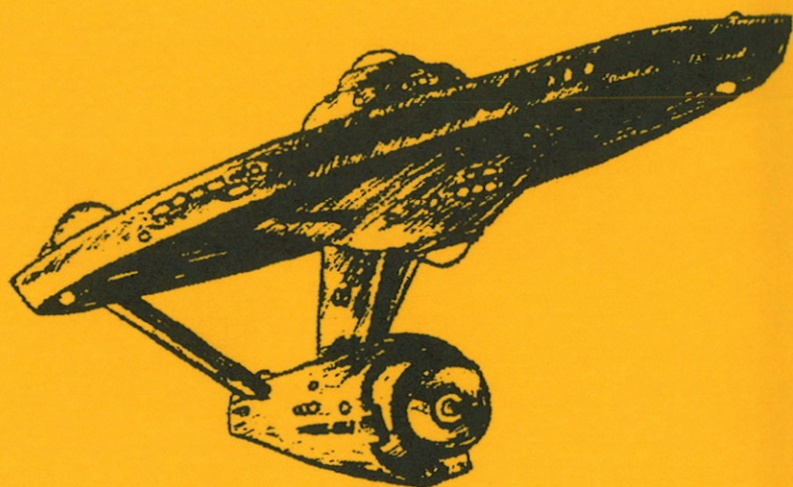


SCOTPRESS

ENTERPRISE



INCIDENTS 12

THE LEGACY

by

Rosemarie Heaton

a STAR TREK fanzine

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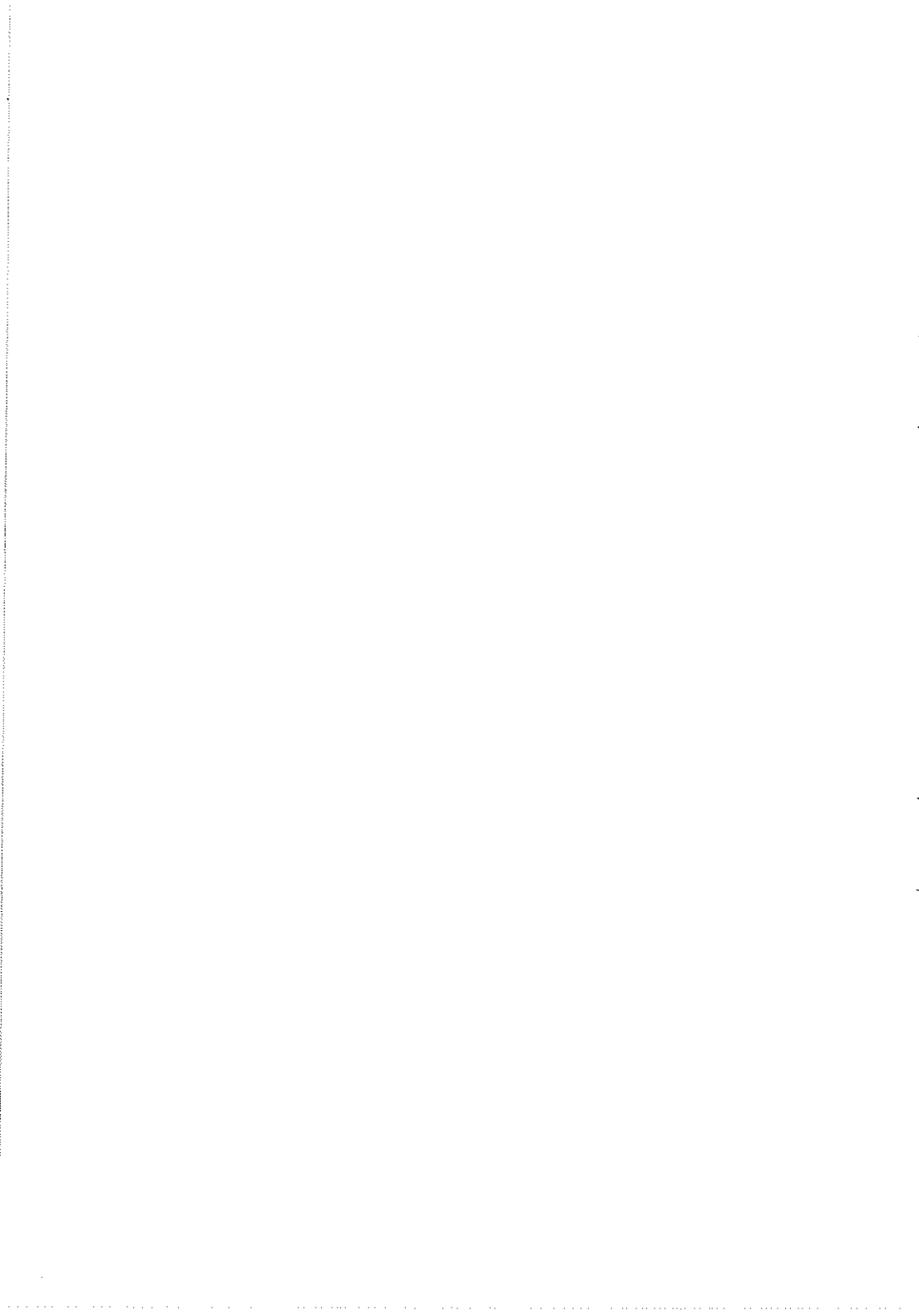
Distracting - Shona and Cindy

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Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
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THE LEGACY

by

Rosemarie Heaton

The crouched figure moved and stretched cramped limbs as the rising sun touched his back. Carefully he stood up, shivering slightly in the chill of the morning. Very quietly he whispered, "Farewell, my old friend. I'm sorry it had to happen this way. I think I'd give anything for it not to have done so... Why? Why did it have to be you?"

After a few minutes of silence the man sighed quietly and said, "We'll be leaving today so this really is our last goodbye. Rest in peace, my dear friend."

The watcher heard both the words and the accompanying sound of rock against rock as they rang clearly in the still air. He risked a quick glance from his hiding place and was just in time to catch a glimpse of the man as, his farewell over, he walked away without a backward glance. The watcher re-settled himself for a while longer, for he was disobeying orders by being there and knew that the stocky figure that had just left the graveside would be furiously angry if he discovered the other's presence.

The thin figure slipped quickly through the narrow gaps between the rocks. He had discovered this precipitous route by accident and had made good use of it over the past several days. This was the last time he would need to use it and he could find it within himself to be grateful for that fact. His mind was busy with thoughts of the long journey that lay in front of them when the sound of voices reached him. Stopping, he peered over a convenient boulder to the rough

trail below him. There were two people and they were arguing fiercely.

"I just want to. That's why!"

"If we get caught there'll be hell to pay and you know it." The man sounded exasperated.

"Did I ask you to come with me? I don't remember doing so." The young woman's voice was bitter.

"Maria, let's go back. This is foolish."

"No! I have to go. Don't ask me why. All I know is that I have to," she pleaded. There was a short silence then the footsteps started again, the female's sharp and assured while the male set scuffled along behind her.

"It's too creepy for words, Maria. I just feel as though somehow he's still there waiting for us," he said.

"Oh, don't be so silly. This will be the last time anyway; we'll be gone by tonight and there'll never be another chance." There was an odd note in her voice that the listener did not recognise. He heard them stop again and suddenly she was much more confident. "Look, the sooner we get there the less chance there is of anybody missing us. I've got something to do for our high and mighty Science Officer so we do have a reason to be out here if we need one."

"But still no excuse for being here," her companion grumbled. There was a short silence then the man said, "Okay, okay. We'll get your samples on the way

back. If I remember correctly Greg Fisher said there was a likely-looking deposit about half a kilometre south-east of here."

The listener let them pass without challenging them for he knew that to report them would mean revealing his own presence. He shook his head. What was that phrase? 'Caught between two stools?' It was not often that he found himself in a position where self-preservation prevailed against his duty. He shook his head again and moved on. It was unlikely that the two youngsters meant to cause any damage and what the Captain did not know would not harm him. Deliberately he dismissed the problem from his mind and concentrated on the wording for the survey report he would finalise this morning.

Chapter 1

"What?" Kirk's disbelief showed in both his face and voice. "Do you realise what you've just said, Mr Scott?"

The burly Scotsman shrugged unhappily. "Aye, sir, o' course I realise. Likely there's a simple enough explanation." It was obvious that he was trying to convince himself as much as he was Kirk and not succeeding with either of them.

Kirk frowned. "I hope you wouldn't consider coming to me with this if you thought that there was a simple explanation, Mr Scott."

"Mr Spock knows more about his computers than I do, sir."

"Meaning he might, just conceivably might, find a fault you missed? Stretching a bit, aren't you?" Kirk thought for a few moments then, sighing, rubbed his forehead. Feeling Scott watching him he summoned a smile. "Okay, Scotty. I'll deal with this. That'll be all for now, thank you."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk watched the dour Scot leave then stared blankly at the closed door, his mind ranging over the past couple of days. It had all started so simply... Just another routine mineral survey. Something they had all done so often it seemed like second nature to them. Spock and a security guard had beamed down to collect some interesting specimens; somehow they had been materialised onto an area of rotten shale and one incautious move had resulted in most of the scree and both men cascading down the hillside. The guard had managed to retain his communicator and finding Spock unconscious had called for immediate beam-up.

Although Spock had regained consciousness fairly quickly McCoy had insisted on keeping him in Sickbay overnight.

"Just to be on the safe side, Jim. I'm never too happy with head injuries and Vulcans." He did not need to add that part of his worries was because he still did not feel competent where Spock's physiology was concerned.

Kirk had nodded his agreement and passed the necessary investigation to Scott. The Engineer had taken the transporter to pieces to try and trace the fault that had placed the landing party in jeopardy, and Kirk did not like the conclusions Scott's failure faced him with. Thumbing the communicator switch he snapped, "Where's McCoy?" to a startled Christine Chapel, then relenting slightly he apologised, "Sorry, Nurse. Is Doctor McCoy there?"

"Yes, sir. I'll just get him for you."

"On second thoughts, maybe you can help me?" Kirk was at his most charming.

"Yes, sir?" Chapel found herself smiling at him.

"Has Commander Spock been released yet?"

"Half an hour ago, Captain."

"Did he say where he was going?" Kirk kept his voice and face expressionless. Under normal circumstances he would have expected Spock to come straight to him.

"He may have mentioned it to Doctor McCoy, sir. If you still want to speak with the Doctor, I'll get him for you."

"Uhuh... it's not that important. I'll see him later. Thanks, Christine." He signed off, drummed his fingers impatiently, got up and was halfway to the door when its chimes sounded. Pausing for a second, he grimaced, then called, "Come in. Ah... Mr Spock." His tone was ironic. "I was just coming to look for you but you seem to have saved me the trouble." He turned away and missed the narrowing of the Vulcan's brows. As he reseated himself, Kirk waved the Vulcan to a chair.

Spock declined, saying, "After two days in Sickbay, I prefer to stand. If you have no objection, sir?"

"No, no objection." Kirk leaned back and surveyed the lean figure in front of him. Coming straight to the point he said, "Mr Scott can find nothing wrong with either the transporter or the bridge relays. Do you have any ideas, Commander?"

None of this was news to the Vulcan - his first port of call had been the Bridge. What he had not expected was the obvious hostility shown by the Captain, as over the past few months he had thought that they were beginning to understand one other. Nevertheless his gaze never left the seated man and he showed none of his apprehension as he replied, "As there was no malfunction, Captain, there must have been operator error."

Kirk nodded. "Human error, Commander?" His voice was as cold as Spock had ever heard it.

"No, sir."

"Then that leaves us with only one option, doesn't it?" Suddenly he leaned forward. "You made that mistake, Commander."

"No other conclusion appears possible at this time, Captain."

"Do you have an explanation?"

"No, sir."

Kirk straightened some papers on his desk while he considered his next move. Standing quickly he moved restlessly away from his desk. Spock remained where he was.

"I have no option but to severely reprimand you, Commander. This reprimand will be entered into your service record. You will realise, I am sure, that it was just," he paused then deliberately said, "luck that your carelessness didn't cost someone's life. However the only damage would seem to have been to you personally so I trust that consideration will make you more careful in future."

Turning quickly he looked at Spock. The Vulcan was staring straight ahead, not a muscle moving. Kirk walked to stand in front of him. He smiled grimly into the blank face.

"You must be aware that I was against your appointment to two senior positions but was overruled by Command. It begins to look as though I may have been right, doesn't it?" Not waiting for an answer he continued, "Don't think I'm letting you off lightly, Commander. I shall be watching you very carefully from now on." His tone was deliberately light as he finished, "You do understand me, don't you, Commander?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good." Kirk nodded his dismissal.

Spock looked down at him from his superior height, drew breath to speak but

realising he no longer had Kirk's attention, he just said, "Sir," and left.

As the door slid shut Kirk had already requested the Vulcan's service record from the computer. Curiously he flicked through it. *Impressive*, he thought. *Pity to have to spoil it.* The task finished he turned to his own log, entering his renewed doubts about the efficiency of one person holding down two senior posts.

After leaving Kirk's office Spock, his earlier systems check notwithstanding, went straight to Auxiliary Control to repeat his investigation. He did not doubt Scott's competence but neither did he remember having made such an obvious mistake. His search proved fruitless, however, and he was left with the beginnings of doubt about his own memory.

Although Kirk did not refer to the incident again Spock was conscious of being under constant scrutiny. His slightest hesitation seemed to draw Kirk's immediate attention. In his turn McCoy watched them both, believing that Kirk's determination to catch the Vulcan out was only matched by the Vulcan's determination not to be caught. All in all a sure recipe for disaster, to the Doctor's own way of thinking. Eventually he raised the subject with Kirk, warning the Captain that he considered that Kirk's treatment of the Vulcan was coming perilously close to harassment, and that he was quite willing to log it as such if Kirk did not back off.

Kirk's first reaction was to laugh but then he realised that McCoy was serious.

"Am I?" he asked, genuinely horrified.

"Anyone else and you'd have had a complaint to the First Officer by now." McCoy was grim-faced. He was not sure that Kirk really believed him.

"Hell! I'll back off, Bones."

"You'd better," was McCoy's only comment.

After McCoy had left Kirk sat and thought about what the Doctor had said. He could not quite believe that he would react to a crewman in the way that he had just been accused of. Still, he forced himself to go back over the past weeks and realised that, for once, McCoy had not exaggerated.

Damn, he thought, *I'll need to be more careful or he could cite me for harassment. If I want rid of him without him causing me any more problems then I'm going to have to be more careful.*

He pushed back from his desk, suddenly determined. *No matter what that Vulcan thinks I am not going to be pushed into asking for his transfer. I can wait him out without any difficulty. After all I'm the Captain; I'll show him... I'll teach him to complain about me!*

Strangely it never occurred to him to question either his changed attitude to a man he had begun to consider a friend or whether, in fact, his very private First Officer would have ever discussed his relationship with his Commanding Officer with the ship's surgeon.

His decision taken the Captain made a valiant attempt to stop watching the Vulcan's every move, and as the tension between him and Spock gradually eased Kirk saw the rest of the Bridge crew begin to relax. He also saw his CMO breathe a sigh of relief and decrease the regularity of his unannounced visits to the Bridge. It was the latter that made

Kirk finally realise that McCoy had been entirely serious about his intentions. The young Captain shivered at the thought of just how close he had come to a possible serious reprimand, for Starfleet did not take kindly to overt harassment of any kind for whatever reason.

Although the intensity of Kirk's scrutiny had lessened Spock was still very much aware that he was walking on a knife edge as far as the Captain was concerned. The Science Officer was concerned enough to exploit any situation that might serve to distract Kirk's attention away from him to its fullest extent. The incident that would become known to the crew as Mudd's Women was just such an opportunity.

It all started innocuously enough when they received, as part of a routine communication from Starfleet, the request to keep an eye out for a stolen vehicle of Earth registry. No-one had expected to find it but found it they had, and all they needed to do was retrieve it. Unfortunately that did not prove to be quite so simple as they expected it would be.

James Kirk was never particularly happy acting out his role of policeman, and the thief's disregard for the safety of his own ship and crew, coupled with the danger to the Enterprise, had raised his temper to dangerous levels. That this had been compounded by the slow reaction of the crew in the transporter room he was, for the moment, deliberately ignoring. He knew everyone was tired and that no-one was functioning at peak efficiency, and he was still conscious of McCoy's comments regarding his treatment of his First Officer.

As Kirk waited in his office for the arrival of Captain Walsh and his crew he cast his mind back a few weeks to the aftermath of their traumatic visit to Delta

Vega. He sighed; the last thing any of them had expected was to be thrust straight back on patrol, and he reflected, not for the first time, on just why their debriefing had been so cursory.

Why had the deaths been accepted without question? Why had Gary had to die...? He shook his head savagely; he knew he was burying his grief instead of accepting it, but Gary... Furiously he slammed back from his desk, turning away from his doubts and using his grief to fuel his temper, so it was an extremely angry man who greeted the small party that Spock escorted into his office.

To say Kirk was taken aback by Walsh and his crew would have been an understatement. He was totally flustered for one of the few times in his adult life. Even so he managed to wonder why Spock had not warned him about the women. Then the look on the Vulcan's face as the three women passed him on their way out told Kirk that the omission had been deliberate. He narrowed his eyes, then returned the Vulcan's look before forcing himself back to the matter at hand, and away from Eve and her companions. He informed the other Captain of the ship's hearing he intended to hold, listened as Walsh tried to talk his way out of it, then tiring of the fat man's platitudes called Security to escort the prisoner to his quarters.

Quickly Kirk returned to the Bridge, where Spock and Scott were holding a quiet but obviously serious conference. Spock lifted an eyebrow as Kirk rushed in.

"The entire ship's power is feeding through one crystal, sir," he said quietly.

Kirk frowned at him. "Then switch to bypass circuits," he said, puzzled. He felt his stomach twist as the Engineer shook his head.

"They burned out when we superheated, Captain. That jackass Walsh not only wrecked his own ship but the Enterprise as well."

Kirk interrupted him, "If it's any consolation that's one jackass that's going to get skinned, Scotty."

They all knew that it was only a matter of time before the last crystal would fail and Kirk found himself looking expectantly in Spock's direction. The Vulcan's face remained expressionless as he informed the Captain of the lithium mining colony on Rigel 12, and that the Helmsman already had the coordinates. Kirk nodded and their eyes met for a fleeting moment before Kirk turned to issue his orders to Farrell.

The loss of the last dilithium crystal coincided with the end of the hearing. Kirk, very conscious of Spock's quiet amusement, was trying to disentangle himself from Eve and was un-nerved enough to give his First Officer explicit orders while they were still in the briefing room. Unfortunately as both he and Spock had underestimated Mudd's greed and resourcefulness they did not expect the demands of the Rigellian miners. Neither of the Starfleet officers was prepared to haggle for the crystals, especially with human flesh as part of the bargain, and Kirk was trying to bluff his way out of their dilemma when Harry Mudd and the women arrived in the Briefing Room. One look at the Captain's face was enough to tell Spock that the two security guards who had allowed Mudd his freedom would, very shortly, be looking for new posts.

As a pragmatic man Kirk knew when he was caught, and so he grudgingly agreed to allow the three women to visit the miners. He and Spock visited the re-incarcerated Harry

Mudd and vainly tried to talk him round. Having unconditionally failed and unable, for the moment, to think of any way out of the impasse Kirk sought inspiration in Sickbay.

McCoy had spent several of the last few hours considering the peculiar effect that Ruth had had on his med-scanner. Kirk listened to him quietly then asked succinctly, "Drugs?"

McCoy pursed his lips, "Possibly. I'll need to do a little more research though, Jim."

"Well don't take too long. We don't have all that much time left." Kirk stood up.

"What are you gonna do?" McCoy asked idly.

"Beam down along with Spock and Harry Mudd and see if I can talk some sense into those miners," Kirk growled.

McCoy snorted. "Always the optimist, eh, Captain?" but the door closed on any answer that Kirk might have made.

Down on the surface the wind was already blowing hard and the noise grated on Kirk's nerves. His already precarious hold on his temper was not improved by the miner's leader, Ben Childress, when he refused to hand the crystals over immediately. Spock's repeated warning about their time limits was not well received and Kirk watched, frowning as the Vulcan backed off and turned his attention to the revellers.

Only a few minutes later tension flared amongst the miners as they began to quarrel about the women. The starship men moved in to break up the threatened

fight but Eve, choking back tears, surprised them all by running for the door and vanishing into the wild night.

In the rush that followed everyone got into everyone else's way and Eve was soon lost in the vicious dust storm that was raging across the barren surface. They searched fruitlessly for a while then Kirk ordered Spock and Mudd back to the Enterprise to carry on the search using the ship's infra-red equipment.

Once back on board Kirk's anxiety erupted in an un-called for attack on his Chief Engineer when Scott, very properly, pointed out the extra drain on the ship's power reserves. Spock's questioning glance made Kirk regret his quick tongue and he apologised to Scott immediately. The Captain knew another spurt of irritation as he noted the Vulcan's incomprehension, but he ignored it and turned his attention to the badly shaken Mudd.

While Kirk directed the search for Eve, McCoy continued his research. Some time during that endless night he pushed away from his desk and crowed, "Got it!" Quickly opening a channel to the Bridge he said, "McCoy here, Captain. Could you and Spock come down to Sickbay for a moment?"

"Both of us, McCoy? We're rather busy up here." Kirk frowned at his CMO.

Spock looked up from his nearly useless sensors and said, "I can remain here if you wish, Captain."

McCoy over-rode them both. "No, I want both of you. It's important."

Kirk shrugged, "On our way, Bones." He turned towards the helm. "Mr Sulu, you have the con."

Five minutes later he was saying,

"Venus drug? What are you talking about, Bones?"

It was Spock who answered. "The Venus drug is an illegal substance, Captain. It is also extremely difficult to find and correspondingly expensive to buy. Mr Mudd must have been expecting a high return on his investment."

McCoy glared at him. "We're talkin' human flesh here, Spock. Not stocks and shares."

"Belay that, McCoy. We've no time to squabble amongst ourselves. Spock, where is Mudd at the moment?"

"To the best of my knowledge he is in the Rec Room, sir," the Vulcan replied.

"Right, let's go find him. He's got some more explaining to do." Kirk was on his feet and halfway to the door before he had finished his sentence.

By the time the lessening storm allowed Spock to pin-point life readings and for them to return to the surface a chastened Mudd was ready to beam down with Kirk. Kirk had determined that Mudd was going to do his own explaining! The next few minutes were fraught, but eventually Eve and Childress reached an agreement and Kirk got his dilithium crystals. A complaining Mudd finally realised that his ploy had failed and he reluctantly returned to the Enterprise with Kirk and without the women, knowing that he was bound for the nearest Starbase.

It was several days later when Spock oversaw the transfer of Mudd, guarded by two very subdued security guards, to the starbase-bound USS

Pompey. Waiting for the acknowledgment of safe transfer, Spock reflected that eventually his Human companions would laugh at Harry Mudd and his antics. He also knew that this was another aspect of their differences - even if he had a Human sense of humour he could never find buying and selling other beings amusing.

However looking back at the past few days he realised that he and Kirk had for the most part worked together amiably. *Is it possible that the Captain has forgiven me for my earlier lapse in judgement?* he wondered. Mentally he shrugged; he would need to wait and see.

That lapse still puzzled him, just as the reasons for it still eluded him. He had run diagnostic after diagnostic, and not just on the hardware, but had found nothing. To himself he had finally admitted that it would seem to have been his mistake, but he had run his internal physical checks and still found nothing that would account for memory loss. *Could it be, he wondered, that Kirk is correct and that I am not sufficiently competent to carry the dual load?* Not for the first time he wondered why he had not transferred off when Pike had left.

Although Kirk had hidden it reasonably well, Spock had always known that he had not been the Terran's choice for the position of First Officer. Still, Kirk had never, until now, allowed that to influence his regard for the Vulcan. *Indeed, Spock thought, we had come close enough in a few short months for me to think of him in terms of friendship.* Idly he wondered when the deterioration had begun.

He knew the Captain had still not recovered completely from their visit to the edge of the galaxy. Suddenly the Vulcan stiffened - could Kirk still blame him for Mitchell's death? Spock knew he

had made the logical decision when he had urged Kirk to kill Commander Mitchell; he also knew that Kirk had seen that logic and however loath, he had been to do so he had eventually acted on the Vulcan's suggestion. Did the Terran still resent the fact that Spock had forced him to see that logic, and ultimately therefore to kill his best friend?

His musings were interrupted by the USS Pompey signalling the safe arrival of the transferees. Moving to the intercom Spock acknowledged the message and securing the Transporter Room returned, with relief, to his work, putting the problem of Kirk to the back of his mind.

Chapter 2

Only that morning Kirk had been thinking that maybe he had been wrong; that possibly the Vulcan was capable of holding down two jobs. Now with the two deaths that had occurred during the survey party's aborted landing on the planet Targa staring him in the face his doubts were once more fully aroused. The briefing room was deathly silent as he entered, confirming his suspicions.

"Well?" he demanded harshly. He directed his question at Scott rather than Spock.

Scott avoided looking at him directly. "I cannae find anything wrong, sir."

"What happened then, Mr Scott?"

Spock, taking pity on Scott's predicament, interrupted smoothly. "The wrong coordinates seem to have been passed from the Bridge to the Transporter Room, sir."

"Seem?"

"My apologies, Captain. I believe I should have said were."

"Again, Commander?" The voice was silk.

Spock swallowed. "Again, sir."

"Any explanation, this time?"

"No, sir."

Spock's answer fell into the stillness of the room. Kirk felt his stomach churning. It was with difficulty that he kept his voice steady as he said, "I see. In that case I must relieve you of duty, Commander, pending a full enquiry. Consider yourself confined to quarters until then."

Spock stood with his usual grace, locked gazes with Kirk momentarily, and then turned to leave.

After his departure Kirk scanned the disbelieving faces round the table. "Unless anyone needs more time the Enquiry will convene in two days at 0900 hours."

Nobody looked at anyone else and no-one argued.

"Very well. Dismissed." Kirk's abrupt departure left them all staring at each other.

"Well, ye all heard the Captain," Scott snapped and there was a rush to leave.

