," he said sadly.

He moved over to what had been a main control board, clambering awkwardly over an unidentifiable component that barred his way, looked up at a dial that - impossibly - was still giving a reading, frowned at the figures and tried to move a switch. "It's all fused solid. Anything I try will just precipitate any trouble that's a brewing."

"You agree there could be another explosion?" Kirk asked.

"Well, Captain, everything's fused at 'on'," Scott said. He pointed to the dial. "The power is still being produced but it can't get anywhere. It'll build up for a while, then - " He shrugged. "That reading's a lot higher than it should be."

"Mr. Spock?"

"I think the sooner we begin to transfer the Falcon's crew, the better, Captain. Now that I have seen the damage, I believe Miss T'Mara's estimate to be a generous one. An explosion, soon, does appear likely."

Kirk nodded. "I agree," he said. "Mr. Spock, beam over as soon as all the injured are transferred. Arrange for the distribution of the Falcon's crew among ours. Tell Lt. Uhura to notify Starfleet with the details of what we are doing. If the Falcon doesn't explode, we'll take her in tow to Starbase Fourteen. Scotty, there's nothing you can do here; you go too. I'll stay and help Miss T'Mara organise the evacuation from this end."

Spock hesitated for a split second before replying. "Yes, Captain."

"You sound doubtful, Mr. Spock?"

"You are more important than I, Captain. Would it not be better if I remained with Ensign T'Mara?"

"In case of accidents? No, Spock. Beam over."

They decided that it would be simpler if the Falcon's crew was beamed aboard the Enterprise from sickbay, since the transporter was already locked onto the sickbay for the transfer of the injured - even although many of them, the less seriously hurt, had actually been in their own quarters - sickbay had never been designed to deal with so many casualties at once. A disaster of this magnitude was - or had been - unthinkable. Undoubtedly Starfleet's best scientists and engineers would spend many sleepless nights trying to discover just what had gone wrong...

This transfer is going to take some time, Kirk reflected uneasily. However, no-one showed any sign of panic, and mentally Kirk awarded T'Mara full marks for her handling of the crisis.

Most of the remaining crew were assembled in the main rec room. T'Mara had spoken to them there, making no secret of the imminence of another explosion, but she had also pointed out that everyone would be clear long before the estimated time of its occurrence. And although she used exactly the same logical arguments that he knew Spock would have done, somehow she had put a touch of humour into her information that kept anyone from reacting with the irritation Spock sometimes engendered. For a fleeting moment, Kirk wondered if it was due to the emotional stability of being a full-bloodied Vulcan...

For the most part, all he had to do was stand by in silent support as the crew filed past en route to sickbay. One young crewman hesitated at the stair leading to the living quarters, looking more than a little uncertain, and Kirk moved instantly to his side.

"You wanted something, Ensign?"

"I... Can't we go and get our things, sir?"

"I'm sorry, Ensign. Look at it this way - you can replace your clothes, but not your life."

The young ensign still hesitated uncertainly, and one of the others stopped as well. "It's not his clothes he wants, Captain. He's from Dorutha, and his pet rachat is in his quarters."

Dorutha was a colony world, settled by Humans over a century previously. The first gift a Doruthan ever received was a rachat; an intelligent little animal that formed an almost symbiotic relationship with its master - a relationship deeper than any other a Doruthan was ever likely to encounter. It was not unknown for a betrothed couple to split up because their rachats reacted adversely to the proposed union.

Rachats usually lived as long as their Human partners and did not survive them; Kirk could imagine what it would be like for the young Human to lose his rachat under these circumstances. He looked at the second man. "You his room-mate?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go with him. Make sure he doesn't take any unnecessary chances." He looked at the ensign. "Five minutes."

"Yes, sir!" The youngster took off down the steps at a run, his

friend close behind him.

Kirk let the file move on, and waited.

It took a little longer than the five minutes, but Kirk had expected that. He had not reached the impatient stage when the two ensigns reappeared, the younger one now wearing a fold-over jacket. A small, pointed, furry head showed in the V.

As the three men headed along the corridor, the young ensign said, "Thank you, sir."

Slowly the waiting queue grew shorter. Kirk began to feel bored. Maybe he should have let Spock stay after all.

Suddenly remembering something important, he turned to T'Mara.

"I'll go up to the bridge, see if I can retrieve the Log," he said. "It mightn't be possible, with the power failure, but we should try for it. There might be information in it from the computers that could give a clue to the fault."

A slight expression of annoyance flickered over the Vulcan's face for an instant, and Kirk realised she was annoyed at herself for forgetting about the Log. "It is my duty, as acting captain," she said.

Kirk shook his head. "Your duty is to make sure your crew get to safety," he said. "I'll be as quick as I can."

He was half way to the bridge when the ship shook to another explosion. He was flung to the floor; he picked himself up, and carried on.

There was no need to bother about how much damage he did in retrieving the small buoy that carried the Log ready to be jettisoned in a ship's final moments - only this buoy couldn't be jettisoned, for there was no power available to operate the eject mechanism. He had to get open the panel that sheltered it - and that panel also was fused shut. He looked round for something to use as a lever.

It was many minutes before the panel yielded and he retrieved the buoy. Sucking a bruised finger, he carried it triumphantly down the stair back towards Sickbay.

The ship shook again, but only slightly - clearly a much smaller explosion this time. A faint smell reached his nostrils and he sniffed.

Smoke!

The ship was on fire. How many were there still to be transported? It was lucky that fire hadn't broken out earlier. At least most of the crew were safe now. A thin wisp of smoke curled along the corridor as he reached the sickbay door.

Inside, he found only T'Mara and a dozen men. Even as he entered, six of them shimmered away. The Doruthan - last in the queue - smiled shyly at him, and the rachat's whiskers twitched as if it, too, was acknowledging him.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were all right, Captain,"

T'Mara admitted.

"I'd to break the panel open," Kirk explained. He glanced at the six men who were still waiting. "These are the last?" He knew that they were, but something in him demanded confirmation.

"If there is anyone else they haven't reported in," T'Mara said. "I couldn't get an accurate count because several men went over with the injured to act as stretcher bearers, and no-one could tell me how many went. Perhaps we should take time to make a final check of the ship - "

"Too late," Kirk said. "We're on fire. It would be suicide to try."

The last six men began to fade, solidified again, fluctuated two or three times then vanished. They looked at each other. What was wrong with the transporter?

Kirk's communicator beeped.

"Kirk here."

"Spock, Captain. A component in the transporter has failed. Your transport will be delayed until it can be replaced."

"Was the last lot of men all right?"

"Yes, though it was touch and go."

T'Mara touched his arm, and pointed towards the door. Through it, they could see smoke beginning to fill the corridor. A wisp curled into the room.

"How long will Scotty be repairing the transporter?"

"Only a few minutes, Captain."

"You'd better have McCoy standing by when we beam over. We're on fire and the fumes are getting to us." He coughed as the acrid smoke caught at his throat.

"Can you obtain life support units?"

"Negative. It's getting hard to breath in here - in the corridor, we wouldn't last ten seconds."

"Mr. Scott says five minutes yet, Captain."

"That's too long," T'Mara put in quietly. "I estimate we will lose consciousness within two."

"I've sent for McCoy. But..." His voice trailed off uncharacteristically.

T'Mara looked at Kirk. "Captain," she said. "You and I do not know each other, but we both know Spock. He thinks of us both as his friends. Can you trust me?"

"I'd trust any Vulcan," Kirk replied, mystified.

She leaned towards the communicator. "Spock. I'm going to try Mar'n'a. Be ready for us."

She looked back at Kirk. "It is a special trance," she explained. "I meld my mind to yours, and put us both into a very deep trance. In that condition, we have a better chance of surviving."

"Carry on," Kirk said.

Aboard the Enterprise, Scott was working furiously.

"Can I assist you?" Spock asked.

"No, we'd just get in each other's way."

McCoy came in then, looking a little annoyed. "What's the emergency?" he asked. "Ericson and I are still trying to get the injured men settled and treated."

"The Captain will need you," Spock replied evenly. "The Falcon is on fire, and there is a delay in beaming the Captain and Miss T'Mara over. They will be suffering from smoke poisoning, if nothing worse."

"Try it now, Mr. Spock." Scotty straightened with a grunt.

Spock set the transporter controls, operated it. The two inert bodies materialised, Kirk with his arms round the buoy containing the Log. Spock strode over to watch McCoy giving them quick injections. Then he applied a mind meld to T'Mara. The girl took only a few moments to open her eyes and sit up.

"I lost him at the third level," she said.

Spock immediately turned to Kirk, his hand reaching for Kirk's face. McCoy looked at T'Mara, puzzled, but instinctively deciding not to disturb Spock.

"What goes on?" he asked.

"Mar'n'a," she replied. "A special trance, so deep that we cannot come out of it ourselves. A third person must be present to draw us back to consciousness. Normally it is only done when all participants know each other well, and Captain Kirk and I are strangers to each other. I thought that perhaps Spock knew your Captain well enough to compensate for the fact that I do not. However, I lost contact with the Captain at a very deep level. Spock is trying to reach him now. If he cannot, Captain Kirk will eventually die."

Spock drew back. "I cannot quite reach him," he said. He looked round. "Doctor. If you will permit me to join my mind to yours, I can perhaps use your Human affection for the Captain to reach him."

McCoy didn't hesitate. "Go ahead, Spock."

Spock reached for his face. McCoy felt the tendrils of Spock's mind curling round his consciousness. "Imagine the Captain is at the bottom of a deep hole," Spock said. "You are trying to reach down to him."

Spock turned his attention back to Kirk. McCoy could feel

nothing, but he obeyed Spock, straining his mind to imagine the hole, straining an imaginary hand down to reach an invisible one. He felt a hand on his shoulder - T'Mara, and knew she was helping him.

Nothing happened for what seemed a long time. Then Spock relaxed slightly.

"I have him," he said.

A few moments later, Kirk's eyes opened. He looked round.

"We made it," he said.

"Barely," Spock replied.

Kirk looked over at T'Mara. "Thank you," he said.

"It's Spock you should thank," she answered.

"I could have done nothing without Dr. McCoy," Spock said quietly. McCoy felt the faintest of pressures on his mind, then a sense of withdrawal... and a momentary feeling of utter loneliness.

"Come on, Jim," he said. "Miss T'Mara too. Down to Sickbay. I want to check you both out."

Later, satisfied that the Falcon's crew was settled in and his own crew as happy with the arrangements as possible, Kirk headed for the recreation room. As he entered, he saw Spock with T'Mara, playing chess. He went over to them, trying not to feel hurt - just a little; aware that it was logical for Spock to seek the company of another Vulcan, particularly one who had told Kirk she was a friend. They looked up as he joined them. T'Mara rose.

"Would you like to take my place, Captain?"

"No, Ensign, finish your game," Kirk said, foolishly pleased that she should think to make such an offer, hoping neither of them realised it.

He watched them for a while. Spock appeared to be winning. McCoy came in, and joined them.

"Everything all right, Bones?"

"Everyone settled," McCoy replied.

Spock won the game. T'Mara rose again. "Will you have a game now, Captain?"

"You don't want to try for revenge?" Kirk asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not very interested in playing chess," she said. "I prefer to watch."

Kirk took her place as Spock began to set out the men. Out of pure curiosity Kirk asked, "How well do you two know each other?"

For a moment the Vulcans each seemed to be waiting for the other to answer. Then Spock said, "Quite well, Captain. T'Mara is my cousin."





T O R T U G A



Stars are not evenly distributed through space. Inside a galaxy, there are clusters, which have more than their fair share of suns; in other areas, the stars are distributed, if not evenly, at least reasonably so; and in the region between spiral arms stars are few and far between.

The United Federation of Planets, with the Klingon and the Romulan Empires barring its route through its home spiral arm, had for some time been considering trying to expand in the other direction, across the space that separated their territory from the neighbouring spiral arm, and colonising there. No matter that it would take a ship travelling at top warp speed almost two months to cross the space between the two spiral arms; the Federation High Council considered that the distance was well within reasonable limits.

Starfleet Command, with more experience of space travel than the members of the High Council (many of whom had never travelled further than was necessary to attend the various meetings, which were held in rotation on the different member planets) protested violently about the unrealistic plans the High Council presented to them.

"Politicians!" Admiral Komack muttered in disgust as he examined the proposals for expansion.

He read the first two pages of the report with increasing annoyance, turned to the third, and slammed his hand down on the buzzer to summon his secretary.

She appeared almost instantly. Indeed - knowing when he had started to read the report - she was surprised that he had not summoned her earlier.

"Set up an immediate meeting of the senior Command officers."

"Aye, sir." Commander Schwarz had served on board the Kongo for some years before an injury had invalidated her to a shore posting, and it frequently showed in her speech. She limped back to her desk, and checked the computer for the schedules of Komack's senior colleagues, then returned to his room in time to catch some more uncomplimentary mutterings.

"Admiral Fitzgerald and Vice Admiral Li will not be available until tomorrow morning," Schwarz reported. "Everyone else can be contacted immediately."

"Tomorrow morning will do," Komack growled. "This has to be a full meeting. We have to be unanimous."

They were.

By the next day Komack had had time to read the full document and summarise it, although both he and Schwarz had had to work deep into the night to do so.

Komack reported the details to his colleagues; and found himself for once in the unusual and pleasing position of having complete agreement from them. Although Komack was the senior officer in Starfleet Command, Admiral Fitzgerald was an ambitious man who would, Komack knew, dearly like to replace him and often disagreed with Komack's suggestions - even when his private opinion was known to mesh with them. But this time, not even Fitzgerald raised a voice in disagreement.

The discussion was brief. At the end of it, Komack turned to the computer where Schwarz was compiling the minutes of the meeting.

"I want a message sent to the High Council," he growled.

"Aye, sir."

Komack paused, breathing deeply as he fought for self control, gathering his thoughts.

"Gentlemen. I have read with interest your proposals for expansion of the territory controlled by the United Federation of Planets and I have discussed these proposals with my colleagues at Starfleet Command. I have been directed by them to bring to your attention several facts.

"The region between the spiral arms has never been explored. Although that space is almost empty, it is not completely so. We do not know what dangers might exist there. We therefore believe that it is necessary to send ships into the region to explore the proposed route thoroughly before any attempt is made to cross it.

"To do this adequately will require money; money that Starfleet will find impossible to allocate from its present budget.

"If we are to use our resources to investigate totally unknown space as well as continuing to develop our present territory in addition to maintaining our defence against both the Klingon and Romulan frontiers, we will certainly require more funding.

"This is a simple matter of arithmetic, gentlemen. The resources of Starfleet are already spread too thinly. We do not have enough ships.

"We have only twelve Star Cruisers; the Klingons are known to have at least double that number of vessels of comparable type, and only the Romulans know how many they have.

"Gentlemen of the High Council, you all have the best interests of your home planets at heart; you all wish to see more money allocated for the development of those planets. Many of you look at Starfleet and do not see that we are of immediate use to you, and therefore do not consider our budget to be of great importance. You forget that we are all that stands between the civilians of your home planets, and of all your colony worlds, and invasion by a ruthless and greedy enemy.

"To explore the space between the spiral arms adequately in the time you suggest will require the use of all our scout vessels as well as half of our Star Cruisers. This will leave our home territory seriously under-defended.

"Gentlemen, we do not say we will not accomplish what you ask. However, with our present resources, we cannot accomplish what you

ask in the time you envisage."

The opinion of Starfleet Command was, of course, overruled.

Faced with the almost impossible task of exploring the space between the spiral arms of the galaxy as well as maintaining a reasonable presence inside Federation space, Komack finally assigned four large survey ships to scout the direct route that would be used en route to the unknown stars of the other arm.

Contact was lost with all four ships, one after the other.

Urged on by the High Council's demands, Komack sent three eight-man scoutships and two four-man scouts into the unknown regions. Designed as they were to explore possibly hostile territory, these smaller ships were faster than the larger survey vessels whose primary function was to produce a reasonably full report on newly-discovered habitable or exploitable planets whose presence had been reported by the scout ships. The disadvantage of using scouts for this mission was that they lacked the sophisticated scanning capability of the survey vessels; their scanners were capable only of very basic study.

They, too, disappeared.

It was impossible to say just when four of the five vessels vanished; but as it happened, Starbase 15 was in direct communication with the fifth when contact was lost.

The Magellan was in the middle of a routine report on one of the few star systems in the stellar desert between the spiral arms when, without warning, a crackle of static intervened, blotting out the signal from the ship. The Communications Officer on duty at the time was a highly experienced man recently invalidated out of active service due to a heart condition which, although making it inadvisable for him to serve aboard a ship, was not severe enough to render him unfit for a ground posting. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to break through the static interference; and when it cleared, as suddenly as it had begun, he was unable to restore contact with the Magellan.

Starbase 15 immediately reported back to Starfleet Command.

Admiral Komack read the report from Commodore Rosenberg and passed it on to the High Council, requesting additional funding to replace the missing ships. The High Council immediately ordered him to find out what had happened - at the same time, ignoring his request for more money.

When he received the reply, Komack swore, long and imaginatively.

Damn the High Council! Here they were, now missing four valuable survey ships and five scouts, and the High Council was still refusing to admit that it was asking more of Starfleet's resources than Starfleet had to give. In all conscience he could not send any more ships into the area - yet without sending at least one more into the void he had no way of finding out what had happened to them.

At the rate they were going, the Klingon/Romulan Alliance would not need to fight the Federation in order to take it over - the High Council was in the process of handing Federation space over to the enemy by leaving it undefended.

He thought things over for some time, but in the end he came to the unavoidable conclusion that he would have to send in one of the valuable Star Cruisers. Although not quite the nearest, the Enterprise's crew had the best reputation for resolving impossible situations.

He therefore told Schwarz to prepare new orders for the Enterprise, along with what little information was available. Captain Kirk and his crew had been chosen for the unenviable task of discovering what had happened to the missing nine vessels.

"New orders coming in from Starfleet Command, Captain," Uhura announced, breaking the silence that had gripped the bridge for fully half an hour.

Kirk gave a grunt, half of annoyance, half of relief; the current mission - acting as a taxi service for routine supplies to a small mining colony - was not particularly interesting, and he was bored enough to welcome a small diversion; but he knew from long experience that a change of orders like this most likely indicated serious trouble.

"Put it on the screen, Lieutenant."

Komack's face shimmered into view.

"Captain Kirk. Over the past year, a number of ships have been surveying the space between us and the neighbouring spiral arm, in the region designated Quadrant 236/69/846XZ. These ships have all disappeared without trace. You are ordered to abort your present mission and investigate these disappearances. All relevant information is being transmitted to your computer.

"The Federation High Command is particularly anxious that this problem is resolved as soon as possible. Komack, Starfleet Command, out."

As the familiar starfield reformed, Kirk closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. He counted slowly to ten, then stood briskly.

"Mr. Chekov, plot a course for Quadrant 236/69/846XZ and execute immediately, warp factor eight. You have the con. Mr. Spock, Mr. Sulu, come with me. Lieutenant Uhura, call Mr. Scott, Dr. McCoy and Security Chief Baillie to briefing room three immediately."

"Aye, sir." She spoke to the closing doors of the turbolift, sighed, and looked at Chekov as he moved to the command chair, his place and Sulu's being taken instantly by O'Neill and Rahada, who, having called reliefs for themselves, left their own, less important, backup consoles unmanned for the brief time it would take for those reliefs to arrive. "What do you think, Pav?"

"I think the Captain does not like the sound of these orders," Chekov replied gloomily. "If several ships have vanished without trace, we could easily be the next."

Kirk, Spock and Sulu made their silent way to briefing room three. Without facts to go on, Spock, of course, would say nothing unless in direct response to Kirk; but Kirk was obviously deep in thought. Sulu, after a quick look at both faces, decided that speculation - at this point - was not called for.

McCoy, having the shortest distance to go, was already waiting when they entered the briefing room.

"What's all this about, Jim?" he asked immediately, ignoring the brooding expression on the Captain's face.

"New orders," Kirk said tersely as he sat. Beside him, Spock wasted no time in flicking on the computer screen and calling up the information that went with these orders.

The door swished open again, and Scott and Baillie entered together.

"Captain?" Scott was clearly agitated. "Warp eight? What's happened?"

Kirk looked round the table.

"We have a change of orders, Scotty." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Some of this... I've known about some of this for a while. It's not quite classified information, but it's not far from it.

"We all know that the Federation's options for expansion are slightly limited by the Klingon and Romulan boundaries. Without an all-out war, we're stymied in that direction. Not even the Klingons or the Romulans want war - that's why they formed their Alliance. They don't trust each other fully even with the Alliance, so you can guess how edgy they'd be without it. However, it seems that they both trust the Federation enough not to bother with any sort of official treaty other than the Organian one.

"Yes, I know we don't trust them, but they're not stupid. We - we - defeated the ship the Romulans sent into Federation space - they lost face then, and they aren't going to risk that again in a hurry. As for the Klingons - they won't risk clashing with the Organians again. And neither will we.

"So the High Council ordered Starfleet to explore in the other direction; across the stellar desert and into the next arm of the galaxy."

"I'll bet they didn't give Starfleet any more money for extra ships," McCoy muttered cynically.

"I wouldn't take you, Bones," Kirk replied. "The High Council depends too much on the Organian Treaty, and reckoned that they didn't need to bother with any defensive presence other than the Constitution class ships.

"Komack was rather more cautious. Starfleet has sent - to the best of my knowledge - no more than nine ships into that totally unknown space in the past year. Komack's orders didn't tell us how many were involved, but I think my information is correct."

"That's no' bad for an area where there aren't many stars," Scott commented.

"Agreed. But that is the reason for our changed orders. All nine have disappeared."

Spock looked up from the computer read-out. "You are correct, Captain. Four survey ships were originally sent into the area, and after they disappeared, five scout ships were sent in."

"That would be... around four hundred and fifty crew?" McCoy sounded horrified.

"Approximately, Doctor. The survey ships each carried a crew of one hundred and six; three of the scouts were eight-man, and the other two were four-man." He looked up. "Eight of the ships disappeared without trace; their last recorded reports placed them close to Quadrant 236/69/846XZ, where the ninth vessel positively disappeared in the middle of a transmission."

"What happened?" Kirk asked.

Spock returned his attention to the readout. "There was extended interference from static, which cut the contact; when the static cleared, Starbase 15 was unable to restore the communications link with the Magellan."

There was a short silence as his listeners absorbed the information.

"Any further details?" Kirk asked at last.

"Negative."

"Komack's not asking much, is he?" McCoy said drily. "No information, just the quadrant where one of the ships disappeared. Does he even realise how big one quadrant is?"

Kirk ignored the comment as rhetorical. He looked round the others. "Any suggestions?"

"Until we actually reach Quadrant 236/69/846XZ, I do not believe so," Spock replied.

"Unfortunately, I think you're right," Kirk growled. "The details concerning the number of ships involved is classified, of course, as well as the reason for their presence in that quadrant; but it won't do any harm to let the crew know we're on a rescue mission. Dismissed."

He watched Sulu, Scott, McCoy and Baillie file out, followed by Spock; but he was not surprised when Spock paused and allowed the door to slide shut, turning back towards the table.

"This mission..." Kirk said. "I don't like the feel of it." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Something here is saying, **Watch out!**"

"I, too," Spock said. "I would be more confident if we knew a little more about the area involved."

Kirk looked at his First Officer, his eyebrows lifted. "We've gone into unexplored space before," he said. "It's part of our job to go 'where no man has gone before'."

"Agreed, Captain. But in this case, we are not going where no man has gone before. We are going where nine other vessels have preceded us - and vanished."

As the Enterprise slid into the star desert Kirk ordered the long distance scanners to be put into operation. There was a chance - vanishingly small, but still a chance - that if one or all of the missing ships had been destroyed, they had managed to launch lifepods. There was also the chance that if the ships had exploded, there would still be detectable traces for the Enterprise's sophisticated scanners to pick up.

It took almost a month before the ship approached Quadrant 236/69/846XZ. They were, of course, unable to travel at warp eight indefinitely, but even when they slowed down to rest the engines they never dropped below warp six.

Space was almost totally empty. There were a few stars drifting through the parsecs towards the spiral arm they had just left - gravity pulling them - but there was no trace of either lifepods or ship debris.

As the Enterprise slid into the quadrant, Kirk ordered, "Warp one, Mr. Sulu."

"Warp one, sir."

"Scanners. Anything?"

"There is one star system in this quadrant, Captain," Spock reported. "A K1 star with six planets."

One of the planets was a dwarf hurtling around the sun so close that had the sun been more active it would have been in danger of being burned by solar flares. Three were so far from the star that they could be nothing but balls of ice. One of the other two was a gas giant, but the last one was situated nicely in the ecosphere, such as it was; Spock estimated that for such a dim star the ecosphere was narrow and temperatures on the planet's surface were likely to be fairly low.

"If there are survivors, and they had any warning of what was happening, they're most likely to be on that planet," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Mr. Chekov, set course for it. Mr. Sulu, assume standard orbit when we get there."

The Enterprise swung into orbit and began a sensor search. Almost immediately, Spock raised his head.

"Life form readings, Captain. Human... Klingon... Andorian... and others. There are also metallic readings which would correspond to the wreckage of ships."

Klingon?

"A Klingon base on our back door?" Kirk asked.

"Possible," Spock replied, a doubtful note in his voice. "There is, however, no indication of advanced technology such as I would expect to find in such a base. In addition, the readings indicate a split into two communities, one much larger than the other - each of

them consisting of mixed species." He bent over the scanner again. "Captain, there are also some life form readings of at least two, possibly three, species unknown to me."

"Uhura, open a channel. Let's see if they have - " He broke off as the ship jolted sharply.

"We're being pulled down, Captain!" Sulu exclaimed.

"We have been caught in a strong magnetic field," Spock reported almost at the same moment. "You could call it a form of tractor beam."

Kirk reached to punch the intercom just as it beeped.

"What's happening, Captain?"

"We're caught in a sort of tractor beam, Scotty. Give me warp eight - we'll try to pull away."

"Aye, sir."

"Sulu, try to break orbit."

The ship jerked, pulled away, and jerked again.

"It's no use, Captain!" came Scott's voice over the intercom. "We can resist the pull for at least forty eight hours, possibly even a little more, but after that... After that we'll go down, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"How long could a survey vessel, or a scout, hold out against that pull?" Kirk asked.

"Survey or scout? No time at all, Captain. They'd be pulled down inside - oh, ten minutes at the outside, if they had any warning. Probably a lot less."

"Hmmm. That would seem to explain what happened to the missing ships, then. Uhura, send a message to Starfleet - "

"I can't, sir. Transmission is blocked by the magnetic field. All I can get is static."

"Static!" Kirk's eyes blazed. "There's no more doubt about it. Our missing ships are down there - and it's up to us to find out why. Mr. Spock - can we beam down safely?"

Spock frowned slightly. "No," he said. "However, I believe that a shuttlecraft would be able to make planetfall. It would of course be caught in the tractor beam and be pulled down more rapidly than is advisable, but since it is designed to travel through atmosphere and land, it would not crash. That cannot be said for any of the other ships that have been pulled down."

