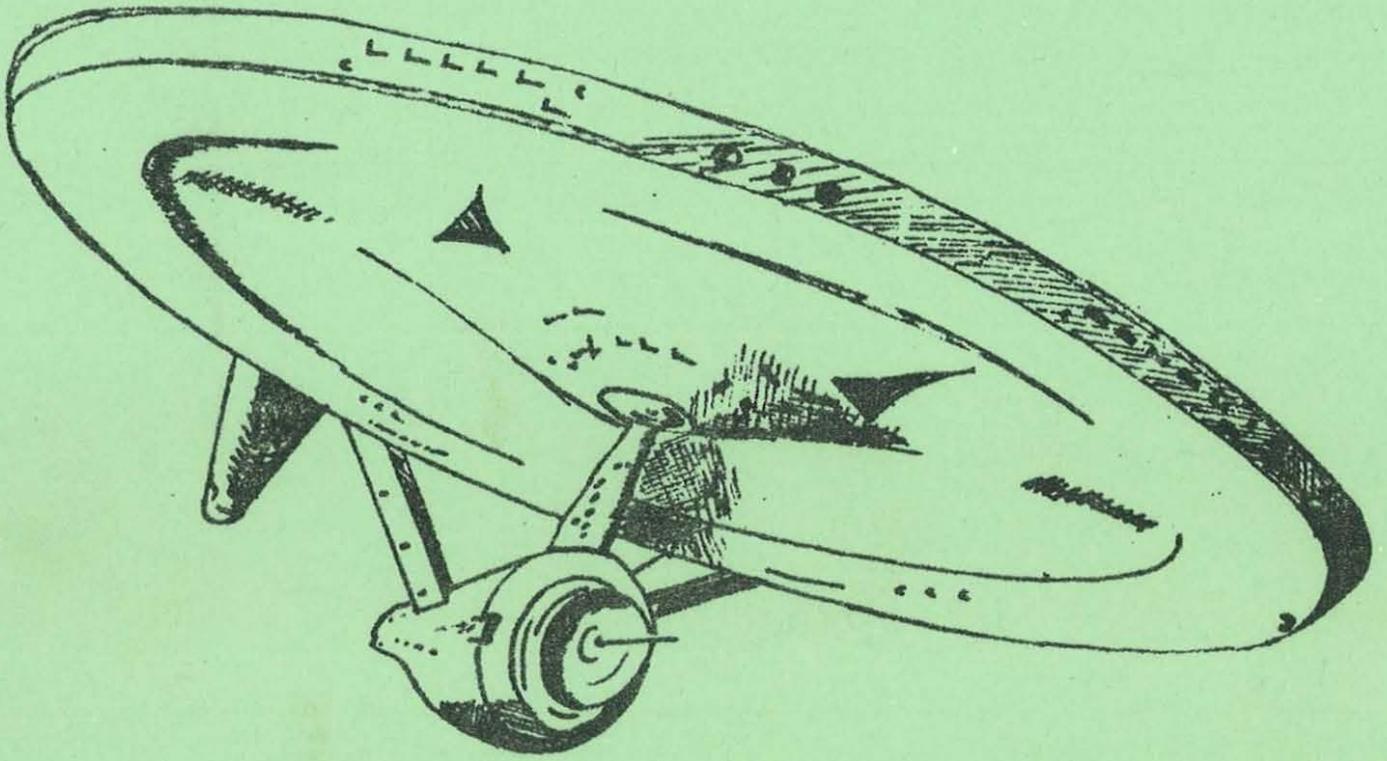


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ENTERPRISE

INCIDENTS 4

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stories by

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A MATTER OF LIFE

Like a hunted animal running to its last refuge, James Kirk strode quickly along the final few yards to his quarters, thankfully throwing himself against the wall inside as the door slid shut. He closed his eyes in blessed solitude. McCoy's angry cries still rang in his ears, and he could still see the quiet concern in Spock's eyes as he left the bridge. Damn it, couldn't they see what he was going through? It was an order, an order that must be carried out - to the letter. What good would it have done if he'd delayed? Coleman would have taken over and done it anyway, so how could he have prevented it?