The background to the Enquiry was straightforward enough. It was just the consequences that were not. They had been mapping a new system; the

Federation was always on the look-out for new sources for important drugs, so when the short-range sensors had shown vegetation of a type suitable for medical use, it was automatic procedure for the Science Officer to take down a team to collect samples. At the last moment Kirk had called Spock away from the transporter room. Before leaving to answer the summons the Vulcan had informed Lieutenant Kyle that the necessary coordinates had already been transferred from the Bridge. He had then given the team a final reminder that they were dealing with a pre-contact civilisation and that therefore the Prime Directive was in full force.

Kyle had beamed the landing party straight into a inter-tribal scuffle, and the emergency beam-up instigated by the senior Security Officer was not enough to prevent the deaths of two of the scientists, nor did it prevent the breaking of the Prime Directive. Kirk's fury had been felt by everyone involved and the resulting investigation was one of the most thorough the Enterprise crew had ever conducted. None of them was looking forward to the formal proceedings.

Kirk avoided his officers for most of the next day. The hearing was going to be bad enough without him breathing down the necks of those who were going to have to wreck Spock's career.

Why hadn't that damn Vulcan admitted that the job was too much? Continuing to think about it Kirk decided he had the answer - Spock needed to be Vulcan - Vulcans could do anything asked of them so... But... Spock wasn't that pigheaded - was he?

The next morning Scott and Kyle reluctantly presented their evidence; Uhura even more reluctantly agreed to having seen Spock transmit the coordinates that had sent two promising young scientists to their deaths on Targa.

Finally Kirk turned to Spock. The Vulcan's quiet answers only served to incriminate him further, at least as far as Kirk could see.

Eventually Kirk noticed McCoy signalling to him. Suppressing a sigh he called a recess. For a moment he thought Spock was about to object but saw him restrain himself and follow the guard from the room.

Impatiently Kirk approached McCoy. "Well, what is it?"

"I just thought you needed an hour away from it, Jim. It might give you a chance to see it all from the outside."

Kirk laughed bitterly. "How? Whatever I do it's the end of his career. I don't even need to throw the book at him. Heaven knows everyone makes mistakes, but this? He doesn't even seem to care!"

"Oh, I think he cares, Captain. He's just not capable of showing it." McCoy continued thoughtfully, "Why do you think he's not presenting any defence?"

"Because he hasn't got one! God, Bones - even my worst nightmares haven't been as bad as this."

"What are you going to do, Jim?"

"I don't know, and even if I did I wouldn't be telling you before Spock." He paused. "I can remove him as First Officer and Science Officer. Take him off Bridge duty - keep him on board until we return to base then transfer him somewhere he can't do any more damage."

McCoy looked at him. "Good job nobody's able to do that to you when you make mistakes, Captain."

Kirk watched him walk away *Now*

just what does McCoy mean by that? Getting a coffee he sat down to think. Am I over-reacting? No, two men died because of Spock's carelessness.

Then slowly he began to run through the names of those who had died during his few short months as Captain. *How many of those were Spock's fault, how many mine and how many their own or even nobody's? Suddenly he didn't want to consider the ramifications. Spock's guilty, he's as much as admitted to it! He paused. Hasn't he?*

The intercom chimed, summoning him back to the Enquiry. Walking in he surveyed the room. Spock was sitting quietly between two guards. He did not look up as Kirk entered. The other faces swung towards him, expectant with the desire that he would have found a way out. Looking at them he realised that none of them wanted him to find Spock guilty. Taking a deep breath he moved forward and sitting down called the Enquiry to order.

"Commander Spock, do you have anything to say in your defence before I pronounce my decision?"

Spock's head lifted and even now an eyebrow rose in enquiry. "I am not sure I understand your question, sir. How can I defend myself when the evidence says I made the error that resulted in the tragedy?"

Kirk felt even more depressed - that was an admission he could not ignore. *I can't, can I? Where on earth did we go wrong?* he wondered.

Allowing nothing of his inner turmoil to show he said quietly, "Very well. Please stand, Commander."

Spock rose, fixing his gaze on the wall above Kirk's head. He heard Kirk's

voice stating his removal from the position of First Officer; revocation of his temporary upgrade to Commander and transfer to 'C' shift. He was not sure what he had been expecting but this surely was not all? He blinked and brought his gaze down to Kirk's level. The Captain's eyes met his for a moment before Kirk got to his feet.

"You'll resume active duty at the start of the next shift, Lieutenant-Commander. Report to the Duty Officer at that time." He paused. "You will of course, be kept under surveillance at all times. You do understand that?"

"Yes, sir," Spock answered quietly. In a daze he watched Kirk and the others leave. Eventually he was alone, and locking the door he sat down and once more went over every action he had taken since the beginning of the affair.

Why do I not recall transmitting the incorrect coordinates?

He knew full well that if he had realised what he was doing he would have had time to correct his error. He also knew he had checked every circuit on his board and everything was in perfect working order. Dismissing those thoughts as un-productive he leant back in his chair and began to consider Kirk's actions.

Why did he not arraign me for court-martial? It was after all quite within his remit to do so. He had to admit to himself that he did not and probably never would understand the mercurial Human who commanded the Enterprise.

Some time later his internal clock alerted him to the fact that he just had time to go and change his uniform before reporting for duty. Standing up he straightened his posture. No-one on this ship was going to see his recognition of

his humiliation.

Chapter Three

Nearly two weeks later Spock made his way to Sickbay. After much thought, and although unsure of the volatile Doctor's reaction, he had determined to ask McCoy to support his request for an immediate transfer. Spock did not understand why Kirk had not already done this. The Captain had still made no attempt to do so even though the opportunity had arisen, for only yesterday they had made contact with the USS Hood. It would not have been difficult for Kirk to have arranged for Spock to have left with the other ship. Spock knew he could not approach Kirk about any of this so he intended to give McCoy the chance to explain to him.

"Maybe he's not totally convinced of your negligence? After all he was unhappy about you having to carry two top positions anyway, so could be he's giving you another chance." McCoy had no intention of revealing that he had no idea what Kirk was doing. The Doctor was unhappy at what he saw as Spock's anomalous position but his last attempt to get some sense out of the Captain had met with no success. Spock was not fooled but decided to concentrate on McCoy's first comment.

"Why would he not be convinced of my negligence? There is after all no other explanation," he said candidly.

McCoy leaned back and examined the Vulcan. This was the first time he had got Spock to utter more than two words for weeks. He was going to be very, very careful not to blow this opportunity to find out what the Vulcan was really thinking. Steeling himself he asked directly, "Did you make those mistakes?"

Just as directly Spock answered, "Not that I remember."

For a moment McCoy stared at him blankly. "Whaddya you mean... not that you remember?"

Patiently Spock explained, "To my recollection I did not make those errors."

"Why not say so earlier?"

"There can be no other explanation. I must therefore be mistaken."

McCoy's face was as blank as he could make it. With Spock's phenomenal memory this admission opened a whole new can of worms. At Kirk's insistence he had carried out a full physical and psych-scan at the time of the Enquiry and nothing had shown up. So why could the Vulcan not remember?

"I'm going to have to think about this," he muttered.

Spock said, "I came to ask you to support my transfer request."

McCoy frowned. "No." He paused. "Not yet, anyway. I'm more interested in why you can't remember." The Doctor then confused Spock completely by changing tack and asking what he, at least, thought was the pertinent question.

"Have you got any enemies on board this ship?"

"None that I am aware of." Spock's face was totally expressionless.

McCoy chewed his fingernails for a moment, then said, "Go away and think up a list of anyone who might have any reason at all to hold a grudge against you. Oh and Spock, remember you're dealing with Humans so try and think illogically."

Spock stared at McCoy for a few moments before saying, "I do not understand your reasons."

McCoy interrupted, "You don't need to understand. Just go do it!"

After Spock had left McCoy thought for a while then went in search of the Captain who, when eventually found, was not in the best of moods. He still did not have a replacement for Spock as First Officer and knew he could not leave it for much longer before Starfleet questioned him. Impatiently, he listened to McCoy's tale, shrugged and said, "Scotty's been over that console and the transporter with a fine-tooth comb, Bones. He's not found anything and what's more neither could Spock."

"Jim, I'm worried. I believe Spock when he says he can't remember doing it. As I see it that leaves us with a couple of options: one, that he's ill and he isn't; or two, that someone else did it. Take your pick!"

"Bones, if it was someone else... Just give me names or even any valid reasons."

"I've sent Spock away to think about it. Can you think of anyone he's crossed recently?"

Kirk thought, shook his head. "No! Except for me that is! Why should anyone have it in for Spock, for heaven's sake?"

McCoy shrugged. This was where his theory fell down. Crew who got as far as starship duty were stable characters who were very unlikely to take drastic action over a necessary reprimand. He also knew that Spock, who had a reputation as a firm but fair taskmaster, did not resort to unnecessary criticism. He sighed and looked up to find Kirk

watching him.

"You're wasting your time, Bones," the Captain said more gently than he felt. "Spock's guilty and you're just going to have to accept it." Changing the subject abruptly Kirk diverted McCoy's attention away from Spock and his problems. It was much later before he was to wonder why he had not thought of Gary Mitchell's condescending attitude toward the Vulcan, and also why he had been so keen to deflect McCoy's concern away from Spock.

Chapter 4

The following day Kirk saw his views confirmed, or so it at first seemed. The equipment malfunction in the Physics Lab could only be put down to careless use, and the fact that the experiment had been set up by Spock was not missed by the Captain. The only redeeming factor that Kirk could see was that no-one other than the Science Officer had been injured. The fact that Spock's injuries had been received as he was shutting down the runaway experiment and that they were all extremely lucky to be alive did not at first occur to Kirk. He had, at last, got the proof of Spock's incompetence that would enable him to remove him from his post without fear of questions from Starfleet Command.

Once Kirk had seen the extent of the damage he turned to Scott and said, "See what you can find out, Mr Scott. I'll be in Sickbay, but it certainly looks as though our resident Vulcan has had his last chance."

He regretted that last comment as soon as he had said it. This whole business was affecting everyone. *I knew I should have transferred Spock to the Hood when I had the chance*, he thought glumly. He

could not satisfactorily explain even to himself why he had not.

Just as Kirk reached the door one of the science team muttered something that the Captain did not quite catch and was too tired to query. As the door closed behind him he heard Scott's voice snap, "Say that again?"

"It's as though he's got a jinx on him, sir." The young Lieutenant was flushed with embarrassment. "I've never seen Mr Spock make a mistake like that." There was a slight stir in the group surrounding her, followed by a murmur of agreement.

The Engineer looked slowly round but it was obvious that nobody else had anything to volunteer. He nodded. "Aye. Aye, I ken what you mean, lassie." He proceeded to question them all closely before turning his attention to the damaged equipment. It was hours later before, sighing in frustration, he left the lab and still worrying at the question headed for Kirk's quarters.

Kirk was working, paperwork strewn across the desk in front of him. This was something he had rarely had to bother about before; more than ever he wondered where Spock had found the time to do both jobs. He looked up expectantly as the Scot came in.

"Find anything?" he asked quickly.

"Noo..." Scott shook his head, "but I feel as though I'm just missing something. That the answer's right under my nose and that maybe we don't have much time left."

Kirk looked at him in surprise. Scott was not usually given to flights of fancy. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Scott was thoughtful. "One of the

science crew said it. 'It's as though someone's put a jinx on him'." He paused and Kirk nodded for him to continue. "I'd like to go back through Science's records for the past few months. If I may, sir?" he added belatedly.

Kirk was curious. "Why? What's the connection?"

Scott remained non-committal. "I'm no' sure yet, sir. May I do it?"

Kirk sighed. "If you think it'll do any good."

Scott straightened and fixed Kirk with a glare. "Someone needs to do something. Mr Spock doesnae make careless mistakes and I, for one, should have thought of that before, not had to have it pointed out to me. It's totally out of character." He softened slightly. "I've known him a long time, sir, and even I've allowed circumstances to influence me."

Kirk let his face harden, showing Scott that he was aware of the underlying criticism. The other man stood his ground, matching stares. Then Kirk nodded his agreement; maybe the Scot could come up with something useful. Relieved, the Engineer went, before Kirk could ask any more questions.

He left behind him a very puzzled Captain whose concentration was no longer on his work. Instead he found himself heading for Sickbay and McCoy, although he was to find no answers there either. Spock was still unconscious and McCoy extremely preoccupied. Eventually Kirk gave in and left for bed, hoping the morning would prove more to his liking.

Following a restless night, full of dreams of Gary Mitchell's death, Kirk

awoke unrefreshed and niggly. *It's weeks since I dreamed about that. So why now?* he wondered. Shaking off the remaining uneasiness as best he could he went to the Bridge via McCoy's office. He found Scott there before him and voiced his surprise.

"Everything all right, Mr Scott?"

"Guid morning, sir. Aye, I'm fine. I was just asking McCoy a couple of questions. I'm finished now, sir."

As the Engineer left Kirk turned to McCoy. "Well?"

"No change, Jim. He's not engaged healing trance, in fact he doesn't seem to be doing much of anything, much less aid his own recovery." He shrugged. "I'll leave him a while longer before I do anything drastic. Odd thing is, it's so unlike Spock."

"Maybe it isn't Spock, maybe something else is stopping him?" Kirk's comment surprised himself.

McCoy leaned back in his chair, obviously puzzled. "I'm not sure I'm following you, Jim."

"Scotty was saying something about Spock having a jinx on him." Kirk was not really sure that he knew what he was talking about either but carried on regardless. "Bones, I dreamed about Gary Mitchell again last night."

McCoy's gaze sharpened. He had been one of several crewmembers on temporary assignment to an off-ship project for those few weeks so all his information was secondhand. This was the first time Kirk, or anyone else for that matter, had voluntarily spoken to him about it and he had not been able to invent a legitimate excuse that would have enabled him to question the

surviving protagonists to the extent that he wanted to. He had not even known about Kirk's dreams.

"Oh?" he questioned non-committally.

"Yes. It's strange. I haven't had those dreams for ages. I wonder why now?" Kirk's intuition made one of its jumps, leaving McCoy way behind him. "Spock... Gary. It has to be something Gary did."

Kirk turned and headed for Spock's room, McCoy on his tail. McCoy's confusion deepened when Kirk took hold of Spock's shoulders and shook him.

"Jim." McCoy voiced his protest, only to be ignored.

"Spock." Kirk's voice was urgent. "Come on, man. I need to talk to you, Spock. Wake up!!" Turning to McCoy he snapped, "Any way you can bring him round?"

McCoy pursed his lips and shook his head. "Over my dead body, Captain."

"It might well be over Spock's dead body unless we can discover what Gary's done." Kirk shook Spock again and then deliberately slapped him. McCoy moved to interfere but was halted by Kirk's command tone.

"Stay out of this, Doctor. If you won't help, don't hinder."

McCoy's mouth tightened but he stayed where he was, watching the diagnostic panel. Kirk slapped the Vulcan again and again.

"No more, Captain." McCoy's voice was icy and Kirk glanced round at him. As he did so, Spock's eyes opened and McCoy watched the indicators as they

dipped and then settled.

"Captain." The voice was little more than a whisper.

Kirk turned back. "Good. Spock, could Mitchell have caused any of this? Would you know if he had affected your mind?" His voice was hard.

"My mind is my own, Captain. Mr Mitchell never made any attempt to influence me."

"Damn," Kirk muttered. "Scrap that theory, then."

After a moment's silence Spock said thoughtfully, "However, it is possible that he may have interfered with the computer in some fashion."

"Oh come on! Surely that's a bit far-fetched, Spock," McCoy protested. He was running his hand-held medicorder over his patient as they talked. The Vulcan did not seem too affected by his rude awakening although it was obvious he was still in need of rest. McCoy wondered when Spock had last eaten a proper meal.

Kirk frowned as he remembered some of the things that Gary had done. "Maybe not, Bones," he murmured. Thoughtfully he continued, "I wonder if that's what Scotty's trying to find out?" He made his way to the intercom. "Mr Scott, report to Sickbay, please." While they waited Kirk continued to think aloud. "Could Gary have done that, Spock?"

"The probability is high, given the other manipulative abilities he exhibited."

"What in blazes are you two talking about?" McCoy's patience was wearing thin.

Kirk looked at him almost absently. He was remembering things he did not want to. "One of the things Gary could do was alter matter," he said very quietly.

"Well, that sure makes the whole thing a lot clearer, Captain." The rest of McCoy's riposte was lost as Scott entered.

"Find anything, Scotty?" Kirk asked.

"If I may say so, Captain, it is unlikely Mr Scott will have been able to find anything," Spock said calmly.

Kirk's frown deepened as he waited for Scott's reply.

The Engineer nodded. "Mr Spock's right, Captain. Absolutely nothin'. Except that yesterday's accident was meant to be permanent."

Eyebrows raised McCoy asked, "How do you know that?"

"I sub-microscopically examined some of the computer circuits. Two of them are fused solid. That's why the alarm didn't go off and why the fire containment procedure didn't work."

"It certainly looks like somebody has it in for you, Mr Spock." McCoy's tone was dry.

Kirk waved him to silence. "What are the chances of it happening again, Scotty?"

"You knew Mr Mitchell better than anyone else, sir," the Engineer said quietly, and Kirk frowned in reply.

"Captain, we must check as many of the computer circuits as possible immediately. I suggest we begin with the transporter mechanism." Spock started to get up.

McCoy finally lost his temper. "You." He pointed at Spock. "Get back in that bed." For a moment he thought Spock was going to ignore him, but the Vulcan settled back and directed his gaze at Kirk.

"Sir?" Spock's tone left them all in no doubt that the Vulcan expected Kirk to deal with this one.

"If we're to replace those circuits quickly, I am going to need Spock on the Bridge, McCoy." Kirk was adamant.

McCoy was breathing heavily. "Captain," he snapped, "it may have escaped your notice, but this man is in Sickbay for a very good reason."

Spock blinked in surprise, "Doctor, I was never in any danger..."

McCoy interrupted him savagely. "Since when did you gain a medical doctorate, Commander? I watched you last night and I know what I saw. Your panel readings are still far from healthy. When did you last eat, for example?" He waved Spock to silence. "So before anyone does anything I want a full explanation and then I'll consider my next move."

Kirk looked at him for a few moments and then nodded. Although he was unhappy about discussing Gary Mitchell he knew that McCoy was entitled to the full story. He just did not want to expose, quite so openly, what he saw as his own inadequacies. Taking a deep breath, he looked at McCoy. "I take it you've read the ship's log?"

"Medical one only, Captain. Ship's log is 'need to know' only." McCoy paused. "So, although I have some idea of what happened, I don't know how or why our pointy-eared friend here escaped?"

All three men looked at Spock who returned their scrutiny before replying, as coolly as possible under the circumstances, "Simply a difference in brain circuitry, Doctor. Vulcan telepathic abilities are not the same as Human ESP."

"Hmnn..." McCoy was unconvinced but also realised that now was probably not the time to pursue this angle. A glance at Kirk showed him that the Captain had not thought about this before and McCoy had a good idea that Spock was going to have to do some fancy explaining sometime in the future.

"Well, let's not get side-tracked," he said kindly.

Feeling Spock's gaze on him he turned back to Jim Kirk who shrugged and said, "The passage through the energy barrier affected several of the crew. Some died but Gary and Elizabeth Dehner were changed somehow. Only," he paused, "Gary couldn't deal with it and Elizabeth never got the chance."

Silence reigned for a few seconds before Kirk burst out, "I'd known Gary for years and I just couldn't believe he'd change like that. I still can't believe it, even though I saw it happen. Still, I'm glad you weren't affected, Spock." His tone made the last a question.

Spock's face was imperturbable. "I have my own disciplines, Captain." He plainly intended saying nothing more on that subject for he continued, "If you have read the medical logs, Doctor, you will know of the abilities manifested by Commander Mitchell before his death. His ability to manipulate objects, for instance?"

McCoy nodded and Spock went on, "If my suspicions are correct, we will find that Mr Mitchell altered one or more of the computer's circuits. We do not have

the time to test each one separately but must replace all those likely to have been affected. We renewed our supplies after Delta Vega so the components which came on board then should be trustworthy."

"One question, Spock." McCoy turned his attention from Kirk to the Vulcan.

Spock looked at him. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Why you?"

Spock blinked, obviously taken back, and for once he was without an answer.

"Oh, I can answer that one," Kirk jumped in. "Spock was the only one of us who saw Mitchell for the danger he was. In fact, he warned me about him and I wouldn't listen. I knew Gary, you see, and didn't want to believe Spock." His voice was brittle.

Spock's voice was gentle as he interrupted. "Captain, this is irrelevant to the subject under consideration. May I suggest a return to the main theme." He addressed his next remark to McCoy. "Now you know our reasons maybe you will grant me leave to begin returning the computer to its normal state?"

McCoy pursed his lips. He still had serious reservations about letting Spock leave Sickbay but also knew Kirk would need the Vulcan's expertise. Sighing, he said, "Okay... I guess I oughta to know, by now when I'm beat. But I want you back here as soon as you finish or you're goin' nowhere! You hear, now?"

"I hear you, Doctor." Spock was already up and taking the clothes that Scott, braving McCoy's glare, handed him. "Captain, I will need Mr Scott's assistance in auxiliary control." He did

not add 'just in case' but they all heard it.

"Can it be done, Jim?" McCoy stopped Kirk as he was about to follow the other two out.

"He's the only one we've got on board who can and, strangely enough, the only one I'd trust under the circumstances, Bones. Just cross your fingers that Mitchell hasn't laid any more traps."

"So, what's Scotty going to do?"

Kirk looked at him as though he wished McCoy had not thought to ask that question.

"Sit in auxiliary control and shut down the computer room if the need arises."

"But that'll shut down all systems, won't it?" McCoy asked uncertainly.

"No, Scotty will have control of all the back-up systems. It does mean, however, we won't be able to get into computer control easily." Kirk's voice was very quiet in the still room.

"So it's Spock's life on the line?"

"Just as it's been all along. It was probably only my insistence that he didn't beam down to Targa that saved him from dying with the others." Kirk's tone was vicious as he continued berating himself. "How did he deceive me all those years?"

McCoy did not pretend to misunderstand. "People change, Jim. You know that. Possibly Gary saw something between you and Spock that was going to leave him behind."

Kirk looked his question and McCoy continued, feeling his way carefully. "You outclassed Gary, so did

Spock, and from what I was seeing, Gary saw his meal-ticket vanishing." Kirk continued to look puzzled so McCoy proceeded to spell it out.

"Like attracts like, Jim. Hence the friendship between you and Gary, but you and Spock complement each other. His logic tempers your impetuosity, whilst your expectations stretch him." McCoy shrugged. "I'd not say this to his face but he's good for you. Gary? well, maybe he'd got as far as he was ever going to go."

Kirk, not really wanting to believe him, just nodded then straightened his tunic. "I'll go do my waiting on the Bridge," he said with a wry grin as he left. McCoy gazed after him then sat down to bite his nails in peace.

While Kirk waited he thought about Gary Mitchell. Reluctantly he had to agree with much of what McCoy had said. He had been growing away from Gary, but as to replacing him with Spock...?

No, not friendship... the relationship is never going to be that simple. He laughed to himself. Spock as a friend. It was hard enough being pleasant to him at times.

Still, he's an excellent Science Officer and I have to admit, a very good First. Guess I am lucky I'd not got round to selecting a replacement, but what if he decides not to stay? Now why does that thought bother me? he wondered. Am I so obsessive about the Enterprise that I'd hold back a good officer?

He looked round the Bridge and considered his reaction to any of them asking for a transfer. *Sure, I'd be sorry to lose any of them.* He even considered some of them as friends, although he had already determined never again to allow a situation similar to the one with Gary to develop. *That's one mistake I'm not going to*

make twice! No, I won't make any attempt to stop Spock if he wants to leave. Damn Nogura, anyway.

His musing was interrupted by a message from Scott informing him that the Vulcan had finished and was on his way to the Bridge. Kirk felt the wave of relief that flashed round the Bridge; indeed he knew it himself. Formally he thanked the Scot, and as he did so heard the lift doors open.

Barely acknowledging him, the Vulcan went towards the science station. After a cursory glance at the controls he looked at Kirk.

"Permission to commence testing, sir?"

His attitude irritated Kirk immediately. "As long as you confine it to inanimate objects." Kirk's tone sounded sour even to himself.

Spock's eyebrows rose. "Precisely my intention, sir."

Kirk swung round, mouth open to make a blistering retort but, catching the interested gaze of Uhura subsided muttering, "Of course, Commander."

After what seemed like hours Spock turned back to him. "All tests completed, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr Spock." Swivelling his chair he spoke to Uhura. "Please contact Mr Scott and Dr McCoy. Ask them to join Mr Spock and myself in Briefing Room B in fifteen minutes." Ignoring her assent he headed for the turbolift. "With me, Mr Spock. You have the con, Mr Sulu."

As the briefing room door closed behind them Kirk made for the coffee machine.

"Coffee, Mr Spock?"

"No, thank you, sir."

With his cup in his hand Kirk waved Spock to a seat. The Vulcan complied and Kirk paced around the room before asking brusquely, "Successful?"

"All my tests show normal function, sir."

"Hmmm... Why, Spock?"

Spock looked surprised, for him. "Why should they not, sir?"

"I didn't mean the tests. I meant Gary." Kirk waved the coffee cup at the Vulcan.

Spock nodded. This was a question he had been expecting, even if he found it unwelcome.

"I do not know, sir. There is the possibility that he resented my position on board the ship." He stopped, trying to be tactful. "I understand the expectation was that he would receive the post of First Officer with the change of Captancy."

Kirk sighed and sat down opposite Spock. "I never realised he was so jealous of you."

"I do not believe he knew he was. He never made any attempt to usurp or interfere with my position. I surmise that..."

Kirk interrupted, "He saw a chance and took it, you mean."

Spock inclined his head in answer. Neither said anything further until McCoy and Scott came into the room. Then Kirk turned to Spock and said, "I'm

going to return you to McCoy's tender clutches, Spock."

The Vulcan acquiesced silently. McCoy looked at Kirk over his shoulder and made leaving gestures.

"One moment, Doctor." Kirk turned to Scott. "Mr Spock says all his instruments show normal function. Can you confirm that?"

"Aye, Captain. My only reservation is that we haven't tested the transporter using living material."