"But we would of course be pulled down to wherever the beam is coming from."

"Of course."

"Worth it. The crews of the crashed ships wouldn't know what was happening; I don't say they'd panic, but they wouldn't be ready to face an enemy; they'd be too busy trying to minimise the damage as

they came down. We, on the other hand, will be ready." He pushed his hair back off his forehead, a subconscious action as he consciously braced himself - mentally - for action.

The intercom bleeped again.

"Kirk here."

"Scott, Captain. We could maybe gain a wee bit more time by reversing polarity on the ship - holding her in orbit by magnetic repulsion."

Kirk glanced at Spock. "What do you think?"

"It could be dangerous, Captain. There are fluctuations in the strength of the beam holding us. And if the landing party manages to cut off the power source of the beam, it would be very dangerous since there would be no way to warn Mr. Scott of the impending change."

"I heard that, Captain. It should be possible to compensate."

"Try it," Kirk decided. "I'll leave it up to your judgement whether it's likely to prove too dangerous or not." One constant in the universe was Scott's unwillingness to do anything that would risk damage to the ship - or, more accurately, the engines. "Now - Spock, I'd like to leave your expertise here, to help Scotty defend the ship, but I'll need you on the surface. Lt. Uhura, contact Mr. Baillie and Dr. McCoy and tell them to report to the hangar deck immediately. Mr. Baillie is to bring two of his best security guards."

"Aye, sir." She turned to her console.

Captain headed for the turbolift, his First Officer at his heels. As he went, he said, "You have the con, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

The lift door shut, and Sulu glanced over at Chekov. Chekov shrugged, saying nothing. Sulu opened his mouth, then shut it again.

There was, after all, nothing he could say that was not already obvious to the other senior officers on the bridge. And it would be no help to morale to let the juniors know that their superiors had anything less than complete confidence in the Captain's ability to solve this problem.

The landing party met outside the hangar door. Kirk looked at the two guards with Baillie, surprised to note that one was female - well-built, but female.

"Mr. Baillie?" he asked.

Baillie grinned confidently, knowing what was in Kirk's mind. "Captain, Lieutenant Helmudsdotter has won the security section's last eight unarmed combat competitions without any difficulty. In total, during those competitions, she has been thrown fewer than ten times. She's also security's top marksman. She's the best I've got."

"That's some recommendation," Kirk acknowledged.

"And Lieutenant Kralik was runner-up in the last six competitions," Baillie finished.

"Right. Let's get going." Although his own choice would have been for an all-male landing party, Kirk was not going to over-rule the opinion of a section head, especially one as competent as Baillie. He turned and led the way briskly to the Columbia.

The shuttlecraft sank quickly towards the surface. It was a controlled descent, however; Kirk's skill as a pilot, while tested, was not overstretched, and Spock, sitting in the co-pilot's seat, remained relaxed even although his attention did not waver from the readings in front of him.

The landing was not quite as smooth as the descent, however. They came in rather too fast and bumped as the shuttlecraft touched down; it rose several feet into the air and then came down again to hit the ground fairly hard.

Kralik picked himself up from the floor, rubbing his rear ruefully, as Baillie opened the door and jumped out, phaser at the ready; Helmudsdotter was just behind him, and Kralik, remembering his duty, forgot his bruised rear and followed them before any of the senior officers could move.

There was no sign of anyone.

Kirk, closely followed by Spock and McCoy, joined the security guards, two of them looking round curiously. Spock's eyes were fixed on a tricorder.

They were in a big clearing in what could only be called a wood. Around them were the wrecks of a number of ships.

Kirk frowned as he looked round. "The source of the beam must be around here somewhere..."

"Captain."

Kirk swung round. The voice was familiar, but it was not from one of their group.

He knew the tall figure who stood there although it took him a second to recognise him.

"Kang!"

"Welcome to Tortuga, Captain Kirk."

"Kang, are you - the Klingons - responsible for what's been happening to our ships?" Kirk demanded.

"No, Kirk. I, too, am a victim. But quickly - come. While you stand there, you are in danger."

He beckoned them to follow him out of the clearing and among the trees.

As they went, Spock said quietly, "There is a small group of

life forms about a mile ahead, Captain - approximately twenty. Mixed races - I read Humans... Klingons... Andorians... Tellarites... and others."

"That is the group of which I am a member," Kang replied.

"Oh." Kirk looked at the tall Klingon. "This quadrant is a long way from Klingon space, Captain Kang - you are still a Captain, I suppose?"

"You could say that," Kang said dispiritedly. "My superiors studied my report on the incident on Beta XIIA; then they studied yours. They decided, most reluctantly, to give me another chance - unusual though it was to do so. A Klingon Captain who loses his ship is normally disgraced for life. However, my new command was much smaller - in fact, it was a scout ship." His face was expressive of conflicting emotions - gratification that he had been given another command, shame that it was such an unimportant one.

After a momentary silence, Kang went on, so quietly that they could barely hear him. "In addition, my superiors chose to give me a mission that carried - that appeared to carry - no opportunity for making a mistake, by sending me to investigate this almost empty space. There wasn't even any reason to send me here - the Klingon Empire isn't interested in a starless void. And then... and then we were caught in a tractor beam and crashed here.

"Even if I should manage to escape from here, I will never get another command."

"My report should exonerate you again," Kirk said. "I don't know yet what has happened, what is causing this - but I have every intention of finding out. I do know that no ship smaller than a Star Cruiser has any chance of avoiding being pulled down by that magnetic beam. Even the Enterprise has barely enough power to resist the pull, and - unless Scotty can pull off a miracle - she won't be able to hold orbit for long."

Kang shook his head. "You are generous, Captain, but I will not be given a third chance. It is not the Klingon way." He sounded completely resigned about it; whatever emotion tinged his voice, there was no bitterness. Then he went on, more briskly,

"We do have some idea of what is happening. There are creatures here who control the tractor beam. They seem to be able to detect a ship coming into orbit, but they don't seem able to tell how long it will take for their tractor beam to pull it down. Once it lands - usually crashes - they come to take the crew prisoner.

"A few of us have managed to escape. The creatures haven't bothered with us - we're not even certain that they know about us, though we think that they probably do."

"What happens to the prisoners?"

"They are forced to work for the creatures."

Kang led them on through the trees until they reached another, but much smaller, clearing. A group of people waited there, among them another two Klingons - Kirk was glad to see that one of them was Kang's wife Mara; without realising it, he had been ever so slightly

worried about her ever since discovering Kang's presence. There were two Andorians, five Tellurians, three Tellarites, half a dozen Humans and several aliens of species that Kirk couldn't recognise; and a tall girl, recognisable as a Mahlian by her blue-tinted skin and short blue hair.

It was the Mahlian who stood as the little group entered the glade. She moved forward to meet them.

Her Starfleet uniform of science blue made her pale skin look anaemic. She wore a Lieutenant's band, and Kirk wondered at her confident attitude, since she was clearly outranked, by Kang if nobody else. Yet in spite of her obvious self confidence, there was a haunted expression deep in her eyes.

"Vanora, this is Captain Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise," Kang said quietly. "Also Mr. Spock, the Science Officer, and Dr. McCoy who, I see, is already at work."

As indeed he was. His trained eye had immediately noticed that several of the group were clearly injured and, ignoring the girl, he had headed straight for the nearest of them.

"I do not know the names of the others," Kang went on, almost apologetically.

"Mr. Baillie, Security Chief, and Lieutenants Helmudsdotter and Kralik." Kirk finished the introduction.

"My greetings," the Mahlian said quietly.

Spock was studying her thoughtfully. "I am honoured to meet you," he said. "I had heard that Mahlians do not readily leave their home planet."

"That is correct, Mr. Spock," she replied quietly. "I am the only one who has ever done so voluntarily. It was not an easy decision, but I had my reasons; they were valid ten years ago, and they are still valid."

"And you are homesick," Spock said softly.

"Yes," she replied. "I do not doubt that I always will be. But I abide by my choice."

Kirk looked at her, puzzled. In his experience, Starfleet personnel were footloose, people who were slow to put down roots; born explorers - the kind of people of whom it had once been said that they would always seek to see what was on the other side of the hill. To meet one who admitted to being homesick was akin to meeting a porpoise who was unable to swim.

On the other hand, what Spock had said was true; as a race, Mahlians - while welcoming visitors to their home planet - almost never left it. Mahlian ambassadors on other planets were mostly hired outworlders; the few native Mahlians who served in that capacity did so only when there were important meetings, and they remained offworld only as long as was necessary for the meetings to take place, rapidly returning home and leaving their interests to be cared for by their employees... who, despite their power, had never betrayed their employers.

"I have heard that Mahlian women are the only ones other than

Vulcans to think logically and unemotionally," Kirk said.

"True, Captain," Spock replied before Vanora could. "It is most refreshing to meet someone else who does think in that manner."

McCoy, overhearing, called over. "He thinks that's a compliment."

"It is a compliment," Vanora replied with a slight smile. "The only difference between my race and the Vulcans is that we admit to the existence of what you might call the constructive emotions. However, we do not let those emotions influence our judgement, as I have noticed Humans often do."

McCoy looked disgustedly at her. "Jim, she's as bad as he is!" He turned back to his patient.

Kirk was already impatient with the courtesies. "Vanora, are you in charge here?" It was the only explanation for her attitude - and Kang's attitude towards her.

She answered slowly. "I am the last free survivor of the first ship to be trapped here. As such, I am considered to be the general leader of this pitifully small group who have escaped from the pirates who trapped us. However, we work a system where each of us does what he is best fitted for. The simple matter of surviving and remaining uncaptured means that we co-operate without anything other than token leadership being strictly necessary."

"Without a strong leader, you can't possibly last indefinitely," Kirk said.

She shrugged. "Within certain limits, I agree," she said. "I am handicapped, however, in being outranked by several of the others - Captain Kang among them. They, on the other hand, have had their confidence in themselves damaged by losing their ships - even although their surviving crew members look to them. We have had to be tolerant and work by co-operation, with each small group inside our bigger one acting autonomously. I am thought to have the best knowledge of the Tortugans, therefore I am the general leader; the one who has responsibility for our safety. None of us has thought of the long-term implications of such a mixed group; we have not dared to. We survive from day to day."

"We'll see about that," Kirk said. "All right, give me some background." He chose a fallen log and sat on it, looking round. Most of the group had dispersed, and were bringing in wood, obviously windblown, for none of the party had tools and none of the wood looked as if it had been felled.

Vanora followed Kirk's gaze. "It gets very cold at night," she said quietly.

Kirk nodded; he would not have called the temperature particularly warm even when the sun was shining directly down on them; now it was sinking, throwing shadows. The temperature was already dropping.

"Right, then," he said. "Let's have some facts. You say you were on the first ship to be trapped here. What ship? How long ago? And what happened to the others?"

"Survey vessel Discovery," she replied. "We were sent into this

quadrant..." She hesitated, clearly calculating. "It would be eleven months, five days ago in standard time; here, nearly fifteen months, putting the time into seven-day weeks and four-week months. There hadn't been terribly much for us to do - space here is pretty empty - and most of the crew were getting rather bored. Finding this planet was a welcome break in the monotony.

"We had just entered orbit when we were caught in a tractor beam. We didn't stand a chance. The communications officer tried to call the planet, to tell them our ship couldn't land, but he didn't get any answer. That's been the pattern since," she added. "No ship has managed to communicate with the pirates." She shrugged. "We came down fast - too fast. When we hit, it was hard. Only a few of us survived the impact. Out of a hundred and six, only eleven survived, and most of them were hurt; two of us escaped with nothing more than bruising, but everyone else broke one or more bones. There was no pattern to the survivals, either," she added. "Six from the sciences; three from security; and two from command. None of the medical personnel survived."

Kirk's eyebrows lifted. "Sickbay is the best protected part of any ship."

"I know, Captain. But nobody ever thought of a starship being pulled down to the surface - fast - by a tractor beam. When she hit, poor Discovery crumpled like paper. A lot of the casualties were caused by people being crushed in the impact. If Sickbay wasn't crushed, it was cut off and the people there suffocated or died of thirst.

"I guessed that the people responsible for the tractor beam would show up fairly quickly, and managed to get out. Ensign Maire had the same idea. We were hardly out when we heard a group of people coming.

"We knew they wouldn't be friendly; and we thought we'd stand a better chance of doing something to help any other survivors from the outside, so we hid before the pirates arrived.

"They did seem rather taken aback by the extent of the damage, and none of the other ships have hit quite so hard, so they must have some way of controlling the force of the beam. Anyway, they searched through the wreckage, and carried off nine prisoners. We couldn't get close enough to see who they were, but of course we saw the colour of their uniforms.

"We followed the Tortugans. They have a sort of camp - wooden buildings, some of them well constructed, others quite roughly built and little more than shelters - and if it hadn't been for their control of the tractor beam I'd have thought that they were survivors from a crash too. They certainly don't look as if they're anything more than a refugee group, but they're totally ruthless."

"Others in the neighbourhood?" Kirk asked.

"None. Just the one camp of them. There are nearly a hundred in it - we haven't been able to get a full count."

"The tractor beam could have been automatic, and they could have been pulled down by it at some time in the past," Kirk mused. "Then when they explored and found it, they learned how it worked and used it?"

"I thought of that," Vanora said. "But none of them seem to have the technological skill needed to run a space ship. That's what they use their prisoners for - but I'll come to that.

"The next ship to crash was the Venture. She didn't hit quite so hard. Maire and I had stayed close to the pirates, watching - at the time, they didn't know we were there - and knew something was happening; so we went back to the clearing where we crashed. We knew we wouldn't have long, and managed to get Sheval, Haster and An'rwn out and under cover before we heard the pirates coming. They pulled out another twenty-eight, again mostly injured.

"The third ship down was the Star. With his broken arm, Haster couldn't help, but he stood guard while the other four of us got five of her crew out, including Commander Varden, the first officer. The pirates got fifty six that time.

"The Beagle was next. Only her senior officers were Human - the rest of the crew was Andorian, Tellarite and Catullan. We only managed to rescue three that time, though; and we were nearly caught ourselves. We just couldn't get the Beagle's crew to realise the danger. The pirates carried off eighty seven prisoners. That was when, for the first time, they had any reason to think that some of us had escaped - Tellarites seem totally unable to keep their mouths shut, even when it would be in their best interests.

"After that there were some Federation scouts. But the pirates were arriving quicker by then; the last five ships down, we've only risked sending one person to try to rescue those of the crew who managed to get out of the ships themselves.

"Mixed in with the Federation ships have been several others; there was Captain Kang's, and we rescued all three survivors; and there have been several strangers." She nodded in their direction. "Two races we just didn't know at all. We haven't been able to communicate properly with them. As far as I can make out they're from the other spiral arm."

Kirk glanced at Spock when he heard that, wondering how the Vulcan would react.

In fact, his reaction was minimal; a slanted eyebrow lifted, but the Vulcan said nothing.

Vanora went on. "None of us has proper medical training, and as you see some of us were injured. I have some knowledge of Mahlian healing techniques, but these are not wholly effective for other races - the best I could do was ease the pain of the injured."

Kirk nodded. "McCoy's one of the best."

"Yes. I can feel his caring."

Kirk watched as one of the group lit a small fire, then changed the subject slightly. "You keep talking about Tortuga and Tortugans. May I ask why?"

"It was Maire who used the name first. He said that the people who pulled us down were pirates and that Tortuga was a pirate stronghold."

Kirk had never heard of the place, but decided to take it on trust. "You said something about them wanting technology?"

"Yes. We've watched them as closely as we dare, Captain, and as far as we can see they have no technology of their own except the tractor beam and some rather nasty hand weapons. But they do seem to know that technology exists, and they want it. The prisoners have to work; and from what we've seen, the skilled men are closely kept. Only the relatively unskilled prisoners have any freedom, and that, not much. The injured..." She gave a hopeless gesture. "At least there are one or two medical staff among the prisoners. But a lot of the more severely injured died. A squad of security men - closely guarded - come out in the mornings to bury whoever has died during the night."

"What do the skilled men work at?"

"We don't know. They work indoors; we never see them. But I suspect they may be trying to build some sort of ship. The security guards are taken out to the clearing every second or third day and salvage what they can from the wrecks - that's why you didn't see as much wreckage as you might have expected. Every now and then they uncover another body and bury it," she added softly; then, after a moment, she carried on briskly. "They take the salvaged bits back to the camp."

Kirk grunted. "What about the tractor beam?"

"As far as we know, it operates from a building close to the clearing where the ships have all crashed. We haven't been able to get into it."

"But the - er - Tortugans can?"

"Yes. We haven't been able to get close enough to see how they manage. Or rather, we dare not go close enough."

Kirk glanced at Spock to see his reaction, and noticed instantly that the Vulcan was looking cold.

"Let's go over to the fire," he suggested. As they joined the group gathered round the almost imaginary heat of the small fire, Kirk noticed that three of the group - Kang, a Human and one of the unknown aliens - remained a little way away, watchful. "Guards?" he asked.

"Of course," Vanora replied. "The Tortugans seem to stay indoors at night, but we daren't assume that they will. We stand guard in threes for an hour at a time during the night."

"Sensible," Kirk agreed. He held his hands out to the fire for a moment. "You say that there's only the one group of Tortugans?"

"As far as we know," she agreed.

"If there is only one group of them, the answer seems fairly obvious," Spock commented.

"That the pirates themselves are not native to the planet?" Vanora said. "We did think of that. But someone built the power house, and these beings lack the technology. The buildings in their camp are similar, of varying sizes - indeed one of them is quite large - but look as if they had copied the design while lacking the skill to do it properly. Yet, if it was not the pirates who built the power house, who was it?"

"For we have not found any remains as far as we've travelled - not that we have been able to travel far. We have found no other buildings, either intact or in ruins. Just that one. No sign of artifacts, either, except the crashed ships."

"It is possible that the power house was built many years ago by a spacefaring race for some purpose, but was abandoned when that purpose no longer existed," Spock said. "Perhaps the pull of the magnetic field is even incidental, an accident and not the main reason for which which the place was erected. It could have been abandoned when its builders discovered that it was acting as a tractor beam."

"In that case, wouldn't they have disconnected it?" Kirk asked.

Spock nodded. "That would be the logical thing to do," he agreed.

Kirk thought for a minute. "If we assume that the power house was built by someone else, where do the... er... Tortugans fit in?" he asked. "Could they be the survivors of a crash? Of a ship pulled down by the beam?"

"I would think not, Captain," Spock put in. "Miss Vanora said the Discovery was pulled down very quickly; most of the crew were killed. That it seems to have been the pirates themselves who, in some manner, managed to modify the strength of the beam so that fewer crew were killed with each successive crash. If the pirates' ship was pulled down, I would have expected it to crash heavily, with considerable loss of life. Yet there are many of them - comparatively speaking. As if the entire crew of a fairly large ship had escaped with their lives."

"O.K., let's talk around that a little longer," Kirk said. "Let's suppose that they are the survivors of a crash. Or... could they be the survivors of an unsuccessful attempt to colonise the planet? Could we suppose that they found the power house; activated the mechanism inside it in the hope that it was an emergency beacon; and discovered that it pulled other ships down."

"If all they wanted was help, why continue pulling ships down?" Baillie asked.

"And why keep the crews prisoner?" Spock added.

"Wouldn't there be indications of an attempt at colonisation?" Vanora asked. "There would surely be ruins - we found none. And they would have some technology of their own, wouldn't they?"

"A colony of farmers mightn't," Kirk argued. "They would know of the existence of technology - as you said - but how much would they know of how it worked? The crew of the Enterprise all know that the ship is powered by matter/antimatter engines, but half of them couldn't begin to tell you how the engines work. No - take a group of farmers desperate to get home again, discovering the tractor beam..."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to ask for help?" Vanora asked.

"They couldn't if they had no communications facilities," Kirk pointed out. "Then when they discovered that the beam made ships crash - that they had killed - they could have been too aware of what they had done to ask for anything."

"No, Captain," Vanora said. "You haven't seen them. They're... vicious. They remind me of a little rodent that lives in the swamps on Mahlia. Luckily it's restricted to the swamps, for it kills indiscriminately, and slaughters far more than it needs for food."

Kirk grunted. "Have you any idea of their social pattern?" he asked.

"They seem to operate a simple pecking order, Vanora replied. "That much we can be sure of. There isn't much co-operation between individuals but a lot of bullying. The guards at the power house are quite low in the scale - otherwise they wouldn't be there. Such a monotonous task is not for the strong among them. It shows every time the Tortugan manning the power house is changed. The guards positively cringe. The half dozen who operate the place are definitely among the strong ones - strong enough that they only have to show their teeth and the guards defer to them. On the other hand, those six are very obviously competing with each other."

"Could these creatures be mentally unbalanced?" McCoy asked as he joined them.

"Perhaps, Doctor," Spock said. "But there are races where strength is still the main source of power. We have an example of that amongst us." He indicated the Klingons. Far from being insulted, the two Klingons in the group around the fire grinned their appreciation of the comment.

"How are the injured?" Kirk asked.

"I've done everything for them that I can, down here," McCoy answered. "One at least won't survive much longer, though, unless I can get him up to the Enterprise fairly fast. It doesn't help that they're having to be moved every day," he added, not quite accusingly.

"We have no choice, Doctor," Vanora said. "If we stay too long in one place, the Tortugans will find us, now that they suspect some have escaped from the wrecks. I for one do not wish to be captured."

"Then the sooner we deactivate the tractor beam the better," Kirk said decisively. "Vanora, will you take us to it?"

"Yes, of course," she answered.

Kirk looked round the group, assessing the eagerness of the faces that he could see only dimly in the flickering flames of the small fire. "Bones, you'd better stay here - the injured need you." His lips pursed. "How many guards at the power house?"

"Two. And the operator inside."

"Right. Spock; Mr. Baillie; Lt. Kralik, Lt. Helmudsdotter."

"I'm coming too, Kirk."

Kirk looked at Kang, realising that more time than he had thought must have passed if the Klingon had been relieved. He thought he could guess why Kang was so anxious to be included, and he saw no reason why the Klingon should not get a chance to salvage his pride.

"Very well."

It was decided that it would be better to wait until dawn before making their raid on the power house. They settled to sleep as best they could, curled up against the chill.

It was in a dim half light that the group prepared to leave. "Good luck," McCoy said quietly. Kirk nodded.

The small party disappeared into the shadows of the forest.

It was not quite full light when they came in sight of the building.

Vanora had led them to the back of it; beyond it, through the trees, they could just see the shuttlecraft, still standing apparently as they had left it.

The building was constructed of rough stone, fairly long and the walls sloped inward until they met. Kirk paused for a moment to admire the skill and workmanship that had gone into it. Vanora was correct; this was no crudely constructed building, it was the work of someone who knew what he was doing.

There were no windows.

Now that they had reached the power house, Kirk moved into the lead, and Vanora stepped back, willing to let him take over as she would have been willing to stand down at any time for any of the officers senior to her, had they been ready to take command.

They slipped round the side of the building, and halted where they could see the two aliens who guarded it.

Kirk saw instantly what Vanora meant when she described them as reminding her of a rodent. They were bipeds, but their faces were muzzle-like; they gave the impression of being a cross between a rat and a fox, and Kirk decided that if he were asked to give a brief description of them, he would have to say that they struck him as having a sly cunning; that he would be chary of trusting them as far as he could see them, let alone out of sight.

Compared to the impression that the Tortugans gave, the Klingons were positively reliable.

"Those beings do not look to be of anthropoid origin," Spock murmured, so softly that Kirk could barely hear him.

"Not all intelligent species are," he pointed out.

"No. But most biped species that we have encountered are anthropoid - according to the biology of their home planets."

Kirk nodded, taking the point. Parallel evolution did seem to be the norm on most M-class planets, and although the build and capabilities of the various 'apes' from each planet varied, they were all, according to the language of those planets, anthropoid.

"That's the case for our spiral arm," Vanora put in. "We can't say the same for the other one. At least one of the alien races in our group is vulpine - and the member of that race who is with us is

most helpful."

"He doesn't know the Tortugans?" Kirk asked.

"As far as we can tell, no. But we haven't been able to communicate freely. We have a translator, but even it has not been able to make much sense out of his language."

"Different spiral arm, different bases for communication?" Kirk suggested.

"Possibly," she agreed.

They crouched for some time, watching the two guards. In this situation, guarding a building in the middle of nowhere on an apparently uninhabited planet, two Humans would have spoken, exchanged the odd comment; two Vulcans would probably have taken it in turns to relax and meditate. These two stood carelessly, slightly crouched, one at each side of the doorway - there were no windows at the front either - pointedly ignoring each other.

There was a shining panel on the upper part of the front wall.

"Vanora - you say there'll be one of them inside?"

"Yes - one of the stronger ones."

"Spock, how long do you think you'll need to disconnect the tractor beam so that it can't be operated?"

"It is difficult to say, Captain, without having seen the unit. Perhaps minutes; perhaps hours."

"All right." Kirk raised his phaser. "Phasers on stun. Let's knock these two out."

Five phaser beams lanced towards the two aliens, struck them...

...and nothing happened for fully five seconds.

It appeared to take the two Tortugans that long to realise that something was happening. Then, without even looking towards each other, each of them acting as if completely independently, they hefted their side arms and rushed towards the hiding group.

Kirk made up his mind instantly. "Kang! Baillie! With me! Everyone else, hide!"

He sprang from hiding and ran, slanting off at an angle. Baillie followed him instantly, and Kang, to give him his due, only hesitated for the barest of moments before he, too, followed.

One of the guards shouted. As Vanora had said, the translator failed to make sense of it. The being for whom it was intended understood it too well, however; the hiding group watched as the door of the building opened, and a third alien appeared in the doorway.

This one seemed to be slightly larger than the two guards, but that could have been a false impression, created by his more upright stance.

He watched the two guards pursuing the three fugitives, and his lips twisted slightly, giving him an even more ugly expression. It

gave the impression that he did not trust the two guards to capture the three men, and indeed its next move proved that, for it too began to run after them.

"Not very clever," Spock commented as he watched Kirk disappear among the trees. "Unless there is yet another of those beings in the building?"

"There never has been more than one," Vanora replied.

"Come, then." Spock led the way into the building. Kralik and Helmudsdotter paused at the doorway, watching for the aliens' return. Inside there was a diffuse light - it was impossible to see where it came from. Vanora followed Spock to the bench of controls. The Vulcan glanced at the panel in the ceiling with some interest, wondering how it worked. Then he turned his attention to the controls.

They were almost childishly simple. It took him only a moment to throw a switch, and then remove a single component.

"That will disable it for good," he said softly. He turned to the door, then turned back and removed a second component. He caught Vanora's eye. "Insurance," he said. He could see a touch of incomprehension in her eyes at this, purely Human, action. A logical, pure-blooded Vulcan - or Mahlian - would never have taken that second part.

Kralik and Helmudsdotter fell in behind them as they left the power house. They ducked back among the trees and Spock flicked open his communicator.

"Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Sulu here."

"Is the ship all right?"

"Yes. We had a rough few seconds, but things are all right now."