"And I have no intention of doing that out here!"

"I think what Mr Scott means is that the transporter has not been tested using me as the test subject." Spock sounded very tired. "I suggest that no-one uses the transporter until such time as I have done so."

"I agree, Captain." The Scot's tone was dour.

Kirk nodded. "Very well, gentlemen."

McCoy looked as though he was about to disagree but Kirk's glance silenced him. "Mr Spock, go with Doctor McCoy now," the Captain said brusquely. Spock did not even argue.

As the other two left, Scott looked at Kirk and handed him some components. "From the lab, sir." He paused, "If that's all I think I'll head back to Engineering."

"Via Sickbay, Mr Scott?"

"It's a good a way as any, Cap'n."

"Thanks, Scotty." As Scott left Kirk looked at the fused components he held in his hand. He sighed, "Oh, Gary, why?"

Shaking his head he crossed to the waste disposal, and after a second's thought consigned both friendship and hardware to oblivion.

That afternoon Kirk faced a reconvened Board of Enquiry with the new information. Summing up he said, "I feel that this information is more than sufficient to reverse my previous decision. If there is no dissenting opinion I wish it known that I intend to quash all charges and return the situation to the status quo." Pausing he looked round and saw agreement on all faces. "Then I will inform Commander Spock at the earliest opportunity. That will be all, gentlemen. Thank you."

As they got up to leave he motioned McCoy to stay.

McCoy did not wait for Kirk to ask questions but said, "He's still asleep, Jim. Probably for several hours yet but he's okay other than that. Just needs some food in him. I've got him in IC, there's less chance of any disturbance." He grinned at his young Captain. "I'll let you know immediately he wakes up."

Kirk smiled for what felt like the first time in weeks. "Thanks, Bones."

It was the evening of the following day before Spock finally woke. Kirk reached Sickbay to find McCoy giving the Vulcan a final checkover. He waited until they were finished and Spock dressed before asking, "May I use your office, Bones?"

"Sure, I've got things to do. Help yourselves."

Kirk indicated McCoy's office to the

Vulcan and Spock preceded him into the room. Facing each other, neither said anything for a moment. Kirk was abrupt as he said, "Spock, I owe you an apology." 'Again' hung unsaid between them.

"You were not to know Commander Mitchell was capable of doing what he did, sir." Spock spoke firmly as if to banish any doubts they both still held.

"No, I know that. I'm apologising for doubting your capabilities and thus precipitating the whole mess." He stood, walked across the room and swung back before continuing, "As you know, I was less than happy at being given a First who also doubled as Science Officer. You had never given me any reason to doubt Nogura's decision but even so I was willing to forget that and charge you with dereliction of duty without a second thought."

Spock stopped him. "Captain, under the circumstances, you had every right to doubt my performance."

Kirk shrugged. "So you say, but I guess that's something I'll need to settle with my conscience. Now, I have a question to ask you." He paused, caught Spock's gaze and held it. "Are you willing to resume your position as First Officer?"

Spock was guarded. "If that is your wish, sir."

"No, that's not what I asked. I need to know what you want to do."

They measured glances for a while. Kirk did not know what Spock was looking for but was strangely relieved when the Vulcan finally said, "Thank you, sir. I would be honoured."

Neither of them had noticed McCoy

come in, and Kirk jumped as the Doctor grunted, "Good, glad you've got that settled. Welcome back, Mr Spock, and I am now going to give you a medical order."

The Vulcan tilted his head slightly in enquiry as he half turned towards McCoy. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr Spock! Go and eat and I'll sign you off in time for your next duty shift, so long as that's tomorrow."

Spock nodded. "Very well. If you will excuse me, gentlemen?"

"Just a moment, Spock."

"Yes, Captain?"

"I want a word with McCoy and then I'll join you, if you don't mind?"

"Of course not, Captain. I shall await you in the mess."

As Spock left, McCoy looked inquiringly at Kirk. "Problem, Jim?"

"No, not really. Just wanted to be sure everything's okay with Spock."

"I told you that earlier. What d'you really want?"

Kirk looked sheepish, "Oh. I'm not sure... Do you think he'll forgive and forget?"

"Forget? With his memory? Don't be ridiculous, Jim. Forgive? Well he said yes, didn't he? I think your biggest problem is that he accepted your strictures without attempting to defend himself. I'm fairly certain he was accepting your view of the whole thing as being the right one." He shrugged, but his face was concerned. "That's what you'll need to work on, Jim. Not worry

about what's in the past and can't be changed."

"How?" Kirk sounded slightly uncertain.

"You'll think of something, I'm sure. You're keeping the man waiting, Captain." McCoy's tone was dismissive.

Kirk twitched an eyebrow and left.

Chapter 5

As they selected their meals Kirk tackled Spock about his lack of defence. "Why didn't you tell me you hadn't made that mistake? After all, you told McCoy."

"You did not ask." Spock looked at the Captain as if trying to gauge his possible reaction. "Doctor McCoy did."

Kirk stared at him. *Could it really be that simple?* he wondered.

"I didn't ask?"

"No."

"And he did?"

"Yes."

"I see." Kirk stopped and thought hard. "Well, it looks as though in future you're going to have to be more forthcoming, and I... well, I'm going to have to watch my phraseology. Don't you agree?"

A lift of Spock's eyebrow was his only answer.

Kirk and Spock ate in slightly wary silence, both of them thankful that the 'difficulty' had been cleared up and both of them looking for the opening that

would set them back on the path that had been so rudely disrupted.

As Kirk laid down his knife and fork Spock looked across the room to the chess corner. Seeing it empty he tentatively suggested a game.

Kirk smiled. "What a good idea, Mr Spock," he said softly.

Kirk stood up, collected Spock's empty dishes and disposed of them along with his own while Spock went to set up the pieces. As he was doing so Spock reflected that although he could remember exactly where they had been in their last game he suspected that the Captain would not want to know.

"I saved our last game, Spock. Shall we finish that one?" Kirk was slightly diffident. He had never been sure why he had saved that game or how long he intended keeping it.

"That would seem the logical thing to do, Captain."

Kirk glanced up at him from the computer where he was calling the game up. The Vulcan continued tranquilly, "There is no need for that, Captain, unless..." he was suddenly unsure "you doubt my memory?"

Kirk shook his head. "No. That is one thing I have never done. For that matter neither did McCoy. It was you who wasn't sure," he said emphatically.

A minute twitch of the head served as an answer as Spock placed the final pieces. "Your move, Captain," he said softly.

McCoy glanced in an hour or so later to find them still immersed in the game. He smiled to himself as he watched them; they were oblivious to

anything but the chess pieces and each other. Scott waved him over and he went to join the slightly rowdy group in the corner.

"A wee dram, McCoy?" the Scot asked.

"I don't mind if I do," McCoy drawled in his best Southern accent. He glanced round the circle. "What's the celebration?" he asked, although he thought he knew.

"Ask a silly question, get a silly answer, Doctor," Kyle exclaimed.

"Aye," Scott agreed, lifting his glass. "To the Command Team," he said quietly.

"The Command Team," the others echoed.

Scott caught a swift glance in their direction from the Vulcan. *Ach*, he thought to himself. *It won't do him any harm to know we appreciate them both.* Standing up, he stretched. "Well I'm away to ma bed."

Murmurs of agreement came from the others and soon the Rec room was empty except for the chess-players.

Spock was not sure whether Kirk had overheard the conversation or not. He himself had been slightly taken aback. Although he had noticed that no-one had deliberately avoided him over the past three point nine weeks he had ascribed it to politeness. What he had just heard meant he must rethink that assumption. It was obvious that the Bridge crew, at least, appreciated both the Captain and himself. Gradually he became aware that Kirk was grinning at him from across the table. Raising a haughty eyebrow Spock moved his piece.

"Damn," Kirk muttered. "You get

me nearly every time."

He laughed as Spock said, "That is manifestly untrue, Captain. I estimate it closer to sixty-six point nine per cent."

The Captain leaned back in his chair idly surveying the board. "I think I'll take a leaf out of Scotty's book, Spock. I'm tired."

"A good idea, Captain." Spock replaced the last of the pieces in their box. "Do you think Doctor McCoy would consider that I had reneged on our 'deal' if I was to visit my office before retiring?"

"That probably depends on what you intend doing once you get there, Mr Spock." There was a smile in Kirk's voice.

Spock did not need to tell him, for the intercom sounded. Kirk groaned and the Vulcan went to answer it.

"Spock here."

"Is the Captain with you, Mr Spock?" It was Lieutenant Palmer.

"He is, Lieutenant. One moment, please." The Vulcan moved away to leave Kirk his privacy but the Captain stopped him with a gesture.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Kirk said more politely than he felt.

"There's a distress call coming in, Captain. It's rather garbled but it seems to be coming from the Dyremin system."

The two men eyed each other. The Dyremin system, two days' travel away, was non-aligned and inhabited by a people who valued their privacy. For them to have put out a sector-wide distress call meant that there was something seriously wrong.

"We're on our way, Lieutenant," Kirk said, flicking off the intercom.

Spock was already halfway to the lift and Kirk had no intention of reminding him of McCoy's instructions. Hopefully the Doctor would never find out.

Palmer was right; the message was unclear and even Spock could make little immediate sense of it. However, Kirk wasted no time in instructing the Helmsman to alter course for Dyremin, and then Palmer to relay the call to Starfleet and inform them of their new destination.

Leaning back in his seat, he swung round to the science station.

"Any ideas, Mr Spock?"

"Ideas, Captain?" The Vulcan shook his head. "I need information, not ideas. Long range scan initiated, sir."

"Very well, Mr Spock." Kirk hauled himself out of his chair and handed the con back to Lieutenant Mahler before heading for the lift. There really was nothing he could do for the moment; he was tired and he knew Spock would let him know immediately there was any information of value.

Spock joined him as the lift doors opened. Kirk looked his question and as they entered the lift Spock said, "I have tied the library computer into my personal terminal. That way I am assured of receiving any information as soon as it is available." Kirk grinned as the Vulcan glanced sideways at him and continued, "After all, what the good Doctor does not know cannot harm him."

The Captain laughed outright. "I won't tell him if you don't!" To his relief Spock did not pretend to misunderstand

but dipped his head in acknowledgement. They travelled the rest of the way in comfortable silence and parted outside Spock's door.

Spock let the door slide closed behind him before he made an attempt to relax. He shivered slightly, looked rather regretfully at the bed and headed for his desk. He shivered again and detoured to look at the temperature gauge; frowning slightly he adjusted it.

The long-range data was already coming in and it was some hours later that he surfaced to find his room still uncomfortably cool. After he had looked at the thermostat again, he thought for a moment then checked the programming. It was only the work of a moment for him to correct the fault. Pursing his lips he filed the anomaly away for future perusal; now was not the time. He had to see McCoy in three point four-five hours and rest was essential if McCoy was to agree to his return to duty.

Kirk had gone straight to bed for he was extremely tired. He had not been sleeping well for the past few days but the last thing he wanted was to let McCoy know. He fell asleep quickly then woke, just as abruptly, much later and lay there trying to capture his lost dreams. Eventually he gave up and got up for a drink of water. Knowing he would not sleep again he went to sit at his desk and stared into space as his thoughts raced around each other.

How can I believe that Gary would not only betray me but the ship as well? He could still hear himself crying 'No' at the thought. Or for that matter how can I believe that a Vulcan would deliberately lie to me?

Determinedly he reviewed the facts as he knew them, hoping he could find a flaw in his admittedly illogical reasoning.

Why, for instance, did that supposedly logical Vulcan not challenge my hunch about Gary? In fact Spock had not even seemed to think about it before he made his own suggestion about the computers. Does that mean he had already considered Mitchell as the culprit but had no means of proving it, and probably thought that I wouldn't entertain the suggestion anyway? Especially as it would be coming from him? He sighed dispiritedly. And does it really matter anyway? It's all over and done with, thank heavens. All that was left to do was for Kirk to come to terms with the bitter dregs of a long-standing friendship that had not been able to live up to its promise.

He got up, flung his cup into the waste disposal and went to shower. Spock had obviously already been in as the floor was still slightly wet.

Kirk paused. *Wet? That's unusual for Spock, he normally uses sonics.* He shrugged. *So what? He's entitled to do what he likes, I suppose. I wonder what he's found out about Dyremin? God, I hope it's something we're equipped to handle.*

The intercom sounded loudly in the quiet cabin; Kirk hurried through from the bathroom to answer it.

"Spock here, Captain. I have the information you requested."

"Good. Bring it down here, will you."

"Yes, sir. Spock out."

Kirk just had time to dress before the door chimed. Calling to the Vulcan to come in, Kirk waved him to a seat just as the intercom sounded again. Grimacing in Spock's direction he answered it.

"Kirk here."

"Palmer, sir. Incoming message

from Starfleet."

"Pipe it down, Lieutenant." He threw a puzzled glance in Spock's direction. There just had not been sufficient time for Starfleet to answer their own message.

"Aye aye, sir."

The screen cleared to show the craggy features of Admiral Henderson. Kirk concealed his surprise; he certainly had not expected a personal call.

"Good morning, sir," he said with another glance at Spock. A raised eyebrow was the only reaction as in his turn the Vulcan acknowledged the Admiral.

"Jim, Spock," Admiral Henderson replied briskly. "Sorry to bother you this early but this is the only suitable window for some time."

Kirk's eyes slid to his desk chronometer. "It's no problem, sir. We were just about to discuss Dyremin."

"Precisely the reason for this call, Captain. Your message was intercepted. We... er... have several ships on stand-by but it will be some time before they reach Dyremin. Meanwhile you are authorised to go in and assess the situation and do what you can until help reaches you." The older man rubbed his chin and then said quietly, "The Council would very much like to welcome the Dyremin system into the Federation." He paused, laughed slightly, then continued, "But you already know that, don't you? I'll not keep you. You've got a lot of work to do. Good luck, gentlemen."

The screen blanked before either of them could say anything. Kirk remained staring at the screen while he queried softly, "Now what does he know that we

don't?"

"Not necessarily anything, sir. However, I do think he was telling us that failure is not an acceptable alternative."

Kirk scowled. "Unfortunately, I think you're right, Mr Spock. So I guess we'd better make sure we don't."

"I agree, Captain. May I?" Spock indicated the terminal.

"Be my guest," Kirk swivelled the screen to allow the Vulcan easy access.

Half an hour later he stared at evidence and said slowly, "I hate to question your findings, but are you sure?"

"I see no reason to suspect the data, Captain. It is however possible that my interpretation may not be entirely correct."

"I don't see how," Kirk replied despondently. "I can see no flaws even though I'd very much like to."

"With all due respect, sir." Spock stopped suddenly. Kirk looked across at him and waited patiently for the Vulcan to continue. "You are not a scientist," Spock concluded softly.

"No! But you are," Kirk snapped. "If you tell me something I expect you to be sure..." He trailed off. "I'm sorry, Spock, but you must realise that I do trust your insight and your capabilities." He studied the opposite bulkhead for a moment then said determinedly, "Let's take your interpretation as the worst possible scenario and run it from there. We'll need those other ships here as soon as possible." He stood up, stretched. "Can I get you a drink? I need something, I haven't eaten yet."

stopped and turned back. "Henderson has to be with those ships. Just how did they know about the distress call? We must be much closer than anyone else."

"I assume they must have observers within the system."

Kirk nodded in agreement. "Which of course they can't admit to." He half-laughed. "Especially with Dyremin's well-known aversion to outside contact. Rather smacks of spying, doesn't it?"

Spock did not reply, just accepted the steaming cup of tea that Kirk was offering him. The Captain continued talking as he settled back down. "That rather implies that the Dyremins are Earth-type humanoids. Are they?"

"My information would lead me to expect a vulcanoid people, Captain." Spock looked uncomfortable.

Kirk nearly dropped his coffee. Recovering his aplomb he said, "Well, let's worry about that later. First of all we need to assess exactly what help they're going to need."

"It would be logical to include Mr Scott, Doctor McCoy and Commander Giotto, at least, in any such discussion, Captain."

"Yes, of course. How long before we reach the edge of the system?"

"Sixteen point fifty-six hours at our present speed, sir."

"And if we increase our speed to warp four?"

"Then we will not have sufficient time to organise a feasible rescue service, Captain."

Halfway across the room he

"Hmm.... Right, flag that

information for Section Heads only and we'll meet at 11.00 hours. That should give everyone time to read it and have their ideas ready."

Spock worked as Kirk spoke then stood up. The Captain walked to the door with him. "You seen McCoy yet? Have you had breakfast?"

"Not as yet."

"Right, see McCoy and I'll meet you in the mess in thirty minutes. That'll give me time to check in with the Bridge."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk stood and watched as Spock walked away. Gnawing at his bottom lip, he turned away and headed for the Bridge. It was obvious to him that he and Spock still had a long way to go before they retrieved the rapport that they had once had. He shrugged the problem away; it would wait. Dyremin could not.

Chapter 6

The atmosphere in the briefing room was subdued when Kirk arrived for the meeting. He was closely followed by Doctor McCoy, whose thundercloud of a face alerted the others to his state of mind. Deliberately ignoring him, Kirk glanced round, noted the one still missing and greeted the others briskly.

"Good morning, everyone. Shall we get started? We have a lot to arrange."

McCoy was the first to jump in. "You know that there's damn all we can do, Jim. We're only one starship after all."

"So we do the best we can, Bones." Kirk's expression defied the Doctor to continue. McCoy opened his mouth

anyway and was smoothly interrupted by a deep voice from the doorway.

"Obviously we will be performing a holding operation until such time as more help arrives, Doctor. However by then we will be in a position to inform the rescue operation of exactly what the people of Dyremin need. Our task, although onerous in itself, may be somewhat ameliorated if we expend our energy on organising our response to this distress call." Spock walked across the room and spoke directly to Kirk. "I apologise for my late arrival, Captain."

"It's okay, Spock. We hadn't really started. Have you got anything new?"

The Vulcan's gaze skimmed round the room before he said quietly, "The position does not appear to have deteriorated further in that there has been no further volcanic or earthquake activity. Unfortunately that state of affairs does not extend to the civil confusion. There appears to be little in the way of state aid for those rendered homeless and even less in the form of universal medical services." He sat down, steepled his hands and said, "I have taken the liberty of forwarding my findings to Starfleet."

Kirk's response was interrupted by McCoy. "Hell of a lot of good that'll do, Spock. These people will all be dead before any help gets through."

Spock reply was icy. "And the longer we spend squabbling about how little we can do then the more people will die, Doctor."

"That's enough, both of you!" Kirk snapped at them. He glared McCoy's attempted riposte down before continuing briskly, "I know you will all have read Mr Spock's findings, but please bear with me while he goes over it once

more."

Spock shifted slightly in his seat and began to speak. "As you will all be aware the Dyremin system is non-aligned with the Federation and is also extremely protective of its sovereignty. Officially, therefore, little is known of either the inhabitants or the planets composing the system. When we first received the distress call we initiated long-range scans of the system and you have received my interpretation of that information. To summarise, it would appear that as they exhausted much of their mineral wealth the people of Dyremin have come to rely exclusively on the ore we know as Tolymanite. Recently they have been looking for new sources of this mineral, and seemingly discovered a possible substitute. Unfortunately this particular mineral is only available, in any quantity, at great depths in the planetary body. More recent data indicates that in fact it is located only within the mantle."

He paused for a moment as a sigh ran round the table. "Mining was begun on an uninhabited planet within the system. Although successful it was prohibitively expensive and increasing urban unrest persuaded the planet's rulers into trying similar operations on the home planet. In a further attempt to keep costs down mining was begun near several of the large centres of population. As some of these centres were sited near active plate margins the results have been catastrophic. Earthquakes have been accompanied by volcanic activity, tsunamis, fires and floods. There has been large-scale damage to property and the resultant number of casualties is extremely high. The distress call we intercepted seems to have been the last action of the previous planetary governors before they fled." He stopped talking.

Kirk's voice fell into the silence.

"We have our work cut out for us, I believe. Are there any questions?"

"Who's in charge at the moment?" Giotto asked.

"Spock?" Kirk queried.

"There seem to be attempts being made by various charitable organisations to co-ordinate rescue operations. As to a government..." He shook his head slightly. "Unless Lieutenant Uhura can tell me otherwise I have seen no indication that any such exists."

"Planetary communications are in total chaos," Uhura told him. "My department is having trouble sorting the various components into any order but I am fairly sure there is no elected government."

"It is extremely unlikely that there ever was an elected government, Lieutenant."

"Dictatorship?" McCoy jumped in.

"No. All the available information points to a plutocratic society, Doctor."

"Same difference," McCoy muttered savagely.

"And this is a system that the Federation wants." Kirk shook his head unbelievably.

"I would suggest that the Council is more concerned with security in this sector than with how Dyremin used to be run. Now we have been invited in I expect that advisors will be readily available." Spock's voice was dry as he ignored McCoy and spoke directly to the Captain.

"Yes... well, luckily that isn't our problem," Kirk said ironically. He

allowed the subdued mutterings to settle before he asked, "Have you managed to contact anyone at all, Lieutenant?"

"A couple of the organisations that Mr Spock mentioned. But that's all so far, sir."

"Very well. Keep trying, Uhura." He turned to Spock and asked, "How long will it be before we get any back-up?"

"I am unsure as yet, Captain."

Kirk looked at him in surprise. "I see," he murmured.

"Well that's more than I do, Captain," McCoy snapped. "Just what are we supposed to do here? Sit in orbit and watch people die?"

"Once Uhura has made contact with a few more of the rescue services your department will help organise medical services. I presume that even if they don't have a state system the services that are available will be top of the range, so to speak. Until then I suggest you offer your organisational abilities to anyone who has need of them." Kirk continued without allowing McCoy a chance to answer. "Giotto, I think we'll need your men to guard any supplies that we beam down. We must however avoid any interference in local outbreaks of violence." He paused again as another thought struck him. "Mr Spock, has there been much fighting?"

"Given the circumstances, no, there has not. In general the people would appear to be more concerned with helping one another. The major problems are logistical - some areas have the resources to offer but there is no-one to organise the rescue attempts. It will be necessary to attempt to provide a planet-wide communications network."

"Your job I think, Uhura," Kirk said.

"Aye, sir," she replied a little faintly. "We'll do our best."

"I am sure that will be more than sufficient, Lieutenant," Spock said.

Kirk pushed on. "These earthquakes and things. Is there any way of stopping them?"

"We may be able to bleed the fault-lines. It will not be possible to tell until we attain orbit."

"But it can be done?" Kirk persisted.

"Aye, under most circumstances," Scott interjected, "but Mr Spock's right, we won't know until we're in orbit."

"You can set up possible scenarios though, can't you?"

"Aye. We're already working on that, sir."

"So, we are as ready as we're ever likely to be. Okay, then that's all for now. Thank you." Kirk watched them file slowly out. McCoy turned at the door, started to say something, shook his head and walked out. Spock, who had stopped in his turn, looked back at Kirk, his head cocked in question.

"You know Bones. He hates the thought of people dying and not being able to help them all." Kirk sounded depressed. "Oh, while I remember. Why did you say you didn't know when those ships would get here?"

"I am not able to give you an exact time of arrival, Captain," Spock answered. "Also your Heads of Department are intelligent enough to make the same deductions as we did. I thought that Doctor McCoy, at least,

already had sufficient ammunition."

"I suppose you're right and it might be for the best if nobody is in the position to let the Dyremins know we've infiltrated their society." Kirk frowned.

"Under the circumstances that information might lead, at best, to accusations of neglect and callousness, or at worst, to allegations of intentional disruption."

"Damn!" Kirk snapped. He looked up at the Vulcan. "It's just that I don't like keeping information from the crew," he said by way of explanation.

Spock seemed to shrug. "As to that, Captain, our knowledge is only conjecture. We have not been informed that there are observers present. Nor do I expect that they will make themselves known to us."

"Right. So in your considered opinion, Mr Spock, how far away are those ships?"

"I would expect them to be in long-range sensor scan within thirty-four hours, Captain."

"That close? How do we explain that?" Kirk asked.

"I do not suppose the Dyremin people will ask for explanations. By the time any of them notices we will no longer be the ones who need to think of the answers. And you have no need to explain anything to the crew."

"How cynical, Mr Spock!"

"I prefer to think of it as being pragmatic, sir," Spock said stiffly. "Now, if you will excuse me I have several items that should be occupying my attention."

"Of course. Keep me informed, will you." Kirk sat on by himself. As always he found this the hardest part of any operation and wished that there was something he could do. He had given the orders and all he could do now was wait for his crew to put them into practice. Still, he consoled himself, there would be plenty to keep him occupied in a very short time.

Chapter 7

Kirk was to remind himself of that last wish frequently over the next few days as he and his crew struggled with what seemed like overwhelming odds. The conditions on Dyremin were as bad as Spock had informed them and the overall co-ordination of the rescue work was an immense task. Secretly Kirk was thankful that Spock had volunteered for that job. He, meanwhile, had his hands full trying to find someone willing to take on the responsibility for the everyday tasks of running a organisation. For, as Spock had suggested, the cartel that had formerly run the planet's affairs had vanished without trace and had left an enormous void behind them. It was only too obvious to Kirk that most of those willing to help had, through no fault of their own, neither the necessary understanding nor the essential qualifications.

Eventually, as they received official news of the approach of the rescue fleet, Kirk took matters into his own hands. He called a meeting of the heads of the rescue organisations and the few officials who had not vanished and co-opted them to form a provisional government. At the same time he persuaded them to proclaim their intentions to provide a democratic constitution and to seize funds from the companies that had caused the disaster in order to pay for the enormous amount of

reclamation work that would need doing.

During one of the new Council's seemingly interminable meetings he noticed Spock standing at the back of the room. Knowing that the Dyremins did not really need him he made his way towards his First Officer. It was the first time he had seen Spock standing still for days.

"I hope I look better than you do, Mr Spock," he greeted the Vulcan cheerfully.

Spock spared him a quick glance. "The USS Hood has just entered the system, Captain. She is accompanied by two hospital ships and various rescue vessels."

"Great. When will they enter geostationary orbit?" He could see that Spock's attention was fixed on one of the officials but needed this information first.

"Within the next five point six hours, Captain." The Vulcan turned his gaze onto his superior officer. "I presume that you are not aware that your interim government contains at least one of the 'observers'?"

"Hell. Spock, we don't even 'know' there are any, so how can I possibly be aware of that?" Kirk snapped. That had been a difficulty that he had hoped to avoid. "How do you know, anyway? Does he have 'Vulcan' written all over him?"

"I recognise her, sir. We spent time at the Academy together." Spock's reply was stiff.

Kirk sighed. "Sorry. Has she recognised you?"

"Affirmative."

"So what do we do now?"

"I suggest that you give them the information I have just given you. I am sure that will distract them all." Spock turned on his heel.

"Spock." Kirk's command stopped the Vulcan in his tracks. "I'll certainly do as you suggest but there are a few things I want to ask you first."

As the other man reluctantly turned back, the harsh light caught his features. Kirk looked at him narrowly, wondering what had caused his First Officer's uncharacteristic reaction.

"Sir?" The Vulcan came to attention.

"Right... Those ships you mentioned - is that all that's coming?"

"No. There are twelve transport ships some twenty-three hours behind. I understand they are bringing supplies including temporary shelters."

"Good. How about the fault lines?"

"Mr Scott commenced bleeding the fault line above the city of Kalis at 0700 hours. If all goes to schedule he should be able to declare it safe at 1100 hours tomorrow morning. That will still leave several minor faults to be dealt with. There have been some reports of tremors within the last twelve hours but as far as we can tell there should be no further danger of a major quake for several years. It is not possible for us to give an exact timescale as yet, but it will be possible to install detection equipment at all important sites before then."

Kirk nodded. "Fine. And the rescue work?"

"All is going as planned. Doctor McCoy reports that the last of the

severely injured that it is possible to move have been evacuated to hospitals outside of the affected areas. Temporary housing for most of the homeless has been erected. Mr Sulu has reservations about the capability of some of the structures to withstand extreme weather conditions, so the equipment on the transport ships will be welcome. The major problems are still the provision of food and clean water. As yet there have been only a few minor outbreaks of disease in the camps but a major epidemic may only be a question of time." He looked away through the unglazed window. "The crucial period will be when these weather conditions break, and it is unlikely that Doctor McCoy's teams can cope with a full-scale epidemic. The hospital ships will not arrive too soon."

Kirk followed his glance. He knew that they had been extremely lucky in that the weather had stayed dry and warm. Although he knew it was not really feasible he suggested, "How about evacuating the refugees?"

"Captain." The Vulcan's voice was drier than usual. Kirk got the distinct impression that Spock was closer to losing his non-existent temper than he had ever seen him. "These people are not yet refugees; they may have lost everything they owned and many of them have also lost their families, but they will not be willing to lose their homeland. They have no idea of when if ever they would be allowed to return." His slightly contemptuous gaze swept the group behind Kirk. "They have not yet learned that they are able to make decisions for themselves."

"I never thought of Vulcans as slavers, Spock." Kirk tried to lighten the atmosphere slightly and failed.

"Although I agree that the physiology is similar, these people are

not Vulcan, sir. Also, as you must know, Vulcan has parts of its past that it does not view with approbation; somewhat similar to your own planet, I imagine." Spock was icy.

Kirk's lips tightened but he refused to rise to the bait, asking simply, "Anything else I should know?"

"Captain Radcliffe presents Admiral Henderson's compliments and a request for your presence on the Hood for a briefing as soon as they assume orbit."

"Just me?" Kirk was slightly surprised. He knew Henderson's regard for Spock's capabilities and also knew that the Admiral would always make sure that credit went where credit was due.

"That was the message I received, sir." Spock was looking over his shoulder. Kirk turned as another voice interrupted them.

"Captain, your officer has taken up a lot of your valuable time. Have you news for us?" The statuesque woman had obviously been sent over by the council who were all waiting expectantly.

"Yes. We have good news, Lady Nila," Kirk said. "Commander Spock has a message from the USS Hood. They will assume orbit in a few hours time."

"That's excellent news, Captain. You will need to help us prepare a proper message of greeting." She took his arm, her gaze sliding over the Vulcan, dismissing him as unimportant.

Kirk bridled at the insult to his First Officer but, catching the warning shake of Spock's head, he just stood his ground and asked clearly, "When did you last sleep, Spock, and don't give me that 'Vulcans can do without' routine?"

Spock dipped his head in acknowledgement. "It is however true, sir."

"Sure." Kirk laughed. "Inform Admiral Henderson that I'll be at his briefing, will you? And I'll need you there if you can find the time."

"Yes, sir."

This time it was the Captain who turned away first. Spock stood and watched Kirk walk back to the excited group and he took the time to study the council members. He bit his lip thoughtfully, for he knew that the woman's attitude to him was similar to that held by her peers to those they considered beneath them. Unfortunately for Dyremim, that seemed to encompass some eighty percent of the planet's inhabitants, as the major part of the crew of the Enterprise had already discovered.

Except for brief visits to some of the major disaster areas when they had first arrived Kirk had spent all his time closeted with those few of the ruling class who could be persuaded to think about the planet's future. Therefore, Spock knew, the Captain had not been given the chance to observe the attitude of even the most dedicated of the rescue workers towards those they were attempting to help. The Vulcan thought ironically that the Federation diplomats might find themselves facing one of their most difficult undertakings to date, and found himself relieved that the task would not fall to the Enterprise. He put the thought away in order to concentrate on his own task and quickly made his way out of the room.

Chapter 8

It took Kirk some fast talking to

persuade the Council that they could manage without him for a while, but he did get to the Admiral's briefing on time. Truth to tell he was pleased that it was Henderson who was heading this mission. At least the old man had some idea of what it was like out here; more so than some others he could think of. He was also only too pleased to be handing this particular hot potato on to someone else. However, he was puzzled by the omission of his senior officers, especially Spock, from this briefing. He had thought about it on and off over the past few hours and still could not fathom the reasoning; after all, as he himself well knew, Henderson had a very high opinion of the Vulcan's capabilities.

Admiral Henderson and Captain Radcliffe were waiting for him when he beamed up to the Hood. Henderson greeted him cordially, introduced him to Jeffrey Radcliffe and then motioned for the other Captain to lead the way.

As they walked to the briefing room, Henderson spoke quietly to Kirk.

"Congratulations on the job so far, Jim. From what we have been able to see you have done remarkably well considering your limited facilities and the short time you've been here." He paused slightly, then said, "I'd like to take this opportunity to say how saddened I was by the loss of Commander Mitchell and Lieutenant Kelso. Good men, both of them."

Kirk nodded. "I agree," he said tightly, and changed the subject immediately. "The congratulations are due to Spock, Admiral. He's the one doing all the organising; I've had my hands and ears full trying to talk sense into some of the council members, and that's definitely one job I'll be very glad to see the back of."

As they entered the briefing room he caught Radcliffe's disdainful look and filed it for future reference before returning his full attention to what the Admiral was saying.

"...surprised that Commander Spock isn't with you. I suppose he's still too busy?"

"Sure, he's busy, but he's not here because he wasn't asked. I've just been talking to him so I have some idea of the true state of things, but you really would be far better talking directly to him." Kirk was too surprised to be tactful.

Henderson turned back from the table where he was filling a beaker. "What do you mean, he wasn't asked? My message designated you, Spock and anyone else you thought necessary."

"Not as I understood it, Admiral." Kirk was too tired to be conciliatory.

The Admiral handed him the beaker and gestured him to a seat before turning to Radcliffe. "Get your duty Communications Officer to get hold of Commander Spock, will you, Jeffrey. I want him here stat." Turning back to Kirk he continued, "All due respect, Captain, but I need to hear exactly what still needs to be done from the one directly involved."

"I agree completely, sir." Suddenly Kirk was much more cheerful.

Captain Radcliffe crossed the room to join them, saying, "Commander Spock is on his way. I can't understand how he managed to misunderstand that message. It was perfectly clear to me but then I suppose that's a Vulcan for you."

Kirk's temper flared. "I'm not Vulcan, Radcliffe, and I interpreted the message I saw in exactly the same way as

both my Exec and my Communications Officer did."

"Then your Communication Officer must have made an mistake, Kirk."

"That will be enough." Henderson's cold voice recalled both junior officers to the present. "This is no time for petty squabbles. Captain Radcliffe, have you arranged for this meeting to be accessible for all Section Heads in this fleet.?"

"Yes, sir." Radcliffe subsided and they waited in silence for the Vulcan's arrival. Just as Henderson was about to request another call the door opened and Spock strode in.

"Admiral, Captains." He acknowledged the three men politely but it was obvious that he considered the meeting an intrusion that he could well do without as he continued brusquely, "I can spare you thirty minutes, gentlemen."

"Good to see you, Spock." Henderson greeted the Vulcan cordially. "I don't want to keep you any longer than absolutely necessary so have a seat and tell me what's going on. I know that you've been co-ordinating the rescue and rehabilitation work while Jim has been concentrating on the council. Obviously I will want a full report on all that later, but what I want now is your assessment of the people of this planet."

Kirk blinked and glanced over at Spock who was, to his Captain's mind, looking very uncomfortable. The sneer had returned to Radcliffe's face as he waited for the Vulcan's reply.

Ten minutes later the sneer had deepened as they listened to the quietly-spoken Science Officer's exposition on the character and capabilities of the two groups composing the population of the planet below them.

Henderson heard Spock out then, with a lack of expression that would have done any Vulcan proud, he asked, "Comments, gentlemen?"

Seizing his chance, Radcliffe jumped in. "Surely," he said so condescendingly that Kirk opened his mouth to interrupt but catching Henderson's eye let the other Captain have his head, "Surely," Radcliffe repeated, "such an experienced officer as Commander Spock is reputed to be should be able to understand that people can act very oddly under stress."

"I have had ample opportunity during my time in Starfleet to apprise myself of that phenomenon, Captain Radcliffe," Spock answered smoothly, "and that is precisely my point. The enormous gap between the rulers and their workers is not a behavioural pattern induced by stress. There is ample evidence to show that this is the 'natural' way of life, and to judge by the conditions in areas not unduly affected by the disaster it is a way of life that would not have existed for much longer."

"Hmm.... unfortunate," Henderson mused. "This will make our task that much harder, but then," he said more cheerfully, "that is what we pay our advisors for, after all." He nodded in Spock's direction. "Thank you, Commander. I won't keep you any longer."

As Spock stood up to leave Radcliffe burst out, "Admiral, you can't be going to take Commander Spock's views at face value?"

"Please explain why I shouldn't, Captain?" Henderson again waved Kirk to silence.

"I... I only meant that we should have more proof," Radcliffe said sullenly.

"I am glad that was all you meant, Jeffrey." To Kirk's hidden amusement the use of his given name did not seem to comfort the other man.

"There is one aspect of this affair that is not entirely clear to me, Admiral," Spock said into the silence that followed, then before Henderson could say anything he continued, "and that is why you asked me that particular question. Surely there are others better equipped to answer?"

Kirk shot his First Officer a swift warning look as Henderson fastened his wintry grey glare on the innocent-looking Vulcan. It was a full minute before the Admiral answered the enquiry.

"One of these days you may find your mind too sharp for your own good, Commander." The voice was gruff but not angry and Kirk breathed a sigh of relief as Spock nodded in acknowledgement and made his way to the door. His relief was short-lived however as Henderson turned the searchlight on him instead.

"You've been fairly quiet so far, Jim. What do you think of Spock's assessment?"

"As I already indicated I've not had much chance to get into the field except right at the start, but I think any assessment that Spock makes should be given full consideration." He paused as he thought back to that morning. "Actually, I think that earlier today I might just have witnessed exactly what Spock was getting at. It was only petty, but if it was an example of how these people consider one another then it would explain a lot of the problems I've had."

"Go on, Captain." Henderson was implacable.

Two hours later a wrung-out James T Kirk emerged from the briefing room. Henderson had wanted a more-or-less blow by blow account of his time on Dyremin. Much to Kirk's surprise Captain Radcliffe had contributed some sensible ideas to the discussion, and Kirk had reluctantly revised his opinion of the man.

Still, I wonder why he was so hostile to Spock? I guess maybe he just doesn't like Vulcans. He shrugged the thoughts away; he had to be back down on Dyremin within half-an-hour to introduce Admiral Henderson to the Council. He increased his speed at the remembrance. He needed to go back to the Enterprise first, for this called for his dress uniform. He groaned mentally. *In this heat? I'll melt!*

It was early morning before Spock returned to the Enterprise. He and Scott, along with the Science Officer and Chief Engineer from the Hood, had spent most of the previous afternoon and night attempting to discover why the bleeding of the Marna fault above the city of Kalis had been unsuccessful, and then devising a new method to circumvent the problem. He now had some three hours before they instituted the new programme, and he intended to spend that time in meditation.

It was the first time he had spent on board the Enterprise since they had entered orbit round Dyremin, but somehow he was not surprised to find his cabin door locked against him, and that when he finally gained entry that the room was bitterly cold. Forcing himself not to shiver he showered quickly, dressed and made his way to one of the small rooms adjacent to the Observation Deck. As he did so he made a mental note to discuss the problem with the Chief Engineer as soon as they left Dyremin. Until then, as he could not

allow these malfunctions to adversely affect his work, he would continue to spend as much time as possible planetside.

It took the Enterprise crew twenty-four hours to hand over to the Hood and the ships accompanying her. Henderson allowed them another twenty-four hours to relax as best they could before handing their Captain his new orders. Much to that individual's credit he kept his temper admirably. Without comment he handed the flimsy to Spock for him to read.

"I have a possible itinerary that you might wish to peruse, sir," was the Vulcan's only comment.

Kirk glared in his direction. "How did you know...?"

The Vulcan called up a schematic before answering the Terran. "I did not know. I surmised that the Admiral would want us away from Dyremin so that the other crews would not feel unduly criticised and so that our people would begin to forget the devastation they have witnessed. Furthermore, I assumed that he would not send us any distance away for the immediate future. So, as a mineral survey of the nearby systems is necessary to provide for Dyremin's immediate energy needs, I took the liberty of devising the schedule now in front of you." He stood up. "If you will excuse me, Captain, I have a final meeting with Captain Radcliffe and Commander Matusi."

"Sure. Go ahead. I'll take a look at this meantime," Kirk said somewhat absently. "Oh, Spock?" The Vulcan turned back. "No further problems with Radcliffe?" Internally the Captain was smiling; he had watched Radcliffe's initial disdain for the Enterprise's First Officer turn to admiration overnight.

Spock tilted his head to one side as he debated how to answer then, tongue firmly in cheek, he said, "No, sir. Captain Radcliffe seems to have accepted my refusal of a change of ship at this moment in time." He watched as the handsome face in front of him went slack with surprise and left before Kirk could think of anything to say.

"Damn, smartass Vulcan," Kirk muttered to the closed door; he had not known about Radcliffe trying to poach his senior officer. "Try that again, Jeffrey, my friend, and you'll have me to reckon with." Suddenly he snorted with laughter. "Just listen to yourself, Kirk. Six weeks ago, you'd have welcomed that offer with open arms." Shaking his head he looked carefully at the schematic in front of him. After a lengthy perusal he stretched, rubbed the back of his neck and called the Bridge.

"Mr Farrell, I'm routing a schematic to you. Please plot a course that allows us the best use of Mr Spock's expertise. I'm going to get something to eat. Is Doctor McCoy on board?"

"Schematic received, sir; and no, Doctor McCoy is down at the main hospital complex in Kari."

"Okay, thanks. Kirk out."

Closing the contact he debated going to look for McCoy but hunger stopped him and he headed for the ship's mess. It was so quiet that at first he thought he was going to be by himself, so he was surprised when he entered the room to find it was nearly full. Selecting his meal he invited himself to a table containing Uhura, Sulu and two or three others.

Half an hour later he recognised that this was probably another reason why they had been given a milk-run; he

had never seen his crew so depressed. As he pushed his dishes into the recycler he determined to talk to McCoy and to try and think of something to distract the crew from the mess on Dyremmin.

They left orbit on schedule and just as they were about to warp out of the system Uhura said, "Admiral Henderson for you, Captain."

"On screen, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered.

McCoy stopped at the turbo-lift and Spock turned round from his instruments. Sulu glanced in Farrell's direction and for a moment the whole Bridge crew seemed to be holding their breath.

"Sorry to interrupt your departure, Jim, but I thought you might like to hear a piece of news I've just received," Henderson said cheerfully.

"No problem, sir." Kirk said. He felt the ripple of relaxation run round the Bridge.

Henderson also noticed the crew settle back more comfortably and mentally congratulated himself on getting the Enterprise away from Dyremmin while still letting them do something worthwhile for the planet's inhabitants. It was going to be a while before this crew recovered its usual insouciance.

"You know, although you might not agree with me at the moment you probably had the easiest job." He watched the wave of indignation eddy round the Bridge; the only one appearing to be unaffected was Spock, but maybe the news he was about to impart might just jolt that equanimity. "Anyway, the Federation Advisor is on his way and as I asked for the best I got it. The team is headed by Sarek of Vulcan, and if anyone can secure an agreement based on your

solid foundations, Jim, it will be him."

"I've heard of him, of course. Who hasn't? I've never met him, though." Kirk recognised that Henderson was not really focussed on him but he could not turn round to see who he was watching.

"Great man with an exceptional brain, but I guess that runs in the family. Wouldn't you agree, Spock?"

"That is not a subject I have ever concerned myself with, Admiral." Kirk allowed himself to swing round to see his First Officer's eyebrows fully raised as he replied to the Admiral.

"Hmm.." McCoy, who had not turned, thought Henderson looked vaguely disappointed as he continued, "Well, you'd best be on your way. Keep me informed and congratulations to you all once again. You've made our task very much easier."

As the screen blanked McCoy grumbled, "Then I wouldn't have wanted to deal with it if we hadn't been there first."

"Sour grapes, Bones?" Kirk laughed. "Come on, it must be lunchtime. How about you, Spock?"

"Thank you, but I have a few items that I must check before I eat, Captain."

The Captain swallowed his disappointment and said equably, "Some other time then?"

"As you wish, Captain."

McCoy rolled his eyes as he followed Kirk into the lift. "Will he ever loosen up, Jim?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Bones," Kirk shrugged.

Commander Scott joined them for lunch and Kirk was quick to notice that the atmosphere in the mess was decidedly lighter than it had been a couple of days ago. When he said as much to McCoy, the Doctor looked around before replying.

"I'm not really surprised, you know, Jim. Most of them have probably had their first good night's rest for days, and putting that blasted planet behind them can do nothing but good." He stood up and collected his dishes, "Well, this old country doctor is gonna have to go and get on with the crew physicals; I'm weeks behind as it is."

Scott laughed. "I guess it must be something like painting the Forth Bridge, eh, Leonard?" He looked from one confused face to the other and said disgustedly, "Ach, never mind. It was only a wee joke and no' worth explaining."

McCoy grunted in reply and left. After a moment Scott realised that Kirk was still waiting for an explanation. He groaned slightly and said, "It's just some old saying based on the fact that once they finished painting the bridge it was time to go back and start again."

"Oh." Kirk was blank-faced.

Scott looked at him indignantly. "I told you it wasnae worth explaining," he said mournfully before he saw the twinkle in Kirk's eyes. "Ach, Cap'n," he laughed, "you had me going for a minute there."

Their joint laughter raised a few eyebrows but the rest of the room found themselves joining in even without knowing why, and a very satisfied Kirk left shortly afterwards.

Chapter 9

Various time-consuming reports stopped Kirk from seeing his senior officers in anything but a professional capacity for the next couple of days but eventually he caught up with McCoy and joined him for lunch.

"Been busy, Bones?" Kirk's tone was casual.

"Hmmm... just the usual stuff. Nothing out of the ordinary." McCoy ate steadily for a few minutes, watched enviously by Kirk. Nothing more was said until, plate cleared, McCoy put his knife and fork down and sighed, "I needed that!"

Kirk grumbled, "You and Spock both; you never put weight on. All I need to do is look at a piece of cake."

Kirk's look of envy was enough to make McCoy laugh. "Luckily, I'm blessed with a very inefficient metabolism. Whereas yours is just the opposite." The Doctor aimed a playful slap in the direction of Kirk's stomach before continuing, "Spock, now... well, he just doesn't eat. Not so you'd notice anyway."

Kirk, alerted by something in McCoy's voice, stopped laughing. "Problems?" he asked.

McCoy shrugged. "How would I know? I never see him. Not that I'm hankerin' after his company, you understand," he added hastily.

Kirk nodded. "I know exactly what you mean. But you're right. He hasn't been very visible since we left Dyremin, has he? Not that I blame him," he added thoughtfully, "not after the way I treated him; but I had thought we'd worked that through."

"We, Jim... we! Nobody, but nobody, stood up for him," McCoy was quick to point out.

"That's not exactly true, Bones. Everyone except me was reluctant to believe it. I just charged in... I was so sure I was right." It was McCoy's turn to come to full alertness. Kirk's tone was despondent.

"It was ages ago, Jim. You're not still worryin' about it, surely?"

"Worrying's not the right word. I can't forget about it and somehow I just have a niggling feeling that we're not out of the woods yet." He warded off McCoy's question with a gesture. "Don't ask me how, or what. I've absolutely no idea! And Spock's avoiding me like the plague, so I guess he's feeling much the same. You know, unless we have to talk to each other, we don't." He paused for a few moments. "Odd isn't it? Six months ago I'd have been pleased that I didn't have to make an effort to deal with him. Three months ago and I'd have been looking for a chess game. Now... I'm aware of his absence." He shrugged as casually as possible. "Guess I'll just have to wait and see."

McCoy nodded. He did know exactly what Kirk meant. The Vulcan had a way of creeping up on one unawares. A definite case of not missing what one has until one loses it.

Spock had not actually been intentionally avoiding anyone but was spending much of his time checking and rechecking the computers in an attempt to put a stop to the numerous small incidents that were continuing to occur around him. So far he had not been successful. No doubt if he had been Human he would have put the

malfunctions down to non-benign random factors. *Not, he mused, that anything has been dangerous. Just annoying; or so, he hastened to add, they would have been if I was fully Human.*

Finally, and after much thought, he decided to confer with the Chief Engineer before speaking to the Captain. Not only did he respect the Scot's capabilities but, even at this late date, he had several questions he wished to ask about why Scott had not been surprised at Kirk's intuitive leap identifying Commander Mitchell as the likely perpetrator of their earlier problems.

Cornering the Scot in the main Rec Room that evening he set about asking his questions. Surprisingly Scott seemed somewhat reluctant to answer, until Spock related a few of the minor incidents that had been plaguing him. Scott pursed his lips consideringly, looked around the room and noticed that Kirk had just come in. He glanced back at the patiently waiting Vulcan, made an obvious decision and stood up.

"Mebbe we'd best talk elsewhere, Mr Spock," he said quietly.

His immediate answer was a raised eyebrow before the Vulcan followed the direction of his gaze. Inclining his head in acquiescence Spock also stood up.

Kirk had already noticed them and was heading in their direction; it was the first time he had seen Spock in the rec areas for a while. Although both men acknowledged him courteously he was distinctly taken aback as they left. Pushing the hurt away he stood sipping his coffee for a few moments before going to join Sulu at the games machine.

The two pre-occupied men made their silent way to the Engineer's quarters. Once inside, Spock accepted a

glass of brandy from the Engineer on the premise that the Scot might find it easier to talk after a drink. It was after all a phenomenon he had noticed before in Humans. Scott sat down, finished his whisky and refilled it before he looked straight at the Vulcan.

"The reason I wasnae goin' to quibble with the Captain was that I knew what had happened on Delta Vega," he paused, "an' I also knew that Mr Mitchell wasnae happy having you as his superior officer."

Spock's raised eyebrows indicated his surprise. He had not realised... Mitchell must have been more devious than he had given him credit for. However there would be time later to meditate on the duplicity of Terrans. For the moment he was more interested in the fact that if, as had been reported, Mitchell had been killed on Delta Vega, then what was now disturbing the ship's electronic equipment? He said so.

Scott shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, Mr Spock."

When Spock ignored the comment Scott realised that the Vulcan was serious. He sighed. "Mebbe you'd better tell me exactly what incidents ye're talking about?"

"They have been only minor incidents but still they should not be occurring." Spock paused.

"Fine, but jist whit are ye talking about?" Scott sounded impatient.

Spock regarded him for a long moment, swallowed hard and then started talking.

Scott heard him out without interruption. The Vulcan was right. They were small things: locked doors; altered

lighting levels; faulty thermostats. Small, but to a Human, irritating and to a Vulcan...? Well as to that Scott could not tell, but any slight amusement he might have felt vanished as the list continued. Afterwards he thought for a minute then said abruptly, "These incidents havenae been reported." His tone was slightly accusing.

Spock nodded. "Correct, Mr Scott. I saw no necessity and, as yet, still do not see any need for this to become official."

Scott was obviously trying to be tactful as he said, "I'm no sure the Cap'n will see it that way."

"There is no reason to involve the Captain at this time. As all the incidents were logged as they occurred, the information will be available when it becomes necessary to inform him."

Scott's pursed lips showed his lack of agreement but he knew Spock well enough not to bother arguing. Instead he said, "I suppose you've checked everything you can think of?"

"Naturally, Mr Scott."

"So you're here to see what I can think of?"

"Not just that." There was another pause as Spock sought for words that would not seem overly emotional. "I should also be grateful for your input as to the source of the problem. If Commander Mitchell did indeed die on Delta Vega, then what is it we now face?"

"Vulcans don't believe in ghosts, Mr Spock?" Scotty laughed.

"Not in the form that Terrans do, Mr Scott." To the Scot's amazement Spock was entirely serious.

Scott nodded and sighed. "Aye. Well, I doot many Terrans believe in storybook ghosts either, Mr Spock."

Spock looked at him, decided not to pursue that aspect of the subject, and returned to his major preoccupation.

"Obviously, Captain Kirk believed he had killed Commander Mitchell. Our problem is either to disprove that conclusion or to expose the crewmember who is taking advantage of the present circumstances in a effort to further his own ends." Spock raised his head. "Whatever those ends may be," he finished calmly.

"Are you saying that you think Gary Mitchell is still alive and on board this ship?" Scott was decidedly taken aback.