"Dr. McCoy is approximately a mile from here with a small group of our missing personnel, two Klingons and some aliens. Some of them are injured, and require to be beamed up immediately."

"We'll see to it, Mr. Spock. What about you and the Captain? And Mr. Baillie and his crew?"

"We're staying down here for the moment. There are more survivors, but they are prisoners. We need to investigate further."

"Aye, sir."

"Let me know when Dr. McCoy's party has beamed up."

There was a short silence, then,

"They've beamed up, sir."

"We could be in a hazardous situation at any time. Do not try to contact us." *Don't call us, we'll call you.* The old Terran comment entered his mind with irresistible irrelevance.

"Very well, Mr. Spock."

"Spock out."

Spock replaced his communicator. He glanced at the others. "Stay here. I will be back in a few moments."

He turned and walked away. After a few seconds he glanced round. He could still see the others; he went on a little further. This time he could not see them. He moved to one side and carefully buried one of the two components from the tractor beam mechanism, carefully noting landmarks. He might, after all, want to retrieve it. Then he moved on and buried the other. That done, he carefully retraced his footsteps. Now only he knew where the two pieces of the mechanism were hidden.

It was not that he did not trust the others; but what they did not know could not be tortured out of them.

As he rejoined them, the third Tortugan reappeared, striding back towards the power house. It went into the building. A moment later they heard a howl of rage. The pirate came out, screaming almost hysterically. It tried to slam the door, but as a display of temper it was far from satisfactory, for the door seemed to have a spring which controlled its action, and it closed relatively slowly.

The creature strode off, still gibbering to itself.

"Come," Spock breathed. He led his party after the alien.

Kirk, followed by Kang and Baillie, raced through the trees, leading the aliens away from the power house. Kirk wanted to give Spock as much time as possible to sabotage the tractor beam; however, luck failed them, for they ran straight into a group of the pirates, and were promptly caught.

The Tortugans who were chasing them caught up with them almost at once, and the aliens chattered together briefly; a few words seemed to be enough to explain to the newcomers what had happened.

Spock hadn't had enough time! Kirk struggled wildly, trying to delay the aliens; the other two were quick to copy him. They all received several deep cuts from the claw-like nails of their captors before they were finally immobilised.

One of the creatures bent and began to lick at the blood running from the gashes on Kirk's arm. The others neither helped it nor tried to hinder it. Kirk sensed that the creature was becoming excited by the taste of the blood, and tried, uselessly, to pull away. Then the beast bit him.

He felt the teeth sinking deep, tearing at his arm, and gritted his own teeth against making any sound, guessing that if he did the alien would become even more blood-crazed.

Surprisingly, one of the others intervened at that point, jabbering fiercely. The creature that had bitten Kirk tried to speak, presumably to defend itself, and was given no opportunity to do so. The alien that had stopped it lashed out; parallel cuts appeared on the culprit's face. It shrank back, no longer attempting to speak, and Kirk realised that they had just been given a

demonstration of the 'pecking order' Vanora had mentioned.

Kirk opened his mouth to speak, to try to make contact, but just in time saw Kang's face. The Klingon was mouthing at him, silently and seemingly desperately trying to tell him something. He thought for a moment before realising what Kang meant.

Quiet! If they treat their own kind like that for speaking, what will they do to us? He simply objects to his inferior damaging us.

Kirk nodded, and Kang relaxed.

The three prisoners were dragged roughly through the trees as the alien who had interrupted strode back in the direction they had come from. Kirk saw it go, and could only hope that Spock had had enough time to disable the tractor beam. He wondered if they would be subject to illtreatment again now that the apparent senior had gone, but the aliens who were left seemed to be completely cowed. They were merely taken to the aliens' camp, ungently but not particularly cruelly.

The Tortugans' camp was very close to a steep, rocky hillside. Vanora's comments on it were correct; although made of wood, the buildings all bore a certain similarity of design to the stone-built power house, and several of them, particularly the largest, were well-built; but the others were crude constructions, looking off balance and as if it would not take much to knock them down.

They were taken through an area where men - and women - of various races were working, pulling apart pieces of twisted wreckage. Even as they passed the workers, a closely-guarded party of eight prisoners, of three different races - Human, Andorian and one of the unknown races - brought in a large piece of metal, which they dumped close to the workers. Then they were hustled away again, their captors ignoring their very obvious exhaustion.

Kirk stared after them, unable to keep his disgust at the Tortugans' callous treatment of their prisoners from his face; Baillie's expression matched his Captain's, and even Kang looked as if he, too, thought that the pirates were being unnecessarily brutal.

The pirates hustled the three of them on, through the camp and towards the hillside.

There, they saw a cave mouth. They were pushed into it.

It was a large cave, lit by a diffused light; they could not see where it came from. Several pirates were gathered near the entrance, probably guarding it, for there were prisoners working here, too, building what looked like parts for a space ship. Humans; Andorians; Tellarites; a Catullan; two Klingons; three or four of the various alien races that they had already seen - and several who were obviously of the same race as the pirates themselves. Kirk looked curiously at them, noting that these Tortugan-race prisoners had a subtly different general appearance from the pirates. Where the pirates had a look of cunning, these prisoners of the same race looked somehow gentler, though how a ratty, foxy face could look gentle was beyond Kirk's comprehension; and they had obviously been at the receiving end of a great deal of cruelty, for all of them were badly marked by the parallel gashes left by the claws of their captors.

Now why had the Tortugans imprisoned some of their own people?

Speculation seemed pointless.

Near the back of the cave, resting on a 'couch' of branches and watching the workers, was a Tortugan who looked altogether meaner, more vicious, than all of the others. The guards pushed the three newcomers forward, while, it seemed, trying to keep as far from this king rat as possible.

Strange; to almost any race, it was usually quite difficult to tell individuals of other races apart. These Tortugans looked facially identical to Kirk - only their stance, which betrayed their social position, made it possible to differentiate. But this one did stand out; Kirk knew that he would recognise it again anywhere.

The king pirate - for so it had to be - glared at them, hissing.

"What position you?"

The voice had the unaccented quality that marked it as that produced by a translator, and Kirk's eyebrows lifted as he realised that the pirates had a translator that was better than any possessed by the Federation, for the Federation translator had been completely unable to make sense out of the alien language.

Kirk hesitated only a fraction of a second, watching the creature's eyes. It was no use trying to dissemble; he would only suffer for it, and pointlessly.

"I am a ship's Captain," he said quietly.

"Skills have?"

He shook his head. "As Captain, I must have some knowledge of all a ship's functions. I have no particular skills."

The creature grunted and looked at Baillie.

"You?"

"Security guard. No skills."

"Rrrrgh. And you?" It glared at Kang, who glanced first at Kirk, then at Baillie, back at the creature, and kept his mouth shut.

"Tell!" The beast bared its claws, the threat clear.

"Tell him, Kang," Kirk advised. "It's something you Klingons still have to learn - there's a time when defiance is foolish. These... beings... are clearly much stronger than we are." He glared at Kang, trying to send a message with his eyes. *Flatter them! Bide our time! Remember we have friends on the outside!*

Reluctantly, Kang mumbled, "I also am a Captain."

The pirate relaxed its claws, but with every appearance of reluctance. They were left in no doubt that it would thoroughly enjoy ripping their flesh open.

It looked past them at its cringing fellows and snarled - the translator either failed to cope with the comment or it had been switched off - and they grabbed the three men and pulled them out of

the cave again. They were hauled over to the workers who were pulling apart the wreckage their fellow prisoners had pulled in. There was little doubt that they were being set to work with the unskilled prisoners. Kirk could almost admire the single-mindedness of the Tortugans; they certainly did not believe in wasting time.

"See?" Kirk muttered to Kang. "If you'd stayed obstinate, you'd have been in there yet, being cut to pieces by those claws. As it is, you're out here without any more injuries. And you didn't tell them anything of importance, either. Just your rank - and that's one of the three things any prisoner is expected to reveal."

"I know, but I don't like it," Kang muttered. "Klingons never like having to surrender to anyone. However, I admit your advice was good."

That's quite a compliment, Kirk thought even as he said, "No better than yours to me a while ago."

They began to work; but the short planetary day was drawing to a close. Dusk fell quickly, and when it was too dark for them to see properly, the Tortugans herded them to one of the larger buildings.

It was one of the more solid structures. Inside, it proved to be lined with metal, and the three new prisoners looked at each other, startled, in the same diffuse light that they had encountered in the cave.

This race was indeed a paradox, a mixture of the surprisingly sophisticated and the extremely crude.

Two of the pirates carried in a tub of an unpleasant-smelling mash, dumped it in the middle of the floor, and backed out. The door slammed shut.

The prisoners gathered round the tub. *Only extreme hunger could persuade anyone to eat that mess*, Kirk thought.

The food - if it could be called food - was quickly eaten, and then the prisoners surrounded the newcomers.

By this time, the Federation personnel had registered Kirk's rank. "Captain?" The speaker was a security lieutenant commander. "What ship?"

"James T. Kirk, U.S.S. Enterprise," Kirk replied.

There was a confused babble of sound for a moment, then the self-appointed spokesman went on. "Enterprise? Starfleet send out a star cruiser after us?"

"Of course. We couldn't leave the crews of nine ships unaccounted for."

His very cheerfulness seemed to give them hope. "You haven't crashed... have you?"

"No. We were able to maintain thrust against the tractor beam, though only just. We - " he indicated Baillie - "came down by shuttlecraft along with my science officer. By now - with luck - he has disabled the tractor beam and is working on some way to free us all. Unfortunately, phasers don't work on these creatures."

He was interrupted by an uproar outside. The door was flung open and two of the pirates entered, glaring around them. They were followed by king rat.

"Prisoner new," he snarled. "Speak you."

Kirk stepped forward. "Yes?"

"Speak you. Who with?"

Kirk looked at him, and indicated Kang and Baillie.

"Who other?" The claws twitched threateningly.

"My science officer."

"Where he?"

"I don't know. We were seen and caught. He wasn't."

The pirate lashed out furiously, moving too quickly for Kirk to dodge, although he had been expecting a blow. Blood ran from the gashes on his chest, soaking into his ripped shirt.

Kirk straightened, glaring at the king rat, although he said nothing. He was not minded to give ground any further, even although he realised the stupidity of open resistance; the pirate dared not lose face with the others - it would claw him to death if it thought he was challenging - or even appearing to challenge - its position, and while he was willing enough to fight to prove his point, should it be necessary, bare hands against razor-sharp claws were far from even odds.

The king rat snarled, then turned abruptly and strode out, followed by the others. The door clicked shut again.

One of the Federation prisoners pushed forwards. "I'm a doctor," he said. "Duffus, from the Beagle." He examined the gashes across Kirk's chest, and grunted.

"Best to let them bleed," he said. "We've discovered that these gashes often become infected, especially if we stop the bleeding right away."

Kirk nodded, then looked round the group. "Can you fill me in on the situation here?"

"All we know is that the prisoners are split into two groups - the ones who work outside the cave, bringing in the wreckage from our ships or sorting it into bits, and the ones who work inside the cave. Heaven only knows what they do, but all the engineers are in there."

"Figures," Kirk said. "They looked as if they were building bits of a ship - using the parts cannibalised from the wreckage." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Some of the prisoners in there look as if they're the same race as the pirates." He looked round the blank faces and realised that nobody else had realised that. "But they don't look as vicious," he added.

The prisoners were all very tired; despite the excitement of discovering that rescue could be near, they soon settled down to sleep.

Kirk lay down with them, but he was unable to sleep; the gashes on his chest, where the blood had finally clotted, were beginning to ache almost intolerably.

And then he felt a not familiar, but known sensation of faintness, and realised that Spock had returned to the Enterprise, and had turned the ship's phasers on the pirates' encampment.

He regained consciousness on the Enterprise.

As he blinked his eyes open he realised that McCoy was standing over him, with Spock on the other side of the bed.

"How do you feel, Jim?" McCoy asked.

"Not too bad. A little stiff."

"What about those gashes?"

Kirk considered. "Aching a little, but nothing out of the way." He pushed himself more upright. "Report, Spock."

"The tractor beam was easily disconnected," Spock replied. "As soon as that was done, I contacted the ship and had Dr. McCoy and the rest of the escaped personnel beamed aboard.

"The easiest way to retrieve you and the rest of the prisoners, as well as capturing the pirates, was to stun everyone in the pirate camp. However, as we saw, ordinary phasers are ineffective against these beings. Miss Vanora, Lieutenants Kralik and Helmudsdotter and I remained on the planet until we captured one of the pirates - "

"Were any of you hurt?" Kirk interrupted.

"No. They may be immune to standard phasers, but they are as susceptible to a neck pinch as any other race."

"Of course," Kirk smiled.

"We were able to establish what the difference was in his nervous system that gave the Tortugans immunity against the phaser, and adapted the ship's phasers accordingly. Then we stunned everyone in the pirates' camp."

"Some of the prisoners are the same race as the pirates," Kirk said.

"We suspected that," Spock replied. "However, we did not dare take any chances. All members of the Tortugan race are in the brig, but we kept the ones we thought might be prisoners apart from the others."

"I'll know them," Kirk said confidently.

"Are you sure, Jim?" McCoy asked. "They all look alike to me."

"Certain, Bones. But then, I only really need to identify one, don't I? He'll be able to identify the others."

"As long as you pick the right one," McCoy worried.

"Bones, if when it comes to it I'm in any real doubt, all we need to do is ask the other men who were imprisoned in the cave."

"That's true." McCoy looked round the other beds in the room. "You're the first to come round, though."

"A few minutes more won't make that much difference," Kirk replied.

He forced himself to his feet, swaying slightly, feeling just a little nauseated as a side effect of the unusual stun. Forcing himself to ignore the sickness, he grinned at Spock.

"Come along, Mr. Spock. We have some prisoners to free."

Even though they were unconscious, the members of the Tortugan race who had been prisoners were quite easily distinguished. They had indeed all been correctly identified as different from the main run of the pirates. All were more seriously hurt than any of the actual pirates, even those of the pirates who had been disciplined by stronger ones, and all that strangely gentler look to them. The actual pirates, even in unconsciousness, still had a more rat-like appearance.

Kirk ordered his men to move the 'gentle' Tortugans to proper quarters, but left a guard with them, with orders to report in immediately any of them showed signs of regaining consciousness.

Although he was the first to regain consciousness, Kirk did not remain the only one to do so for long. He assigned Chekov to listing the names of the Federation survivors for transmission to Starfleet; assigned Spock to trying to adapt a translator to cope with the alien languages; then, giving in to his increasing nausea, he returned to his quarters with orders that he be contacted immediately one of the 'good' Tortugans regained consciousness.

He lay on his bed feeling increasingly miserable. The after-effects of a phaser stun were never pleasant, but this time - probably because of the altered frequencies - they were far more unpleasant than usual.

He jumped when the intercom beeped for attention. sat up, and fumbled the connection open.

"Kirk here."

"Gomez, sir. One of the aliens has regained consciousness."

"On my way."

He fumbled the connection closed again, and stood, swaying slightly. Then he headed for the door.

By the time he reached the room where the 'good' Tortugans were sleeping off the effects of the stun, several more of them had regained consciousness. As Kirk entered the room, he saw that they were all looking slightly disorientated, and wondered again at how different these beings looked from their pirate fellows.

He opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated, suddenly remembering that Federation translators didn't work with these beings.

One of them looked up, saw him, and came over to him.

"Leader you?"

Ah. They all had their version of a translator, then. That could be useful.

"Yes. Captain James Kirk. You are on board the U.S.S. Enterprise, a star cruiser of the United Federation of Planets. We have some reason to believe that we come from a different spiral arm of the galaxy from the one that you do." He wondered if the translator would cope with the complexities of that, but it seemed that it could.

"Gratitude. Helped you us."

"Why were you prisoners too?"

He had to listen very hard to follow the explanation, for the translator, although it could cope, did so presumably following the rules of grammar of the alien race.

The aliens' home planet was called H'lsw'rd. Thousands of years previously, their race had been hunters, feared by most species on their home planet. Finally, however, their diet had altered to include vegetable matter, and with the omniverous diet had come a more civilised way of life.

However, very occasionally, individuals were born with the old, uncontrolled hunger for blood.

It was difficult to know what to do with those individuals. To keep them in prison for life seemed unnecessarily brutal, yet how else to protect everyone else from them?

For lack of any other answer, they had imprisoned these people, but once manned spaceflight had passed the experimental stage, what better way of getting rid of them in such a way that they would bother nobody than take them to an uninhabited planet and leave them there, to live freely in the way that suited them.

They had been doing this for many years. They had built the power house on the planet to provide a source of light and heat as well as the houses of the original camp. What they did not know was that one of the criminals had managed to adapt the power source, producing a magnetic field that was guaranteed to pull down any ship entering orbit.

Their ship was taking a batch of criminals to the planet when they were caught in the magnetic field and pulled down. The crew stood no chance at all against the brutality of the criminals, who were led by one of the most vicious of these throwbacks.

But their ship was designed to land on the planet. The criminals were really surprised when later ships crashed.

"Our ships are mostly designed not to land," Kirk put in.

With luck, they expected this to be the last group of throwbacks to be brought here, for they had discovered the reason for the problem; a genetic fault which could now be predicted through medical examination of the adults, and if such a prediction was made, the couple would be advised either to look elsewhere for their mates or choose not to have children. Since nobody wanted to breed a throwback, everyone affected accepted this restriction. Unfortunately,

however, the knowledge that misused the power house would not go away; and how could they disable it and leave these unfortunates here, on a planet where it became very cold at night?

"We might be able to find another planet," Kirk said slowly. "But tell me - are there females among them?"

"Not. Females affected not. Males only."

"What is your life span?" Kirk asked.

"Revolutions fifty."

Around fifty years... and they were all adult. Say another thirty years at most. "Then there's no problem. We shouldn't have any trouble finding somewhere for them. Then we'll get you home."

Saying he was going back to his cabin to change, Kirk left the H'lsw'rdian with Spock, letting the patient Vulcan discover, through the slow, laboured translations, where its home planet was; Spock was perfectly capable of doing that while still working on improving a translator. His general feeling of malaise had not lessened; if anything, he felt even worse than he had earlier, when he first regained consciousness.

He had originally blamed the after-effects of the heavy stun, but nobody else seemed to have been affected; man after man had regained consciousness, and all of them seemed to be perfectly fit. He was the only one feeling sick; and the Tortugan-inflicted injuries were feeling hot and uncomfortable, particularly the ones on his arm.

Kirk returned to his quarters, intending to have a shower before he changed. He felt hot and sticky, and felt that a shower might just cool him down.

It didn't.

Wearing only a robe, he sat at his desk, toying absently with the reports that sat on it, unable to summon up the energy to do anything positive with them. Finally, he gave up. He dropped the robe on the floor beside his bed, and crawled into it.

Probably all he needed was a good sleep.

A quick check of the H'lsw'rdian translator was all that Spock needed to adapt a Federation one to follow the alien tongue, and, with more fluent language, the problems of communicating with the H'lsw'rdians diminished to almost nothing.

H'lsw'rd was close to the edge of the other spiral arm, and ripe for contact. It was a promising start to the proposed Federation expansion programme, for the H'lsw'rdians had explored some of the systems closest to them and could advise them. And the translator now also worked with the other alien races. They, too, were explorers, and impressed by the apparent ease with which the Enterprise crew had overcome the pirates; Spock took the opportunity to explain to them all the way in which the Federation worked.

The only real problem was the Klingons. Certainly there were

only the five of them; and Kang seemed convinced that they would be forever dishonoured by the loss of their ship. Spock did not wholly trust them, for they would surely be anxious for something, anything, to redeem themselves in the eyes of their superiors. He ordered a surreptitious guard to be kept on their movements, then went to Kirk's cabin to report to him.

When he received no answer to his buzz, he used his override and went in.

Kirk lay in bed, tossing restlessly; thinking that his Captain was in the throes of a nightmare, Spock put a hand on his arm to waken him, and stiffened as he felt the fever-heat that burned through the Human. He swung round and punched the intercom.

"Spock to Sickbay. Dr. McCoy, please report immediately to the Captain's cabin."

It seemed an age before McCoy arrived, although his time sense told Spock that it was barely a minute.

"What's wrong?"

"The Captain is running a fever," Spock said. And only he knew the effort it took to make the statement quietly and evenly.

McCoy checked Kirk quickly, his expression growing increasingly worried, especially when he saw that the badly mauled arm was inflamed and swollen.

"How did this happen?" he asked. "His arm wasn't swollen like this when I checked him out earlier."

"I don't know," Spock replied. "The injury must have happened when he drew the Tortugans away from the power house. Perhaps Mr. Baillie can enlighten us." He reached for the intercom again as McCoy gave the Captain an antibiotic injection.

"Mr. Baillie, please report to the Captain's cabin."

"On my way," came the answer. The Security Chief arrived as McCoy, having taken possession of the intercom, was calling sickbay.

"What happened to the Captain's arm?" Spock asked.

"His arm was clawed," Baillie replied. "One of the pirates started licking his blood, then bit him. Then another one chased it off before it could do any more damage."

McCoy grunted. "I suppose there could have been an infection on the claws - " he began.

Spock said slowly, "Perhaps not. Many of the prisoners were clawed, but nobody else appears to have had an adverse reaction. Besides, there didn't seem to be any species native to Tortuga to give rise to harmful bacteria. I suspect the bite."

"You could be right.

I will speak to Th'r's - "

"Who?"

"The Captain of the H'lsu'rdians."

"Oh."

Before McCoy could say anything more, an orderly appeared wheeling a trolley. Spock helped McCoy lift Kirk onto it, and watched as it disappeared down the corridor.

"Mr. Baillie, almost everyone taken prisoner by the Tortugans was clawed. Has anyone else complained about their injuries not healing properly?"

"Not to me, sir, but I'll ask round."

Spock went off to speak to Th'r's, and Baillie, as good as his word, went off to speak to the survivors of the crashed ships. He quickly learned that there had been some fatalities - and every one was someone who had been bitten. He hurried to tell McCoy.

Meanwhile, Spock had obtained from Th'r's a sample of saliva, which he took to McCoy.

Testing quickly showed that there was a substance in the saliva that was poisonous to Humans, and Spock promptly set to work searching for a neutralising agent.

Meanwhile, McCoy was busily testing Kirk's blood, seeking to discover if there was anything in it other than the alien substance in the saliva to account for his fever - he had a memory of reading somewhere that a lion's bite could carry an infection.

He found traces of alien bacteria, but they were far from active; it seemed that they were too alien to survive in the Human bloodstream.

So - the poison was the main problem. He wasn't even totally certain that it was a poison - an allergic substance seemed to be just as likely; people tended to think of allergies as not being fatal, but they could be.

Meanwhile, Kirk's temperature was still rising. McCoy nibbled his upper lip for a moment, then injected a broad-spectrum anti-histamine.

Then Spock returned from the lab, carrying a small phial.

"This should be effective, Doctor," he said quietly.

"Tested?"

"On a laboratory animal," Spock replied. "It worked perfectly. I cannot of course be certain that it will be as effective on a Human."

"All right." Although he would never admit it openly, McCoy trusted Spock's judgement. He took the phial, and injected Kirk.

Nothing happened for what seemed a very long time. At last, Spock indicated the diagnostic panel.

"His temperature is dropping, Doctor."

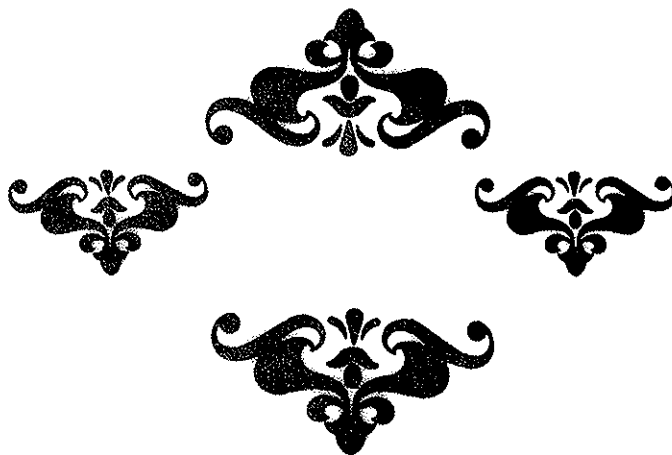
They found a planet in another solar system that was suitable for the Tortugans. The Enterprise crew fabricated enough buildings for them, they were beamed down and left; then the ship headed for H'lsu'rd.

They were half way there when the message from Starfleet, in response to their report on the Tortugans situation, caught up with them.

"We've to wear our diplomatic hats," Kirk complained from the bed (in his cabin) where McCoy was insisting that he still spend part of each day. "Frankly, I'd rather be back on Tortuga!"

Spock and McCoy looked at each other.

If Kirk was complaining, he was all right again. It was a comforting thought.





STRANGERS AT THE GATE



When the transporter malfunctioned - somewhat noisily, and with a flash that materialised even on the surface of the planet - everyone had returned to the ship except Kirk and Spock.

"Landing party!" It was Scott's voice, slightly panicked.

"Kirk here."

"Are you and Mr. Spock all right, Captain?"

"Yes, Scotty. Did the last group get back safely?"

"Aye, but it was a close thing. I was scared you'd been caught in the backlash."

"No, we hadn't got into position. How long before it's repaired?"

"I don't know yet, sir. I havena' had a chance to check the damage. Will I send down a shuttlecraft for you?"

Kirk thought about it for a moment. It was an uninhabited planet; their survey had shown no dangerous animals. If they stayed put, it would give Spock a few hours' break.

Granted, the Vulcan ate work and always refused shore leave; but Kirk often felt guilty about it. This would give Spock a short 'leave', and he wouldn't even be able to continue gathering data about the planet, for all the tricorders had already gone back to the ship.

"No, I don't think so, Scotty. We'll go and have a look at those caves we spotted just before beam-up. We'll stand by for your signal every half hour until you're ready for us."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk returned his communicator to his belt with a satisfaction that he had some difficulty in hiding.

Spock looked at him quizzically. "You could have asked Mr. Scott to send down a shuttlecraft. Why are you so pleased about staying here?"

Kirk grinned wryly. He should have known that he could not hide his feelings from his friend.

He thought quickly, but it was not difficult to find an excuse. "I was just thinking - it's like playing truant. It's the same sort of feeling that I used to get when I was a kid raiding the neighbours' apple trees. Sort of... guilty, but not guilty enough to stop. And... well, we didn't have time to check those caves. Without light we won't be able to go deeply into them but it will give us the chance to see something of them."

"Without tricorders we won't find out much either," Spock pointed out.

"It'll be like a good old-fashioned exploration - the kind there used to be before tricorders were invented," Kirk insisted.

Spock shrugged mentally, and followed the Human.

The first thing they discovered was that the walls of the first cave they entered were glowing faintly. Spock peered closely at the rock, then straightened.

"I could wish that we had a tricorder, Captain," he said. "This rock may be radioactive. If so, exposure could be... dangerous. Certainly it does not have the appearance of a radioactive rock... but appearances can be deceptive."