Spock shook his head. "By no means. I believe Mr Mitchell died on Delta Vega. I also believe that the earlier malfunctions were caused by his tampering before he was removed from the ship. The tenor of the incidents has changed; the latest are more remarkable for their nuisance value than for their malevolence. Also, I am loath to believe that he can reach, as it were, from beyond the grave. However I should like to discover the culprit before the ship is placed in a life-threatening position when even small malfunctions could be the cause of considerable damage to both crew and ship."

"So you think that someone on board is causing the problems?" Scott was appalled at the scenario created by the Vulcan's words.

"It is the most obvious answer." Spock did not sound as though he was all that sure.

"Who?" Scott sounded exasperated,

"How many people are there on board who could do all this? Without being noticed, I mean," he added hastily.

"Including ourselves, I estimate twelve. However, I am at a loss as to possible motives."

Scott laughed cynically. "Aye! I'm no surprised. Mebbe you'd better give me that list and I'll see what I can come up with. But I still think you should tell the Cap'n."

The Vulcan paused in the act of handing over a copy of his list. Very firmly he said, "Allow me to be the judge of that, Mr Scott." Relenting slightly he continued, "I wish to be in possession of firm evidence before approaching the Captain on this matter." Seeing the Scot still was not convinced, Spock resorted to verbal blackmail. "Captain Kirk was, I believe, hurt by Mitchell's defection. Recent events must have returned the incident to the forefront of his mind. It would seem unfair to compound that difficulty until we are absolutely sure of what we know."

"Whatever you say, Mr Spock." The Scot's sigh indicated his continued reluctance.

"I have done and will continue to log all such incidents, Mr Scott." Spock did not bother to inform the Scot that he was going to add the recorded details of their meeting to the file. He had no intention of allowing blame to be attached to the Engineer.

Spock turned back at the door. "I should like to ask you to remain vigilant in case our 'problem' should alter its focus."

"That seems unlikely but o' course I'll do that."

"You think that these incidents will remain focused on me? You can envisage no possible scenario in which attention could move to another?"

"If you're meaning the Cap'n? Then, no. If this is Mitchell's influence then he was very friendly with Captain Kirk." Scott hesitated, unsure how to phrase the next bit, and then decided it was best to be blunt. "And he both resented and disliked you."

"You seem convinced that the perpetrator is a manifestation of Mr Mitchell." It was a statement not a question.

"Aye, I am that. But dinnae ask me why."

Their gazes held for a moment until Spock nodded. "I see," he murmured. "Thank you for your time, Mr Scott."

The spate of small incidents slowed to a trickle while Spock and Scott went about their investigation of the names on the list. It was almost as though the culprit knew that they were looking and was determined not to be caught. Eventually, even Spock had to admit that if the malfunctions were being caused by a crewmember then whoever it was was extremely adept at covering both their tracks and their reasons.

"It still points towards Mitchell, Mr Spock," Scott said firmly.

They were once again in Scott's cabin, for they had decided that was the least likely place for them to be disturbed. Spock's eyebrows were on the rise.

"Am I meant to infer possession, Mr Scott?"

Scott shrugged; put like that it did sound far-fetched. However he was often right about these things. He did not have a Highland grandmother for nothing.

"I cannae think of any other method, Mr Spock." He knew he sounded defensive.

Spock regarded him pensively for a few moments before answering, "Unfortunately, neither can I."

Scott stared at him, mouth half open. "You agree?"

"I believe I just said so."

"Aye! Aye well... What are we going to do?"

"I am unsure." It was Spock's turn to be defensive. "I have never before attempted to catch a ghost."

"We could start by telling the Captain."

"My views on that subject have not altered, Mr Scott."

"With all due respect, sir, Captain Kirk is going to be furious." The underlying message was clear - can you afford to annoy the Captain quite so much quite so soon?

"I know, Engineer, but that will occur whether I inform him now or later. In fact, I believe his anger may be somewhat mitigated by firm proof."

"How can we obtain firm proof of a ghost?" Scott's voice rose with his exasperation.

"That I shall have to consider, although I believe a search of the historical data banks may give us a base from which to start."

Scott rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to reply just as his comm unit whistled. He frowned, then answered it. It was Kirk.

"Sorry to bother you, Scotty, but we can't find Spock. There's a problem in Science Lab One." Spock was out of the door before Kirk had finished and Scott could hear the beginnings of a ship-wide call for the Vulcan as the door closed behind him.

"What type of problem, sir?" he asked quickly.

"I'm not sure of the extent yet, Scotty. The Duty Officer said something about vandalism."

"On my way, sir." Scott closed the connection and followed in the First Officer's wake.

He found Kirk, Spock and Giotto staring at a mess he for one had never seen the like of before. Spock moved forward with the intention of entering the lab but was stopped by Giotto's arm across the door.

"Not until Security's finished checking, please, sir." Giotto was polite but firm.

Spock's lips tightened but he stayed where he was saying, "May I point out, Commander, that it is more likely that I will be able to see any discrepancy than a member of Security."

"In that mess?" Giotto's voice was incredulous.

"In that mess." Spock's tone hardened. He was interrupted by Kirk's quiet voice.

"You'll get your chance later, Mr Spock." The Captain changed the subject

slightly. "We couldn't find you - how'd you get here so quickly?"

"I came immediately I heard the ship-wide call, sir." Much to Scott's amazement and Kirk's obvious irritation the Vulcan's reply was deliberately evasive.

Looking around him, Kirk decided his questions should wait for a more private setting. As his eyes swept the gathering people began to move hastily away. He stopped them in their tracks.

"Before anyone leaves here I want names and an explanation of your presence in the area." Looking back at Spock, he waited.

"There is a seminar room, not presently in use, at the next intersection of this corridor." To Kirk, at least, Spock sounded reluctant and the Captain had not missed Scott's earlier reaction. Eyes narrowed he tried to stare his First Officer down. Spock held his gaze, eyebrows raised, then with a flick of his eyes indicated their very interested audience.

"Carry on, Mr Giotto. Scotty, see what you can do to help. Spock, with me." Abruptly Kirk walked away.

Eyebrows still raised, Spock moved to follow him, saying as he did so, "Mr Scott, Lieutenant Teril should be informed. Most of the disruption appears to involve her work."

Scott nodded and looked meaningfully after Kirk. His only answer was the minutest of shrugs as the Vulcan followed in Kirk's wake. He found Kirk waiting for him around the corner.

"Just what's going on, Spock?" The Captain's voice was quiet.

"Going on, Captain?" The Vulcan

had recognised the danger signs but was not sure how to proceed.

"Don't give me that. I am not in the mood!" Kirk snapped in reply.

"My office is available if you wish to talk somewhere more private, Captain." Spock gestured to the nearest door.

Kirk, annoyed with himself for forgetting where he was and for thus allowing the Vulcan the advantage of home territory, frowned. "As good as anywhere, I guess. After you, Commander." It never did your subordinates any harm to remind them occasionally who was in charge.

Spock opened the door and went in. He thought about offering his seat to Kirk, but decided against it. He might need the doubtful security of his desk.

"Well?" Kirk demanded as they seated themselves. "What happened?"

"I have not as yet been given an opportunity to ascertain that, Captain."

Kirk closed his eyes, took a deep breath and counted to ten before opening his eyes. He found his First Officer staring at him with what Kirk thought was well-simulated puzzlement. Kirk leant forward, placing his elbows on Spock's desk. Very deliberately he said, "Don't be obtuse, Spock. I want some answers. And,* waving the Vulcan to silence, "I'm not just talking about tonight. I've hardly seen hide nor hair of you, off duty, for days and then tonight you weren't in your cabin, the labs or the Rec Room. Just what are you up to?"

Instead of answering immediately, the Vulcan turned sideways and punched a code into his terminal. Looking back at Kirk he said simply, "I assure you I had

no intention of avoiding you, Captain. Mr Scott and I have been busy trying to trace our intruder."

"Intruder?" Kirk looked carefully at the screen display in front of him. "What in hell's name is all this?" he asked tightly.

"We ascertained the presence of twelve crew members who have the ability to cause most of the small problems that have been occurring."

He was interrupted before he could continue. Kirk had been busy taking in the information appearing before him.

"Small? Problems?!!" Dangerously quiet, Kirk continued, "Why have I not been informed of this before now, Mister?"

Spock swallowed, then took the plunge. "That was entirely my decision, Captain. I had thought to find firm evidence before approaching you. However, tonight's - " he paused deliberately to make sure he had the Captain's full attention - "manifestation has made that impossible."

"Manifestation? What on earth? Are you talking ghosts, Spock?" Kirk, his jaw dropping, turned his gaze away from the screen to focus on Spock, wondering whether he should have brought McCoy with him.

The Vulcan recovered his poise as Kirk lost his.

"As good a description as any, Captain."

Kirk's jaw dropped even further. "But, ghosts? Are ghosts logical, Spock?"

Spock resisted the temptation to inform Kirk that he was unaware of the

answer to that question as he had yet to meet any such being. Instead, he waited quietly for Kirk to make the connection he was leading him towards.

"Gary! You're thinking it's Gary. But how?"

"As to that, I must admit that at present I am devoid of ideas."

Kirk had turned back to the screen. "All that? Gary?" He laughed shortly. "I'm sorry, Spock, but I don't see how. And anyway, I thought we'd decided that the rest of it had been done before Delta Vega."

Spock shifted in his seat. He was no longer sure of his ground; he was going to have to speculate, a process that he detested as it led to so many inconsistencies. A thought struck him; maybe tonight's ploy had been a deliberate attempt to force them to take action before they were ready?

"Spock?" Kirk's voice brought him back to the present.

Gathering his courage he said, "There are two possible methods of survival that Mr Mitchell could have employed, Captain."

"Oh?" Kirk transferred his gaze back to the Vulcan from the fascinating screen in front of him. He was really going to have to talk to Spock about correct procedures; their almost constant misunderstandings could end up endangering the ship.

"Yes. One by remaining as a discorporeal entity, in which case I find it difficult to envisage his means of influencing inanimate objects. The other, which is to my mind the most likely, is by residing in another's psyche."

"Possession?" Kirk's hand played with his bottom lip. It was not often he was this badly thrown. "Who, Spock? And, for that matter, how? He was dead and buried when I left him on Delta Vega."

"Captain, you know that several landing parties returned to the surface before we left orbit."

"None of them went anywhere near where I left Gary and Elizabeth." Kirk sounded very certain.

"Certainly you gave orders to that effect, sir." Spock said coolly.

"You mean someone deliberately disobeyed my orders? Why?"

Spock nearly shrugged. "Not necessarily deliberate disobedience, sir. I found myself near those co-ordinates on at least one occasion. I see no reason why someone else might not have done so as well." He paused, trying to phrase his next words tactfully. "May it not have been possible that if someone who had, as it were, been close to Commander Mitchell had found themselves nearby, then curiosity or grief might have persuaded them to go closer to see the grave. After all, very few people are fully aware of what actually occurred."

Kirk regarded him quizzically. "I presume you're referring to one of Gary's many conquests? Or do you mean me?"

Spock had no intention of telling Kirk that he had followed on more than one occasion when the Captain had visited Mitchell's grave, or that he was only fifty-nine point four percent certain that he was not the person they were looking for. Instead he gravely inspected the man sitting across from him.

"I think one of his 'conquests' is the

most likely candidate, sir. You, after all, have had ample opportunity to harm me if you so wished."

Kirk was still watching him closely. "It could still be me," he said very quietly. "I might be waiting for an ideal opportunity to get rid of you once and for all."

The Vulcan shook his head. "No, sir. That is unlikely. If you refer to the list you will note that, unlike the earlier manifestations, none of these latest occurrences are life-threatening. I would speculate therefore that the carrier of Mr Mitchell's 'soul' is neither physically nor mentally capable of doing the damage that you could."

Kirk was taken back. He was not sure whether he had been insulted or complimented but now was not the time to find out. "So, we start looking for one of Gary's friends." He laughed slightly. "We could end up having to go through all the female crew, you know."

"Not so, sir. Mr Mitchell's relationships with female crew were usually short. They frequently ended... shall we say... acrimoniously."

"You mean Gary had difficulty keeping his mind or his hands on one person at a time? Just how do you know all this? I wouldn't have thought you would have spent your time watching him?" Kirk was beginning to get slightly impatient.

"As First Officer it is part of my duties to be aware of what is happening between crewmembers." Spock's voice was cold. He did not appreciate being accused of voyeurism.

"Sorry, Spock. I wasn't really accusing you of being nosy." Kirk sounded contrite. "So, who are we

looking for?"

"Unlike yourself, Captain, Mr Mitchell did not confine himself to visiting staff or passengers." Spock's voice was still icy, which did not stop Kirk's immediate reaction.

"Damn! I didn't know you watched me as well!!"

Spock closed his eyes. Sub-vocally he counted to ten. *Why does he always manage to make it sound as though he enjoys pushing my patience to the limit?* Determinedly he ignored Kirk's interjection.

"Mr Mitchell seemed to 'make a play' for most new female crew. However I think most if not all of them were enlightened by their colleagues before too much damage was done. Therefore, I suggest we should concentrate our efforts on those crew who came aboard either with Doctor Dehner or at Starbase 2. They would not have had too much chance to be disillusioned before the Commander's death."

Kirk had sobered at the reminder. "Well that should be easy enough, I guess. Then when we've narrowed the field down, what do we do?"

This time Spock did shrug. "I am open to suggestions, Captain."

Kirk buried his face in his hands. "So am I, Mr Spock. So am I." He raised his head. "I know no more about how to conduct an exorcism than you do." They sat and stared at each other for what seemed like hours before Kirk stirred. "Well, I don't see what else we can do for tonight. Let's go and find Mr Scott and see what he's come up with." At the door he turned back. "This last one is rather puzzling if our theory is correct." He

shrugged at Spock's enquiring look. "This doesn't seem to have anything to do with you. Does it?"

"Not directly, no. However the Lieutenant is one of my best workers. If the work is salvageable, I fully expect her to get a commendation for original scientific work and a promotion to Lieutenant Senior Grade. It is always possible that the perpetrator is attempting to avenge their own petty jealousies at the same time as discrediting me and my department."

Kirk shook his head as he led the way back down the corridor. "Give me uncomplicated command decisions any time."

Scott and Giotto had come up with nothing. Nobody was willing to admit culpability and no-one was admitting to having seen anyone except the people they had been with at the time. By now Kirk's head was aching, so he left Spock and Lieutenant Teril to clear up the mess and made his way to Sickbay, hoping that McCoy was still there.

"Bad day, Jim?" The Doctor clucked sympathetically.

"Oh, very funny, McCoy. You know," he said reflectively, "I feel as though someone somewhere is finding all this very amusing."

"Uh?" McCoy had no idea what he was talking about. "Did you find Spock earlier?"

"Yes. Appeared out of the woodwork as usual. Sometimes I think he knows all the shortcuts there are to know. He was with Scotty or so he says. I haven't asked Mr Scott." Kirk was morose.

"You don't believe him?"

"I don't know what I believe! Did you see the shambles that lab was in?"

"I took a quick glance - you can't be thinking of blaming Spock surely? He'd never do..." McCoy trailed off.

"No, of course not. I've learnt that lesson but..." There was a long enough pause for McCoy to sharpen his wits. "... he's talking possession and what's more, according to him, Scotty would seem to agree."

McCoy was sitting bolt upright. "You wanna run that past me again?" His voice was incredulous. "Possession? Spock? What are you talking about?"

"Now you know why I've got a headache," Kirk grumbled.

McCoy was scrabbling in his desk. He dug out a small bottle, looked at it, glanced at Kirk.

"No, not if you've got a headache." He slammed the drawer shut, scratched his head, "Can we sleep on this?"

"Sure. If you *can* sleep." Kirk got up and headed for the door.

"Jim," McCoy sounded uncertain, "who?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Spock seems to have kept a close watch on Gary so maybe he knows. But if so, he isn't telling me."

"Where is Spock now?" the Doctor asked curiously

"I left him and a few others tidying up. He and Lieutenant Teril are then going to see what they can retrieve of her work." Kirk scratched his head. "This last episode is plain senseless, Bones. It doesn't hurt Spock. So, why do it?"

"Could be jealousy, I suppose. Anyway, what makes you think it's anything to do with the other incidents? I thought that was all cleared up?"

Kirk realised that McCoy did not know of Spock's list. "Bones, I must be more tired than I thought. I'd try explain it all but I doubt I'd make much sense. Suffice it to say - it hasn't been a while. There have been lots of small incidents." He held his hands up. "I know, I know, but even I didn't know until earlier this evening when Mr Spock condescended to tell me." He sighed rather melodramatically. "I'm gonna to have to do something with that Vulcan of ours, y'know." He yawned. "I'm going to bed. We'll talk this through in the morning. Okay?"

"I guess so." McCoy was as sour as ever. He watched Kirk walk down the corridor. "Possession," he muttered, "where'n in hell would a Vulcan come up with *that* idea from? Must be that crazy Scotsman!" He turned back into Sickbay intent on handing over and heading for his own bed. He had decided he definitely did not want to think any more that night.

After Kirk had left Spock dismissed the Security team. It would be quicker if he and Teril cleared up by themselves. He took advantage of the noise of their departure to speak to Scott.

"I have informed the Captain of the occurrences."

Scott nodded. "I'd guessed as much." Curious, he waited, but when the Vulcan seemed to have nothing more to say he started to leave.

Spock spoke very quietly. "You were correct as to his reaction. I think I

have been able to distract him for the moment but I expect to hear something more on the subject in due course."

"Aye, no doubt we will - but not before this whole mess is cleared up."

"I agree. Goodnight, Mr Scott."

"G'night Mr Spock, Lieutenant." The Scotsman left, leaving the Vulcan and his subordinate to gaze at the task in front of them. Shrugging, she waded into the mess, Spock following.

"Lucky we'd finished that run and that I'd taken the results with me. I'd just started to write them up when Mr Scott's call came through." She sounded fatalistic, like most of her kind.

Spock was puzzled as to why her work had been singled out with such vindictiveness, especially as this last batch of experimental work had been completed. Arandians generally made good if uninspired scientists, although Phila Teril was very much an exception. She had the spark of genius that most of her race missed. Still, he had never worked any more closely with her than with any other of his staff so that could not be the reason. Also, as far as he was aware, she was generally well-liked so an act of jealousy from one of her co-workers did not seem to be indicated. He was still wondering when three hours later they placed the last item back on the benches.

Straightening, Teril dusted her hands. "Well, that's that, I suppose." Turning to Spock she asked curiously, "Who do you think could have done it and why, sir?"

"I am not sure, Lieutenant," Spock said slowly.

He was obviously distracted, his

mind on other things, but she persisted. "Could it have anything to do with that failed experiment, sir?" This time she got his attention.

"Why do you ask that, Lieutenant?" he asked sharply

She blushed. "It's just - oh I know I'm probably being silly, but that lab fire, and now this. It just seems someone's out to get us."

"I should prefer to think your conclusions incorrect, Lieutenant. You should get some rest. I will re-arrange your duty schedule for tomorrow. Good night, Lieutenant Teril."

So summarily dismissed she could do nothing but leave. As the door started to close she looked back to see the Vulcan starting to call data up on the computer. *I wonder if he ever sleeps*, she thought idly. *Gods, but I'm so tired, I could sleep for a week.*

Chapter 10

The next morning saw a morose Captain, a slightly hung-over McCoy and Scott, and an annoyingly bright Spock gathered round a briefing room table. Kirk had met Spock in the corridor and had reminded him that 'elephants never forget'. The remark had only earned him a raised eyebrow and left him wondering whether the Vulcan really did not understand idiom or if he had been pandering to their sense of superiority. When he thought about it he groaned to himself. Spock had long since stopped pretending that the Human part of his ancestry was far distant; he probably had nearly as good a command of idiom as McCoy had. He dragged his thoughts back to the present, conscious that the other three were waiting for him to start the ball rolling.

Slightly irritably the Captain gestured in Spock's direction and said, "You seem to know more than the rest of us. Maybe you'd better begin and maybe you'll be kind enough to tell us everything you know." Seeing Spock's mouth open he added hastily, "About this situation, I mean."

McCoy rolled his eyes and Scott grinned. Spock tilted his head in Kirk's direction and murmured, "But of course, Captain." Kirk scowled at him and the Vulcan immediately directed their attention to the screens in front of them.

"Two of you have seen this material before but for the benefit of Doctor McCoy I will just say that this is a list of all the unexplained incidents that have occurred on board the Enterprise over the past one point nine solar months. As you can see most of these incidents would be of minor importance by themselves. It is only the quantity that merits attention."

"And the fact that they are mostly aimed in one direction," McCoy snapped. He was sure that Spock's pedantic delivery was meant to annoy him. He had changed his mind last night and gone to find the Vulcan in a vain attempt to ferret out of him what was going on. The Vulcan had very politely told him to get lost, so McCoy had gone in search of more congenial companionship. He had found Scott in the Rec Room and they had spent a long time talking and drinking. Mostly talking, it had to be said, but the lack of sleep had had the expected effect and McCoy was not at his most tolerant.

"Agreed, Doctor." Spock turned to Scott. "Mr Scott, what made you think of outside interference?"

Scott shrugged, "I wasnae happy about what was happening but... it was that lassie Lieutenant Teril saying that it seemed as though someone had put a jinx

on you that really got me thinking. Ye ken it was after that fire in the lab, Mr Spock."

Spock nodded. That could explain why it had been Teril's work that had been targeted this time. It was possible that now the perpetrator knew they were aware of his actions he might widen his target area. If that was so then it was imperative that they discover who it was as quickly as possible. He steepled his hands and looked round the table, wondering if the others had thought of this aspect. Kirk was staring at him.

"Could that be the connection, Spock?" the Captain asked.

"In all probability, Captain, although we must remember that we are sure that incident was the work of Commander Mitchell. However it may serve to narrow our field of investigation."

Kirk looked slightly puzzled, "I'm not sure... Oh, you mean it would need to be someone who was there?"

"I would suggest that is as good a starting point as any. Can you remember exactly who was there, Mr Scott? I can help up until the point of explosion but not beyond that."

"I can try, Mr Spock. It'll be easy enough to check who was meant to be there; it's the ones who were just passing who may be a problem. I wasnae paying that much attention and I dinnae necessarily know all your staff."

"Stop talking and think, Scotty," McCoy urged.

"Aye, I'm trying to, McCoy. Let's see... Teril, Cavanagh, Landon..."

"I have the duty list, Mr Scott.

Maybe the three of you would look at it and write down the names of anyone else you noticed?"

"Of course, I'd forgotten you were there, Jim." McCoy was already making notes.

Kirk looked astounded. "Me? So had I. Lemme me have a look, Scotty."

There was silence for a few minutes as the three of them racked their brains. To Spock's unvoiced surprise it was McCoy who eventually said quietly, "I guess this puts all of us in the running as suspects, doesn't it, Spock?"

The Vulcan glanced in the Doctor's direction as he said smoothly, "Not necessarily, McCoy. For instance, I do not think that you are involved as you were not present on Delta Vega nor do you have the necessary technical expertise."

"Gee, thanks Spock." McCoy was sarcastic. "What about Jim and Scotty then?" He watched the Vulcan's lips tighten as Spock glared at him.

Not looking up from his work Scott muttered, "He wouldnae have approached me if he thought that, Leonard, and the same goes for the Captain."

McCoy ignored him and watched the exchange of glances between Kirk and Spock. Eventually Kirk spoke. "Mr Spock assured me last night that he thought I was capable of far more damage than had been done so I guess that leaves me out. Spock, can we cross-match this list and your original list with the new crew members?"

Spock silently called the cross-match up on the screen. Kirk nodded his thanks and just as silently stared glumly

at the list of names in front of him.

"Why are you confining the list to women?" McCoy asked after a minute.

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances again and then Spock looked away as he said, "Commander Mitchell's tastes were somewhat... eclectic."

McCoy interrupted him. "Made a pass at you, did he, Spock?"

The Vulcan ignored him and spoke directly to Kirk. "However, I am not aware of any such liaison on board the Enterprise. We may need to look elsewhere, Captain."

"How about the computer itself?" Kirk had to ask.

"Negative. I would be aware of any such infiltration." The Vulcan sounded definite.

"Then how about if he can move between hosts?" Scott asked tentatively.

"God, I hope not," McCoy blurted and Kirk swung round to stare at the Engineer.

"That is a possibility," Spock admitted.

"How are we going to find him, then?" Kirk's patience was reaching its limit. He had not slept well the night before, was still edgy from their experiences on Dyremin and this was really the last straw. He sighed loudly. "Well, gentlemen, shall we try the gentlemen?"

"Computer, display the full contents of the file presently on screen," Spock's calm voice instructed.

Once again they all studied the

screen. Scott pointed to a couple of names. "Those two. She's on all the lists except for your original one, Spock. He's currently in a relationship with her and he's a competent engineer, even if not a brilliant one."

"Are you suggesting that he could be the cause of the problems but he's doing it for her?" McCoy voiced his own and Kirk's surprise. "Why on earth would anyone want to do that?"

"I dinnae know that I'm suggesting anything," Scott interrupted impatiently. "All I'm saying is that they are the only two names that I can link together."

"Gentlemen." Kirk's voice cut across the impending argument. He turned to his Exec. "Do you know these two people, Spock?"

"Lieutenant Vassily is, as Mr Scott has said, a competent electronics engineer. He does therefore have the expertise necessary to enable him to initiate most if not all of the malfunctions. As to Lieutenant Comori, she was... er... smitten with Mr Mitchell. I had to speak to her on a number of occasions about her inattentiveness to her work when the Commander was present." He looked at Kirk uncertainly.

"Go on, Mr Spock," the Captain encouraged.

"On one of the times that I found myself near the site of the graves on Delta Vega I did see them both. As I had no proof that they were in fact intending to visit the burial area, I ignored them."

"I see," Kirk murmured.

"Well, that's more than I do, Jim," McCoy growled as Scott stirred restlessly in his chair.

"The Captain had given orders that no-one was to approach the burial area. By rights I should have reported the infringement," Spock explained.

"Hmmm... Why did you do that, Jim?" McCoy asked. When Kirk did not answer the Doctor persisted. "Jim?"

"What? Oh. Do you know, I'm not really all that sure now, though I suppose I must have been at the time." He thought for a few moments before saying, "I don't think it was because I thought he wasn't dead," he shrugged, "and I'm pretty sure that I never imagined anything like this happening." He laughed shortly. "Though the way I felt back then, I'd have probably welcomed him with open arms."