"The light will let us get deeper into the cave," Kirk suggested. "Supposing it is radioactive, Spock - how long an exposure can we risk?"

Spock hesitated. "Possibly an hour or two..." he said slowly. He, too, was beginning to feel curious as to what was beyond the limits of immediate visibility.

"Then let's go into the cave for quarter of an hour - or until we get to the end of it, of course. Then we can turn and come back. That'll be within the limits of our check time."

He set off; not unwillingly, Spock followed.

The cave descended slowly, curving slightly. It was nearly five minutes before they saw anything.

They rounded a fairly sharp bend, and came on a cluster of stalactites and stalagmites, almost classically shaped, glowing translucently in the dim light. Kirk paused for a moment in open admiration.

"They are beautiful," Spock agreed, sensing his friend's thoughts.

It took some moments to find a way to pass them without doing any damage; then, once past, they continued through the cave. Single stalactites and stalagmites dotted the tunnel, and here and there the walls were streaked with sheets of the same limey material, and here and there were patches of vegetation that Spock thought were lichens. There was nothing as spectacular as the cluster they had first seen, but the cave still held a faery beauty.

"If we are to return to the surface in time for our first check, we must turn now," Spock said at last, reluctance colouring his voice. He thought he could see more stalactites ahead, in the distance.

"I suppose so," Kirk agreed. There was no point in being foolhardy, and they really shouldn't miss a check.

They turned back.

It took only a few minutes for them to realise that they were lost. What they had thought was a single passage turned out to be forked and reforked when they tried to retrace their steps. When they finally came in sight of a particularly spectacular stalactite

that both men knew they had not seen before, Kirk stopped.

"We're lost," he said bluntly, admitting it openly.

"Indeed, I believe we are," Spock agreed.

Annoyed with themselves, but not yet worried, they tried to retrace their steps, but it was hopeless. The passages seemed to be multiplying.

"This is impossible!" Kirk said after five or six minutes. He looked round. It was impossible to say which was the passage they had just come down; just behind them, two passages led off.

The time for their check came and went. Kirk's faint hope that the Enterprise might somehow pick up the communicator signal through the rock were unrealised. They could do nothing but blunder on, hoping that sooner or later they would emerge into open air again.

When they did finally leave the tunnels, it was to emerge into a great open space; a huge rock hall. The roof rose sharply to a point where they could not see it; the walls diverged so rapidly that they were practically forming a straight line. Neither man could see the far side of the great hall, yet they were still definitely underground. The glow was brighter here, shining with an unhealthy blue light.

Spock peered at the rock again.

"It is definitely radio-active here," he said. "We must get away, or we will surely die."

Kirk glanced back into the tunnel, strangely reluctant, now, to re-enter it. The very beauty of the stalactites now seemed somehow frightening, the shapes that had been so appealing, somehow threatening. He took a deep breath, opening his mouth to speak.

"Captain - look!"

Kirk glanced at the Vulcan, then followed his pointing finger. Coming towards them were several humanoid shapes.

As they drew closer, the two Enterprise officers could see that they had a standard biped shape - but their naked bodies were a pallid, unhealthy, colourless grey-white, and their eyelids appeared to be fused shut. Yet they were making their way unerringly towards the visitors, as confidently as if they could see. Memories of blind cave fish rose from his subconscious mind, totally failing to reassure him.

The humanoids stopped, their leader a bare yard from Kirk.

"Welcome, strangers."

At least the translator was working. But the voice was thin, high-pitched, and with a timbre that sent a shiver down Kirk's back.

"We're lost," he said abruptly, politeness forgotten in the need to get out of this place. "Can you show us a way out, back to the surface?"

"The surface?" There was a note of alarm in the thin voice. "The surface is death."

"Not to our kind," Kirk replied. "Your caves are death to us."

The humanoids muttered together, their voices sounding like the twittering of birds, too high-pitched and shrill for the hearing of either man to distinguish words.

Finally the spokesman turned back to Kirk. "We will take you to the surface, but we must prepare ourselves first. We must cover ourselves so that the killing radiation of Outside will not touch us. Come - be our guests. Rest yourselves until we are ready."

Kirk hesitated, reluctant to go with them; more than reluctant, but he realized that if they refused, they might find themselves deserted by these oddly repulsive cave-dwellers who were their only possible key to escape from the caves.

The eyeless humanoids led them away from the rock wall and into the huge cavern. They must have covered at least a mile before they saw, ahead of them, what looked like a small town; a cluster of huge blocks of stone, with many of the humanoid forms moving about.

As the party reached the 'town' the two visitors saw the beings clearly. Some were small, obviously children; but Kirk suddenly found himself wondering if these creatures were, in fact, mammals despite the male configuration of the ones who had met them, for there were others, without male sexual organs, who had no breasts; and then he realized what had perhaps instinctively repulsed him.

None of the creatures had nipples.

They looked like men - but they were not men.

The visitors were shown into one of the 'houses'. These blocks did not have the blue glow that the rocks of the cavern had, but windows cut into the sides of the block let the light in. Yet these could not be windows in the usual sense; the humanoids were sightless and did not need light.

The humanoids brought in water and a peculiar greyish-looking substance piled high on a stone plate.

"Food?" Kirk asked nervously when they were alone again.

"Probably lichens of some kind," Spock suggested.

Neither felt hungry enough to sample it; and although both were thirsty, they were not inclined to risk drinking the water. If it came from an underground spring, which seemed most likely, it would certainly be lethal to them.

There was nothing to sit on but the ground. Side by side, they leaned back against one of the walls, waiting. Kirk yawned, and closed his eyes.

A crackling sound woke him.

He raised his head with a jerk, smelling the smoke that curled under the door of his room. Outside, he heard the terrified howling of his dog, and then his mother's anguished scream.

"Jimmy!"

He stumbled towards the door, groping for the handle, then

snatched his hand away as its heat burned his fingers.

The smoke was really thick now, and he coughed as it stung his throat. How could he get out?

The window!

He staggered and fell, choking, to lie still for a moment, but he was too obstinate to give up. He had to reach the window...

"Jim!"

How did the fireman know his name?

"Jim!" The call came again, and this time he managed to answer.

"I'm here," he croaked.

Strong arms caught him. He looked up at the adult face gratefully...

...and frowned at the sight of the slanting eyebrows and pointed ears.

"Jim."

The urgency in the voice dragged him from the memory he had buried beyond reach of conscious recollection and back to the present.

"Spock?"

"You were dreaming, Captain."

"More like a nightmare," he muttered. "Something I thought I'd forgotten long ago. Thanks for waking me." He shivered as he remembered the helplessness...

Several man-shapes pattered into the room. They were clutching what looked like stone knives, and Kirk knew instantly that his first instinct had been right.

The lichens might be their staple diet - but these creatures were flesh-eaters too, and he and Spock were undoubtedly being regarded as potential food.

He whipped out his phaser, routinely set to stun, and fired.

The beam was weak, and failed even as his finger still pressed the button, but it felled their attackers.

"The radiation must have drained the phasers," Spock suggested.

"Never mind that now! Let's get out of here. We'll be better taking our chances with the caves."

They paused at the doorway of the stone block, peering out. It seemed clear; but a sound made Spock hesitate, and touch Kirk's arm. They waited.

A child ran past. It, too, was clutching a knife, and Kirk realised that, part grown though it might be, it was probably totally self-sufficient, possibly learning from the adults but unlikely to be

dependent on any of them.

Once it was out of sight, the two men slipped out of the 'house and began to walk quickly back towards the cavern wall, as quietly as they could. When they were about half way, they speeded up to a run.

There were several openings, and nothing to indicate which, if any, they had come out of. They hesitated, wondering which one to try, when a sound behind them decided them; the sound of pattering feet coming ever closer.

Kirk glanced back, then plunged into one of the passages.

It took them upwards fairly quickly, but sounds from below told them that their pursuers were following.

The roof lowered, and they had to crawl for some yards. As they straightened again, Kirk muttered, "Any power left in your phaser, Spock?"

The Vulcan realised instantly what was in Kirk's mind. He drew his phaser and aimed it at the roof of the low passage.

There was just sufficient power to loosen enough rocks to block the low tunnel.

"Right - come on!"

They scrambled on. Suddenly the passageway forked. They hesitated. There seemed to be a movement of air from the right hand tunnel; Kirk turned into it immediately.

Within ten yards they knew it was blocked by a rock fall. Yet there was air blowing through the fallen rock; this way must lead to the outside.

"We must dig through the rock," Spock said quietly. He might have been suggesting going for a swim on a hot day.

Kirk nodded, although he was near despair as he looked at the fallen rock. His ears strained, listening for the padding of feet coming towards them, for he was sure that the phasered tunnel would not stop those creatures for long. They probably knew a way round it, another passage leading to here.

They began shifting the rock, depositing it behind them, using it to block the tunnel in an attempt to defend themselves against the creatures. It was fortunate that it was all rock, with no soil to complicate matters. Many of the pieces were relatively small, though some were larger and it took all of Spock's strength to shift these - the tunnel was hardly wide enough for them to work side by side. Their fingers were soon torn and bleeding.

Memories from the past that he had long subdued began to run through Spock's head. He tried to ignore them as he worked doggedly on, his muscles straining as he hauled at the rocks that were too heavy for the Human to attempt. But the memories, once roused, refused to be ignored.

Singly, as he had lived them, the events he was involuntarily remembering had been bearable and controllable; but all together they

battered at his mind, draining his control until he began to understand why, in the grip of his nightmare, Kirk had been threshing wildly.

Grimly, he set his lips and laboured on.

At first Kirk found the hard work keeping his mind occupied; but as he got into a rhythm, the enclosed nature of their surroundings began to beat on his mind, recalling the horrible occasion when, as an adventurous - over-adventurous - small boy, he had become trapped in a narrow drain he had tried to crawl through for a dare. The memory of his helpless terror fogged his mind.

The drain had not been empty, either, he remembered. There had been -

A sudden hiss brought back the childhood memory tenfold.

A colourless snake-like beast reared up on its tail from under the stone he had just lifted. Kirk, already in the grip of the memory of terror, dropped the stone and turned as if to flee, completely forgetting that there was nowhere to flee to.

The sound of the stone thudding to the ground caught Spock's wandering attention. He caught Kirk's arm just as the Human began to move.

"Let me go - "

"Jim!" Then, when awareness began to return to Kirk's eyes, Spock continued. "What is it?"

"Snake..." Kirk managed.

Spock looked down. "There is nothing there but rock," he insisted, not altogether sure that he was speaking the truth and far from sure whether he was speaking to convince Kirk or only himself. "You must believe that."

The hissing sounded again in Kirk's ears, and he struggled against Spock's grasp, oblivious of the bruising grip of the Vulcan's hands.

Hysteria? Spock wondered. Certainly Kirk's reaction was one of unthinking terror.

Concern for Kirk shattered the memories that had been beating on Spock's mind, and he remembered seeing McCoy dealing with a hysterical youngster who had proved to be totally unsuited to Starship life.

He released one of Kirk's arms and slapped his face - hard.

It worked. Kirk gave a shuddering gasp of relief, and relaxed, slumping slightly, fully aware once more of where they were.

After a moment, Kirk straightened resolutely. "Thanks, Spock." He hesitated. "I keep remembering things... unpleasant things..."

"So do I, Captain," Spock said quietly. "But we must remember - they are only memories. They are events from the past, and they are past. They cannot affect us now."

Kirk turned back to the rockfall. "What do you think is causing it?"

"Uncertain. It could be the radiation; it could be a... a weapon used by the cave-dwellers to trap their prey." He hauled a large stone from the rockfall and pushed it against the barrier they were building.

"You know, that's something of a puzzle," Kirk said. He was taking to keep his mind off his growing claustrophobia. "The planet has practically no animals that those creatures could use for food, and they clearly don't like coming to the surface - didn't they call it 'death'? The obvious food source is lichen or possibly fungus - yet they seem to be meat-eaters. How do they get their meat?"

"Perhaps animals wander into the caves for shelter in inclement weather," Spock suggested. "Or perhaps..."

"Yes?" Kirk asked when Spock made no attempt to finish his sentence.

"Cannibalism. They may eat their own dead; and... the cave system is extensive; there may be several groups of them. They could easily consider the members of other groups as legitimate prey."

Kirk shuddered. "I didn't like them when I saw them," he said. "I think I like the thought of them even less now."

"Captain, remember that that is only speculation," Spock insisted.

"Yes. But I think you're right. Ah - "

Spock peered past him. The stone Kirk had just shifted was the last one at the top of the rockfall. They were nearly through.

It took only a few minutes to clear enough of the rocks to let them wriggle through, and they set off along the cave with renewed optimism.

"Think they'll manage to follow us?" Kirk asked.

"They undoubtedly know the cave system well," Spock said thoughtfully. "However, this passage was blocked; they may not know it."

They hurried on. And then, in his haste, Kirk stumbled over a loose stone. He lay still for a moment, unwilling to stand, to put any weight on the stabbing pain in his ankle; then through the rock, he felt the vibration of many feet. He sat up.

"I hear them," he said tightly. He scrambled up, and winced as he tried to put his weight on the injured ankle.

Spock slipped an arm around his waist, pulling one of Kirk's arms round his own shoulders to support the Human, and hurried him on.

Ahead of them, the dim blue light whitened and intensified. They had reached the mouth of the cave.

Outside, they looked over the ground that they had so recently been surveying. A shuttlecraft stood there; four security guards and

a yellow-clad figure that Kirk recognised as Sulu were checking tricorders.

"Sulu!"

The five figures below them turned, and began to run towards them. Spock, still supporting most of Kirk's weight, started down the slight slope that led away from the caves.

The two parties met about halfway between caves and shuttlecraft, just as the first of the cave creatures emerged.

"What - ?"

Spock glanced back. "They're dangerous," he said.

Two of the guards lifted Kirk between them despite his protests, and the group ran for the safety of the shuttlecraft. As soon as they were all in and sitting, Sulu took off.

Below them, the creatures milled around for some moments, not knowing where their prey had gone; still aware of it, but knowing that it was retreating rapidly. The sun shone on them, too warm, burning their unaccustomed skin. Afraid, they abandoned the chase and returned to the welcome coolness of their caves.

Sulu reported back to the Enterprise as the shuttle soared skywards, and McCoy was waiting when it landed and the hangar repressurised.

"You two need keepers," he told them as he ran a scanner over them. "For intelligent men, you can be really stupid at times! Going into those caves..."

"Actually, Doctor, I suspect that the cave creatures were aware of us even when we were on the surface and put the thought of entering one of the caves into our minds," Spock said, loyally assuming equal blame with Kirk.

McCoy grunted his opinion of that as he straightened.

"You're both going to need decontamination," he said bluntly. "And that means a couple of days in sickbay."

"Bones - "

McCoy glared at him, and he subsided. The doctor nodded, and turned to the intercom.

"Sickbay. I want an orderly down here with a med trolley immediately."

"Bones, I can walk - " Kirk protested.

"Go on a trolley and stay in sickbay two days, or walk and stay in sickbay four days," McCoy replied.

"Bones, that's blackmail!"

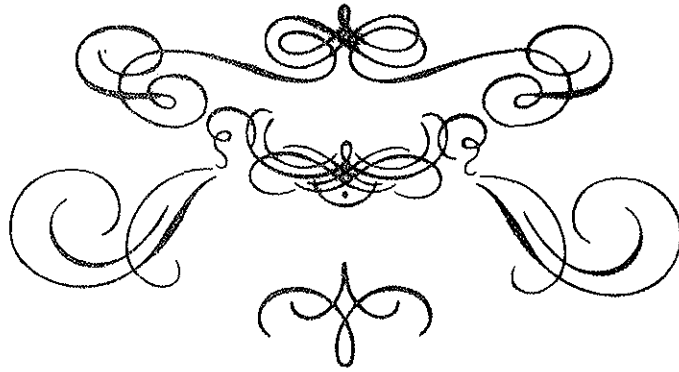
"Yes."

Once in sickbay, McCoy hustled both into bed. He checked their readings again, and reached for a hypo.

The injections given, McCoy put a support bandage round the twisted ankle.

"Now, go to sleep," McCoy instructed, knowing that they had no option; he had given them both a strong sedative.

He waited until a soft snore broke the silence; then he turned, and went back to his office to fill in the inevitable accident report.



PHILANTHROPY

Spock and McCoy halted their argument long enough to acknowledge Ambassador Beaully's presence in the corridor, and picked it up again the moment they were past him.

Beaully looked after them, frowning a little. He had only been aboard the Enterprise for a matter of hours, but this was the second time he had heard the two disagreeing. Forgetting that on a ship the size of the Enterprise the Doctor and First Officer could very easily avoid each other if they wanted to, he decided that something would have to be done about it.

For an Ambassador, Beaully was very dogmatic, and he had the habit of jumping to immediate, unalterable conclusions based on first impressions. His first impression here was that McCoy and Spock apparently found it impossible to agree; it was therefore impossible for them to work together effectively. From the few words he had heard, combined with his knowledge of Vulcan psychology - which was more limited than he realised - he decided that McCoy must be the instigator of the quarrel; and without waiting to consult Kirk, or to see anything of the working relationship between the two men, he followed the Doctor to Sickbay.

McCoy glanced up from the tape he had begun to study as Beaully entered his office. "Yes, Ambassador?" he asked. "What can I do for you?"

Even although at need Beaully could be as devious as the next beurocrat, he was not a man who normally wasted words. He believed in coming straight to the point whenever possible; and on this occasion it was undoubtedly possible.

"Doctor, in the few hours I have been aboard I have heard you quarrelling with Commander Spock on two separate occasions."

McCoy stared at the Ambassador, open-mouthed, too startled to say anything.

"It was obvious to me," Beaully went on, "that you began those quarrels, and that it is therefore impossible for you and Commander Spock to work together in harmony. Accordingly, I will make it my business to recommend that you be transferred as soon as possible to another ship. I cannot understand why Captain Kirk has not already made such a recommendation."

Before the stunned McCoy could recover enough to reply, Beaully turned and left.

McCoy stared blankly at the closed door for some moments; then, collecting his scattered wits, he went in search of Kirk.

He found the Captain in his quarters, playing chess with Spock. Kirk glanced up as McCoy entered, and began to smile a welcome, but the smile quickly faded as he saw the trouble on the surgeon's face.

"Bones! What's wrong?"

"Beaully. He heard Spock and me arguing and thinks we were

serious about it. He's recommending my transfer, he told me."

"He can't do that," Kirk said. "Not if I oppose it."

"I think perhaps he can, Captain," Spock put in. "As an Ambassador, he has a great deal of influence and I did hear that he is related through marriage to Admiral Lewis, of Staffing."

The three men looked at each other.

"I'll go and have a word with him," Kirk decided.

The Captain was away for a very short time. He looked furious when he returned.

"No use?" McCoy asked.

"He accused me of wantonly endangering the ship by condoning - or at the least permitting - the presence of two officers in the crew who so dislike each other that they cannot agree."

"Perhaps I should be the one to see him, Captain," Spock suggested. "According to what Dr. McCoy told me while you were away, he is being blamed for instigating the 'quarrel'. That being so, I am the logical one to tell Mr. Beaulieu that our efficiency is not affected by our 'dis-agreements'."

"You can try," Kirk said gloomily. "But I tell you now, he won't listen. I've never met such an opinionated, self-satisfied idiot in my life!"

Spock buzzed at Beaulieu's cabin door, and on receiving a reply from within, he entered.

Beaulieu looked a little surprised to see him. "Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Ambassador," Spock began, "I believe you may have reached a hasty decision regarding Dr. McCoy. He and I, contrary to the impression you appear to have received, are on perfectly good terms. Certainly we disagree frequently, but never about anything important - and we both derive a considerable amount of enjoyment from these differences of opinion."

"I am prepared to admit that you do not appear to take offence at Dr. McCoy's attitude," Beaulieu said slowly, "but then, Vulcans never do. My experience is that Vulcans do not realise when they are being deliberately insulted."

"Your pardon, Ambassador, but I am half Terran. I would know if that were the case."

"Very well, I can accept that - or at least that it could be so. But it did seem to me that Dr. McCoy was being deliberately insulting - so subtly, however, that you may not have realised it."

"Ambassador, he was not."

"That is the forgiving Vulcan nature, Mr. Spock. I am afraid I must hold to my opinion. Your efficiency may not suffer, but McCoy,

to my mind, clearly does not regard you with friendly eyes. His competence to proceed with his work in an efficient manner must be suspect. I feel I must hold to my original decision, and recommend to Admiral Lewis that he be transferred as soon as possible."

"Ambassador, we do work well together," Spock insisted. "Vulcans do not lie. Dr. McCoy and I are not serious when we disagree, any more than two wrestlers are when they indulge in a sparring contest..."

"You, perhaps, are not," Beaulieu repeated, "but I think you are mistaken in your view of his attitude. That will be all, Mr. Spock," he added, seeing that Spock was preparing to advance yet another argument.

"Yes, sir."

Kirk and McCoy were waiting in the corridor for him as he left the Ambassador's quarters. He looked at them and shook his head.

"He wouldn't listen," he said. "He thinks I was defending Dr. McCoy because Vulcans do not take offence."

"You tried, Spock," McCoy said, rather dully. "Thanks for that."

"We can try letting him see you working together," Kirk decided. "But from his dogmatic attitude, I don't hold out much hope of it being successful."

For several days thereafter Spock and McCoy refrained from exercising their tongues on each other. Beaulieu saw them together on a number of occasions, and remained obstinately unimpressed.

"It says a good deal for Commander Spock's patience and good nature that he permits Dr. McCoy to use him like that," Beaulieu told Kirk eventually.

Kirk tried again. "Ambassador, McCoy isn't using Spock. Neither is patience nor good humour necessary. I've known them for years, sir. Neither of them will admit it openly, but they do have considerable affection for each other. It does show - sometimes. They argue as their way of expressing that affection, and everyone on the ship knows it. Dammit, if they really didn't get on together, would McCoy be so anxious to stay here? Would Spock want him to?"

"I'm afraid that's too complicated for me, Captain," Beaulieu replied. "Men who are friends do not argue in the terms I heard Dr. McCoy using to Mr. Spock."

Three days later the Enterprise reached her immediate destination and swung into a standard orbit round a planet which had been investigated by a Research vessel some months previously. The crew of the Ulysses had reported the native Acrons as being extremely nervous and suspicious of strangers; indeed, they had been unable to get near them. Acron was well off the usual beat of Starfleet vessels; nor was it anywhere near Klingon or even Romulan influence. There was nothing to indicate that the natives knew anything about other races, yet they were nervous of strangers. Starfleet felt that

this fact was unusual enough to warrant investigation.

Sensors indicated a not very plentiful, well-scattered, intelligent humanoid population living at a pre-industrial level. Farming appeared to be the main pursuit.

"We'll beam down," Kirk decided, not surprisingly. As usual he chose Spock and McCoy to accompany him. Beaully made no secret of the fact that he considered Kirk's choice injudicious; Kirk stood firm. At last, he said,

"Would you care to accompany us, then, Ambassador? You would then be able to satisfy yourself of the competence of the landing party. We three work well together, we understand each other; I would not choose them otherwise."

"Very well," Beaully snapped. "But I warn you, Captain - one sign of inefficiency and I'll have you out of the service for endangering your command. Does that make you change your mind?"

"Ambassador, I have selected the two men with whom I work best, and who, in my opinion, work effectively together."

Beaully merely snorted.

The landing party materialised in an open, sparsely-wooded stretch of country. They looked round, moving slowly forward as they did so.

"There's a path here, Captain," Spock said.

It was very faint. "How recent is it?" Kirk asked.

Spock shook his head. "Difficult to say, precisely, Captain. It may merely be an animal track, of course."

"But you don't think so."

"I would say that an animal track would show more obvious sign of use, Captain."

"Do we follow it?" McCoy asked.

Kirk nodded. "But carefully." He glanced up and down the path, and gestured. "Choice of direction will have to be arbitrary," he said. "There's nothing to indicate which way would be best. Let's go this way." He glanced consideringly at Beaully. This man was the weak link in their team; not Spock, not McCoy. Where best to place him so that he could cause the minimum amount of trouble? "Mr. Spock, you go first; then you, Bones. Ambassador, if you follow McCoy, I'll bring up the rear."

They went on in silence for some distance, then Spock stopped. Kirk moved up beside him.

"What is it, Spock?"

"A village, Captain."

Ahead of them, just recognisable as a settlement, was a cluster of primitive huts made of woven sticks and reed thatching. The place

seemed deserted.

"This could be why the track looks unused," Kirk mused. "The people have left; migrated to another area, perhaps?"

"I disagree, Captain," Spock put in. "The area around the huts bears a look of cultivation - primitive, certainly, but unmistakable. People are unlikely to leave a region before they harvest their crops."

McCoy nodded. "He's right, Jim. Unless something scared them so much that they just ran."

"If they were simply frightened away, they would soon return," Spock objected.

"Perhaps not," Kirk said slowly. "I know that, logically, once the cause of their fear was gone, you might expect them to come back... but the Captain of the *Ulysses* reported that the Acrons were very nervous. A race like that might keep on running."

"What could frighten them?" Beaully asked.

"A rare but very dangerous life-form? McCoy suggested.

"I would think not, Doctor," Spock said. "They were reported to be suspicious of strangers. Humanoid beings, accustomed to a dangerous native life-form, no matter how rare, would not necessarily be suspicious of another humanoid."

Kirk looked at him. "Speculation?"

"A possibility that they are familiar with a dangerous alien humanoid - or at least have encountered such a race. We ourselves are familiar with several humanoid races who are, to say the least, unfriendly."

Kirk nodded.

"But that doesn't explain why the Acrons, having run, didn't eventually come back," McCoy protested. "They must have left here weeks ago." He glanced round the weed-thick passages between the huts.

"I know, Doctor. I would therefore suspect that this putative race is extremely dangerous; the natives may have begun to run, then all been killed. It may also be a race we have not before encountered; we are very near an unexplored spiral arm, and it would be foolish of us to assume that the Klingons and the Romulans are the only inimical species in the galaxy."

The party moved on slowly, half expecting someone to spring out at them from one of the huts, deserted though they seemed to be. But nothing stirred in the empty settlement, and they reached the other side of it without incident.

Once there, something caught Kirk's attention, and he led the way through the grass to a barren area. The vegetation, crushed, scorched by extreme heat, was just beginning to sprout again. The patch was several times larger than the mark left by a shuttlecraft. Spock turned his tricorder onto it.

"What caused it, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

"There are traces of fuel deposits, partially burned," Spock replied slowly. "This mark was left by some kind of vehicle, presumably a flying one; whatever kind of engine it has, it is not particularly efficient."

"Efficient enough to get around in," McCoy commented drily.

"It certainly supports your theory about a dangerous race," Kirk told Spock. "And certainly not native to this planet."

"Indeed not," Spock agreed. "There is nothing on this world to indicate any flight potential."

"The next question is, what makes them dangerous?"

"Slave hunting?" Beaulieu suggested. "That would explain why there aren't any of the villagers around; any that did escape would be scared to come back."

"Surely there is a limit to the number of slaves any such culture requires?" Spock said doubtfully. "Unless, of course, the death rate among them is very high."

Kirk shook his head. "That doesn't follow, Spock. Did Vulcan ever have a period when there was a slave-owning culture?"

"No. In the distant past..."

Kirk cut in before the Vulcan could elaborate. "Well, Earth did... and remember that 'Roman' culture we encountered a while back? Slave-owning cultures never have enough slaves. Possession of slaves is a sign of wealth; that was part of the reason why Rome, back on Earth, eventually fell. Too many slaves. The citizens hadn't enough to do. Even their fighting was all done, eventually, by members of conquered races... and the slave population outnumbered the free population by... I can't remember the exact figures, but it was dozens to one... But I think we're entering the realm of pointless speculation now." He pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Is there any sign of mechanisation on any part of the planet's surface?"

"Nnnooo, Captain." Uhura sounded doubtful. "There are indications of another ship nearby, but we can't pinpoint it. Nothing else."

"Any chance that it's a ship on the ground?"

"It's possible, Captain," Scott's voice out in, "but if it is we can't give you a position. The readings are fluctuating, fading in and out, and very faint even at their strongest. More like a sensor ghost than anything else."

"Right. If you do locate anything positive, let me know."

"Aye, sir."

"Kirk out."

"Is that another track?" McCoy asked, pointing.

"Looks like it," Kirk said. "Let's see where it goes."

The went along it fairly quickly. After a while it forked,

three branches leading off it in different directions. All looked equally unused.

"Spock, you take that path," Kirk said. "Bones, you take the middle one. Ambassador, you and I will take the other. Be careful. Contact each other at the first sign of anything - anything at all. If you find nothing within, say, three hours, beam back to the Enterprise."

The others nodded acknowledgement and set off.

Kirk and Beaully found nothing. Their path led only to the fields around the village, and after about an hour of wandering around trying to make sense out of its meandering route from field to field, getting increasingly annoyed by Beaully's assertive suggestions, none of which appeared to have any positive foundation, Kirk contacted Spock and McCoy. McCoy reported that his path also appeared to be nothing more than access to the fields, but Spock was making good time on his track, which definitely seemed to be going somewhere. "Most probably to another village," he concluded.

"Right, then," Kirk decided. "Bones, beam up. Wait for us, then we'll all beam back down to join Spock. Kirk to Enterprise... Scotty, you have all our coordinates? Beam McCoy, Beaully and myself up, then down again at Spock's position. Energise when ready."

It seemed no time at all before they materialised in the transporter room. McCoy moved back onto the platform to join them, and they returned to the surface. They materialised beside the barely-marked track, to find no sign of Spock.

"Scotty, have you got the coordinates right?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Kirk to Spock." There was no answer.

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other, concern showing clearly on both their faces.

"Could something have attacked him - knocked him out?" Beaully asked.

"Unlikely," Kirk replied. He looked round.

McCoy moved a few paces, and stopped. "Jim."

"Yes, Bones?"

As Kirk joined him McCoy bent and picked up Spock's communicator from where it was lying at the side of the track. Beaully joined them.

"You may have been right after all," Kirk told the Ambassador.

"Whoever - or whatever - it was can't be far away," McCoy said. "It's only seconds since we talked to him."

"You would think so," Kirk agreed, "but in that case, we should be able to hear something, surely. I can't hear anything..."

"Could he have been transported away?" Beaully asked.

Kirk looked at the Ambassador. At last he had made a useful suggestion.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Any word yet on that unidentified ship?"

"It could be on the ground quite near you," Scott answered.

"Spock's theory about a hostile race seems pretty well proved," Kirk went on. "It also seems as if he's been caught by it," he finished grimly.

"So what are we waiting for?" McCoy said urgently. "If we're to rescue him..."

"Hold on, Bones. a, We don't know that that is what happened - it's still speculation. b, We don't know where this ship is. And c, it won't help Spock if we blunder into the same trap."

"All right, then. Let me set myself up as a decoy, then you and Ambassador Beaully can see what we're up against; and if I'm caught too, expecting it, I might be in quite a good position to help Spock."

"I know, Bones," Kirk said sympathetically. "But remember, Spock may already be dead. It won't help any of us if you're killed. It's too big a risk."

"Isn't Spock worth it?" McCoy demanded fiercely. Beaully looked at him sharply.

Before Kirk could reply they became conscious of a sweet, sticky smell, then all collapsed unconscious.

Kirk slowly became aware of lying on something hard, and then of a steady humming sound. He opened his eyes and looked around.

Beaully and McCoy lay beside him, still unconscious; a few feet away, Spock was sprawled limply. They were in a small room with metallic walls; a grating near the ceiling looked like part of a ventilation system; apart from that, the walls looked solid. At a guess, they were inside the alien ship.

Kirk scrambled up and bent over Beaully, then McCoy. Both were stirring, and would not be long in regaining consciousness. He crossed to Spock, and rolled him onto his back.

Even his untrained eye could see that something was far wrong with the Vulcan. Spock was breathing heavily, and his face was an unnatural blueish colour. Kirk crossed back to McCoy and shook him.

"Bones! Wake up, Bones!"

McCoy grunted and opened unwilling eyes. "Jim. What..."

"Spock," Kirk said tersely. "Something's wrong with him."

McCoy sat up abruptly at that, looking round. As Beaully opened his eyes McCoy was moving over to Spock. He bent over the Vulcan.

"Well?" Kirk asked anxiously.

McCoy groped for his medical kit and found it missing. He reached next for his communicator, and failed to find it either. "It looks like some sort of allergy," he said, his voice worried. "I can't think of any known Vulcan allergy, but that doesn't mean there isn't one somewhere. Without instruments I can't even begin to guess exactly what's wrong - or to treat him. We've got to get him back to the Enterprise."

"How?" Kirk asked bluntly. "My communicator's gone too. And my phaser. I can't see a door in this place, either."

"I don't know how," McCoy said irritably. "But if we don't get him back to the Enterprise, and soon, he'll die. This... allergy... or whatever it is, is affecting his lungs. It's becoming more and more of an effort for him to breathe, and unconscious as he is, he'll soon reach the point where he hasn't the ability to make the effort."

Kirk bit his lip. "Any idea what might have caused it?"

McCoy shook his head. "Unless whatever we were gassed with. He must have had a dose of the same stuff. Blood with a copper base is very rare - the vulcanoid species are the only intelligent ones I know of with it. His blood could have reacted to the gas in a different way from the one iron-based blood would. And if that's the case, his lungs are probably the first place where the reaction would show up."

He felt for Spock's pulse, adjusting his grip on the Vulcan's wrist until he found it. "Heartbeat's slowed, too. If I even had my kit I could give him an anti-histamine injection. The longer I am getting him treated..." He trailed off, not needing to finish.

"Any possibility he's managed to put himself into some sort of trance?"

McCoy shook his head again. "His breathing's too laboured for that, Jim. It's not a trance."

"Not even a healing trance?"

"No. Besides, he needs a few seconds to prepare, and he wouldn't have had the time. Remember how quickly we were knocked out? It was almost instantaneous."

"That's true."

With startling abruptness a door that had been invisible until then slid open. Four... creatures... entered.

They resembled nothing so much as a praying mantis; Beaully, the diplomat, took an automatic step backwards. They were humanoid, in that they were biped and two-armed and stood reasonably erect; but they had a secondary pair of rudimentary arms culminating in tiny claws, which looked as if they might still be functional when the creatures fed. Their heads were insect-like, with two bulbous eyes set at the sides, short antennae, no noses and large mouths. They had no obvious ears. The actual shape of their bodies was difficult to determine, as they wore loose long robes; but from the way they moved it seemed possible that they had large abdomens protruding behind - or below - where their legs joined their bodies. Their arms were connected to their bodies at the front of their chests, and

terminated in tentacle-like fingers.

As Kirk moved forward, his attention was drawn back to McCoy. The surgeon was bending over Spock, his mouth covering the Vulcan's.

"Bones?"

"He's past... making... the effort..." McCoy jerked out as he worked, gasping out the words as he drew another deep breath to force into the Vulcan's lungs.

Kirk whirled to the aliens. "You've got to let us get back to our ship! Our friend is dying!"

The aliens seemed to communicate with each other, although Kirk heard nothing save a series of meaningless clicks. Then one of them moved forward, holding out a communicator. Kirk snatched it, then nearly dropped it in his haste to open it.

"Kirk to Enterprise - four to beam up. Have a medical team standing by."

They were caught in the familiar transporter field.

Once on board the Enterprise McCoy and the waiting medical team rushed Spock off to Sickbay, leaving Beaully staring after the whirlwind with an almost stupefied expression until Kirk attracted his attention.

"I must admit," the Ambassador said thoughtfully, "that Dr. McCoy's reaction to Mr. Spock's condition has surprised me... and yet it is wholly in keeping with what you - and Mr. Spock - told me. Perhaps I was wrong after all..."

Kirk managed to smile. "Yes, Ambassador. It does show - sometimes." He glanced at the door, wanting to follow, knowing that duty must come first. "You and I must now consider what to do about those aliens down there."

Beaully straightened almost defiantly. "I am a fully qualified Ambassador," he told Kirk, unnecessarily. "It is my duty to return and attempt to make contact with them."

"I fully agree, sir. Their readiness to let us go, after they had captured us, seems to indicate that they started off by thinking us natives; once they realised we weren't, they probably wanted to see what we'd do."

The two men beamed back to the planet, taking a translator unit, to materialise in the little room they'd left so short a time before. The insectile aliens were waiting, looking almost as if they hadn't moved during the interval. *Of course, Kirk thought, patience is a virtue amongst carnivorous insects like the praying mantis...*

Kirk faced the aliens. "I thank you for permitting us to remove our friend. May I ask why you captured us? You must have known that we were not natives."

"We did not know." The translated language came over in a

series of clicks, sounding very unusual; both men found they had to listen hard in order to follow the alien speech. "Your species all look alike to us."

Well, that figured, Kirk thought; these aliens all looked alike to him, too.

"When we examined the small devices you carry, we soon realised that you must be representative of a more advanced culture. It took us some time, however, to decide that you must be like us, travellers from another world."

"Do you know why the natives are so frightened of strangers?" Beaully asked.

Kirk's first thought, that that was a stupid question, quickly faded as he realised that the Ambassador was right; the aliens were making no threats, had in fact treated them very sympathetically. It seemed unlikely that they would behave so to one race while preying on another.

"We have been removing them from this planet and taking them to another world."

"What!" Beaully sounded horrified.

"We have a reason. Come, we will show you."

The two men followed their hosts to another room, where there was a viewscreen. One of the aliens manipulated a control, and pictures began to form on the screen.

"This is five years ago, when we first arrived."

The pictures showed a mountain range. High, snow-covered hills stood out clearly against the sky; trees climbed half-way up the slopes, marching in serried ranks.

"Our sensing devices showed instability in this ground. We waited, and watched."

"Instability?" Kirk exclaimed. "Those mountains look good for a million years!"

"Four years ago," the insect said evenly.

It was the same range of mountains, but now two of them were smoking and red lava was pouring fluidly from one of these. The trees on its lower slopes were burning, the fire spreading rapidly on each side of the stream of lava that was destroying them.

"Three years ago."

It was again the same view; but now it was terribly changed. Now, at least half the peaks were showing signs of incipient vulcanism. One of the new volcanos was throwing out great lumps of rock; very few trees were left.

"Two years ago."

It had to be the same scene, Kirk realised. Had to be. But it was so altered as to be almost unrecognisable. The whole outline of the mountains was different, and every mountain there was breathing

smoke. One was almost gone; in its place was a volcanic crater, the pitiful wreck of a once-proud giant. It must have exploded, Kirk decided. He glanced at the aliens.

"The natives took fright when all this happened?" he surmised.

The insect manipulating the control turned its head in a swivelling motion to the right. "This range of mountains is in a deserted region. There was no-one living nearby to flee in alarm. This is only one of many such areas. For so many volcanoes to appear over such a small area so quickly, indicates great instability. We investigated, studied the planet carefully, and realised that it is beginning to disintegrate. We estimate that it will explode within a few weeks. These are the only intelligent people we have found in twenty years of travelling to the stars; we wanted to save them if we could."

"So you began to carry them off?"

"Them and their domestic animals. We take them to a planet of a nearby system. The planet resembles this one closely, and those we took there first have settled down well. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to catch them. The ones who are left do not believe us when we try to tell them of the danger, and run from us."

The two men looked at each other. Fear of insects... of aliens...

"Perhaps we could help," Kirk suggested. "The natives might listen to us - you say we resemble them sufficiently that you can't tell us apart."

Beaully shook his head. "The crew of the *Ulysses* couldn't get near them, remember, Captain? But..." he glanced at the alien, "... have you ever thought of bringing back some of the ones you have settled, and getting them to tell the others you mean no harm?"

The alien swivelled its insectile head again. "Do you think it would be effective?"

"Well, if they see some of their own people happy and contented, they might be more inclined to listen."

"Where are you taking them?" Kirk asked.

The alien clicked what must have been a set of coordinates, but it failed to translate. *No referents*, Kirk realised. *Oh well, they could sort that one out from the ship.*

"How long does it take?"

"Five of our days to get there," was the doleful reply. "Only four of our ships are available to assist; our home world is too far away for any further help to reach us in time."

"I'll see if any of our ships are near enough to divert."

Beaully remained with the aliens when Kirk beamed back to the *Enterprise*. His first thought was to contact Sickbay.

"McCoy here."

"How is he, Bones?"

"Breathing." McCoy's voice was carefully controlled. "We've run tests, but we can't come up with any cause, although anti-histamine shots did help, and he seems to be throwing off the effects all right. Don't ask me when he'll regain consciousness, though."

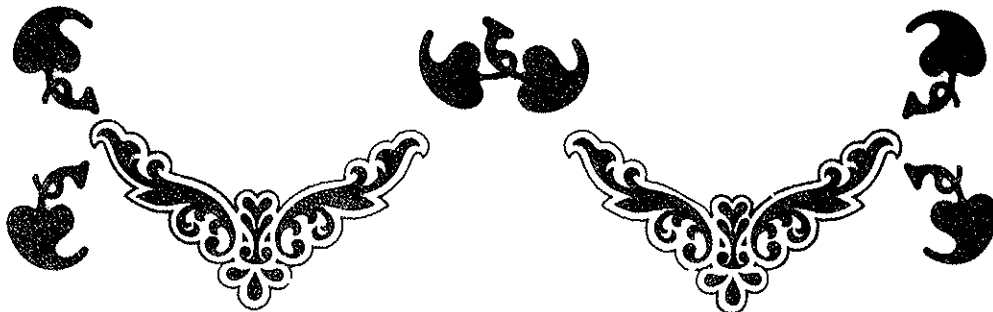
Satisfied, Kirk went to the Bridge. While Chekov checked out the nearby systems to discover which one was being used for the resettlement, Kirk contacted Starfleet Command and arranged for the nearest Federation vessels to be diverted to help the evacuation.

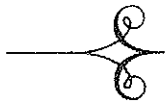
With the assistance of several of the transplanted Acrons, the remainder of the evacuation was successfully carried out by a mixed fleet of Federation and alien vessels.

Beaully left with the insectile Jaaniks to provide liason between them and the Federation. This was a friendly species worth cultivating, despite the initial mistrust the insects' appearance engendered.

"I am pleased that the Ambassador decided not to recommend your transfer, Doctor," Spock told McCoy some hours after they left the asteroid belt that Acron had become. "I would have... missed... the entertainment that I derive from the illogical workings of your mind."

McCoy grunted. "I knew I should have jumped at the chance," he said. "I might never get another."





IF I FORGET YOU



The planet called Thorsten had been settled for nearly half a century. The colony on Thorsten was well established. Its economy should have been flourishing. It should have been expanding.

Instead, it had been first static, then failing, for two or three years; now it was collapsing.

Governor Masters was known to have reached his level of inefficiency on Thorsten; he had been a satisfactory enough assistant governor, but once he was in a situation where he had nobody to pass the buck to (should it prove necessary), he proved to be of an irresolute nature, but he was not incompetent enough to be removed from office. To be incompetent, a man has to do something, make some decisions, usually wrong, and he did neither. He simply coasted along, letting events take their course, and for several years they did so without any trouble.

Then the titanium mines began to show a growing drop in production.

Since they had no valid reason to deprive him of office, Masters' superiors in the Colonisation Office kept pressuring him for reasons for the lack of continuing expansion in the titanium mines, in the hope that the constant harassment would encourage him to resign - especially since he was nearing retirement age.

Masters, to give him his due, did make an attempt, as persistent as his rather easy-going, vacillating nature would permit, to discover the reason for the poor production figures from the mines that were the main source of income for the planet. But incompetent leadership does not encourage conscientiousness among his underlings unless an ambitious one sees an opportunity to bring his face to the attention of those in supreme power; and there was no opportunity for that on Thorsten, since all reports to the Colonisation Office, and from them to the Federation Council, went through the governor. Masters' department heads had become lazy, giving only the appearance of brisk efficiency when he was around, knowing that their superior lacked the drive to do anything positive about it if indeed he even noticed their negligence.

And then Masters, who for so long had been too irresolute even to decide to remove himself from a position that he found unbearably demanding, finally made a positive decision and took early retirement, driven to it at last by the continual pressure from his superiors.

The powers that be at the Colonisation Office breathed a collective sigh of relief and put their heads together to select a successor. They discussed qualifications, this time looking for someone who had proven experience in colony governorship rather than an assistant applying for promotion.

After much thought, the decision was made to appoint Roald Dorcas to the post.

Despite a well-deserved reputation for being able to get

satisfactory work out of a stone, Dorcas had always maintained a good relationship with the men under him. He went to Thorsten quite sure that within a month the planet's problems would be at an end; he was convinced that these problems were all the responsibility of the previous Governor, whose reputation - or lack of one - had become well known throughout diplomatic circles.

He was wrong.

Not only did his arrival fail to improve the situation; within a very short time he realised that matters were growing rapidly worse. Despite every incentive he could offer, production of titanium continued to drop. The miners claimed that they were producing almost as much of the ore as they had ever done - there was dissatisfaction over certain of the working conditions and a work to rule in operation - but the weight of titanium leaving the mines was steadily diminishing.

His study of the figures led him to the unwelcome conclusion that the miners were lying, although he could not understand why they should. An inspection of the mines showed that the veins of ore were still rich. Certainly the miners had had some genuine grievances, none of them particularly major - Masters' vacillation and unwillingness to commit himself to any concession that he might have to justify later were responsible for many of them - but Dorcas quickly managed to resolve most of these and promised to look into the remainder. The work to rule was suspended. It had made no difference to the production figures.

Unlike Masters, Dorcas was not afraid to admit that a situation had become impossible. His report to the Colonisation Office listed everything that he had done in an attempt to resolve the problems as well as the few things that Masters had managed to suggest, and finished with a request that an experienced negotiator should be sent to Thorsten in an attempt to discuss the situation with the miners' leaders, for he was still reasonably sure that he had nothing more than a labour dispute to blame for the trouble.

Perhaps predictably, the Colonisation Office reported the lack of progress on Thorsten to the Federation Council, which in turn ordered Starfleet Command to Do Something About It.

Starfleet - also predictably - responded in its usual fashion, by sending in a Starship.

James T. Kirk scowled irritably as Admiral Fitzgerald's image blanked out, to be replaced by the ever changing starfield. Who did Starfleet think he was - Sherlock Holmes? This situation needed an industrial negotiator, possibly even one skilled in industrial espionage; the situation seemed to Kirk to bear all the hallmarks of typical commercial sabotage.

Certainly it was difficult to think of any group who would be able to benefit from a failed Federation mining colony; before a private group was permitted to take over any Federation-funded project it had to pay back all the money the Federation had spent in developing that venture as well as showing that it was wealthy enough to do something positive with it. Few industrial groups, no matter how successful, possessed that sort of money.

What of one of the member planets of the Federation? passed

through Kirk's mind. He shook his head. The likelihood was vanishingly small, for the failure of a Federation undertaking meant loss to all member planets.

He rose abruptly and crossed to the science station. "Opinion, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan shook his head. "The situation is unprecedented," he said quietly. "This is not a normal industrial dispute, that is certain; the miners have made no impossible demands, and while they did have certain grievances these would now appear to have been rectified. It is not a strike nor, now, a work to rule; the miners say they are working normally, that the ore is being produced. Therefore the problem is one outside the industry - despite Governor Dorcas's suspicions."

Kirk nodded gloomily. "I tend to agree," he muttered. He sighed. "Just what Starfleet Command expects us to do..."

Spock glanced at him, the faintest gleam of mischief in his eyes. "It is your own fault, Captain. You have never yet failed to resolve whatever problem Starfleet has assigned to you. If you do not want to be assigned these impossible missions you should endeavour to fail occasionally - "

"And have them think I'm incompetent?" Kirk responded in kind, his mood involuntarily lightened by his friend's teasing even although the indignation in his voice was only half feigned.

The gleam in Spock's eye intensified. "Then it is a matter of pride, Captain? You complain, but you are also proud to be assigned these 'impossible missions'?"

"Dammit, Spock - !" Kirk gave a resigned shrug. "I suppose I am," he admitted ruefully. "Not for myself, though..."

"No, not for yourself," Spock said softly. "It's for the Enterprise, isn't it? You're really quite proud that Starfleet automatically thinks of the Enterprise when there is a difficult task to be undertaken."

"Yes. Yes, I am." He glanced round the bridge. "The best ship - and the best crew - in the Fleet."

As the Enterprise swung into orbit around Thorsten Kirk swung the command chair round to face Uhura.

"Contact the Governor, Lieutenant," he ordered.

There was a brief pause, then, "I have Governor Dorcas, sir."

"On the main screen."

The face that shimmered into view looked tired, although Kirk knew that Dorcas had only taken over his position a few weeks previously.

"James T. Kirk, commanding the Starship Enterprise, Governor," he introduced himself.

"Captain Kirk. You are most welcome."

"I understand you're having some problems, Governor."

"Yes, Captain. If you would like to beam down we can discuss them with the figures in front of us."

"By all means, Governor." He glanced over at Spock. "You have the co-ordinates, Science Officer?"

"Yes, sir."

He stood. "We'll be straight down, sir. Lt. Uhura, contact Security and tell them that the landing party is to report to the transporter room immediately. Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Mr. Spock - " He headed for the door, the Vulcan at his heels.

The four security guards were already waiting in the transporter room when the Captain and the First Officer walked in.

Security duties were normally undertaken in rotation, but because of the nature of the mission, Kirk had ignored the duty roster on this occasion, and selected four highly experienced men to accompany him. Inexperienced men sometimes made the most elementary of mistakes; although they were well trained in both armed and unarmed combat there were times that it seemed that the men and women who specialised in security were taught nothing else. It never failed to horrify him when he discovered how little some of the new crewmembers knew about possible dangers on alien planets.

The group materialised in Dorcas' office. The Governor began to move forward to greet them, but paused when he saw that his Vulcan guest carried a tricorder which he was studying even as he shimmered into existence.

As the guards scattered to doors and windows, Spock scanned the room carefully with the tricorder, then nodded to Kirk, who was already wiping sweat from his forehead.

"It's clear, Captain."

"Clear?" Dorcas asked, puzzled.

"We wished to ensure that there were no communications devices surreptitiously embedded in, or on, your furniture," Spock explained.

"Oh. You mean bugs?"

"Yes, Governor," Kirk agreed, smiling apologetically.

"I can see why, I think, but do you really think it was necessary? Who would want to bug my office?"

"Offhand I can't think of anyone, but you never know." He indicated Spock. "Mr. Spock is my First Officer - also, incidentally, my Science Officer. I've discussed this situation with him. We're agreed that it has to be caused by something more than a simple labour dispute - "

"Captain," Dorcas interrupted wryly, "labour disputes are seldom simple, but I am now forced to concur. The miners had some legitimate grievances, but most of these were easily dealt with. Any that are still outstanding are being negotiated. There is no reason for the miners to be disrupting the output of titanium ore. Indeed, they say they are working full time and producing a full quota of

ore.

"I don't want to disbelieve them, but the production figures have been diminishing steadily." He indicated a wallchart that showed a steadily dropping line. "The colony was almost self-supporting when this started, Captain, even with Masters' mismanagement. The earliest drop in income wasn't big enough to throw the colony into the red, but as it continued... Another six months like this and we'll be showing such a loss that we'll be right back to square one; fifty years away from being self-supporting." Dorcas ran a distracted hand through his hair. "I've got a good reputation, Captain. I'll admit I don't want to lose that. But there's more than that; colonists who settle a new planet expect to have to work hard - it can be practically slave labour in the first few years, depending on how much money has been invested in it in the first place, and there was a lot invested here. I don't want to see all the hard work of two generations of colonists thrown away; I don't want to see the present generation condemned to nothing but constant hard work at a time when they have the right to be expecting an improvement in their standard of living, increased leisure time... That's another reason I don't want to disbelieve the miners. I can't see them being willing to lose a higher standard of living. Yet I have no choice but to disbelieve them.

"There have not been any demands by an outside body, or threats to any personnel on the planet that I know of. Just this impossible drop in output."

Kirk grunted. *Dorcas has his priorities right*, he decided, as he said,

"Governor, the Klingons could be responsible for quite a surprising amount of disruption without even letting themselves be seen. In their eyes, bankrupting a Federation colony could be a legitimate move in the power battle between us."

Hot as it had been inside the office, it was even hotter out of doors - a sticky, humid heat that all of them - even Spock, whose home planet was dry - found enervating. Within seconds the Humans were all sweating profusely, and Spock, whose metabolism was geared to preserving body moisture, found himself wishing that he could sweat - anything, even the loss of precious body fluid, that would relieve the distress of the unpleasant heat would be welcome.

Dorcas took them to the mines, where the manager, Karl Unger, showed them round. The men were all hard at work, and watching them. Kirk decided that the Governor was correct; he did not want to disbelieve these men. From the way they were working, there was no reason for the drop-off in production. Their morale was not good, which was hardly surprising under the circumstances, but they responded to Unger's praise, his occasional joke, in a manner that showed that the mine manager was well liked.

Yet when Unger showed them the production figures, calculated from the amount of ore taken from the grading sheds, these indicated clearly that production had fallen quite sharply.

Kirk said little until they got back to Dorcas' office. There, in the blessed relief of a mere eighty degrees fahrenheit, he said slowly, "When was the last shipment sent out?"

"They go monthly. The last one was three weeks ago."

Kirk turned to the Vulcan. "Mr. Spock - I'd like you to take two of the guards and check out the storage areas here. Compare what's there with the figures for the last three weeks that Mr. Unger showed us."

"Yes, sir." Spock looked over at the guards. "Tadden; Donnelly. Come with me."

The three men went out, and Kirk turned his attention back to Dorcas' records.

He began to look over the records, discussing them with Dorcas. They gave him a history of the colony that he found quite fascinating, and he was soon deep in a study of it. He eventually raised his head from papers showing the first signs of the incompetence of the unmissed Masters to the realisation that fully two hours had passed and there was no sign of Spock's party coming back.