"Go on, Jim," McCoy urged gently.

"I did blame Spock for Gary's death, for a good while afterwards." Kirk looked across the table at the Vulcan. "However, I also knew then and know now that I had absolutely no grounds for that attitude. It's probably why I wouldn't talk to you about it, Bones."

It was obvious to all of them that Kirk was still finding it difficult to talk about what had happened but just as obvious to them all that he needed to. Suddenly the next words jerked from him.

"Spock, could that be because I was acting as host?"

The Vulcan refused to look at him as he said, "I do not know, Captain, but I would say not."

"Why not?" It was McCoy who snapped the question.

"Bones," Kirk snapped in return.

"For heaven's sake, Jim!" McCoy

exclaimed. "Just how does he know?"

"I said I do not know, Doctor." Spock was icily controlled.

Kirk, eyes narrowed, stared at the bent head of his First Officer. Remnants of an earlier conversation trailed through his mind. What was it Bones had said? Something about wondering why Spock had not been affected by the barrier?

"Bones, Scotty, please leave us," he said decisively. The Engineer was on his feet immediately, pulling the extremely reluctant McCoy with him. "Aye, sir," he said as they left.

"Thank you," Kirk said softly. All his attention was on the Vulcan who was still not looking at him. "Spock," he said, his voice, for all its quietness, holding a note of command that forced Spock to glance in his direction. The Human's eyes glinted silver in the harsh lighting and for a moment the Vulcan felt near panic. *What if I am wrong?* he thought.

"Spock," Kirk repeated gently. "Talk to me." He waited for a moment then said, "McCoy's right, you know. You did sound very certain and I do think I'm due some explanation. You... we can't continue like this."

Decision made, Spock nodded. "I agree completely, Captain." He lifted his head and caught Kirk's lighter gaze. "However, I am not sure where to begin."

"Time's important if we want to catch our culprit before he causes any more damage. Just answer McCoy's question for now."

To Kirk's surprise the Vulcan relaxed immediately. "Very well, Captain." Spock paused, as if to gather his thoughts but in reality to observe surreptitiously the man sitting opposite

him. Survey completed, he steepled his fingers and began. "As you are no doubt aware a Vulcan's perception of the electro-magnetic spectrum differs from that of most other humanoid species."

"Yes. So?" Kirk asked.

"All humanoids radiate an electro-magnetic field. In your language, an aura. Many factors may influence the exact composition of the aura; ill health, for example, produces marked fluctuations."

"I know all this. Get to the point, Spock." Kirk was abrupt. He was now sure that Spock was still being evasive.

"I was about to do so, Captain."

Kirk glared at the reproving tone but said nothing more.

"Your aura is to all extent and purposes completely normal. You are tired but otherwise there is no change."

"And that's all?" Kirk was incredulous. Putting thoughts of calling the Vulcan's bluff to one side for the moment he concentrated on the immediate problem. "Then you should be able to tell whether Comori or Vassily are hosts."

Spock shook his head. "No, sir. I am not familiar with the normal aural pattern of either of the lieutenants. They are both relatively new on board."

Kirk was not willing to accept this. "You work with Comori." His tone sounded slightly accusing even to himself.

"True, but I did not know her well before our visit to the galactic barrier. I have no frame of reference for comparison."

"No, I suppose not," Kirk sighed. "Pity, though. It would have made our job a little easier. In fact I suppose if it had been that simple there would never have been a problem to begin with."

"Indeed. For the moment I suggest we activate computer surveillance in areas considered to be vulnerable. Our next survey area is the one most likely to produce sufficient ore for Dyremin's needs. I would prefer to have..."

"What about having McCoy do a psych-scan?" Kirk interrupted.

"On what grounds, Captain? Also, if Mr Mitchell is indeed influencing one or both of them then he may be able to transfer at will. We must be able to isolate and keep them isolated until we can find a method of evicting Mitchell."

"Well how about if you take them with you on your next survey?" Kirk held his breath as he waited for Spock's reply.

"You mean that the one Mitchell is influencing might attempt to dispose of me? It is a possibility worth exploring," Spock said thoughtfully.

"You could handle them, couldn't you? Until we can get a Security team down to you?"

"Why would I wish to do that, Captain?" Spock asked blandly.

Kirk laughed, "You know exactly what I meant." He looked across the table, caught the Vulcan's eye and said seriously, "I made a mistake earlier and asked the wrong question but I am aware of it and once we've got this mess cleared up I have some questions that I expect answered."

He watched with a degree of

dismay as Spock straightened in his chair, his face blanking as he said, "As you wish, sir."

It took them only a few minutes to manufacture a reasonably fool-proof plan to catch their victims. Spock admitted to Kirk that he would recognise Mitchell's aura on its own but was not sure he could recognise an interaction with that of another being.

"Except me, you mean," Kirk murmured.

"It is my duty to know your aura, sir. It is vital that I am aware of your exact state of health at all times," Spock answered stiffly.

"Yes, of course, Mr Spock." Kirk rubbed his brow. "How long before we reach the survey coordinates?"

"Nine point four five hours at present speed, sir."

"Any use in increasing speed?"

"None that I am aware of. It might even have an adverse effect in that a change, for no specific reason, in our posted routine may act as an indication that we have discovered them."

"Okay. Well I guess I'd better go and make my peace with McCoy and Scotty. What do you intend doing?"

"I have some survey results to check. I shall be in Geology Lab B."

"Fine. Try and stay with people, will you."

Spock turned back from the door. "In that case I will escort you to your destination, Captain."

"It's not me he's after," Kirk flared.

"No, but it must have occurred to you that the attack on Lieutenant Teril's work may indicate a change in his mode of action."

Kirk's lips tightened. "Yes, but..."

"Then I will walk to Sickbay with you. It is not out of my way, Captain."

Kirk shrugged. "After you, Mr Spock."

They walked in silence along the corridor until they reached Sickbay where Spock halted. "Not coming in, Mr Spock?" Kirk asked teasingly.

"I think not, sir. I am sure Doctor McCoy will have sufficient to say without my presence." He turned abruptly, knocking against Kirk as he did so. Apologising, he reached out to steady the smaller man.

"No harm done, Spock." Kirk straightened his tunic and the Vulcan released him.

"Very well, sir. Then if you will excuse me?"

"Sure." Kirk nodded his dismissal and watched as Spock walked away. *Now I wonder what that was all about?* He shook his head. *Guess I'll just need to add that to my list,* he thought as he entered McCoy's office.

Instead of going straight to the Geology Lab Spock went first to the main lab complex. It was empty except for Lieutenant Comori and with only the briefest hesitation Spock said, "I am intending to examine our latest survey results, Lieutenant. I will need some assistance so if you and Lieutenant Teril are not otherwise occupied please join me

in Geology Lab B as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir. Phila isn't here at the moment though." The young woman smiled brightly at him.

"Then please find her, Lieutenant. I will go and begin our work." He did not wait to see if she had anything further to say but vanished as quietly as he had appeared. Maria Comori stared after him, a calculating look crossing her face. Hurriedly she left the room and was nearly running as she made her way back to her quarters.

It was only ten minutes later when she entered the room where Spock was working. As she did so he looked up enquiringly.

"Phila's on her way, sir," she said slightly breathlessly.

"Very well, Lieutenant. If you would use that terminal." He indicated one across the small room. "I think you will find the work self-explanatory. If not, please ask."

"Aye aye sir," she answered and made her way across to the terminal and sat down. Inside she was quivering and at first found it hard to concentrate. Even then she was very conscious of the rather intimidating presence across the room.

Phila Teril arrived shortly after her and apologised to Spock.

He looked up from his work, surveyed her coolly and said, "There is no need to apologise, Lieutenant Teril. Lieutenant Comori will show you what she is doing." He turned back to his own work, seemingly dismissing them from his mind.

Maria quickly showed Phila what she was doing and the Arandian woman

nodded and moved to another terminal. Silence reigned for a while then Maria Comori spoke.

"Phila, could you come over here for a moment?" She sounded puzzled and Teril hurried across.

Spock lifted his head and glanced over at them. He debated calling Kirk but as they seemed to be concentrating on something on the screen decided against it. He returned his attention to his own work, but not long afterwards he felt a presence close behind him, a hand on his shoulder and a voice hissing in his ear.

"You shouldn't turn your back on those you turn down, Spock."

"Lieutenant," Spock said quietly. "Please return to your work and I will ignore this incident." He tried to shrug her away but only succeeded in forcing her into tightening her grasp. Twisting his head he caught a glimpse of Maria, who was sitting slumped over the terminal she had been working at.

"Lieutenant Comori!" he called as he tried once more to turn round. "Please alert Security." He could hear someone at the door and with a sinking feeling realised that one of the two women with him must have locked it. Forcing himself to forget it was a woman attacking him, he twisted and managed to catch her arm. Turning to face her, he drew a deep breath and lowered his shields sufficiently to allow him to recognise Mitchell's presence. The woman, her face on a level with his, laughed and leaned closer. He pulled back and out of the corner of his eye saw that Comori was struggling to her feet.

Spock's call had penetrated the haze in Maria Comori's mind. She grasped vainly for the now familiar presence of Gary Mitchell and cried out as she

encountered the gaping wound in her mind. Sobbing quietly she hauled herself to her feet. She started to turn towards the struggling pair and her hand knocked against the phaser she had brought with her. Suddenly raw hatred for both of them surged through her and, for a moment, a spurious calm descended as she picked up the weapon and continued to turn round.

"Open the door, Lieutenant," Spock called again. She ignored him and lifted her hand. Neither he nor Teril had any chance and both collapsed as the phaser beam enveloped them. Comori drew a deep sobbing breath and fell back into her seat. Gradually she became conscious of the hammering at the door and pulled herself together enough to cross the room and unlock it.

Suddenly the room seemed overcrowded. Kirk pushed past her and the still sobbing Comori fell back against the wall.

"Damn!" Kirk said. "McCoy, Spock's down. Giotto, get Comori's phaser." Kirk knelt down by the bodies. McCoy was already there running his medi-corder over the still pair. "Well?" Kirk demanded.

"I'm not sure, Jim. Call a med team, will you."

"Already on its way, sir." Giotto's voice recalled Kirk with a jerk. He stood up.

"Giotto, put Lieutenant Comori in the Brig. Then arrest Lieutenant Vassily." He glanced back at McCoy then continued, "Make sure neither of them has any contact with anyone else, and that includes each other."

"Aye aye, sir." Giotto did not waste time asking questions but moved away

and began giving his orders as McCoy's team arrived.

Kirk and Scott stood back as McCoy gave terse instructions and the stretchers left with their burdens. The Doctor stopped next to Kirk and said quietly, "The phaser was set for heavy stun. I'd say Teril took the brunt of it, and at such close range I'm not sure she'll survive it. However, Spock should be okay but I'll need to wait until he comes round to be certain."

Kirk nodded. "Very well, Doctor. Let me know immediately he does so. I want to talk to him. Meanwhile I'll be in Brig seeing if I can get any sense out of our prisoners."

Chapter 11

Kirk had spent what seemed like hours with the two prisoners. Comori was saying hysterically she could remember absolutely nothing, whereas Lieutenant Vassily was only too pleased to talk. Eventually the Captain had to allow McCoy to sedate the young woman, and leaving Giotto to take a formal statement from the loquacious Russian went to oversee the start of the next survey. Later he had joined McCoy and Scott for a rushed evening meal where none of them had very much to say and all were thankful to have valid reasons to be able to hurry away. They were all very conscious that they had allowed the Vulcan either to walk into a trap or to set up one without their knowledge.

McCoy had still been furious with both Captain and First Officer when Kirk had entered his office, and it had taken Kirk valuable time to calm him down enough so that he was willing to listen. Scott had by this time reappeared from

Engineering and it had been he who, on hearing that Spock had escorted Kirk to Sickbay and had seemed concerned about the possibility of their quarry widening his activities, had said, "If Mr Spock was so insistent on you not being by yourself, Captain, who's with Mr Spock?"

Kirk had frowned as he replied, "I told him to make sure he had someone with him at all times, Scotty, but I guess it won't do any harm to check." When they had been unable to contact the lab Kirk had called Security and they had arrived at the lab to find the door locked against them.

"Captain," Scott had said softly, "This is a secure lab. We'll need to cut through."

"Do it then." Kirk was quietly furious, though he would have been hard put to say with whom. Scott had left quickly and the others had waited until they had heard the sounds of a scuffle and Spock's muffled voice saying something they could not quite make out. Kirk and Giotto had once again tried the door, and the next sound they had heard had been the unmistakable whine of a phaser. Scott had just arrived back as the door slid open and Kirk pushed past the panicky woman in the doorway. So far none of them wanted to talk about what could have been a disaster, and they all wanted to know exactly what Spock had thought he was doing.

It was late the next day before McCoy would allow Kirk to speak to Spock. The Vulcan had come round for a few moments the previous evening but had quickly lapsed back into unconsciousness. Phila Teril was still holding her own and as McCoy said, the longer she could do that then the more likely it was that she would eventually recover. All Spock needed was the time to sleep off the effects of the heavy stun.

Kirk had reluctantly agreed, but he was down in Sickbay seconds after McCoy had given him the all clear.

Kirk found himself facing a pale but determined-looking Vulcan who had just as many questions as the Captain did. Somehow, James Kirk found himself explaining everything that had happened since the attack. As quickly as possible he brought Spock up to date, wondering all the while why he was doing it this way round. The Vulcan said very little until Kirk mentioned Vassily, who was still in the Brig and, if Kirk had his way, would remain there until they either reached a Starbase or returned to Dyremin where he could be transferred to the Hood prior to dismissal from the service.

"Why?" Spock asked curiously. "You say he admits to doing everything that he was asked to by Lieutenant Comori. It is obvious to me that he was influenced by Mitchell and therefore I see no reason why he should repeat such acts. He is, after all, a competent engineer, and Starfleet has great need of such people. Placed somewhere he can be observed he should cause no further problems."

Suddenly Kirk leaned forward and fixed the Vulcan with a gimlet eye. "Enough," he said. "I have had enough!" Turning round he dragged the nearest chair over.

"Right, now I ask the questions and you provide the answers!" He saw Spock swallow nervously and a small part of him said, *I've got him now. Let's see how he gets out of it this time.* Aloud he said, "How do you know he's free of Mitchell's influence?"

"I do not, but I would be able to tell if I was allowed to speak with him."

"How?"

"When I was in contact with Lieutenant Teril I recognised Commander Mitchell."

"Recognised how?" Kirk asked sceptically.

"I am a touch telepath, Captain."

Enlightenment dawned in Kirk's mind and he said, "That was that why you bumped against me in the corridor outside Sickbay."

"Yes, sir."

"So you weren't sure about me?"

"Not entirely," Spock admitted.

Kirk nodded. "Okay, let's leave that subject for the moment, shall we?" The Vulcan looked at him levelly and Kirk grinned at him. "Just what did you think you were doing?"

Spock shifted slightly in the bed. "I did not intentionally usurp your authority, Captain."

"I'm extremely glad to hear that, Commander." There was a long pause. "I'm still waiting, Mr Spock."

"After I left you outside Sickbay I made my way to the main lab complex in order to fulfil your request. The only person present was Lieutenant Comori, so I requested her to report to me and to bring Lieutenant Teril with her. She was some ten minutes in following me and I must assume that she spent part of that time fetching the phaser she later used. Lieutenant Teril arrived five minutes afterwards. We had worked for fifteen point seven minutes when I heard Maria Comori request help from Teril. I checked but there was nothing untoward

happening. Eight minutes later Phila Teril attacked me; I was unprepared for her strength as I tried to free myself. It was then that I saw that Lieutenant Comori had collapsed, and I surmised that Mr Mitchell had transferred his presence from her to Ms Teril. I lowered my shields sufficiently to enable me to detect Mr Mitchell's presence, and it was at that moment I saw Maria Comori raise the phaser and fire. There was insufficient time for me to move either of us out of the way. Obviously I remember nothing more until I regained consciousness here." He paused. "Doctor McCoy has since informed me of his prognosis for Phila Teril." He was quiet for a few moments then raising his head from the contemplation of his hands said, "It did not occur to me that anything like this would happen. My sole intention was to keep Lieutenant Comori under surveillance."

Kirk nodded and said softly, "I'd guessed as much, Spock. Why, though, do you think Comori had that phaser with her and why use it on Teril?"

Spock shook his head slightly. "I do not know. It is possible that I was mistaken as to the extent of damage that Mr Mitchell intended. In that case she may have had the phaser in order to try and kill me." He hesitated. "As to why she attacked Lieutenant Teril? I can only surmise that she had become so dependent on Commander Mitchell's presence that she was unable to function normally when he abandoned her."

"That was my guess too. Bones says she'll need a lot of help before she's fit to be allowed into society."

Spock closed his eyes and Kirk watched him before saying, "One last question for now, Spock, then I'll leave you to sleep."

The Vulcan spoke without opening his eyes. "Whatever you wish, Captain."

"Why didn't you come to me about the incidents? Why go to Scotty? Was it because you weren't sure whether I had something to do with it all?"

"Correct, Captain." He opened his eyes and sat up straight. "I had on occasion followed you while we remained in orbit around Delta Vega." He watched Kirk's mouth tighten and hastened to add. "I never followed you closely enough to be aware of what you did; just to be near enough to ensure that you came to no harm. I would have been unaware if Commander Mitchell had tried to enter your mind." There was a short silence then he said, "It was after one of your trips that I realised that you were not the only crew member to visit the graves."

Kirk shook his head. "God, what a shambles! And what about Mitchell? Is he still buried in Teril's mind? Or could he be hiding somewhere else?"

"Doctor McCoy has told me Lieutenant Teril took the phaser blast directly on her spinal cord and brainstem. There is some brain activity so he holds some hope for her recovery. If Commander Mitchell is still there then he is safe enough until we can reach a Healer who is capable of dealing with such matters. If he managed to escape from her mind as she lost consciousness it is unlikely that he would have been able to retain his identity without the support of a body. Most humanoids need a frame of reference to enable them to function normally."

It was obvious to Kirk that the Vulcan was tiring rapidly and he was surprised that McCoy had held off this long. "Just one more thing. How do we find a Healer?"

"If the results of this survey are successful, Captain, we will be returning to Dyremin. There are several Vulcan Healers available."

At Kirk's look of incomprehension, Spock sighed. "May I remind you that Vulcans are a partially telepathic race, Captain?"

"Right, that's enough for now, Jim. Time you were asleep, Spock." Not allowing either of them time to protest McCoy stuck a hypo to Spock's arm and watched as the drug quickly took effect. Then taking Kirk's arm McCoy steered him in the direction of his office. Waving the Captain to a seat he indicated the waiting glass. "Drink that," he advised, "then it's time you hit the sack as well."

Kirk sank into the chair and picked his glass up. Idly he took a healthy swallow and nearly choked. McCoy shook his head at his spluttering Captain.

"If I'd known you were going to do that," he chided.

Kirk gave him a watery glare and gasped, "What'n hell's name is in that glass, McCoy?"

The Doctor shrugged and produced the small bottle Kirk had glimpsed a couple of days earlier. Kirk picked it up, looked silently at it, then handed it back.

"If you'll put that away, I'll pretend I never saw it," he said before he sat back and took a cautious sip. He savoured it and let it trickle slowly down his throat. "Cheers, Bones." He lifted his glass in salute.

McCoy reciprocated the gesture but said nothing and the two men sat in silence for some time, the Doctor waiting Kirk out.

Eventually the Captain looked up at him and said very quietly, "Am I in the wrong job, Bones?"

"Do you think you are?" As he waited for an answer McCoy reflected that Kirk somehow always managed to surprise him.

"Most of the time, no. I wouldn't be here if I did. Or at least I hope I wouldn't." The younger man swirled the blue liquid in his glass. "But what if I'm wrong?"

"You and everyone else?" McCoy leaned forward and said seriously, "Jim, it's taken you a lot of hard work to get where you are now and I'll grant that you are doing a job that usually goes to a more seasoned man. However I, for one, would be a lot more worried if you didn't occasionally feel unsure." The Doctor relaxed back in his chair. "As for this fiasco," he grunted, "the blame lies fairly and squarely with whichever Headquarters idiot it was that sent a new Captain and a new First Officer out on an extremely dangerous mission without briefing them properly. Think about it, Jim!" he urged. "Neither of you got as much as a verbal reprimand, did you?"

"No, but neither were we exactly popular, and they sure got rid of us as quickly as possible." Kirk still sounded unconvinced.

"Because it didn't work out the way they expected it to." McCoy was adamant. "You know the brass, Jim... they were probably trying to cover their own asses and keeping the ship on patrol was less embarrassing than having her sit at a Starbase while an inquiry was held."

"I know all that, McCoy, but none of it can bring back the dead, can it? Nine dead during our first contact with that damn barrier then Lee, Doctor Dehner

and Gary, and it isn't finished yet. Teril could still die; Comori and Vassily will never serve on a starship again; and Spock..." He stopped. "Well, Spock could have been killed."

"No-one ever promised Starfleet was a safe occupation, Captain. You can read statistics as well as anyone. You know what the survival rates are and for the record, Spock did not get killed." McCoy stood and walked round the desk to stand in front of the younger man. "Finish that; then take the rest of my prescription. I know it's a cliché, Jim, but things will look a whole lot better after a good night's sleep."

Kirk half-laughed. "Thanks, I think, Bones." He stood up. "Er... I could do with Spock back, as soon as possible. This survey..." He trailed off under McCoy's eagle eye.

The Doctor glanced towards the panel readouts on his desk and pretended to study them. "He's still weak, Jim. Even Vulcans don't recover from heavy stun that quickly. However his tongue wasn't involved so I guess I'll be glad to let you have him back at the latest by tomorrow afternoon. Just," he cautioned, "make sure he doesn't do anything energetic. He'll find sitting in front of a console tiring even if he'll never admit it."

"I'll do what I can, Doctor." Kirk did laugh this time. He emptied his glass and put it down. "Goodnight, Bones, and thanks again." As he left he was sure he could hear McCoy muttering something about being a Doctor not a maid-servant.

Chapter 12

True to his word it was late afternoon before McCoy succumbed to Spock's repeated requests and allowed

him to leave Sickbay. Having gained his objective the Vulcan seemed strangely reluctant to leave. Eventually McCoy snapped, "Well, I've got things to do even if you haven't, Mr Spock," and left him alone.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow at the retreating back, waited a while longer, then crossed the room to the ICU where McCoy had Lieutenant Teril on full life support. He paused in the doorway and considered his options again; he had to know, and once he knew then he must go straight to Kirk. The time for caution in his dealings with his mercurial Captain was long gone.

Mustering his courage he stepped into the room and walked over to the bed. He quickly scanned the dials above the bed, swallowed hard and reached for the meld points. Only seconds later he snatched his hand back and, breathing heavily, backed away from the bed. He spun round as he heard the Doctor's harsh voice.

"What do you think you're doing, Spock? I released you from Sickbay so you could go and get on with this survey of yours, not so you could go hospital visiting."

There was no way the Vulcan could tell from McCoy's face how long he had been there. Inclining his head he was preparing to make the best of a bad job when McCoy waved him away.

"Go on, get lost before I put you back on the sick-list."

Prudently, Spock refrained from arguing but left as quickly as possible. McCoy watched him leave then turned back to the bed. He stood studying the panel and wondered what the Science Officer had been looking for. He had seldom seen the Vulcan so shaken. The

panel told him nothing he did not already know. He was faced with an age-old dilemma. He knew he could maintain the young woman's body indefinitely and while there was the slightest sign of brain activity he fully intended doing so. He sighed aloud. "But am I doing the best thing for you, Phila?" he asked the still air. He knew he did not have an answer; he would just have to wait and hope.

On leaving Sickbay Spock had reported to the Bridge. Kirk was very glad to see him and much to the Vulcan's bemusement said so.

"Welcome back, Mr Spock. Your expertise has been sorely missed."

"I am pleased to be back, Captain. I much prefer these surroundings," the Vulcan said laconically.

Kirk laughed. "I can't say I blame you. Anyway, I think we've got all the data you need. Your labs are working away at it now."

"Then with your permission, Captain, I shall report there at once."

"Okay, but remember your shift ends in three hours. I promised McCoy not to overwork you, for today at least."

"I see. Then I had best get on with my work." Spock turned to leave, then as a seeming afterthought stopped and asked, "May I request an interview this evening, Captain?"

Kirk looked puzzled. "Surely you won't have the full results by then, Spock?"

"No, sir, only a resume. However there is something else I must discuss with you." The Vulcan's face gave no indication of his purpose.

"Fine. There shouldn't be any problem. Shall we say my quarters at twenty-hundred hours?"

"Thank you, sir." Without further ado Spock left.

Kirk sat and stared at the view-screen for several minutes before he decided that it was no use speculating; he would just have to wait. Shifting in his seat slightly he turned expectantly to the Science Station.

"How long before we finish the data collection, Ensign?" he asked.

"It should be sometime within the next few hours, sir," the young woman answered.

"Could you be a little more specific?" he asked gently.

"Not really, sir. A lot depends on Mr Spock's interpretation. Once he's had a chance to look at what we've got so far then we'll know for certain but until then..." She shrugged and looked apologetic.

Kirk sighed; he loathed inactivity. Suddenly he bounced to his feet. "Mr Sulu, you have the con. I'll be..." he cast vainly for inspiration, "I'll be in the main Science Lab," he finished brightly and left.

It was obvious to him that his presence in the Science Labs was both unnecessary and inconvenient. Spock was already deeply involved with the data and everyone else was extremely busy. He only stayed long enough to note that Spock was actually sitting down and then left, promising to return to check up on his First Officer.

"Per Doctor's orders," he chuckled at the long-suffering expression on Spock's face. Walking back along the corridor he

wondered what to do next and decided that it was a long time since he had done a surprise inspection. He nodded to himself. *Yes, that should keep me occupied for several hours, and where better for me to start than Engineering?*

His appearance in Engineering was greeted cheerfully by Mr Scott. "Ah, I'm glad to see you, Cap'n. I was jist aboot to see if you could spare me a few minutes. I've got something you might well be interested in."

They both got so involved with Scott's new scheme that it came as a surprise to Kirk when he realised that he was due to meet Spock in something less than thirty minutes. He did not have time to both eat and shower; nor, he realised with a sense of guilt, had he been back to check on the Vulcan.

"I'll need to call a halt, Scotty," he said. "I've got a meeting scheduled."

The Engineer nodded, "Aye, sir. We can finish this some other time. I'd like Mr Spock's input too."

Kirk looked at him in some surprise. "Spock? He's not an engineer, Scotty."

"Beggin' yer pardon, sir, but he's a better engineer than mony that call themselves such." Scott was slightly indignant.

"Then by all means, Mr Scott. Arrange a time and a place, but you'd better let Spock finish this survey first" Kirk was scrambling down from the catwalk as he spoke. Scott followed him and they left Engineering together and headed for officer country.

Kirk was still changing when he heard the door chimes. He called "Come in," and smiled cheerfully at Spock as he

entered the room. "Have you eaten yet?" he asked without preamble.

"No, sir. I was delayed, as you would also appear to have been."

"Right first time, Mr Spock." He sobered slightly. "This conversation? You want it to be private?"

Spock nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Then I suggest we eat first unless it is exceptionally important." He raised his brows in question.

"That should not be a problem, sir."

"Good. You can bring me up to date on the survey results while we have our meal and save whatever it is until later." He ran a brush through his hair and turned round.

"That is a satisfactory compromise, Captain," Spock said and stood back to let Kirk precede him to the door.

An hour later they slowly walked back towards Kirk's cabin. "So you're sure that we can break the survey off, now? This find is definitely going to provide for Dyremin's need for the foreseeable future?"

"Undoubtedly, especially as the Federation will no doubt provide the Dyremin people with experts who will help them change to power sources that will not do lasting damage to their environment." The Vulcan stopped outside his own cabin. "Captain," he said hesitantly, "I would offer you hospitality if you would accept."

Kirk had also stopped and was staring at his First Officer. After a moment he found his voice; he knew that

invitations to enter the Vulcan's quarters were extremely infrequent. "I would be honoured, Mr Spock," he said quietly.

The Vulcan keyed his door and followed the Captain in. Kirk stopped and stared around. The room was warm but not stifling as he had half-feared it might be; the lighting was subdued and conformed to that of Spock's home planet. His eye was taken by the selection of weapons on the walls and the beautiful musical instrument sitting on the cabinet.

"Captain?" Spock's voice recalled him. "Do you wish to inform the Bridge of your whereabouts?"

"Yes, I suppose I'd better." Kirk switched the intercom on but when the Bridge Duty Officer answered him he just said, "Kirk here, Mr Farrell. Mr Spock reports data collection complete. Set course for Dyremin and inform Admiral Henderson that we are on our way."

Spock's eyebrows rose as Kirk closed the link but he said nothing except, "May I offer you some refreshment, sir?"

"Thank you, Mr Spock." Kirk took the glass his Exec offered him and sat down. The Vulcan picked up his own glass and sat opposite the Captain. It was obvious to Kirk that Spock was uneasy so he asked simply, "What did you want to talk about?"

"I visited Lieutenant Teril before I returned to duty this afternoon."

"Oh?" Kirk was confused. He sometimes wished that Spock would be more direct.

"I initiated a brief meld and," he paused and Kirk wordlessly urged him to continue, "I am now certain that the brain activity that is registering on Doctor McCoy's instruments is not solely that of

Lieutenant Teril."

Suddenly Kirk did not like the supposition the Vulcan seemed to be leading him towards. He sat up straight. "You're not trying to tell me that Gary's still alive, are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Not exactly, sir." Kirk relaxed immediately then he closed his eyes in horror as the Vulcan continued, "I am trying to tell you that Commander Mitchell is trapped within the body of the Lieutenant." He waited for Kirk to answer, but realising the Terran had nothing to say he resumed his tale. "As I had been in recent contact with Commander Mitchell's mind I had no difficulty in recognising his presence."

"Oh god," Kirk exclaimed quietly. "What do we do now?"

"We must release him," Spock said just as quietly. "He does not have the strength to do so himself; he is trapped."

Kirk looked at him. "Explain!"

"You must understand that this is speculation." Kirk nodded and Spock continued, "I suspect that Commander Mitchell's original intention was to use Lieutenant Comori as a temporary host but that he expended more energy in the invasion than he had expected to do. He looked thoughtfully at Kirk. "If he did exhaust himself performing the first transfer it would certainly account for his use of Lieutenant Vassily's capabilities. I must also surmise that for various reasons he then found he was unable to make a further move."

At Kirk's questioning look he explained. "For instance he probably discovered that he needed close contact in order to exchange hosts without draining himself. He would also have discovered

that the Lieutenant's peer group did not contain anyone suitable for his purposes."

Kirk sighed. "Do you think it possible that my behaviour towards you over the past few months was influenced by him? That he targeted you because once he realised that I meant to leave him on Delta Vega he intended trying something like this? Maybe even using Lee Kelso, and he realised that you were the only person on board who would recognise what he was up to?"

"Those possibilities do exist, Captain." Spock was blank-faced but Kirk gained the impression that the Vulcan was grateful that he had not had to spell everything out to him.

"You said we must release him. Just exactly what did you mean by that?"

"There is a Vulcan technique whereby it is possible to rescue the essence of a person in order to release that essence at a time and place of its own choosing." He saw Kirk's instinctive recoil and continued gently, "It would only be for a short period of time; once we return to Dyremin I would contact a Healer and arrange for the Commander's release."

Kirk was shaking his head. "No! What about the danger to you? Why can't we just wait and let the Healer take care of it all at once?"

"Captain." Spock leaned forward to give emphasis to his words. "Consider this. Lieutenant Teril is dead. Only the machines give her a semblance of life. Commander Mitchell is imprisoned in a cell from which there is no escape. There is no light, no warmth, no sound, no companionship." He stopped, steepled his fingers and took a deep breath. "It is my considered opinion that if he is left for the four point nine days it will take us to

return to Dyremin then he will become insane. If that does occur then the probability is minimal that the use of logic to persuade him to depart from his host would work. We would be forced to switch off the life support machines while the Commander was still there." He paused again as Kirk looked appalled. "We have no other choice, Captain. The transfer must take place as soon as possible."

Kirk sat back and stared blankly around him. He was unsure whether this was the right thing to do or not. He thought for a minute but could not think of anything else they could do. He looked measuringly at his companion. *Spock must think it's necessary and that it'll work or he would never have suggested it*, he thought. *And after all Spock must be the only person on board with the capability to carry out such a transfer.* His mind refused to consider the concept further.

"Do you mean tonight?" he asked eventually. As he did so he made another mental note to find out exactly what his First Officer was capable of doing.

"It would seem logical." Spock did not allow his relief to show. He had not as yet considered what he would have done if Kirk had refused to listen to him.

"What about McCoy?" Kirk asked.

"At this time I should prefer that there is no-one else involved."

"But what if something goes wrong, Spock? Say Gary takes you over? He read your mind easily enough, after all."

"That is true. Only that one time, though. I was more careful after that."

Kirk shook his head. It was obvious to Spock that he was still not really convinced. He said earnestly, "Captain,

we should not delay any longer than necessary."

"Yes." Kirk stood up, grim-faced. "Once again you're right, Mr Spock. What does it feel like to be always right, Commander?" Somehow he felt the Vulcan's shields snap into place as he made his snide comment and part of him wondered at his own reaction; after all Spock was only doing his job as he saw it.

"I am unable to answer that, Captain, as it is a phenomenon with which I am unfamiliar," Spock replied calmly as they left his quarters.

Neither of them said anything further as they made their way to Sickbay. To Kirk's dismay, McCoy was still there and he seemed surprised not just to see them but to see them together.

"I thought I told you to take it easy, Spock?" McCoy growled before he attacked Kirk with, "And I thought you told me you were going to keep an eye on him?"

"Well, I am, in a manner of speaking, Bones." Kirk grinned disarmingly at the irate Doctor. "Spock wanted a look at Lieutenant Teril and I came along to make sure that was all he did."

McCoy looked at him disbelievingly but turned to Spock and said gruffly, "There's no change, you know."

"I understand, Doctor." The Vulcan walked across the ward but when McCoy started to follow him he stopped and turned back. Eyebrows raised he asked sombrely, "Do you think I intend doing her harm, Doctor?"

McCoy stopped in his tracks. "No, of course not, Spock. I just... Oh, have it your own way. Jim and I will be in my

office when you've finished." He stomped away leaving Spock standing in the middle of the ward.

Kirk shrugged his shoulders and followed the Doctor. Left alone, the Vulcan firmed his resolve and entered the ICU.

He stood at the foot of the bed for several moments allowing the peace of the room to permeate his being. Then he walked round the bed to stand near Phila Teril's head and putting out his hand he gently touched the meld points. He was expecting some resistance from Mitchell's katra so was not prepared to find the Human obviously waiting for him.

They faced each other warily for a long moment before Spock said, *I have come to offer you a temporary refuge, Mr Mitchell.*

Mitchell did not answer immediately. Eventually he waved his hand at his surroundings and said grudgingly, *Well, I guess anywhere's better than here. So, he eyed Spock calculatingly, what do I have to do?*

Spock did not allow his distaste for the man's selfishness to show. He extended his hand and after a long moment Mitchell took it. Spock nodded, his hooded eyes never leaving the other man's face. Suddenly panic flared in Mitchell's mind as he felt Spock's mind take control of him, and he began to struggle in the other man's hold. The Vulcan held him easily and quickly broke the Human's contact with Phila Teril's mind.

Then as he also broke his meld with the woman his face twisted in a involuntary grimace of pain as he felt the little that had been left of Teril die. He sagged against the bed as his hand fell away from her face and he whispered,

"Go in peace, Phila."

He could hear hurried footsteps crossing the main ward and he straightened carefully as he firmly secured Mitchell's presence in his mind. By the time McCoy and Kirk burst in the room he was standing calmly by the bed, his fingertips grazing Teril's hand.

"What did you do to her?" McCoy yelled.

"Do? I did nothing to her, Doctor." After exchanging a brief glance with Kirk, Spock surveyed the angry man dispassionately and turned to attack. "I may not be a medical man, Doctor, but even I can see that there is minimal brain function. Why are you keeping her body alive when there is no hope of recovery?"

Not waiting to consider Spock's words McCoy burst into speech. "Get out of here, Commander. You may be First Officer aboard this ship but that doesn't give you the right to interfere in how I treat my patients. That is my decision and mine alone."

"Then make it, Doctor." Spock walked calmly past McCoy and out into the main ward.

McCoy turned after him and found Kirk barring his way. The two of them exchanged a long glance and McCoy felt his anger fade as quickly as it had risen. As Kirk turned to follow Spock, he said quietly, "Make it, Bones."

Suddenly understanding more than he wanted to McCoy said nothing. He watched them cross the room and leave before he turned back to the bed, knowing full well what he was going to see. Warily, he set about dismantling the equipment.

Once in the corridor Kirk said,

"What now?"

Spock turned an apparently peaceful face to him as he answered, "I will retire for the night. I must meditate." He started to walk away and after a moment Kirk followed him.

"Will you be all right?" he asked rather anxiously when he caught up. "Do you need anyone with you?"

"Not at this time, Captain. There is no need for concern; I am in control of the situation. Goodnight, sir."

Kirk watched him go then turned back towards Sickbay. For a moment he wavered then decided that it might be best to wait until the following morning before speaking to McCoy. *I may well need all my wits about me and I certainly don't have them at the moment*, he thought as he followed in Spock's footsteps.

The next few days dragged for Kirk even if for no-one else, for he was once again in the type of situation he disliked most. The Science staff were busy with their final report for Admiral Henderson and the people of Dyremin, and although Kirk knew he had to be familiar with the findings he also knew that Spock would provide him with the necessary information in ample time for him to absorb it. He had managed to fob McCoy's questions off for the moment but knew that state of affairs could not last for ever. To make everything that much more frustrating he had not seen Spock for more than a fleeting glance since the evening they had visited Sickbay together.

He had just about decided to beard the lion in his den and go down to Spock's office when the turbolift decanted his Exec onto the Bridge. To Kirk's relief the

Vulcan came straight over to him.

"I have the final report on our findings ready for your perusal, Captain. Do you wish to discuss it now?"

"Good. Yes, I think so. Here or in a briefing room?"

"The latter would be more convenient." Spock waited while Kirk turned over the con to Sulu and then followed him from the Bridge.

They spent a long time going over the report. Normally, Kirk would not have had to bother with the minutiae of the findings but they both knew that unless the Federation diplomats had managed to work a miracle, then the Council members would not yet be ready to listen to anyone from the Enterprise except for her Captain.

Eventually however they were finished and Kirk felt a slight lifting of his spirits. As they walked back along the corridor towards the lift Kirk said, "I'll be very glad when tomorrow is over and so, I imagine, will you."

Spock inclined his head in acquiescence. "Yes. I have spoken with Healer T'Kie and she has agreed to conduct the ceremony," he added with some trepidation. He had been unsure whether Kirk would have preferred to contact the Vulcan Healers himself. However it was obvious that in this instance he had made the correct decision.

"Good," Kirk said, then, "Are you okay?" he asked in some concern. This was his first close look at Spock for three days and he could see how tired the Vulcan was.

"I am functional, Captain." He turned his head towards Kirk and the Human felt a degree of relief that it was

Spock's normal face still. "However I would beg a boon of thee?"

Slightly taken aback by the archaic phraseology, Kirk stumbled over his reply. "Er... yes... um... I guess so. I mean, yes of course, Mr Spock. What is it?"

"Will you accompany me when I go to meet with the Healer?" Spock was still diffident.

"I intended doing that, anyway. Surely you didn't think I'd let you go by yourself?" Kirk stopped at the turbolift doors. "Gary was my friend, you know. This will be my last chance to say goodbye to him," he said vehemently.

Spock stared straight in front of him. "I am aware of that, Captain," he said formally. As he did so he wondered what he had said to cause such a reaction in the Human.

The lift was already occupied so they travelled the short distance in a silence which continued until they reached Kirk's cabin. As the door opened Kirk said brusquely, "Come in a minute."

"Captain, I - " Spock was not given a chance to finish.

"It's not an order yet, Mr Spock." Kirk waved the reluctant Vulcan into the room. Once there Spock stood to attention until the weary Captain said, "Sit down, will you. You're giving me a crick in the neck." He rubbed the back of his neck as he was speaking and pointed to the chair across from him.

"I would rather - "

"Sit down, Spock!" Kirk said somewhat impatiently. "Look, I'm tired even if you aren't, and the sooner I get this said the sooner we can both go to

bed. Okay?"

Wordlessly the Vulcan sat down and waited for whatever it was that the Captain wanted to say. After a moment Kirk said, "I think that I may have given you the wrong impression just now." He smiled wryly. "I always intended to go down to the surface with you, not just because of Gary but also because I found that I did not like the idea of you having to go alone."

Whatever Spock had expected Kirk to say it had obviously not been what he had just heard. He looked steadily at Kirk and said quietly, "I did not realise."

"No reason why you should. Now that's out of the way. You look tired. Will you be able to sleep tonight? Do you want someone with you?"

"No." Spock welcomed the return to less overtly personal matters. "It is traditional that the Bearer spends the night in meditation. It calms the mind and allows a last exchange of thoughts if the pair so wish."

"I don't suppose you so wish - or do you?" Kirk asked curiously.

"Indeed not. I have little inclination to share my thoughts with the Commander." Spock gauged Kirk's likely reaction before continuing, "Our minds are totally incompatible."

"That's why you're so tired." There was no question in Kirk's voice. Spock inclined his head in agreement. "Why didn't you say so? At least someone could have taken your duty shifts."

"And alerted McCoy? Besides, there was no need. I preferred to be kept occupied." Spock stood up while Kirk wondered whether to tell him that McCoy had already guessed and was probably

only waiting for an opportune moment before launching his attack. "Is there anything more, sir?"

"Just one thing. When do we beam down for this ceremony?"

"Healer T'Kie asks that the ceremony take place at sunset, sir."

"That could cause the odd problem, Spock." Kirk consigned McCoy to the back of his mind to concentrate on this new problem. "You know we're bound to have meetings scheduled all day."

"I did explain that; however she is adamant. If necessary it can wait another day."

"No." Kirk was very definite. "I want it over and done with and I want away from here as quickly as possible before we get pulled back into the rebuilding work."

"I agree, Captain." Spock had already checked and found that Sarek was away on the other continent and was not expected back for several days. He had been unvulcanly grateful; he had no wish to make contact with the Ambassador.

Kirk was speaking again. "Okay, then. Schedule an important staff meeting for whenever sunset is. That should do it with a bit of luck." He yawned widely. "Sorry, Spock," he mumbled. "I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"I can see no necessity for you to do so any longer, Captain. I shall see you in the morning."

"Mmm... Goodnight, Spock." Kirk muffled another yawn. "Oh.. meet me for breakfast, will you? There may be the odd item I'll need to check on."

"As you wish, sir. Will 07.30 be suitable?"

"Should be. Maybe you could wake me up a bit earlier just to make sure?"

"Of course, sir. I will bid you goodnight, then."

Kirk knew that there was no real reason for him to meet Spock for breakfast but he was conscious of a definite need to be sure that the Vulcan was all right. *And at that time of the morning it also, he reflected as he got ready for bed, just might help me, or rather us, to avoid McCoy's rather heavy-handed attentions.*

Spock walked slowly across his room to stand in front of the attunement flame. He closed his eyes and felt weariness settle over him like a long, gray cloak. As it did so he once more became vividly aware of the alien presence in his mind. He sighed and sank down to sit cross-legged on the floor. Determinedly he pushed the heavy cloak back and turned inwards to face Gary Mitchell.

Dispassionately, Spock surveyed the barren area that Mitchell had created in his attempts to break free from the Vulcan's control. He wondered bleakly just how much of the damage that Mitchell had done to Phila Teril's mind had been deliberate. A sudden movement caught the edge of his vision and he flung a protective shield around himself. Mitchell's barrage bounced harmlessly off the Vulcan's shields, and as he had done every day for the last three days Spock waited until the Human had exhausted himself.

Calmly he said, *I have spoken with Healer TKie. She has agreed to assist your passage.*

I don't want to die, damn you! Gary Mitchell's voice cracked.

You find this preferable? The Vulcan indicated the waste stretching around them.

It won't always be like this. I'll win eventually, Vulcan, and then you'll be the one locked away. Just you wait and see.

The Human's mercurial mood swings had become more pronounced each time the Vulcan had attempted contact. Spock shook his head almost imperceptibly. *No. I offered you a temporary refuge. I will not allow you the freedom of my mind and body. He leaned forward to emphasise his point. I will die before I allow you that control. Believe me, Commander. If it becomes necessary then Healer TKie has my permission to kill.*

Silence followed his pronouncement then the Terran jeered, *Rubbish, Spock. You don't really expect me to believe that you'll voluntarily give up living, do you? You're all talk, Spock, just as you always were!*

I will remind you once again, Commander. I am Vulcan; my strengths and weaknesses differ markedly from yours. Do not be so quick to place Human interpretations on my words.

Half-Vulcan, Mitchell sneered. *You're not even good at that!*

Good enough to stop you, Spock shot back, then calming himself he continued, *I would also remind you that the final decision will rest with TKie and she is not half-Vulcan.*

For a moment he thought Mitchell had returned to his hiding place again. He looked carefully round and so saw the missile as it began to form. Watching it, he decided on a final lesson; the Human had to be made to realise that he was now dealing with a trained mind and not the

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easily influenced ones of his compatriots. As he stood there he could feel Mitchell's building excitement when Spock failed to produce his protective shields.

I'll show you, Spock. I'll show you just what you can expect, the Human yelled.

Spock did not answer but remained where he was, quietly watching as the fireball attained its full proportions and began to roll lazily towards him. The Terran was visible again now, edging forward as he suddenly saw victory within his grasp.

Then the edge of the glowing ball touched Spock, and moving just as slowly the Vulcan absorbed the energy it contained. Looking back across at the open-mouthed Human he said, *Children should not play with fire, Mr Mitchell.*

He stood there and listened wearily to the litany of threats and taunts that followed. Eventually he had heard enough and he straightened as he said crisply, *Enough, Commander. When I came here this evening I had thought to suggest to you that you might wish to talk, but I see that is not the case. So, I will bid you good-night.* He turned and withdrew, leaving the enraged and very lonely man to vent his anger on the wasteland of his own creation.

Surfacing, Spock blinked in the glow of the flame. He was so very tired, but knew that he could not relax his guard enough to sleep. His show of strength to Mitchell had expended more energy than might have been wise. He stood up, staggered slightly, then walked across the room; he would shower then enter a second-level meditative trance. That would have to suffice for now.

To Kirk's critical eye the Vulcan did not look much better the following morning. As they collected their breakfasts he decided to alert the Vulcan to McCoy's state of mind.

"Spock," he said as they sat down, "I think McCoy's guessed."

"Guessed?" Spock raised an eyebrow. "Do I take you to mean that the Doctor has arrived at a decision concerning the Commander's whereabouts?"

Kirk nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"I had anticipated as much. Doctor McCoy can be most astute when he chooses to be." Spock ate another mouthful of his meal before continuing serenely, "However I would have expected to have been approached by now. He is showing remarkable restraint. I presume you think this rather atypical behaviour will not last?"

Kirk grinned and wordlessly shook his head.

"Then maybe it is as well that neither of us are likely to be available to him until late tonight."

They finished their meal in companionable silence interspersed by occasional conversation. Kirk spent most of his time sneaking looks at the Vulcan, who did not betray his awareness of them by as much as a flicker of an eyebrow until just as they were leaving the Mess.

"I will not break, Captain. Although I must admit that I will be more comfortable once today is over."

"So will I, Mr Spock, and also very much relieved, I can assure you." Kirk's

tone was slightly acidic, causing the Vulcan to look searchingly at him.

"Of course. This is a strain for you, Captain, but I assure you that it will work."

"I don't doubt that for one minute, Spock. Not really, anyway, but..." Kirk ran a hand through his hair. "I guess... I've never seen this before and I just do not know what to expect."

"I must apologise, Captain. I have been most remiss in not informing you of the details. The ceremony is normally very short. The Healer involved contacts the intelligence that is to be released and once permission is obtained then the contact with my mind will be broken. That is all."

By now they had reached the transporter room and there was no further chance of discussion, but as they de-materialised the Vulcan was sure he heard Kirk say sourly, "You're rather relying on Gary's good nature, aren't you, Mr Spock?"

The day was a long one, and Kirk was more than thankful when Henderson called a halt to the afternoon's proceedings.

"Well, I think that's all we can do today, everyone," said the Admiral. "I think that we will do very well with the information that Enterprise has brought us." He turned to the fretting Kirk. "Another task well done, Captain. You'd better watch it or you'll be getting all the awkward jobs," he said jovially. "Could you and Spock wait for a few moments until I get rid of this lot?" he added more quietly.

There was nothing either of them

could do but wait. The excuse of important meetings might have worked with the Dyremins but Henderson as their superior officer had the authority to command their presence for as long as he wanted. Kirk fiddled until he caught Spock's eye.

"We still have one point three hours until sunset, Captain. I do not think there is, as yet, cause for despair."

"Very funny, Mr Spock." Kirk had already begun to realise that there was much more to Spock than just the excellent officer he undoubtedly was. Grinning inwardly he took notice of the Vulcan's veiled rebuke; the last thing he wanted was for Henderson to query his restlessness.

"Thank you both for waiting." Henderson had come back into the room unnoticed. "No, don't bother to get up. This is meant to be an informal meeting."

The two Enterprise officers exchanged quick glances as the Admiral sat down. He stretched his long body comfortably in his chair. "I just wanted you both to know that there are commendations waiting for you and to say thank you for a good job well done." He paused and looked at them narrowly until Kirk felt like squirming in his seat. He did not dare look in Spock's direction. Eventually Henderson removed his gaze and looked at the ceiling. "I'd also like to give you personal thanks."

"I do not understand, Admiral." Spock spoke first.

"For proving two old men right, gentlemen."

The two across from him looked at each other in mutual incomprehension, then Kirk's expression showed a dawning light. "As I remember it I was told we had

to, sir."

Henderson laughed. "I thought you two would make it but there were others who thought you were both far too young, and that at least one of you as possibly just a little headstrong." He watched Kirk's colour rise before turning his gimlet eye on Spock. "And I'm not naming names here, Commander."

Spock swallowed hard; he was well aware that the Admiral was an old acquaintance of both his parents. Kirk looked puzzled. Headstrong was the last adjective he would have used to label his First Officer. *I wonder what Henderson meant by that? It's obviously struck a chord in Spock, though. I've never seen him look so uncomfortable.*

Henderson stood up and the other two hastily followed suit. "You'll get your new orders as soon as possible, Captain. I don't want to keep another starship hanging around here any longer than necessary but in the meantime I'd be grateful if your crew could give a hand anywhere it's needed."

"That's no problem, sir. Just let us know what's wanted where and we'll do what we can."

"Good. I won't keep you any longer then. I'm sure you've got other things to do and I, for my sins, have a diplomatic dinner to attend." He walked with them to the door.

Once away from the room Spock looked at Kirk and asked, "I am at a loss as to what the Admiral was referring?"

"Do you mean the bit where he said thank you, or when he was referring to you as headstrong?" Kirk asked gleefully.

"The former, Captain, as I am not convinced that he was referring to me.

After all the term headstrong is hardly likely to be used in describing me, is it?" Spock's voice was at its blandest.

Kirk snorted. "No, I guess not; but it certainly threw you didn't it?"

"Threw me, Captain?" The Vulcan held Kirk's gaze and the Terran knew he was going to get no further explanation.

"He was referring to a conversation that I had with Nogura just after I met Chris Pike and the rest of the you," Kirk said curtly. "I was told that Fleet 'expected great things of you', and he meant us rather than you, if you get my meaning. Actually, you weren't there, were you?"

They had been standing outside the conference room as they talked and Spock moved away towards the exit as he said, "I believe not, sir, that is if you are speaking of the hand-over ceremony. I was attending a conference on Vulcan."

"Yes, that's right, because I remember wondering why -" He stopped suddenly. "Anyway, that doesn't matter right now. Shouldn't we be going to meet your Healer?"