Surprised - checking the storage areas should not have taken half that time - but not yet worried, Kirk reached for his communicator and flipped it open.

"Kirk to Spock. Spock? Come in, Spock."

There was no reply except a faint crackle of static.

"Strange," Kirk muttered. "Kirk to Tadden... Kirk to Donnelly..." His frown deepened when neither replied.

He glanced over to where the two remaining guards were standing by the window, gazing out and exchanging spasmodic conversation. They looked bored, and in all honesty he could not blame them if they were.

"Dixon! Fasleur!"

The two men jumped, but recovered quickly, turning with every appearance of alertness.

"Sir." Fasleur was a man of few words; Dixon answered for them both.

"I can't get a reply from the rest of the landing party. We'd better go to the storage sheds and see if they're all right. Governor, I'll call on you again tomorrow; but for the moment I must check up on my men."

"Yes, of course, Captain. If there's anything I can do..."

"If there's any trouble, I'll take you up on that, but I imagine there's a simple enough explanation, though offhand I can't think of one."

He nodded a farewell and led the two remaining guards from the office into the intolerable heat of outdoors. Even the clouds that had begun to gather did not chill the air when they passed in front of the sun.

They found the storage area easily enough. It was cluttered-looking, dirty and with a strangely hopeless appearance of neglect - but it was deserted. To call these buildings 'sheds' was not wholly accurate, for they were quite big, but they were built of wood and had a not-quite-permanent air - as if whoever had built them in the first place had intended to replace them at the first opportunity with something more durable but had never found the time to do so.

The three men looked into shed after shed, noting the depressing emptiness of most of them, but finding no sign of the missing trio.

At last Kirk called a halt. He scowled round at the unresponsive buildings as he flicked open his communicator.

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Lt. Uhura here." Her voice had a background accompaniment of crackling.

"Lieutenant, has Mr. Spock called in?"

"No, sir."

Kirk hadn't really expected an affirmative. "Ask Mr. Scott to beam down a full search party - Mr. Spock and two of the guards are missing. Initiate a sensor scan - "

"Scott here, sir," the Chief Engineer's voice interrupted. "Sensors arena' working properly - " The signal faded completely for a moment, replaced by a hissing crackle, then strengthened. "This planet has a heavier than usual magnetic field and it's disrupting the signal."

"Damn. All right, cancel that. But get a search party down. There's only about an hour of daylight left, unfortunately, but I'd like to make full use of it."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk replaced the communicator on his belt. Moments later, he heard the hum of the transporter as the first group of security guards materialised.

In the hour before it became too dark to see properly, the Enterprise's security guards searched the area around the grading and storage sheds as thoroughly as was possible without the help of tricorders. There was too much static electricity in the air; it disrupted the tricorders as much as it had the communicator signal, and as the sky darkened the static interference worsened. Kirk could feel - or thought he could feel - a tingling in his body that corresponded to the crackling of the electricity in the air.

Finally, reluctantly, Kirk gave up for the night. He called the ship again.

"Landing party ready to beam up, Mr. Scott."

"I wouldn't - @*+*!@@&! - disruption."

"I didn't quite catch all that, Scotty."

"@**%&%! - working properly, Captain."

"Captain Kirk."

Kirk swung round. Intent on his attempted conversation with the ship, he had not heard Dorcas' approach.

"I wouldn't recommend trying to get back to your ship now, Captain. The magnetic interference isn't impossible for most of the day, but it gets worse at night - there's a build up of electricity during the heat of the day. It dissipates during the hours of darkness. You'll be able to contact the Enterprise again in the morning. Meanwhile, I can provide quarters for you all. The huts that were put up for the building workers are still used from time to time so they're in good condition, and I've a spare room at my own house where you can stay, Captain."

Well, that explained why he had been able to communicate with Dorcas when they arrived without the annoyance of static crackling disrupting half of what was being said.

"Thank you, Governor." He was not happy about the situation, but realised that it would be ungracious to complain. He was beginning to dislike this planet, he realised, as he wondered why, in almost fifty years, nobody had thought to include information about the nightly magnetic disruption of the atmosphere in the recorded data for Thorsten. Probably because most of the contact and loading of ore was done early in the planet's day. Well, once he returned to the Enterprise, he would personally see to it that the information was entered in the data banks.

Kirk saw his men assigned to the currently empty workers' dormitory Dorcas was offering them. It was at least clean; an air conditioning system had been switched on, and the hut, while not exactly cool, already had the worst heat off it and, according to the Governor, would soon reach a tolerable temperature. Kirk nodded politely as Dorcas added, "There'll be a meal ready soon in the mess - " he indicated a door on the opposite side of the corridor - "and there's a common room along there. I think you'll be comfortable enough."

Kirk hung back slightly as Dorcas turned to the door, glancing at Lt. Gulkin, the ranking member of the search party.

"If you have any problems let me know right away," he murmured.

"Aye, sir."

Kirk followed Dorcas out. In some ways he would have preferred to remain with his men, but he realised that this would be the perfect opportunity to talk over the situation with the Governor in guaranteed privacy. Despite their failure to find any bugs in Dorcas' office, he had become quite suspicious of the security on Thorsten.

The search was resumed at first light.

Several hours later a tricorder trace led a pair of searchers to a pile of rubbish in a narrow alley between two of the sheds.

Tadden's body was roughly buried among the empty boxes and sacks of anonymous, mixed waste. The back of his head was smashed in.

Lt. Cappas reached for his communicator.

"Cappas to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"We've found Tadden, sir. He's dead."

"What about Lt. Donnelly and Mr. Spock?"

"No sign as yet, sir. We've only just found Tadden. About to resume the search in this area. We're beside the storage sheds, sir."

"I'll be right there."

Kirk paused only long enough to order all the search parties to the storage area and call McCoy down.

Dr. McCoy bent over Tadden's body, scanner busy.

"Killed instantly," he said with the professional impersonality that he assumed at such times to cover his sorrow at the waste of a young life. "He's been dead at least twenty four hours."

"Any other injuries?" Kirk asked.

"No," McCoy replied. "I suspect that someone came up behind him and killed him before he even realized the danger."

"In that case - " Kirk's voice was grim - "the other two should be around here to."

"We don't know that they were all killed," McCoy protested.

"If whoever killed Tadden was going to bother with prisoners, why kill one of them with a blow from behind?" Kirk asked.

"Over here!" Gulkin called harshly. Kirk moved instantly, McCoy behind him by barely the second that it took him to rise.

Donnelly lay at the other end of the pile of rubbish. His skull had also been crushed by a heavy blow.

"He's the same?" Kirk asked unnecessarily as he bent over the dead man.

McCoy nodded. "Yes. Killed instantly about twenty four hours ago."

Kirk straightened and looked round. The rest of the men had resumed the search, but Gulkin was still standing looking down at Donnelly's body, the expression on his face showing with brutal clarity the effort he was having to make to maintain his self-control.

"Lieutenant?" he asked.

He saw Gulkin's Adam's apple bob as the security lieutenant swallowed before he looked up. "It's just... Dave Donnelly was a good friend, sir. Even while we were still searching, I'd hoped..."

"We'll get whoever killed Donnelly, Lieutenant," Kirk promised. He glanced round again. The pile of rubbish was being moved steadily to the other end of the alley as the search for the missing Vulcan continued.

Behind him he heard McCoy talking, then the hum of the transporter. A moment later, McCoy joined him.

"I've sent the bodies up to the ship," he said. "I don't think there's any need for an autopsy. The cause of death is self-evident." He fell silent again as he watched the rubbish being shifted.

Even before it had all been moved, it was clear that Spock was not hidden there.

Kirk ordered the search extended again, not sure whether the lack of a Vulcan body was good news or bad. Then he turned and began to make his way back towards the Governor's office. Dorcas should at least be informed of this development.

As he went, he noticed that the area was strangely quiet. Surely there should be someone at work? Even though the mines were apparently working at less than half capacity, there should be some ore to grade and then move to storage.

He rounded a corner, to see a group of four or five men loitering in the roadway ahead of him. Despite his belief that there should be some work to do, there seemed to be no reason for their presence, and he felt uneasy, not liking the look of them; there was an air of watchfulness about them. He almost hesitated for a moment, almost turned back, then changed his mind and strode onwards. There was no reason to feel nervous; hadn't he just been thinking that there must be some work for the non-mining men of the colony to do? If they were not working, it must be because, in the present uncertain economic climate of Thorsten, they were unemployed and merely looking for some way to pass a few hours, and possibly regarded him with some hostility as a representative of the Federation which had so far failed to produce a solution to the problems the planet was facing. They might have it in their minds to rough him up a bit, but if they did try to start something, he was confident that his training would enable him to defend himself without any great effort.

He watched them surreptitiously as he walked briskly towards them, alert for any hostile move.

He had almost reached them when something heavy landed on his head, and he collapsed.

Kirk regained consciousness to the awareness of a throbbing headache. He opened reluctant eyes, and closed them again hurriedly as the dim electric light hurt them. He lay for some moments, hoping that the throbbing in his head would ease, but it remained obstinately severe, preventing him from thinking clearly.

At last he opened his eyes again, very cautiously, and glanced round the small, filthy and - he now realised - really very dimly lit room, moving his head carefully to avoid aggravating the ache.

He forgot about it, however, when he saw the man who was sitting

beside him, apparently guarding him. He pushed himself upright, grinning foolishly.

"Spock!"

His First Officer looked blankly, unrecognisingly, at him. It was quite clear that the name meant nothing to him.

When Spock, with Tadden and Donnelly, left Kirk they headed straight for the storage area. They soon left the mine offices and entered an area which bore a slum-like appearance, unlikely though that seemed in a colony as recent as this one. It seemed more like part of an ancient city, hundreds of years old, decrepit and desperate for renovation.

The place had an unsavoury atmosphere and even Spock glanced round uneasily as they made their cautious way through increasingly litter-strewn streets, past the grading sheds to the ones where the graded ore was stored.

As he looked round, it seemed to the Vulcan that the area had been designed for maximum inconvenience. The sheds were an awkward size, too big to be totally efficient yet, at the same time, not big enough; fully stocked, each would hold too much for one freighter but not enough for two. The streets between them were too narrow for safety, too; should fire break out in one of the sheds the streets would be useless as firebreaks. The entire area would go up like tinder.

He knew that the ore was taken to be graded, then to store, in wheeled transport; he would have thought that the streets were too narrow for any wheeled vehicle to negotiate easily. Certainly it would be impossible for two such vehicles to pass.

Spock led the way round a corner, and stopped.

A truck, long but narrow, was drawn up at the entrance of one of the sheds; several men were busy, loading it with what had to be some of the meagre stock of ore that was in storage. Although they had been told that one was not expected for other week, a freighter must have arrived unexpectedly.

And yet... He had just left Dorcas, and if anyone was told that a freighter had arrived, it should have been Dorcas. These men had obviously been working for some time. In addition there was something about them - a furtive quality that attracted Spock's attention. It was almost as if what they were doing was not official.

"What are they doing, sir?" Tadden asked softly. "Nobody said anything about ore being moved."

"I know, Lieutenant. I believe that we should check this with Mr. Dorcas."

He had his communicator half out when they were jumped from behind. Three iron bars were brought down almost simultaneously. The two Humans collapsed, both killed instantly; Spock slumped to the ground, unconscious.

One of the attackers growled, "Good work, Mason, Drem," as he

bent to examine the three bodies.

"These two are finished - shove them somewhere out of the way where they won't be found too quickly. Bring the Vulcan along - he could be a useful hostage." He straightened. "Looks like our time here has about run out. That bastard Dorcas was bad enough, noseying in where he wasn't wanted, but now that he's called Starfleet in... Still, we've done pretty well; this goose has been pretty well plucked for the moment. It's about time to move on. We'll get as much away as we can while the boys in red are running round looking for their pals then if we have any trouble getting away ourselves we can use buster here as a lever."

"Why not just kill him now, Boss?" the man called Mason asked uneasily. "Vulcans have good memories; he'll remember our faces - "

"Mason, a dead hostage is a useless hostage. We need to keep him alive until we get away. After that... Well, I never said we were going to let him go after we get off planet, did I?"

When the Vulcan regained consciousness and struggled into a sitting position it was to find himself in a gloomy, dirty room with three masked, armed men glaring at him. He blinked at them, confused.

"Your name?" one of them snapped.

"I..." He shook his head, puzzled. "I don't remember."

"What is Dorcas planning?" There was impatience in the rough voice.

Spock considered the question. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said at last. "Who's Dorcas?"

"I knew it was a waste of time bringing him here," muttered one of the other two. "Kill him now."

"No." The first speaker held up his hand. "Vulcans do not lie, even when it would be to their advantage to do so." He turned his attention back to Spock. Reaching out, he twisted Spock's head round to face the light, not bothering to be gentle; he peered into Spock's eyes. "Can you remember anything?" he asked, a calculating note in his voice.

Spock looked at him. "No," he said at last. "Who am I? And... who are you?" Even lacking his memory, instinct told him that he did not know these men.

The man glanced at the other two. "He's lost his memory." He stated the obvious with a gloating satisfaction. "That could be... very... useful." He thought for a minute, then addressed Spock again.

"Your name is Vulcan," he said. "Now listen; you were attacked by a government agent, for no reason except cruelty. The government of this colony is corrupt, and we're trying to do something about it. You could help us. Will you help us? We found you lying unconscious where you had been left by your attacker. We brought you here to tend your hurts. In return, will you help us to destroy this evil government and put a new one into power?"

Spock continued to look at him; his words were oddly at variance with his facial expression and even the tone of his voice; somewhere deep in the Vulcan's mind a question tried to formulate itself, but his head ached too much; thinking was so much of an effort that it was easier not to think.

He could only take the words at their face value. There was, after all, no logic in lying.

"Yes," he said. He hesitated. "What will I call you?"

"My name is... One. That is... Two; and this other friend is Three." The Vulcan would never be able to tell the three of them apart anyway as long as they kept their masks on. (In fact, he could, for their heights were different.) "Rest now. We'll bring in some food shortly."

He went out, followed by his two men, leaving Spock alone.

"Are you sure this is safe?" asked Mason, the man designated as Two.

"Of course it is!" laughed One. "We've got him convinced already. Think of it - Vulcans are very strong. With a tamed one to help us load up we'll get double the stuff away in the time we have left. The idiots from Starfleet will be too busy looking for their missing pals to bother about the missing ore - we'll just have to make sure we take ore on its way from the mines rather than after it's graded. It's a pity, because we'll get a proportion of low-grade ore among it. Still, even low-grade titanium ore is fairly valuable, and we'll probably be able to sell it to some hick planet that doesn't know the difference till they start to work it."

"And what if the Vulcan regains his memory?" Mason insisted.

"Mason, you're a worrier," the third man said.

"Too right, I am!" Mason admitted. "It's kept me alive, too, Drem, and out of a rehabilitation centre. I'm happy with myself the way I am. I don't want any shrink poking around inside my skull telling me what a bad boy I am and how I'll need to change my ways."

"I don't think there's much risk, and I do think it's worth what risk there is," One said decisively. "Remember - while they're looking for him in the last place he was known to be, they won't be looking for us."

What Spock had chanced upon was the theft of titanium ore.

With the arrival of Governor Dorcas, the man who had introduced himself to Spock as One had quickly realised that their days of carefree larceny on Thorsten were numbered.

He was not particularly upset. Despite the impression that he had carefully given his men, he had been aware for some months that it was only a matter of time before the inefficient Masters was replaced by someone with more drive; indeed, if anything he was surprised that the replacement had not arrived earlier.

Greed, however, had persuaded him to continue gathering the titanium ore for as long as possible and even to extend the range of

his activities. Where they had originally done nothing but raid the stocks of ore at the grading sheds, in the last two or three weeks he had taken advantage of the total lack of morale in the colony to remove much of the ore that had gone into storage to await transport.

The interruption they had received when Spock and his men had appeared had caused the gang to retreat with their truck not quite half full. One was determined to make up that half truckful and - if possible - collect still another truckful of ore.

The next day saw the gang joining the ore trucks being loaded at the mines, quietly adding their truck to the line of vehicles being loaded.

"This is the source of the government's power," One told Spock. "They have a monopoly, and sell it at an inflated price. We plan to sell it at a proper price and use the money to help undermine the tyrants."

Spock accepted what he was told. The half thought that had begun to formulate had gone, apparently beyond recall. He found it easiest to accept what he was told.

He spent most of the day helping to load ore into a truck, and when it was full and driven away helping to load another, only half aware that he was working harder than any of the other men. He was very tired when at last the work was finished and he was taken back to the dingy little room that was, apparently, home. He was only half aware of the sound of the door being locked.

His head still ached, and when he lay down on the heap of sacks that was the only possible bed, he discovered that there was a painful place on the back of it. The aching made it difficult to concentrate, and he felt quite ill.

He could remember very little, even of what he had been doing during the day. One half memory did remain; he thought he remembered One saying that they would tend his hurts, but no-one had done so. And at the back of his mind was a strangely empty feeling, as if something that should be there was missing - but he had no idea as to what it could possibly be.

As it happened, Spock was given very little time to rest. Barely fifteen minutes had passed when he heard the grating sound of the key turning and the door opened again to admit One, closely followed by Three, who was carrying an unconscious man slung over one shoulder. Spock scrambled to his feet; Three strode over to the sacking bed and dropped his burden ungently onto it.

"Special job for you, Vulcan," One said, a note in his voice speaking of some emotion that Spock was completely unable to identify. "This is a government spy we've just captured. He has to be guarded. He's unconscious just now, but even when he comes round he shouldn't give you any trouble. If by any chance he does... kill him."

"Kill?" Something in the empty mind rejected the order.

"Remember that government men tried to kill you. Remember that the government is composed of corrupt men. We'd like him alive for the moment to get information of the government's plans out of him,

but it's not vital; you'll be doing the country a service if you do kill him."

One and Three left, and Spock heard the lock grating as the key was turned again, securing the door. This time it registered.

Why are they locking me in? he wondered, dimly but without any real interest, as he sank back onto the sacking bed. He looked down at the unconscious man without recognition, but somehow liking the look of the prisoner. He would not want to kill this man.

With a mental effort that left him shaking, Spock decided that the man did not look like the representative of anything corrupt. And... he also had hurt his head. It gave Spock a strange sympathy for the prisoner as he reached out and touched the cut on the unconscious man's head very gently, remembering the still untreated injury on the back of his own head. Was this what his head injury looked like? An open cut, with the brownish-red of dried blood surrounding it?

Then the captive's eyes opened, and shut again quickly. Spock found himself sympathising. The prisoner also must have an aching head from the blow that caused that cut.

After a few moments, the man's eyes opened again, slowly and carefully. He looked round.

"Spock!" he said.

But the sound meant nothing to the Vulcan.

Kirk looked thoughtfully at his First Officer. This, then, was the answer to one question; something had happened to make Spock forget who and what he was. But what? For a moment he wished McCoy was there; then, remembering the possible danger of his position, he was glad that the doctor was safe.

"Spock," he said again, his voice gentle, soothing. "Don't you remember me at all? Jim Kirk - your Captain. Your friend."

He began to sit up, to be stopped by the more than usually impersonal note in the other's voice as he said, "You will remain still, tyrant, or -"

"Tyrant?" Kirk exclaimed, surprise making him speak louder than he had intended, and winced as his own voice made his aching head pound. He noticed the Vulcan's eyes closing momentarily as an involuntary spasm of pain flickered across his face.

Pain? What on earth had happened to Spock that he would show pain so openly?

But Spock was looking at him once again with that cold, almost threatening, expression that forbade liberties; a hostile stranger.

Fighting the throbbing in his head, Kirk began to speak. He spoke of the past; of the years that they had been together. He spoke of the dangers they had faced side by side, of work they had done together. Spock listened, his face still expressionless, never taking his eyes off Kirk's face.

No memories stirred in the injured mind... but the voice was kind and gentle - so much more pleasant to hear than the rough, harsh voices of One and his men. He felt that he wanted to trust this man... but government men had injured him, and this was a government man... If only he could think!

Kirk's voice eventually faltered to a stop. This was getting him nowhere.

He closed his eyes again in a futile attempt to ease the pounding in his head while he wondered what else he could do to reach his friend. At last, without opening his eyes, he said, "Spock, what are you trying to accomplish here? You and these others?"

"We seek..." Spock hesitated as he fought to remember the lies One had fed to him. "We seek the downfall of a corrupt government," he managed at last. Kirk's eyes opened abruptly at that. "Its supporters are wicked men who must be stopped before everyone is destroyed."

"It's the men you're with who are wicked," Kirk protested. "The government is doing the best it can for everyone in spite of the selfish actions of these men here."

"You insult my friends, tyrant." The words came automatically, but to Kirk's ears Spock's voice somehow lacked conviction.

"Are they your friends?" Kirk asked, speaking more gently. "What are you getting out of all this? Anything? What are they giving you for your efforts? What will your reward be? Have they ever said?"

Spock frowned. "I want nothing," he said. "It is enough for right to defeat tyranny."

"Can you be sure that right will defeat tyranny?" Kirk asked. "Do you - can you - trust them all? How much do you know about them, Spock? How well do you remember them?"

Spock looked puzzled. "I..." He hesitated for a long time. At last, he said slowly, "I know nothing about them. But they have been good to me; they brought me here to tend the hurts that a government agent gave to me, and they have sheltered me..."

"Can you remember that a government agent hurt you?"

A long pause. "No. But why should they lie to me? An enemy must have hurt me, and only friends would help me. That is... logical."

"Yes, that would seem to be logical," Kirk agreed. "But Spock, Humans are often not particularly logical. Humans are among the galaxy's greatest opportunists. Suppose they hurt you themselves - and when you they discovered that you couldn't remember, pretended that it was someone else who hurt you, in order to gain your confidence. You're very strong, Spock. Have they used your strength?"

Slowly, Spock nodded.

"Asked you to do more than your share of work, and you still recovering from an injury?"

Spock nodded again.

"Would friends ask that of you?" Kirk's voice was very gentle.

There was another long silence while Spock struggled to make his rebellious brain consider the question.

"No," he said at last.

"I wouldn't ask it of you," Kirk said softly.

Spock tried to consider Kirk's statement, confused by the conflicting 'facts' he had been given since he regained consciousness to a world in which there was no past.

At last, remembering the long monologue of *we went... we did...* that the captive has given him, he asked, "Who are you?"

"Before you were hurt, you knew me well. I'm Jim Kirk. You are one of my closest friends, Spock - indeed, you ~~are~~ my closest friend. And as your friend, I think that you have not recovered from being hurt. You should be lying down, resting."

He reached over to put a gentle hand on Spock's arm. The Vulcan stiffened suspiciously, and Kirk remained very still. Spock relaxed slightly.

The Human was irresistably reminded of a dog he had once owned, when he was still a boy. It had been a stray, and very nervous; it had taken a great deal of convincing that nobody would hurt it. But, its confidence once gained, it had been so friendly...

He waited, ignoring the throbbing beat inside his head, until Spock was completely relaxed once more.

"Spock," he said as gently as he could, "will you let me - your friend - look at your injury?"

He waited, hardly daring to breathe. He could tell that he had made Spock start thinking, had made him a little suspicious of the men who held them. He sensed that Spock wanted to trust him, yet was so convinced by the lies he had been told that he was afraid to trust his own instincts.

After a moment, he smiled at the Vulcan, allowing the very real affection he felt to show clearly.

Spock continued to hesitate for what seemed an age, then he grasped Kirk's right hand and held it firmly.

"You may look." He turned his head.

With his left hand, Kirk carefully moved aside the blood-matted hair, struggling to focus with eyes that he now realised were persisting in trying to see double.

The wound looked nasty, swollen and inflamed. Kirk felt round it carefully with gentle fingers. He was very aware that the limited training in first aid given to all Starfleet personnel was completely inadequate to permit him to do anything useful for this injury.

"Bones should see this," he said. "It needs skilled attention. It must be very painful?" His tone made it a question.

"Yes," Spock admitted. "And my head aches."

Kirk nodded slightly, although Spock couldn't see the gesture, and, slightly clumsily because he was using only his left hand, pressed the sides of the wound more firmly. A fair amount of unpleasantly-coloured pus oozed from the cut, and Spock drew in his breath with a gasp of pain.

"Sorry," Kirk said. It was obvious now that Spock had forgotten even pain control along with everything else. "Is there any water?"

Spock had not thought about water since his capture. Even injured, his desert-born metabolism required very little liquid. "I don't think so."

Startled, Kirk asked, "Didn't they give you anything to drink?"

"No."

Suspicion flared. "What have you had to eat?"

Spock had not thought about eating either - the food promised him the day before had not appeared - but even without memory, instinct had controlled him. The body of a Vulcan who was sick or injured normally rejected food until he had had the opportunity to initiate a healing trance. "I have not been hungry."

"That isn't an answer, Spock. Have they given you any food?"

"No."

Kirk's lips set in an angry line. He kept the anger from his voice however as he said, "I can't really do anything to clean this out up without water." He pressed the swollen sides of the gash again, and more pus oozed from it.

"Let my hand go, Spock. I need to tear my shirt to get some cloth to mop this up."

Spock hesitated for a moment, then obeyed. Kirk began to worry at the hem of his shirt, mentally swearing at the obstinacy of the material as it refused to tear. His shirts usually tore far too easily, according to Stores.

And then he heard the familiar hum of the transporter.

As they materialised on the transporter pad, still in a sitting position, Spock swung round. "Where are we?" Then he registered the presence of two phaser-armed security guards as well as two other men. Anger on his face, he reached out for Kirk's neck. "Where...? Traitor! You tricked me nicely, tyrant, with your false words of friendship. But you won't fool me again!"

Kirk grabbed at his arms, desperately holding him off, grateful - in spite of his concern for his friend - that Spock seemed to have been slightly weakened by his injury. McCoy leaped forward, waving the security men back. A hypo hissed; Spock swayed and fell forward against Kirk, who broke his fall, steadying him with gentle hands.

"What caused that?" McCoy asked. "Oh, my God!" He groped for his scanner and checked the Vulcan's head injury.

"He seems to have lost his memory," Kirk explained.

McCoy grunted and glanced towards the control console. "Scotty, call sickbay for a medical trolley." He looked back at Kirk. "What about you, Jim?"

"I'll do. Just give me something for a headache, and - "

"Liar," McCoy commented without heat. "If you have a headache, you won't 'do'. Just how did you get your headache, anyway? To say nothing of that gash." He turned the scanner onto Kirk.

"Well..." Kirk hesitated, unwilling to let anyone know how easily he had been caught.

"Someone clouted you over the head, right?"

"I... I think so."

"I think so," McCoy growled as he checked the reading. "Jim, you don't get concussion by accident. You only get concussion courtesy of a blow on the head - "

"Which could have been an accident," Kirk offered in a very small voice, well aware that the doctor couldn't be fooled. "I didn't see anyone."

"Don't try playing word games, Jim," McCoy said. "Tadden and Donnelly are dead because someone clouted them over the head with more force than was needed just to knock them out. You could have been lying there dead too and then we'd be reporting in for a new Captain."

"Yes, I know," Kirk said quietly. "Sorry, Bones - I was just... just..."