Not by a flicker of an eyebrow did Spock reveal his curiosity as to why Kirk had not finished his sentence. As he thought, *It is obvious that we both still have a long way to go before we are willing to confide in each other. Maybe it is as well; I would find it very difficult to explain my family circumstances, after all,* he said aloud, "I need to change my attire before the ceremony. I have received the co-ordinates from T'Kie. It will be best if we beam directly there from the ship."

Kirk already had his communicator out and was requesting beam-up as the Vulcan spoke. As they re-materialised he asked, "Do I need to change?"

"Only if you wish to do so, Captain." Spock was at his most formal as he acknowledged the Transporter Room operator and moved quickly into the corridor. "If you will meet me here in fifteen minutes." He was gone before Kirk had time to do anything more than simply agree. The Captain stood staring after his Exec until he realised that he was being stared at in his turn.

"Thank you, Ensign," he said somewhat absently as he left for the Bridge. Halfway there he changed his mind and hurried to his quarters where he changed as quickly as he could and informed the Duty Officer that both he and Spock would be absent from the ship for the evening.

He was three minutes late when he entered the Transporter Room. "Sorry I'm late, Spock," he breezed then did a double-take at his resplendent First Officer. "That's some outfit, Mr Spock," he said slowly. "Are you sure that I'm okay dressed like this?" He indicated his dress uniform, which he felt paled into insignificance next to the black and silver robe that Spock was wearing.

The Vulcan barely glanced at him. "It is of little import what we wear, Captain. I have pre-set the transporter co-ordinates. If you are ready?" There was the barest trace of impatience in his voice as he continued, "We will have a short distance to walk from the beam-down point to the meeting place."

They took their places on the platform and Kirk said, "We'll call for beam-up when we need it, Mr Scott."

"Aye, sir. Energising now, Captain." The Engineer worked the controls and waited for the pair to relay their safe arrival. He stood staring at the readings for a moment before deleting them as Spock had asked him to do. He

knew his knowledge of the geography of this planet might not be absolutely correct but he was pretty sure that those settings had landed the command team in the middle of the largest desert area on the planet, and quite some way from the nearest source of water. "I hope you know what ye're doing, Mr Spock," he mumbled to himself as he secured the transporter.

To Kirk the area where they materialised was one of the bleakest he had ever come across. There was nothing to be seen but sand, rocks and more sand. He said nothing, just watched Spock take a deep breath of the hot, dry air and visibly relax. After a few seconds Spock said quietly, "We want to go in that direction, sir."

Kirk looked around him. Everywhere looked the same. "How do you know?" he asked curiously.

"I told you I had the exact co-ordinates," the Vulcan said shortly. Kirk's facial expression must have shown his annoyance for Spock went on to explain patiently. "TKie assures me that she has selected an area that bears a remarkable resemblance to the Sas-a-Shar Desert on Vulcan."

"That still doesn't explain how you know where to go, Spock," Kirk snapped.

"I have a very efficient sense of direction, Captain."

"Is there anything you can't do, Spock?" Kirk asked nastily.

Spock did not answer immediately and when he did he just said, "Five minutes more, sir." After another short silence he said diffidently, "It is unlikely that we will need to ask you to participate in the actual ceremony. Your presence is as much for observation as anything.

However I would ask you to refrain from questioning the Healer."

"That's a tall order, Mr Spock." Kirk stopped, forcing the Vulcan to do likewise. "What if I don't like what she's doing?"

"You are free to refuse any proposition she may make. All I am requesting is that you do not ask questions." Spock was already walking onwards. Kirk glared at his back but asked no further questions.

They walked the last one hundred metres in stony silence. Spock was unsure why he had succumbed to the temptation to ask Kirk to go with him and Kirk was wondering why, at twenty-one hundred hours and after a very long, tiring day, he was traipsing through a desert. *I must be mad*, he thought sourly as he continued to follow the Vulcan.

T'Kie was waiting for them as they crested the next rise. Looking down towards her Kirk was conscious of a strong desire to turn and run.

Spock whispered, "I think the Terran term is 'her bark is worse than her bite'," and Kirk found himself with an insane desire to giggle.

"I thought Vulcans weren't meant to have a sense of humour?" he whispered back.

"There is no need to be insulting, Captain." A quick glance in Spock's direction showed his eyebrows hidden beneath his fringe and a totally bland look on his saturnine face. There was no time for him to say anything further and Kirk contented himself with a grin and realised that his apprehension had vanished entirely.

"Spock, Captain Kirk," the small,

upright woman greeted them both.

"T'Kie, live long and prosper." Spock raised his hand in salute. She bowed her head in response and Kirk repeated her gesture.

"Shall we begin?" she asked. "It is the hour of sunset."

Spock knelt before her and Kirk stood back to watch and wait. T'Kie touched the Vulcan's face and for several moments they froze in that position. Kirk could see nothing and wondered to himself exactly why he was there. The next few minutes dragged by; eventually T'Kie stirred and her hand dropped away from Spock's face.

"It would seem that thee was correct when thee anticipated this difficulty, Spock."

Spock nodded, his face drawn and tired.

Kirk started forward, many questions on the tip of his tongue, then as he remembered Spock's earlier warning he simply asked, "Is there anything I can do, Healer T'Kie?"

She looked from one male to the other, then nodded. "Yes, Captain. If you are willing to help there is indeed something you can do. The katra that Spock bears; it is that which belongs to a friend of yours?"

Kirk nodded. He himself would have said former friend but there was nothing to be gained by disputing the tense she used.

Spock shifted slightly and she turned her attention to him. "Thee must have intended that I ask this of Kirk or thee would not have requested that I allow his presence, Spock," she said

sternly.

The young man met her gaze steadily and said quietly in Vulcan, "I had not expected the Commander to be quite so desperate, T'Kie. In his present state he may try to transfer his katra to Captain Kirk."

"I understand that, Spock. However between us we have sufficient strength to thwart any such pretensions," T'Kie answered him in Standard, and Spock bowed his head in acquiescence.

Kirk was about to ask questions whether Spock wanted him to or not when the elderly Healer turned to him and said simply,

"Commander Mitchell fears death alone, Captain Kirk. Would you be willing to be with him as we free him?"

The young Captain swallowed before answering. "Yes, I think so. Just how do I go about doing that?"

"If you will allow me access to your thoughts, Captain, I will be able to persuade the Commander that he is not alone; that there is a friend for him. You will need to do nothing more than show your compassion and love. Spock and I will do all else that is necessary."

Kirk nodded slowly, wondering at a Vulcan who could talk so easily about love, and walked towards her. At her indication he knelt next to Spock and steeled himself. He felt her hot fingertips graze his brow and suddenly he saw the tableau from her eyes and felt his fingers touch Spock's face. Then he saw a slightly defiant Gary hiding behind a makeshift barricade in the corner of a barren wasteland, and he was immediately aware of his friend's fear and anguish.

Gary, he called softly.

His friend jumped and twisted round towards the sound. *Jim? Mitchell questioned. Jim? Is that really you, or something this green-blooded freak has thought up to get me with?*

Kirk winced but concentrated on sending soothing thoughts to the distraught man. *Of course it's me. Who else is going to come after you? Look; remember the week we spent climbing in the Rockies? There's no way Spock could know about that, is there? Or about that last leave we shared on Wrigley's.* He blushed unseen about some of the scenes he was allowing T'Kie and Spock to witness, but knew that he had to give Gary something that he would know Kirk would never willingly have shared with any one else.

Gradually Gary relaxed. The barrier faded and the man walked over to where Kirk was waiting. *It really is you, isn't it? He laughed, Why on earth did you come? How did he manage to persuade you? After all, the last time we met I tried to kill you.*

Kirk thought for a moment then said softly, *Do you know, I really don't know why. I guess that it's because the person who tried to kill me wasn't really you. I love you, Gary. You've always been my closest friend, and I miss you.*

Gary smiled and came closer. He laughed again, and Kirk noticed that his friend did not attempt to say he was sorry for what he had done.

Jim, it's good to see you. Gary Mitchell held out his arms.

After a momentary hesitation Kirk returned the gesture and they hugged each other. Breaking free after a moment Mitchell held Kirk at arm's length.

You're looking good, kid. Is that fancy

First Officer of yours looking after you properly?

Kirk nodded. His heart was too full for him to say anything, and somehow he was aware of the two Vulcans somewhere close by and watching. Mitchell, however, did not seem to notice anything but sat down and started to reminisce about their friendship.

While he listened to Gary's stories and put in the occasional comment Kirk kept feeling that he was involved in another conversation, one that was taking place nearby between two very different beings but one that he should not have been able to hear. He was trying desperately to strain his hearing hard enough to catch what was being said when he heard Mitchell take a sharp, indrawn breath and then sigh in sudden acquiescence.

Glancing at his friend he saw Mitchell's form start to waver and become transparent. Startled, Kirk rose to his feet and tried to make a grab at the disappearing man but his fingers slipped through the insubstantiality that once had held the appearance of Gary Mitchell.

A ghostly whisper filtered back to him. *Thanks, kid. Thank you for being here.*

Suddenly bereft and totally without bearings, Kirk yelled, *Gary!* and spun round desperately searching the barren waste for any sign of his friend. Instead he found himself staring at two figures he only vaguely recognised. *Gary!* he half-sobbed. Then focussing on the two not-quite-strangers he shouted suspiciously, *What have you done with him? Where have you hidden him?*

The taller of the two figures moved as though to confront him but was stopped by a look from the other one. Unable to move a muscle Kirk watched as she approached and stopped in front of

him. Behind her the male figure seemed to waver slightly and she glanced back for a moment. Whatever she saw did not cause her undue concern for she returned her attention to Kirk.

Moving closer she raised her hand to the Terran's face. Then as she touched him the woman said gently, *Come, Captain. Our task is done and it is now time to return.*

Suddenly, and with no sense of disruption, Kirk found himself back within his own mind and looking at T'Kie lifting her fingers from Spock's face.

"Gary?" Kirk croaked and T'Kie turned her attention to him.

"He is at peace, Kirk. I thank you for your cooperation." She straightened to her full height. Spock began to stand up, wavered and crumpled to the ground.

"Spock? Is he all right?" Kirk asked. He found it difficult to summon the energy to stand. *Just how long did that meld take?* he asked himself.

T'Kie said sternly, "Thirty-nine point seven minutes. Do not try to move just yet, Captain. I will deal with Spock." She returned her concentration to the collapsed Vulcan and a bleary-eyed Kirk watched as she once again touched his First Officer's face.

"He has expended much energy keeping the Commander's katra intact and is in need of rest, Captain. There is no need for worry. He has done well, all things considered."

Kirk managed to say, "I didn't think Vulcans worried, T'Kie?"

The Healer fixed him with a grim glance. "I do not, but you do, Kirk."

The Captain had the grace to grin shamefacedly before he got to his feet. *Spock isn't the only one who's tired*, he thought as he said, "I'll get him back to the ship once he's come round enough to stand on his own two feet."

"An excellent idea, Captain. I would suggest that you need rest as well as your First Officer."

"I know, T'Kie, and I'll do exactly that as soon as we return to the ship. How will you get back?" he asked rather stupidly.

"In the same way you will, Captain." Kirk could have sworn she was laughing as she produced her communicator and requested beam-up. As she closed the transmission she looked Kirk full in the face. Whatever she saw there obviously satisfied her for she nodded slowly and said,

"The compatibility between you and Spock is remarkable, Captain. I would not have expected such a link in two such disparate beings. You would do well to nurture it, Captain." Her "Live long and prosper," dissipated with her body as the transporter effect took place.

"T'Kie... ? What in... ? What link?" the confused Kirk spluttered. "Damn!"

"Captain?" The weary whisper reminded Kirk he was not alone.

"Spock?" He turned to where the Vulcan was supporting himself on one elbow. "No, don't try to get up yet. I'm going to get McCoy down."

"I would prefer if you did no such thing, sir," Spock replied stiffly. "I am sure T'Kie told you that I merely need to rest."

"She did, amongst other things, and

do you think you can stand without keeling over?" Kirk stood menacingly over his reluctant officer.

"Other things, sir?" Spock looked slightly confused. "What other things?" They were interrupted by the sound of a transporter beam.

"I'll tell you later," Kirk said as he wheeled round to see McCoy beginning to form.

"What in hell have you been up to now, Spock?" McCoy grumbled. In answer to Kirk's enquiring look he explained as he ran his Feinberger over the Vulcan. "I got a message from the Sterin saying that you were both here and Spock needed some attention." He stood up after emptying a hypo into the Vulcan's arm. "Stay there for a minute while Jim tells me what you've both been playing at."

Spock settled back with a resigned look on his face. Kirk grinned at him and then cast a quick glare in McCoy's direction as the Doctor ran his instrument over him. "Hmmm..." McCoy said. "You read as though you've run a marathon, Jim. Just what happened?"

He could see that neither man was in any hurry to tell him so he shrugged. "I guess I'll find out when you feel like telling me and not before, is that it?" He did not allow Kirk time to answer, "Admiral Henderson was looking for you, Jim. He wants you to contact him immediately."

"Why didn't you tell me that sooner, McCoy?" Kirk fumed as he opened his communicator and requested Palmer to have them beamed up on his command. Spock struggled to his feet, McCoy waiting to catch him if necessary. Once on his feet the Vulcan nodded to Kirk and the Captain said, "Now, Lieutenant."

They materialised in the Transporter Room and Kirk turned to the others. "Spock, go with McCoy. Let him check you out properly then join me in my quarters. Meanwhile I'll talk to the Admiral. He's probably got our new orders."

"That would seem most likely, Captain," Spock said as he reluctantly allowed McCoy to chivy him through the doorway.

Kirk smiled after them then turned to Kyle. "Everyone else on board, Lieutenant?"

"Just about, sir. Mr Scott's still over on the Hood but he's due back shortly."

"Good. Carry on, Mr Kyle."

Chapter 14

It was some time before Kirk could contact Admiral Henderson but when he did so the conversation was short.

"I've received a communique from H.Q., Jim. They want you back out on regular patrol as soon as possible but you're to go via Starbase 2. They've some crew changes for you." Henderson was obviously puzzled. "Are you expecting anyone in particular, Jim?"

For a moment Kirk considered telling Henderson everything that had happened over the past few weeks but something restrained him. He shook his head. "No, sir," he said truthfully. "They didn't give you any details, then?"

It was the Admiral's turn to shake his head. "None whatsoever! How soon can you be ready to break orbit?"

Kirk turned to look at Spock who

had just arrived.

"All personnel are aboard, sir. The ship is secure and we can depart whenever the Admiral so wishes," the Vulcan said.

"Fine. You're cleared to leave orbit, Captain. Bon voyage, gentlemen."

As Henderson's craggy visage faded from the screen, Kirk leaned back in his chair. "Well you heard the man, Mr Spock."

Spock looked at him blankly. "Sir?" he asked.

"Take us out of orbit, Commander, or the Admiral will be asking us what we're playing at."

His First Officer's eyebrows rose but he obediently contacted the Bridge. "Mr Farrell, the Enterprise is cleared to leave Dyremin. Take us out on impulse and engage warp drive at the system's edge. Our destination is Starbase 2. Spock out." He closed the connection and looked down at the slumped Human.

Kirk's half smile quirked his lips as he graciously waved the Vulcan to a seat. "We are going to have our long overdue conversation, Mr Spock," he said genially.

"With all due respect, sir, we are both tired and -"

"Sit down," Kirk growled, and was somewhat surprised at the Vulcan's immediate compliance. "I know we're both tired but you promised me some answers and I'm calling in that promise."

The Vulcan was still evasive. "I do not recall making any promises, Captain."

"Damn you, Spock. Stop this! I need to know what T'Kie meant when she

said we were linked." Kirk was scowling.

"Linked? T'Kie said we were linked? You must be mistaken, sir. That is not possible." Spock's tiredness was obvious as he allowed his shock to show.

"I can assure you I am not mistaken, Commander." Kirk's voice was hard. "Tell me exactly what she was talking about."

Shock was still evident on his First Officer's face, and for a moment Kirk wondered about postponing the confrontation. After all it was not just Spock who was tired, but he knew that he had the edge just now and it would be stupid to lose such a splendid opportunity.

"Better still, start with how you survived the effects of that barrier," he snapped.

The Vulcan looked away for a moment then straightened in his chair. "Very well, sir," he said tonelessly and Kirk wondered again whether he was doing the right thing. Grimly he pushed his doubts away. It was now or never; he was perfectly sure of that.

"The explanation I gave Doctor McCoy was essentially correct, Captain. The telepathic centres of the Vulcan brain can not be equated with the psi centres of a Terran brain. Also I am a touch telepath working on a ship of people who use touch indiscriminately. It is therefore necessary for me to maintain my shields at all times." He moved slightly. "Presumably that was sufficient to enable me to filter out most of the effects."

Kirk was unconvinced. "Your shields must have been pretty strong then, Mr Spock. How come Gary managed to read your mind later on?"

Spock looked uncomfortable. Kirk's expression lightened a little and he said with a certain amount of satisfaction, "You let him, didn't you? Why?"

"I was curious as to the extent of his capabilities," the Vulcan admitted.

"Did you think you might fool him about your own abilities?" Kirk asked.

"It had occurred to me that it might be useful not to let him know what I could do."

"You were testing him to see how you might possibly kill him. Weren't you?" Kirk knew he sounded accusing and watched as the Vulcan flinched.

"It had also occurred to me that you might not be able to order the death of one who was your closest companion."

Spock stared unblinkingly at Kirk, who nodded his head slowly before replying. "Thank you for your consideration, Mr Spock."

They sat in silence for a few moments then Spock stirred and the movement brought Kirk out of his reverie. He looked up quickly. "Nearly finished, Spock. Just tell me what T'Kie was talking about."

"I am unsure, as I did not hear what she said to you."

Kirk concentrated, forcing his tired brain to work. "I can't recall the exact words but it was something about not expecting to find two such compatible minds in different species." He paused. "She also said we should nurture our link... or words like that." He looked across at Spock and thought his companion seemed near collapse. "Are you all right, Spock?" he asked as his hand reached for the intercom.

"There is no need to call Doctor McCoy, Captain." The Vulcan's voice was a mere whisper. "Are you sure that is what Healer T'Kie said?"

"As sure as I can be. To be perfectly honest I was nearly dead on my feet. I was functioning on auto-pilot."

Spock shuddered and dropped his head into his hands. Kirk moved from behind his desk and grabbed the Vulcan's shoulders. Spock tried to pull away but Kirk held him still. Suddenly it was Kirk's turn to flinch as he realised that he was seeing the room from a different view-point.

"My god," he whispered.

A voice he only partially recognised said very quietly, *This is what T'Kie meant, Captain. You and I would seem to have minds that will interact extremely easily on all levels.*

Kirk panicked as he realised that the voice he could hear was in his head. He pulled away and Spock gasped as the link broke.

"My god, Spock! What are we getting into?" Kirk asked shakily.

"Nothing." The Vulcan's voice was also slightly unsteady. "You have nothing to worry about. Now that I am aware of this rather unfortunate circumstance it will be relatively easy for me to control it." His voice steadied and he stood up abruptly, tugging his tunic straight as he did so. "I apologise for my inadvertent intrusion into your privacy, sir. I can assure you it will not happen again."

Kirk had retreated behind his desk and he had to swallow before he could speak. "It wasn't all your fault, Spock. I'm sorry I panicked." He shrugged. "I guess it was just rather unexpected." He

looked keenly at the Vulcan. "What do you mean, relatively easy?"

"Normally there would be no chance of us invading each other's thoughts. What happened tonight is a result of your tiredness and my..." He stopped.

"Your exhaustion?" Kirk supplied.

"I would not call it exactly that, sir," Spock protested.

"Oh? Well I would, and so would McCoy if I'm not hedging my bets. So there's just one more thing before you go off duty. How do we stop that type of thing happening in future? You know I'm a tactile person."

"I know," Spock said ruefully. "Captain, I expended a lot of energy today. Once I am fully rested my normal shielding will be sufficient to ensure that we will not link inadvertently."

"You mean we could do so if we wanted? Say, if we needed to communicate privately?" Suddenly Kirk was excited.

"That would indeed be possible. However it is not a process that I would recommend we use except in an emergency." The Vulcan's dry tone dampened Kirk's excitement immediately.

"I guess you're right, Spock," he said despondently. "After all you're the telepath not me."

Unable to explain his sudden sense of loss he looked down at the desk and straightened some papers, and so did not see the quickly arrested move that Spock made towards him. When Kirk looked up Spock was standing seemingly at ease and obviously waiting to be dismissed.

Wearily Kirk smiled at his First Officer. "McCoy will have my head if he ever finds out how long you've been here. You'd best get some rest, Science Officer."

"That is my intention, sir." Spock was already on his way to the door when Kirk's voice stopped him.

"Before I forget. This change-over of personnel? Do you know anything about it?"

"No, sir. However I consider the probability that T'Kie does is high."

"Precisely my opinion, Mr Spock." Suddenly Kirk laughed, and Spock thought how young he looked when he relaxed. The Human sobered just as quickly and said quietly, "Poor Gary."

Spock's curt rejoinder shook Kirk slightly, "Do not forget Phila Teril and Lee Kelso as well as the other innocent victims, Captain."

"No. No, of course not, but Gary never asked for it all to happen to him, you know." He changed tack quickly. "Spock, I'm out on my feet and so are you. I do not want to see any sign of you for the next twenty-four hours, when I will expect to meet you for dinner in the Officer's Mess."

"As you wish, Captain. I will bid you good-night."

"Good night, Spock." Kirk stood and watched the door close before he turned away. He stood up, stretched and wandered across the room to pour himself a drink, and wondered how long McCoy would be. He had just taken his first sip when the door buzzer sounded. With a wry grin he took another glass out of the cabinet and called, "Come in."

"Brandy, Bones?" he asked as he

waved the bottle at his CMO.

"In a minute," McCoy said gruffly. He pointed his ever-ready tricorder in Kirk's direction and for once the Captain accepted his ministrations without demur. "Huh," McCoy grunted at nothing in particular.

"Do I pass muster, Doctor?" Kirk passed the filled glass to his friend.

"Thanks, Jim." McCoy took a large sip and swallowed before saying, "You need sleep, but other than that you'll do."

The Doctor sat down on the nearest chair and Kirk perched on the end of his bed. "How's Spock?" the Captain asked.

"You saw him last," McCoy said sharply.

Kirk sighed. "Yes, I know I did, but you're the doctor, Doctor."

"He's completely exhausted. How do they do that? I mean keep going when anybody else would have collapsed."

Kirk shook his head. He was too tired to even consider thinking. Silently he wished that McCoy would get to the point and then they could both go to bed. The Doctor took another sip of his drink then reflectively swirled the remainder around his glass.

"I take it that this time Gary's really dead?" he asked abruptly.

Kirk lifted his head. "You take it correctly, or at least so Healer T'Kie thinks." He sighed deeply. "You know it was really weird, Bones. It was as though he was actually there talking to me. I felt as though I could have touched him and he would have been solid."

McCoy settled back pleased that

Kirk was at least willing to talk. *A pity that Vulcan can't do the same thing*, he thought as he prepared to listen, even though he was not sure exactly what Kirk was talking about.

"He was just like he always was." Kirk paused, "Well, no, I guess that isn't really true, not at first anyway. He called Spock a freak, but then it really was Gary, Bones." He leaned forward urgently. "If I could have stopped him going I would have done so!" There was a much longer pause before Kirk, his eyes bright, said quietly, "I miss him. Even more now. Now that I realise that it really wasn't him. That he was just a victim of circumstance."

McCoy let his face show his scepticism and Kirk said earnestly, "Surely you must see that? If he had been truly evil, do you think Spock would still be alive?"

The Doctor was about to remind Kirk of the others who had died as a result of that 'circumstance' and of the fact that Spock was a trained telepath who could probably deal easily enough with attempts to take over his mind. Then he looked at Kirk's face and something held him back. He nodded non-committally, took another sip of brandy and waited for the Captain to continue.

"It all seems such a waste, Bones. Gary could have done so much and now it's all gone, wasted...." His voice trailed off and to McCoy's practised eye the young man seemed to sink into depression.

"Captain," the Doctor said gently, "why not think about what Gary left you rather than what might have been." He waited for his words to penetrate Kirk's fog of dejection and exhaustion.

Kirk looked up at him. "I'm not sure I get what you're talking about, Bones," he said slowly.

McCoy just looked at him sympathetically. "I know you're tired, Jim, but think for a moment. Gary has left you a permanent legacy if only you are willing to try for it."

Kirk's tired face showed his incomprehension. "Legacy?" he said, feeling stupid and wishing McCoy a thousand miles away.

McCoy was aware of Kirk's very obvious need to sleep but he also knew that unless he talked to Kirk now he would never get the chance again. By tomorrow the younger man's defences would be rebuilt and he would not want to talk about Gary at all.

"Yes," McCoy said grimly. "I'm talking about you and Spock."

Kirk's eyes left McCoy's face and the Doctor knew he had hit a nerve, even if he did not know the cause. Taking a deep breath and mentally crossing his fingers he continued, "This whole farrago has served to make you and Spock really look at each other; not just see what you wanted to see. You've seen each other through a potentially deadly situation. So, don't forget what you've learned or Gary's death will truly have been wasted." He stood up, drained the last of his drink and defiantly put the glass down with a clatter. "I'll leave you to clear up," he said as he turned towards the door. "Oh and Jim, go to bed will you?"

Kirk looked at him and smiled sweetly. "Exactly what I planned to do half an hour ago, Bones, but something rather got in the way." His smile widened to a grin at McCoy's predictable reaction and like a gleeful little boy played his

trump card. "Oh by the way, it's odd you should have said that about Spock and me, Bones. Healer T'Kie more or less told me the exact same thing. Strange, isn't it? Good-night, Doctor."

McCoy found himself standing in the corridor with his "Good-night, Jim," still on his lips and facing a closed door. For a moment he debated going back but laughed to himself. *If Jim can still play me like that when he's this tired, I guess there can't be much wrong with him.* Shaking his head he made his way down the corridor.

Meanwhile as Kirk got ready for bed his thoughts turned back to T'Kie's words. *I must remember to see what I can find out about Vulcan mind-links. It could be very, very useful indeed.*

He yawned widely and suddenly was too tired to think about anything at all.