"Jim, the only way to keep me from worrying about you is to make sure that I've nothing to worry about," McCoy said bluntly.

Kirk looked at him, hesitated, then said, "How did you find us?"

"It's planet morning, not quite dawn. The magnetic interference is at its lowest." He glanced over at the Chief Engineer. "Scotty tried looking for Vulcan readings - got 'em without too much bother, too. So we just beamed Spock up along with the Human who was with him. We had expected it to be one of the people who were responsible for his disappearance; it was sheer good luck that it happened to be you."

The door swished open and an orderly hurried in, pushing a trolley. McCoy helped him to lift Spock onto it.

"Right, Abrams. I'll be right behind you."

"Yes, Doctor." Abrams left as quickly as was consistent with giving the patient a smooth ride.

"You, too, Captain." McCoy offered Kirk his arm. "I'll spare you the indignity of a ride, but you need time in sickbay."

"Bones, we've got to let Dorcas know - "

"I'll see to that once you're in bed," McCoy told him firmly.

"You can fill me in as we go."

"Not that I do know much," Kirk said ruefully as McCoy steered him towards the door. He called back, "Well done, Scotty," as the door opened, continuing as it swished shut behind them. "As far as I can make out, once the men who captured Spock discovered that he had lost his memory, they spun him a tale about a corrupt government, that they'd rescued him when he was hurt. I'd just begun to convince him that they were no friends of his and that he could trust me when you beamed us out." He shrugged. "Now he seems to think I've... well, kidnapped him, wouldn't you say?" He shrugged. "At the same time, I don't fault Scotty for beaming us out. Spock's rather desperately in need of medical attention."

"So is Captain James T. Kirk," McCoy told him bluntly.

"Just close the cut and give me something for the headache, Bones - "

"Uh-uh. No way. You don't fool with concussion, Jim."

They turned into sickbay and McCoy gestured Kirk onto the examination table. With a resigned sigh, Kirk took his place on it. McCoy checked the cut with gentle hands, and Kirk winced.

"Still say it'll do?" McCoy growled. Without waiting for an answer, he closed the cut.

"Spock's worse hurt than I am," Kirk protested with a worried glance at the bed where Abrams, helped by Nurse Chapel, was settling Spock.

"Don't try to sidetrack me," McCoy growled. "If I attend to you first while Chapel's getting Spock into bed and cleaned up a bit that'll get you out of the way; then I'll be free to concentrate on trying to re-wire the circuits that that Vulcan computer calls a brain. Now - how bad is your headache?"

Kirk hesitated, then settled for the truth. "Pretty bad."

"I wouldn't have believed you if you'd said anything else," McCoy commented drily.

"Give me something for it?" Kirk asked. "Please?"

"Sorry, Jim. I can't give you any medication; not with concussion. You should know that."

Kirk made a face, but he did know that McCoy was right. The doctor watched as the Captain, realising that he was not going to fool his friend about his condition, closed his eyes. McCoy nodded to himself, seeing in Kirk's behaviour a clear indication of how bad he really felt. He couldn't let Kirk sleep properly - but he **could** let him snatch a brief nap.

He stood looking down at Kirk for a moment longer before he turned to the bed where Spock was lying. Hearing the sound of McCoy's feet moving away, Kirk opened his eyes and watched him, allowing himself to relax now that McCoy was attending to Spock. His only real worry now was his First Officer's memory - or rather, lack of one. If the Vulcan did not regain his memory, his career in Starfleet was finished... but at least he was alive.

That's... something, he reflected as his face twisted in grief. If Spock never regained his memory, Kirk would miss him, and miss him badly, both personally and professionally. But at least he would know that Spock was alive.

Without realising it, he drifted into sleep.

He was wakened about half an hour later. He looked up, seeing McCoy's face peering down at him, and closed his eyes again. It seemed that he was no sooner asleep than he was wakened again... and again... and again.

Finally, he woke more fully, to the realisation that the pounding in his head was fractionally less. He tried to sit up, realising that he should beam down to see Dorcas. The moment he moved, however, McCoy, who was studying his readings, pounced.

"And where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"I forgot - I have to report to Dorcas - "

"Not in person you don't," McCoy told him. "Not tonight. Come to that, you can't report to him at all yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Forgotten the evening loss of communication?"

"Evening?"

"You've catnapped all day, Jim. Communications are at their worst right now."

"Oh." He glanced across to the other bed. "Spock?"

"He's come round, but he's hostile. I've had to use security restraints. It hasn't helped encourage him to trust us."

"No, I suppose it hasn't. Is he conscious now?"

McCoy shook his head. "I sedated him an hour or so ago. Not that he was violent or anything like that, but he was obviously agitated and he needs to rest."

"His head injury?"

"There's no fracture, for what that's worth, and we've got the cut cleaned up. There was a slight infection, but that's dealt with too. There's no obvious pressure on the brain to cause the amnesia, so... dammit, Jim, there's nothing else I can do!"

"Has he said much?"

"Nothing that made sense. Just rambled on about corrupt governments having to be stopped. What you said he'd been told."

"Mm. I thought I'd got through to him, persuaded him that the men who told him that weren't to be trusted; obviously I didn't." He fell silent again, glad that his mind seemed to be working again - at least fifty percent efficiency. "When you beamed us up, Scotty didn't think to send a security detachment to where we'd been found?"

"Yes, he did, as it happens. When you didn't give any orders about it, even he guessed you were in a worse state than you were admitting and that it was up to him to do something. It was just an empty building, a few scraps of furniture in one or two of the rooms and no sign that anyone was making it any sort of base."

"Figures. Keep the prisoners away from their real base, someplace that could be abandoned at a moment's notice. Did he tell Dorcas we'd been found?"

"I think so - you did say something about letting Dorcas know before I got you off to sickbay."

"Yes, I remember. Bones, how long was I missing?"

"Best part of a day and a half."

Kirk thought about that for a moment. "I must have been unconscious for quite a while," he admitted. "The room we were in didn't have any windows - at least, they'd been boarded over - and we were in artificial light. But I'd have said - guessed - that I was only there for two or three hours."

He yawned, already bored with his sojourn in sickbay. "Any chance of releasing me to my quarters?"

"No."

"Please, Bones - I'll behave, I promise - "

"Jim, I've heard that before. You go off with perfectly good intentions, but someone sees you going into your cabin, the grapevine gets to work, and half an hour later you're being contacted because there's some sort of emergency. And because it's an emergency, you forget you're off duty, forget you've promised to take things easy, and you're diving straight in to whatever crisis has developed. Right?"

"Well..." Honesty wouldn't let Kirk deny the charge, slightly exaggerated though it was.

McCoy grinned at him. "Try to get some sleep. Proper sleep this time."

"More sleep?" Kirk asked, a note of disbelief in his voice.

"The more you sleep the quicker you'll get better," McCoy told him, then turned and moved back to Spock. He studied the readings on the diagnostic panel thoughtfully, before continuing, "On the other hand, I don't see any reason why Spock can't be moved to his quarters, as long as we leave someone with him. Chris Chapel, I think - he won't have any reason to distrust a woman. The familiar surroundings might do something for his memory."

"But he was belted over the head too!" Kirk protested. "He's lost his memory! Surely he needs to be kept monitored?"

"Christine can do that with a medical tricorder. The biggest problem was the lack of immediate attention. That made the head injury seem worse than it actually is."

Kirk looked unconvinced, but McCoy ignored him. He punched his intercom. "Abrams! Chapel!"

The orderly hurried in. "Yes, Doctor?" he was asking as Chapel followed him through the door.

"I want a trolley. We're taking Mr. Spock to his own cabin." Abrams hurried out again. "Nurse, get a medical tricorder; keep him monitored. I'll send in a relief in a couple of hours."

"Yes, Doctor," she said as Abrams wheeled in a med trolley. McCoy helped Abrams to lift Spock onto the trolley while she collected a tricorder; then she followed Abrams out.

McCoy paused, looking down at Kirk. "Going to sleep, or do you want a sedative?"

"I'll sleep, I'll sleep!" Kirk assured him, closing his eyes. He gave the Captain one last suspicious glare, and left hastily, half running to catch up with Chapel and Abrams.

Kirk waited until he heard the doors swish shut, and opened his eyes again, wishing that it was possible to read his own diagnostic panel accurately from a sitting position, or even lying with his head to the foot of the bed.

How does Bones think I can possibly sleep with all this going on? he thought irritably.

It seemed quite clear that the difficulties on Thorsten were the result of a deliberate campaign; but just what was the motive? Was it in fact political, as Spock had been told, or had the criminals merely picked on a 'reason' that they guessed the logical Vulcan would accept without question?

No; it could hardly be political. No demands of any sort had been made. Political agitators were usually very vocal about the 'improvements' they wanted. Usually all that that meant was 'I - or my leader - should be the boss rather than you'.

The miners said that production was still as high as it had ever been; the amount of ore in storage was low.

So - someone must be stealing ore. How they managed to steal it without having been noticed was one mystery. How they got it off planet was another, for he would have expected an unauthorised ship to be detected.

Did that mean - could that mean - that the leader of the thieves was an official here? Someone who could suppress a report...

Who in the Governor's office might that be? He acquitted Masters and Dorcas, if only because the thefts spanned the terms in office of both men. It might be possible to clear some of them the Governor's heads of department for the same reason, but it still left several of them as suspect.

His eyes felt tired, and he closed them. Almost at once he fell asleep.

McCoy returned a few minutes later. He strode in, saying cheerfully, "Well, that's got Spock - "

He broke off as he realised that Kirk was asleep. He moved

quietly to his desk, and sat, starting to bring his notes up to date.

Time passed. McCoy finished updating his notes and began to read through his latest medical journal. After a while he left his desk, moved to check Kirk's readings, and, satisfied, returned to his seat again. He immersed himself once more in a report on new vaccines.

The intercom bleeped, and he flicked it open.

"McCoy here."

"Kyle, doctor." He sounded slightly groggy. "Mr. Spock beamed down a few minutes ago - and he took Nurse Chapel with him. He knocked me out when I tried to call security."

McCoy muttered a near-silent curse as he made a quick check of the time. Yes, enough time had passed for the interference to have diminished to a safe level. "Do you have his co-ordinates?"

"I've got the co-ordinates he beamed down to, but he's not there now; he's moved away."

"All right, Kyle - I'll get the bridge sensors on to tracing him." He flicked the switch again. "McCoy to bridge."

"Bridge. Scott here."

"Scotty, Spock's managed to beam down to Thorsten with Chapel. Can you pick up his readings?"

"No problem, Leonard."

McCoy closed the channel and rose, crossing to collect a hypo.

"Bones? I heard that."

McCoy paused beside his patient. "We'll soon pick him up, Jim - and just as soon as we do, I'll get him sedated. Then I'll bring him back here and this time I'll keep him under restraints."

"I'm coming with you." Kirk sat up.

"No you're not. Your place is in bed - "

"Bones, one of my crew is injured. He might cause injury to another member of the crew. I've got to go down! I'm the Captain - it's my responsibility." He gave a wry smile. "You know perfectly well that Komack won't accept 'injured' as a valid reason not to go down under those circumstances - at least, not without a far more serious injury than I've got."

"Jim, you don't play with concussion."

"Tell that to Komack."

McCoy knew perfectly well that Kirk was quoting higher authority simply to overrule the medical authority that would otherwise have been used to keep him on the ship.

"Jim, that's cheating." But he surrendered. Concussion alone was not in fact serious enough for him to pull medical rank on the Captain; if they had been in routine flight, he would indeed have

released Kirk to his cabin.

Kirk dressed quickly and the two men made their way to the transporter room. Once there, Kirk called the bridge.

"Scotty? Any word on Spock?"

"Yes, we've got him, Captain. There are a dozen or so Human readings with him, though. They're moving."

"Right. Feed the co-ordinates to the transporter. We'll follow on the ground. Kirk to Security."

"Security. Lt. Peden here."

"Lieutenant, I want twenty men for landing party duty, in the transporter room in two minutes. I think we've found the group that killed Tadden and Donnelly."

"Right away, sir."

The men arrived inside the two minutes. Kirk glanced round them, seeing two or three faces he remembered from the search - including Gulkin.

"Shouldn't some of you men be back to the end of the duty roster?" he asked, his eyes fixed on Gulkin.

"Everyone volunteered for extra duty on this one, sir," Gulkin told him. "We ran up a new roster just for it - names out of a hat - because everyone wanted a crack at whoever killed our men and hurt Mr. Spock and you."

Kirk looked round at the men. "I... I appreciate your loyalty," he told them. "Now, this is the situation - " He explained what had happened as concisely as possible. "We want to get those men alive, and we want to rescue Mr. Spock and Nurse Chapel unhurt. So - phasers on light stun. The idea is that we stun everyone in the area; be ready to move in as soon as everyone is unconscious."

"Right, sir," Gulkin acknowledged, and headed for the transporter pads, gesturing to the three nearest guards to join him, Kirk and McCoy for beam down.

They beamed down a short distance from where Spock's Vulcan readings had been detected, and waited until the rest of the guards joined them. As they waited, McCoy said softly, "Jim, let Lt. Gulkin lead this one."

Kirk looked at him. "Bones - "

"You don't fool with concussion, Jim." McCoy was beginning to feel like a repeat loop recording. "I'd let you do light duty - **very** light duty - if you were still on the ship, but you're not fit for anything more than that. You either let Gulkin lead, or I knock you out."

Kirk stared disbelievingly at the phaser McCoy held.

"I mean it, Jim. We can't afford to lose our Captain as well as our First Officer - and Gulkin is trained for this sort of situation. You're not. You're good at unarmed combat, but it's not your job." He saw that Kirk was unconvinced, and added, "You want to give Spock the best chance of surviving this, don't you?"

Mutely, Kirk nodded.

"Then let the trained professional fighter lead."

Kirk took a deep breath, and for a moment McCoy thought that he was about to object. Instead, he said quietly, "You're in command, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." If Gulkin was aware of the debate he gave no sign of it.

Once everyone was down, Gulkin, clutching a tricorder that he consulted frequently, gave the signal to advance. The guards fanned out. Kirk began to move forward, and McCoy grabbed his arm.

"Let them do their job, Jim."

Inwardly rebellious, Kirk allowed McCoy to hold him back, not wholly resigned to the situation but encouraged to accept it by the renewed throbbing in his head and the sick feeling that had begun to accompany it.

He could still function, but honesty compelled him to admit that if things got much worse, he would find himself completely unable to do anything with any degree of competence.

He had not had such a severe migraine for a long time.

The security guards advanced cautiously, Gulkin's eyes still fixed on his tricorder. When the readings told him that the readings were stationary, he signalled to his men to spread out and surround the building that the men they were following had entered - insofar as it could be surrounded, for one side was attached to the neighbouring, derelict building. At least, Gulkin assumed it to be derelict, for there were no life readings from it.

Moments later his communicator beeped.

"Gulkin."

"All in place at the back, sir."

"Right." Gulkin paused to examine the building. "How's the back for windows?"

"Several at ground level."

"Split into small groups and each group take a window. Go in on my signal."

The communicator beeped again. "Anders cutting in. We're all set at the side."

"Windows?"

"Two."

"Use them both; get in as fast as you can." He glanced at the men with him, lowering the communicator. "Chang, Hardy - take the right hand window. Gundorf, Larssen, the left hand one. Preston, Sykes, through the door with me."

Without waiting for the muttered acknowledgements, he raised his communicator again. "All units - go!"

He replaced the communicator on his belt as he ran forward, steadying the tricorder with one hand as he went, his two men at his heels.

The door opened easily, and he found himself in a small hallway. Several doors opened off it, and a flight of wooden steps led upwards. The readings had indicated that their quarry was up those stairs, and he took them two at a time, Preston and Sykes close behind him. They were half way up when the first of the doors opened and two more of his men ran through, to follow them. Before Gulkin reached the top, the guards were all on the stairs, having, by virtue of entering at different points ensured that all the downstairs rooms were empty and spread themselves out so that they were not getting in each other's way as they headed up the steps.

But so many feet on the wooden steps could not avoid making a great deal of noise. It was inevitable that a door on the landing at the top of the stair should open and a man come out.

Sykes gave him no time to fire the phaser that he was holding, but felled him with a quick burst of the phaser he was holding ready.

Gulkin hurdled the collapsing body on his way into the room - and stopped short. Behind him, the other guards also stopped as they registered the scene inside the room.

Spock lay still, accepting the medical attention that he was given almost without interest and certainly without trust. It did register that One's erstwhile prisoner had been as good as his word about attending to his hurts - or at least getting them seen to - but he could not forget that the prisoner had tricked him.

The man who fussed over him had seemed friendly too, even concerned, but had asked him too many questions. Doctor though he appeared to be, he had to be a government spy sent to discover One's plans. So he pretended to be more confused than he really was even while he muttered about "corrupt governments" in the faint hope that the spy could be made to see the government's faults.

He had expected to be kept under strict guard, but no; he had clearly succeeded in fooling them. They took him out of the area where his hurts were tended and through several corridors to a fairly small room where they put him to bed... with only a single woman as guard!

Spock could hardly believe his good fortune.

It was the work of only a moment to slip out of bed while her back was turned and capture her.

She gasped as he caught her arm. "Mr. Spock!" she exclaimed,

but her voice was weak as she fought to keep from fainting at the pain of his grasp on her arm; it was clear to her that he had forgotten his strength. "You're hurting me!"

He relaxed his grip slightly. "I want to leave this place," he told her. "How do I get back to... to where I came from?"

"This is where you came from, Mr. Spock," she protested.

He ignored her comment, which made no sense to him. "How do I get back?" he repeated. A faint memory, triggered by the beam-up, connected. "I must... there is a machine..."

"You need to go through the transporter," Chapel said reluctantly.

"Take me to it."

As he forced her to the door, Chapel debated the wisdom of taking him somewhere other than the transporter room, but she could not guarantee that there would be someone to help her in any given part of the ship, for though the grapevine would have let the whole crew know that Spock had been retrieved, only a handful knew of his condition. In addition, he might have amnesia, but he would remember if she tried to lead him directly back to sickbay, and the alternate route led past the transporter room.

No she would have to take him to the transporter room, and hope that Kyle, who did know the situation, would be quick enough to act when they walked in.

He wasn't.

Rather, Spock was too quick for him. Before Kyle could react, Spock's nerve pinch forgotten had knocked him out.

He dragged Chapel over to the control console, and looked down at the controls with a puzzled expression. It was clear to the Nurse that he knew he ought to know how these worked, but his memory refused to co-operate.

"We use this to travel, do we not?" he asked.

She debated lying, but realised that it wouldn't work. "Yes."

"Set the controls," he told her.

"I'm not terribly sure - " she began.

"You work here. You know how to set them."

Even Chapel realised that the logic was suspect, but she decided not to argue. She could at least set the controls to take them down to the surface. Then, as she depressed the control levers, she said, "Onto the pads, quickly."

Spock dragged her with him. They had almost no time to wait before the transporter beam took effect.

They rematerialised on the surface close to the mines. There was a truck being loaded, supervised by a man that Spock recognised, by his general build, as One. The Vulcan promptly crossed to him, pulling Chapel with him.

One stared at him, annoyance on his face.

"I'm sorry, One," Spock said. "I was captured by government agents. But I've brought back a hostage."

One turned his attention to Chapel. An amnesiac prisoner was one thing, but an alert member of Starfleet was something else altogether. He grunted as he recognised the medical insignia. A woman - *unlikely to be a doctor*, his male-dominant mind decided; a nurse, then. But even a woman could be a danger to him, for even the stupidest of them was likely to be able to identify him.

Irritably, he gestured to his men. Mason scrambled into the driver's seat of the truck and began to drive it away, while One said, "Come," harshly and began to walk briskly away. Still pulling Chapel, Spock followed him, with the other men close behind.

One took them to an apparently derelict building not too far from the mines. There had been furniture in it - once - but much of it was now broken. Once inside, Spock released Chapel and turned to face One, suddenly apprehensive. There was an ugly look on the man's face, and the Vulcan could not help but compare it with the much gentler expressions he had seen on the faces of the 'government agents' from whom he had so recently escaped.

Was it possible that he had made a mistake?

Would a friend ask that of you?... I wouldn't ask it of you...

The words sounded faintly in his mind.

Just you lie there and rest... The other one, the doctor, speaking in gruff tones that nevertheless had carried - he now realised - a would-be-hidden caring.

One reached out and grasped Chapel's arm roughly. "You've done well, Vulcan," he said, but Spock was no longer fooled by the feigned friendliness.

Yes - he had made a mistake.

"Don't hurt her," he said, knowing that alone he was powerless to defend her against so many enemies.

One laughed harshly as Chapel tried to pull herself free. He twisted her arm viciously, and she cried out with the pain.

Spock flung himself forward, but before he could reach One, Drem snatched up a broken table leg and struck at him with it. The blow landed heavily and Spock crumpled. Chapel tried to pull free to go to him, her nurse's instincts roused, but One held her easily.

It was then that the door was flung open and the Enterprise's security men burst in.

Gulkin took in the situation at a glance even as One hauled Chapel roughly in front of him as a shield. He reckoned without Gulkin's pragmatism - or perhaps he had just forgotten that a phaser could be set to stun. Gulkin fired; Chapel went limp in One's grasp and the continuing stun beam caught the criminal. He collapsed, face down, not quite on top of Chapel.

Seeing their leader defeated, the others were quick to

surrender. When Kirk and McCoy arrived seconds later, it was to find everything over.

"Nurse Chapel's just stunned, Doctor," Gulkin reported, "but Mr. Spock was unconscious when we broke in."

McCoy crossed quickly to the Vulcan, reaching for his scanner as he went, Kirk close at his heels.

"Bones?"

"He's been knocked out..." McCoy sounded slightly doubtful.

Kirk swung round to the prisoners, wincing as the sudden movement intensified his headache. "What happened to him?"

The men looked at each other doubtfully. Finally, one of them said, "He was going to attack One. Drem there hit him."

Kirk looked at them in disgust and turned back to McCoy. "Get Spock and Chapel up to the ship, Bones. Gulkin and I will see to things down here."

McCoy nodded, crossed to Chapel and lifted her over to beside Spock, then spoke into his communicator. Moments later the three shimmered away.

"Right," Kirk said. "Lieutenant, we'll take our prisoners to Governor Dorcas first - he may recognise some of them. Then we'll take them back to the Enterprise."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk indicated the still unconscious figure on the floor and addressed the prisoners. "Two of you carry him." Then, when none of them moved, "You - and you."

The two moved reluctantly, but they moved. As they picked up their leader, Kirk saw his face for the first time.

"Unger!" he gasped.

Faced with Dorcas, it was not long before a couple of the prisoners cracked and told the Governor where the stolen ore was hidden. Much of it was indeed still on-planet, hidden in one of the worked-out levels of the mines; as mine manager, Unger had been in the perfect position to know where these levels were. It transpired that he had planned to charter a private ship and use it to lift the ore when he finally decided to leave.

But Kirk was tired, and worried about Spock. He pleaded the after effects of his concussion to get away from a grateful Dorcas and a relieved colony, and returned to the ship, where the prisoners had already been taken.

He went straight to sickbay, worry about Spock keeping him on his feet. In the turbolift, he leaned against the wall, grateful for its support, and when the lift doors opened he stared at them for some moments before he registered that he should get out of the lift. In the corridor he paused for a moment to orientate himself, then set off, headed for sickbay.

McCoy glanced round as he entered, and moved straight over to him.

"Jim, you've been doing too much. Here - onto this bed."

Kirk tried to shake his head, and the movement was too much. His body finally rebelled and he doubled over as his stomach emptied itself.

His retching had one good effect; it eased his headache considerably. When it finally eased off, he straightened, feeling much better.

"Spock?" he asked as McCoy urged him to the bed.

"Just coming round," McCoy assured him.

"Doctor? Why am I under restraint?" Spock's voice interrupted him.

Momentarily forgetting Kirk, McCoy swung round. "Spock! How are you feeling?"

"I was under the impression that you preferred to tell me the current state of my health," Spock replied.

"Spock," Kirk said. "How much can you remember?"

"Remember?" Spock fell silent for a moment. "A lorry being loaded... and then something hit me from behind."

"And that's all?"

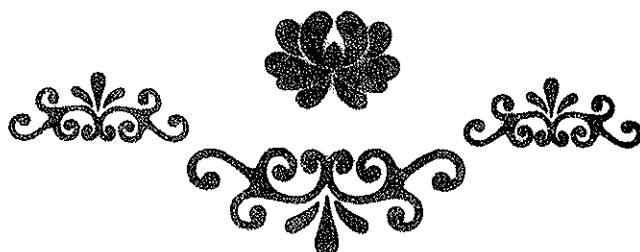
"Yes."

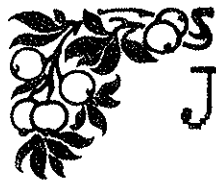
"Well, you've had quite a busy time since then," McCoy told him. "But now isn't the time to discuss it." He looked from one bed to the other. "You both need rest - " He broke off, seeing that Kirk had already fallen asleep. He looked at Spock, and indicated their sleeping Captain. "He's exhausted, Spock. Just take my word for it - everything's worked out fine. We'll tell you what happened - in the morning. For now - you'd be better of a sleep too."

Spock nodded. He lay for a moment assessing his physical condition. Yes - he did require rest.

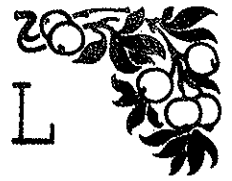
Obediently, he closed his eyes and allowed himself to sleep.

McCoy looked from one to the other. Then he turned to call an orderly to clean the floor.





JOURNEY FROM BABEL



Kirk relaxed for the first time in a full fortnight.

For a fortnight he had known the terrible diplomatic strain of carrying an explosive group of Ambassadors and their retinues, and trying to keep the peace between them. His personal view of their behaviour was unprintable; the only one who seemed to behave according to his status was Sarek - and Sarek had spent the major part of the trip in sickbay. It would have been difficult enough if he had been fully fit, Kirk reflected; but he also spent part of the journey in sickbay - though not as long as McCoy would have liked him to spend, if he had had his way.

Several factors had combined to force McCoy to release the Captain from sickbay. The importance of the diplomatic mission, for one; it was essential that the various Ambassadors did not fully realise how near they had all been to extinction. In addition, Kirk felt - and at heart, McCoy agreed with him - that since Spock and Sarek had not spoken as father and son for eighteen years, it would be only tactful to give them the opportunity to communicate freely, and privately. So McCoy agreed to let Kirk leave sickbay after two days, on condition that he spent very little time on duty, and a maximum amount of time in his quarters, preferably in a horizontal position.

But in spite of doing a minimum of work, there had been considerable strain on him. The diplomatic personnel quarrelled like children, he reflected, and with as little real provocation. In his more charitable moments, he gave them credit for being sensible people under working conditions, and tried to convince himself that the petty quarrelling was caused by their reaction to the difficult conditions under which they worked. In his more irritable moments, he decided that they were a bunch of undisciplined idiots masquerading as useful members of society.

And although he had been taking things easy, in accordance with his promise to McCoy, he was feeling very tired. Maybe he had been doing too much... except that he was sure he hadn't. He had felt all right... well, reasonably all right... when he had first come out of sickbay. His back had been sore, especially when he moved unwarily, but now he felt plain tired. It was an effort to stand up straight... come to that, it was an effort to sit up straight.

Oh, well, the last of the Ambassadors were on their way down to Babel now; the crew was due some leave now. It would be very pleasant not to have any responsibilities for a day or two, other than the routine ones connected with the running of the ship; and even so... Spock would be back on duty in a couple of days. He would take a lot of weight off Kirk's shoulders.

Uhura turned from the communications console.

"Message from Starbase 11, Captain."

"Oh, no," he thought. "Don't say it. Don't say they're going to send us out again already without a break." Aloud, he said, "On audio, Lieutenant."

He was right. They were ordered out again, without a break. They had to make a rapid rendezvous with a survey ship that had found a supply of a rare drug much in demand for the treatment of heart conditions in certain races of the Federation. A survey vessel could not travel nearly so fast as a Starship; the Enterprise was assigned to pick up the drug and rush it back to Star Base 11.

"Acknowledge, Lieutenant."

He allowed himself to slump down in his seat for a moment. It would be a routine enough trip, he reflected; no annoying diplomatic personnel to complicate matters. No strain. Perhaps he would be able to rest.

He left Sulu with the con, and made his way slowly to the rec room, where he got himself a cup of coffee. He debated getting something to eat as well, but decided that he was not hungry.

He was sitting drinking it, and wondering just what was wrong with it, when McCoy joined him.

"I've just heard from the Vulcan medical authorities that Sarek will definitely be O.K., Jim. My experimental surgery was fine - even with you throwing the ship about like a... a..." he stopped, looking closely at Kirk. "Jim, are you feeling all right? You haven't been overdoing things, have you?"

"I'm fine, Bones. Just a bit tired; too many diplomats, I reckon. That lot would have exhausted a statue." He yawned. "I'm thinking of going to bed now; we've a rendezvous to make, but we don't leave until morning. How's Spock?"

"Beginning to wonder if you've forgotten he exists," McCoy said drily. "I'm letting him out of sickbay tomorrow for restricted duties, same as you."

Kirk sighed. "Yes, I suppose I have neglected him recently," he admitted. "Those blasted diplomats... You too, Bones - I could have found more time to come and see him if you hadn't made me promise to spend so much time on my back. And anyway, I didn't want to butt in."

"An odd five minutes wouldn't have been butting in," McCoy pointed out.

"Bones, you agreed with me that we should give him as much time as possible with his father."

"Yes, I know, but this last couple of days I got the impression that he'd have liked to... well... show you off to his father."

"Show...?"

McCoy nodded. "You're his, Jim. His friend, found without any parental influence. Unlike his prospective wife, who proved to be so worthless. Of course he wanted to let his father see the worth of the friend he found for himself. If I'd had the sense to realise it quicker, I wouldn't have let you out of sickbay at all. And don't say that's a Human reaction. Spock's Human enough to want to do that, even though he might not ever admit it. He'd come up with a logical reason for having you and Sarek socialising. But that's his real reason. By letting you out, I prevented you and Sarek from seeing much of each other; and by staying away so much, you kept

Sarek from seeing you. Oh, they both realised you had your duties, and that you were far from well... Sarek knows you nearly killed yourself pretending you were all right so that Spock would be free to give the blood for the operation."

"Meaning that Spock knows too."

"Come on, Jim. You're looking far too tired. I'm going to see you in bed before I leave you. Are you sure you've been resting enough?"

Kirk got up wearily. "Yes, I've been resting. I've been resting until it's a wonder I haven't put down roots and got stuck to the bed."

"Then maybe I'd better get you back into sickbay for a check."

"Bones, give me a break! It's just nervous strain from too many diplomats."

"Sure, Dr. Kirk. I'll let it go for tonight, but if you're still as tired tomorrow, I'm having you back in before you can say 'Babel'. So take your warning. If you have been overdoing it, stop it now."

He settled Kirk in bed, waited until the Captain had fallen asleep then left quietly.

Kirk woke next morning feeling unrefreshed. His back was aching; his head throbbed. He was having trouble seeing, too - everything was blurred a little, and he definitely had to concentrate on focussing. In addition, there was a humming sound in his ears. He was hot, too hot - yet he found himself shivering. He had to force himself to his feet, and once upright, had to hang onto the bed to keep from falling.

The intercom bleeped for attention. He forced himself over to it.

"Kirk here."

"Message for you from Starfleet Command, Captain," Uhura's voice came. There was an odd note in her voice, he thought.

"Put it through, Lieutenant."

The message was brief... he found himself unable to assimilate it properly, aware only of a deep, cutting grief. His mother... it was so long since he had been home. He hadn't even managed to get home when Sam died. She had understood... but it didn't make it any easier to bear the fact that he would never see her again. He couldn't even get home for the funeral... that was part of the burden of Starship life, the complete severance from home. But the emotional ties were still there... even though home was now a beautiful lady who travelled between the stars, and his family was now a mixed group of men and women for whom he was responsible... and two brothers who were, if anything, even closer to him than Sam had been... He broke the contact, knowing that the ship's grapevine would pass the word round almost instantaneously. He would not be alone in his grief... yet the sympathy of these people who were his family now wouldn't help...

He was still sitting staring blankly at the empty screen a few minutes later when Spock came to his cabin, brought by the news on the grapevine. Spock didn't bother buzzing... he simply walked in.

He crossed to Kirk and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. Kirk looked up at him; the sudden movement made him dizzy, and he sank into grateful unconsciousness.

Spock caught him as he fell forward, his unobserved face showing his anxiety. No grief should have this effect, surely? Then he felt Kirk's skin. Its dry, febrile heat alarmed him; he swung Kirk up into his arms and headed for sickbay, his mind a confusion of emotions.

McCoy glanced up as he came in, and started to his feet as he saw Spock's burden.

"He collapsed as I went in just now," Spock said. "He feels hot, fevered."

"Here..." McCoy indicated an examination couch, and Spock laid Kirk gently down onto it. McCoy bent over the couch, diagnostic scanner busy. "I noticed last night that he wasn't looking right, but I put it down to just plain tiredness. He said himself that he'd had a surfeit of diplomats this last few days." He rolled Kirk over gently, and turned his attention to the injury on his back, an injury that had been closed and healing nicely when he last examined it, four or five days previously. He drew in his breath sharply as he saw it.

The wound, which had been well on the way to recovery when last checked, was now an angry red, slightly swollen and oozed pus when McCoy gently pressed the sides of it. McCoy's lips set in a grim line. He turned away for a hypo to take a blood sample, and nearly collided with Spock, who was examining the wound intently.

"Spock, I'd get on better if you stayed back a bit. Why don't you just get back to the bridge, and I'll let you know as soon as I have anything?"

"Doctor, you informed me that the Captain's injury was healing well, and that he was quite ready to be released from sickbay. You released him while keeping me in; which was a totally unnecessary proceeding. There was nothing wrong with me. It would have been more to the point to have released me, and kept the Captain in bed."

"Spock, the strain on your body processes because of that drug was intense. I had to be certain there were no lasting effects - if only because you were, in effect, a guinea pig for the drug. Jim's injury was straightforward, and it was healing; it was almost healed."

"Have you been checking on it every day, Doctor?"

"No; there wasn't any need to. It was a clean out. When I last saw it, four days ago, it was closed and looking perfectly healthy. Now will you stop trying to tell me my job, and go and do yours!"

"Doctor, part of my job is making sure you do yours properly."

"Well, I won't be doing it properly if you keep on getting in my way."

Spock turned, almost reluctantly, and headed for the door. There, he paused, looking back. "Doctor, I don't know if you've heard yet, but the Captain has just received a message telling him of the death of his mother. I do not know if the knowledge will make any significant difference to your treatment of him now, or even if the knowledge will necessitate any difference in the treatment."

"Have you any idea how he took the news?"

"No, Doctor. He collapsed as I went in to see him." Spock turned and went out without another word.

McCoy looked after Spock for a moment as he left. He could only guess at the intensity of the Vulcan's feelings, but he sensed that Spock was worried, very worried, both about Kirk's collapse and about how Kirk would react to the news of his mother's death. As McCoy turned back to the still unconscious captain, he was aware of a parallel worry. The wound had been healing - indeed, had almost healed. What had caused this resurgence of infection? And - more important - Kirk was tired out, weak from the injury and exhausted from the worry of transporting the Babel delegates. In his exhausted state, how would he take the news? He had taken his brother's death very well, but he had been less worn then, and in addition had had the problem of solving the Denevan situation and the worry about Spock to take his mind off his loss. But the death of a parent... even one he hadn't seen for several years...

McCoy resolutely turned his mind from pursuing the useless speculation of how Kirk would react. He would soon see. He thought instead about cleaning out the wound and trying to discover what it was that had infected it.

The swelling seemed to be full of pus, so he lanced it, and found that he was right; it was a concentration of pus that had caused the swelling. Once he got that cleaned out, he disinfected the opened cut and put a dressing over it. Then he went to get the pus analysed.

With one of the lab technicians set to work on the analysis, McCoy returned to his Captain's side. Kirk lay there unmoving, his skin flushed, sweating in fever. McCoy chewed at his lips as he checked Kirk's temperature, already 103 degrees and rising. Whatever infection had got into the wound, it was pretty potent.

He checked the cut again. It was already oozing more pus.

Spock returned to the bridge, his mind a confused jumble of thoughts. He trusted McCoy - the surgeon had saved his life more than once, and had just saved his father's life in an operation performed under the most trying circumstances - but he had been careless with Kirk during this mission. He had allowed Kirk out of sickbay far too early so that he could perform that same operation and while Spock admitted that he appreciated the action on the part of both his friends, he disapproved strongly of the fact that Kirk's life had been endangered in the process. Then, after Kirk had been readmitted, McCoy had again let him out too quickly. Now Kirk was suffering from this new infection...

Sure enough, the analysis showed a concentration of germs. But

the germs were of a type previously unknown - there was no record of them in the medical computer.

McCoy's lips tightened. The Captain was already very ill; researching an antidote to previously unknown germs would take up a great deal of time that they could ill afford. But where could he have picked up an infection from unknown germs?

Of course! From the Orion. The germs must have entered the wound when Kirk was stabbed, but hadn't shown up until now. They had taken this long to incubate.

Alien germs. They were either completely harmless or desperately dangerous. It was hard that Kirk should have fallen prey to the latter when he was already below par.

He assigned the technicians to work on researching a serum for the infection, and went back to Kirk. The Captain, if no better, was at least no worse.

McCoy hesitated, then flicked on the intercom.

"McCoy to bridge."

"Bridge. Spock here." The Vulcan's voice was cold, over-controlled. McCoy shivered involuntarily, remembering the unfriendly nature of Spock's last exchange with him.

"The Captain has contracted an infection from what I believe to be an Orion disease. I have initiated research to discover a serum for it."

"I see. Was there no way to predict the ailment?"

"No. The scanners only show up diseases for which they are programmed. This is a completely new disease. It could have been completely harmless - "

"But it wasn't."

"No, it wasn't."

"Doctor, if you had kept the Captain in sickbay, you would have noticed the initial symptoms much sooner."

"Not necessarily, Spock. I saw him last night, remember. He looked tired, nothing more."

"If he had been in sickbay, would you not have realised that his tiredness wasn't natural?"

McCoy stared at the intercom for a moment without speaking, then he leaned forward and switched off without replying.

In the event, the research turned up an antidote rather faster than McCoy had dared to hope for. It wasn't exactly a miraculous cure; it took some time to work; but the fever broke fairly quickly, even though it took two or three days before Kirk was well enough to be allowed up. And even then, McCoy kept him in sickbay instead of permitting him to return to his own quarters. Spock's accusation of carelessness had made him feel rather guilty - though he would never

have admitted it to the Vulcan!

Unusually, during this time there was no sign of Spock. Once he was assured that Kirk would recover, he seemed to lose interest; he neither visited sickbay nor contacted McCoy on the intercom.

McCoy noticed that Kirk was a little restless; he seemed to spend quite a lot of time watching the door, fidgeting restlessly and irritably. McCoy could only guess that Kirk was looking for the truant Spock.

There was one other thing that worried McCoy. Kirk hadn't mentioned his dead mother... not once. But he was very quiet. Just restless. McCoy suspected that Kirk was brooding over the two things - Spock's absence and his mother's death. And knowing Kirk, he guessed that Kirk thought that Spock might be... silently accusing him of neglecting his family obligations, by remaining away from him. Yet - what **were** his family obligations? He had written his mother as regularly as it was possible for any Starfleet officer to do; and now that she was dead, there was nothing, nothing at all, that he could do. Even the funeral arrangements had been made and carried out by others, of necessity...

Eventually, on the fifth day, with Kirk well on the way to physical recovery but far from well psychologically, McCoy went to see Spock.

He found the Vulcan in his quarters, gazing abstractedly at an empty viewscreen. Spock seemed to be hardly interested in his presence.

McCoy stared at him. "What's wrong, Spock?"

There was a short silence. "Nothing is wrong, Doctor, I am merely meditating. I would be obliged if you would say what you have come to say quickly, and then leave me in peace." His voice was as cold and distant as McCoy had ever heard it; their friendship, the many dangers they had shared, might never have happened; it was like listening to a total stranger speaking.

"All right, Spock. I've come to you about Jim. This may sound silly to you; but Jim needs you. He needs you right now. Just why, I don't wholly know - and the way you're behaving, I doubt you'll be any good to him. But there's something, some reason he needs you. He keeps on looking for you, and when someone comes in to see him - Scotty, Sulu, any of the others - and he sees it isn't you, I can see he's disappointed. Whatever he wants you for, it isn't something I can help him with, or he'd have asked me - "

"Perhaps he has learned not to trust you wholly any more, Doctor. After all, you nearly let him die recently." The very calmness and unemotional delivery of the speech made it the more hurting. "Tell him I will come to see him after he is released from Sickbay. I find I do not wish to encounter you." He turned, and left McCoy without another word, moving through to his sleeping cabin.

McCoy stared at the closed door in shocked silence.

He let Kirk leave sickbay the next day, without mentioning to him the response Spock had made to his appeal. Kirk had enough in

his mind - he, McCoy, had no intention of adding to his worries.

Spock looked round from the command chair as Kirk entered the bridge, and rose.

"Are you quite well, Captain?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Spock." Despite himself, a little of his hurt at Spock's neglect showed, and he knew Spock was aware of it.

"Did Dr. McCoy not give you my message?"

Kirk shook his head. "What message?"

"I told him to inform you that I would see you after your release from sickbay."

Kirk looked at him. "What was wrong with coming to see me in sickbay?"

Spock hesitated. "I would... prefer to tell you in private, Captain."

The atmosphere on the bridge was electric. Everyone knew that Spock and McCoy hadn't exactly seen eye to eye over this latest illness of Kirk's; but no-one knew any details. It seemed they weren't going to, either.

"Very well, Mr. Spock. Let's go down to my quarters. Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

"Aye, sir."

They went down in silence. In the elevator, Kirk watched Spock's set face unhappily. He had enough to feel guilty about, without having to worry about anything else just yet.

In his cabin, Kirk sat, waving Spock into a seat. And waited.

Spock didn't seem to be quite sure where to start. He looked uncertainly at Kirk, who gave him no help. He had enough to think about without trying to make things less embarrassing for an awkward First Officer.

At last, Spock said, "I find it... difficult to... to excuse Dr. McCoy for nearly letting you die, Captain. He let you out of sickbay far too early, not just once, but twice - "

"He agreed, very reluctantly, with my decision, Spock," Kirk cut in. "The first time, I considered Sarek's life too important to lose. I had intended to turn command over to Scotty as soon as you left the bridge, but the emergency arose before I could do that. The second time, there was nothing seriously wrong with me; I could well afford to stay in bed in my quarters. You and Sarek were the ones who were really ill, and needing all McCoy's attention. The germ I picked up - that had nothing to do with the other condition."

"Dr. McCoy should have kept you in sickbay until he was certain that there would be no ill effects from a wound given by an alien."

"Spock, are you trying to tell McCoy his job? He took all the

obvious precautions and it wasn't his fault they weren't sufficient." He forced a smile. "Try to remember the number of times he's saved your life... and mine... and your father's, under the most trying of circumstances. Balance that against one alien disease he failed to diagnose before it developed, and you don't have much to criticize him for."

Spock failed to meet his eyes. "I have tried to. I find... I would willingly entrust my own life to him... my father's life... but I am unwilling to entrust your life to him again."

"Spock, that's not logical."

"I know. Nor do I know of anyone else who would be even half as efficient. I cannot understand what is wrong with me. I should not feel this way. He has given so many reasons why I should trust him, yet..."

Kirk looked at him sympathetically. "You're over-tired, Spock. That's all." His feeling of loss, temporarily pushed to the back of his mind, suddenly re-emerged with redoubled force. His face twisted in the intensity of his grief.

Spock reached out to him, kneeling at his side. "Jim! What is it?" His hands were gentle on his Captain's shoulders.

Kirk allowed the tears to flow, Spock's very gentleness breaking him. It was the first time he had allowed expression of his grief. He leaned against Spock, who, with instinctive sympathy, slid an arm around him and moved the other hand to hold Kirk's head to his shoulder. Kirk relaxed completely, sobbing unrestrainedly. Spock continued to hold him comfortingly. When at last the racking sobs ceased, Spock still held Kirk to him.

"I haven't seen her for so long," Kirk whispered. "I couldn't. She understood. Like your mother understands. But I know she missed me, would have liked to see me sometimes..."

"I know, Jim. But I am sure she accepted - as my mother accepted - that we cannot live our lives as children. The time must come when the young grow up and want to make their own lives. When that time comes, the mothers worth having let their children go... as yours did, as mine did. And she knew that the work you are doing was - is - important, not just for her, not just for your family or your own planet, but for the entire Federation, and possibly even for more than that. If there was a price to pay for that... by not seeing you... I am sure she paid it willingly..."

When at last Kirk lifted his head from Spock's shoulder, there was a kind of peace in his eyes. The Vulcan released him, and they looked at each other for moment in a near-embarrassed silence.

"Thanks, Spock," Kirk said quietly. Some of the tensions seemed to leave the Vulcan. He permitted himself to smile slightly - then without another word, he slumped forward in a dead faint.

Kirk leaped for the intercom. "Kirk to sickbay! Bones, Spock's just collapsed in my quarters!"

"On my way." The intercom went dead.

Kirk bent over the unconscious first officer, shifting his limbs into a more comfortable position. "Spock... Spock..."

The door slid open. McCoy ran in.

He slithered to a halt at Kirk's side. "What happened?" he asked as he bent over the limp figure.

"We'd been talking. Then - he just collapsed."

McCoy ran his scanner over Spock, and frowned.

"What is it, Bones?"

"That blasted drug. I thought he was all right... but there's something wrong now - a delayed action effect, I suppose; there wasn't any sign of marrow malfunction when I let him out, I'll swear it by everything I know. But there's definite signs now of a blood condition caused by marrow deficiency."

Kirk stared at him in horror.

McCoy called sickbay for a stretcher, and rushed Spock back to a bed there. Kirk went with him. He watched in a grim-faced silence as McCoy gave Spock an injection; then another; and another. After the third, McCoy glanced up.

"That should hold him."

"How serious is it?"

"I'm not sure yet. It was what I was afraid of all along... but he seemed to have got away with it. I don't know why it took so long to show up."

"Bones; would it cause unusual reactions to given situations?"

"It could; with a blood ailment, and a deficiency such as there is here, the brain could - probably would - be starved of blood... or at least of nutriment in the blood. The injections I've given him will be all right for a while; but I'll have to find something for the marrow deficiency or he'll be on injections for the rest of his life."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "You've got to come up with something, Bones. I don't care what it takes, you've got to!"

"Jim, do you think I don't know that? He's my friend too, remember - even though you two are far closer to each other than I can ever be."

"Bones..."

"Don't worry, Jim, I'm not jealous... at least, not much, and that only very occasionally - like when I want to do something for one of you and can't... but the other one can."

Kirk looked at him, feeling guilty. It was true that he and Spock were much closer to each other than they were to McCoy, but he hadn't realized that the surgeon was aware of it. McCoy grinned reassuringly at him, and turned back to Spock.

Kirk, somewhat unwillingly, went back to the bridge. There was nothing he could do in sickbay; he knew McCoy would let him know as

soon as he had any news, and the rendezvous was close. He had to be on the bridge.

They made the rendezvous and exchanged the drug; and set off again at warp six for Star Base 11. Once on course, Kirk called sickbay again.

"Anything, Bones?"

"Sorry, Jim, not yet. I'll let you know as soon as I'm able to. I promise."

"I know, Bones."

Kirk paced restlessly across the bridge; realised that his restlessness was probably infectious, and left the bridge, turning command over to Sulu as he went. He went to his quarters, but found himself unable to concentrate on anything there. He moved out into the corridor again; paused in front of Spock's door. He hesitated, then went in.

He sat at Spock's desk and rested his head on his hands, his elbows propped on the desk. Spock...

In sickbay, McCoy was harrying his technical staff. Spock still lay unconscious; definitely unconscious, not in a healing trance. Every now and then McCoy moved back to check him, and every time found no change... but the deterioration caused by the deficiency was bound to increase soon. Injections could only do so much...

At last one of the technicians came running, holding out a phial. "This worked on the marrow sample, Doctor," he gasped.

McCoy grabbed it, filled a hypo and injected Spock, staring anxiously at the diagnostic board as he did, knowing that it would take time to work. But it needed less time than McCoy had feared. Almost at once, the blood readings began to shift to a more normal level. Spock opened his eyes, and looked up.

"How do you feel, Spock?"

Spock looked at him, considering the question. He raised an eyebrow; then said, "Surprisingly well, Doctor. What happened?"

"That drug you took to increase blood manufacture in the marrow had an adverse effect, but it took until now to show up."

"I see." Spock glanced round, made certain that they were alone, and went on with an effort. "Doctor - I wish to apologise for certain remarks I made recently. I... know that we have every reason to trust your skill..."

"It's all right, Spock. Just forget it." McCoy turned to the intercom. "McCoy to bridge. Spock's come round, Jim. He'll be all right."

On the bridge, Kirk relaxed as he heard the note in McCoy's voice. "Thanks, Bones. Tell him - I'm on my way down to see him."



CITY

- A CONCLUSION

"You deliberately stopped me, Jim! I could have saved her! Do you know what you just did?" Even in his angry bewilderment, McCoy bit back the other words that were in his mind - *You could have saved her - you were nearer than I was.* For he could feel the tension in Kirk's body, and understood that there was more here than he knew.

And Spock confirmed it as Kirk moved to lean against the wall. "He knows, Doctor; he knows."

McCoy watched as Kirk slowly straightened. Behind him, he was only half aware of the crowd gathered round the limp body. His doctor's instincts were touched, but he could ignore them; he knew from the way her body had been flung forward by the truck that Edith Keeler was certainly dead, had died instantly. Kirk, however, he **could** help - his anger had passed, leaving only the bewilderment. Knowing that they would explain, recognising that Kirk was suffering from shock, he moved forward.

"Come into the mission, Jim," he said, gently now.

Kirk shook his head. "We must get home. The Guardian..."

"Not yet, Captain," Spock cut in. "First we must return to our room; we must dismantle the apparatus I constructed, for should anyone mechanically minded discover it they might be able to surmise something of its purpose and cause the premature discovery of computers."

"Yes... you're right, Spock." Kirk gave one last look at the milling group that split up as an ambulance arrived, then turned away. "Come on - the quicker we get it done, the better."

As they went, Spock dropped a few paces behind Kirk, pulling McCoy back. Quickly, softly, he explained the situation.

"That time round... didn't I try to stop her making such a mistake?" McCoy asked.

"You couldn't. I did not tell the Captain, but in the alternate future I also saw a 1930 newspaper article. The headline was 'Down and out dies saving social worker'. In that future, Doctor, you died saving her."

"I see..." McCoy studied Kirk's back. "Someone had to die in that place at that moment..."

"Yes, Doctor. Your death in this time period - any of our deaths - would be unimportant; no-one would be affected. But hers... While her death is undoubtedly a tragedy - she has done much to help others - it saves millions of lives in the future, and provides for the future welfare of your entire planet - and other worlds beyond. The Captain knows that; although he has not yet accepted the fact. But he will. It was another Command decision; he

will not let it damage his life, any more than any other such decision that has sent a man to his death has done. He would not be the man he is if he did not feel those deaths; but neither would he be the man he is if he did not accept them without being overwhelmed by guilt."

"Yes," McCoy said sadly. "I know."

They worked quickly to dismantle the makeshift computer that Spock had constructed with such time and effort, piling the valves and tubes and sockets and switches and wires, all carefully separated from each other, in a corner of the depressing little room. A collection of radio spares, almost valueless... Kirk and Spock resumed their Starfleet uniforms, carefully retrieved from the basement and hidden here, leaving their stolen clothes folded on the bed.

Spock looked up. "Guardian!"

The deep, remembered voice sounded softly. "You may return." A faint outline showed beside the wall.

"Come, Doctor," Spock said. He and Kirk turned, side by side, and ran towards the vaguely circular shape, and jumped through it. McCoy hesitated for a second, sure that they would cannon into the wall - his memories of his trip through the time portal to here were tenuous, like the mist that partially obscured the wall behind the shadowy shape; then as his friends vanished, he followed.

He was only slightly surprised to find himself on a desolate planet, standing beside Spock with Kirk in front of him, facing Scotty and Uhura and Galloway and Mancini; and no more surprised than his friends to hear that - for the rest of the landing party - only seconds had passed during the days they had spent in 1930.

Kirk sat alone in his cabin. He had never felt so guilty - so depressed at any death he had ever felt responsible for.

He had sent crewmen - and women - to death before during his career. It was part of his command responsibility. But they were people who had chosen a life of danger; people for whom death was a familiar companion. Edith had not chosen such a life; she had chosen a life of service to others; a life devoted to helping others.

Because she had died, many men would go hungry to bed tonight... No. Not 'tonight'. 'Tonight' was... what? Three hundred years ago. Tonight - now - millions of colonists were alive on planets not discovered back then... planets that would still be undiscovered if Edith had lived.

If Edith had lived... he, James T. Kirk, might never have existed outside the protected radius of the Guardian. Certainly Spock would never have been born, for Earth and Vulcan would still not know of the other's existence.

Spock would never have been born. Strange how that thought began to reconcile him to the fact of Edith's death. Yes, he had loved Edith... admired her, respected her... would happily have spent the rest of his life with her, had it been possible. But Spock would

never have been born. And Spock complemented him, completed him, in a way that Edith could never have done. Kirk knew no words that could explain the intensity of his need for Spock's friendship, and now he did not even try.

Kirk moved to the intercom. "Mr. Spock, report to my quarters."

They would speak together, recalling Edith and her goodness... and in the Vulcan's quiet wisdom and compassion, Kirk knew he would find peace.