His thoughts spiralled and contracted, bitterness building on guilt, and for some reason he thought back to when it began - when the death warrant for the Meathanians was truly signed.

It had only been a short time ago, a few brief days, or was it weeks? It did not really matter, for all the events were a nightmare.

The Enterprise had been on patrol along the edge of the Klingon Neutral Zone, keeping a wary eye on a Klingon warship which was doing the exact same thing on their side. The entire crew was on stand-by alert, and the atmosphere in the ship was jumpy and unsure. His senior officers had said nothing, but he knew they were anxious about the possible strain on their men. Unfortunately he could do little but suggest they carry out their routine duties - his orders were to watch the Klingons, and that was exactly what he was doing.

The Klingon ship was slightly behind them, cruising quietly without any outward sign of the activity within, when Chekov noticed something on his scanners. He looked round at Kirk, who was busily signing a pile of reports brought up by Yeoman Rand.

"Captain, a small spacecraft has just entered Federation space, bearing 1047 mark 54."

"Where from, Mr. Chekov?" asked Kirk.

"It seems to have come from inside Klingon territory, sir, but it does not appear to be threatening."

"Very well, plot an interception course, Chekov. Let's see what it's up to..." He contacted the science labs on Deck 2, where he knew his First Officer would be. "Mr. Spock to the bridge."

They were almost on the small intruder when Spock arrived in the elevator, taking in Kirk's brief explanation as he walked across to his station.

"Closing on craft, sir," Sulu said as he skilfully guided the huge ship.

"Main viewer on, Mr. Sulu."

The small ship hung in space, a dot among a great many other dots.

"It is stationary, Captain," Spock confirmed.

"Any idea what it is, or what it's up to?"

"A small, limited-range scoutcraft...one occupant. Klingon in origin but unarmed. It appear to be waiting for us."

Uhura interrupted from her position behind Kirk. "Captain, the scoutcraft is sending peaceful signals in Klingonese; whoever is aboard says he is unarmed and asks for political asylum."

Kirk's eyebrows lifted almost as high as Spock's. "A Klingon wants asylum? Wonders will never cease... Sulu, lock on a tractor beam and bring our friendly Klingon aboard. Lt. Uhura, I want a team of security men down there when the ship arrives. Mr. Spock..."

The Captain and First Officer arrived at the shuttlecraft hangar just as the

Klingon ship slid quietly aboard. The security men surrounded it as soon as the deck was pressurised, phasers ready as the door slid open.

The Klingon stumbled out, his eyes flickering nervously back and forth between the phasers and Kirk, who signalled the men to put their weapons away. This was obviously not a dangerous enemy.

He wore a deep crimson tunic, an insignia of some kind on his left breast. His dark face was clean-shaven and his hair close cropped. His hands constantly rubbed nervously together. Eventually he focused on Kirk, a stream of alien words babbling out.

Kirk smiled ruefully and shook his head. "I'm afraid Klingonese isn't my forte. Can't you speak Galactic?"

The Klingon looked dismayed. He glanced desperately from Kirk to Spock, still speaking in his native tongue. Kirk shrugged and turned to Spock.

"Isn't there anyone here who speaks his language?"

Spock paused, searching his memory. Within a few seconds he had the answer. "Lt. Whitmore has studied the language, sir. Shall I contact her?"

"Please do - the sooner we find out what he wants, the better. I know the computers could translate for us, but I'm not taking him near them until we know more about him."

Uhura quickly traced the young woman in question for them, and barely ten minutes had passed before Lt. Sally Whitmore arrived at the hangar deck. She took in the situation at once, changing quickly to the harsh, abrupt Klingon speech.

Kirk watched impatiently as the two conversed in what at first sounded like incomprehensible gibberish, and nearly jumped out of his skin at the urgent call from Sulu on the bridge. He answered quickly, wondering what was up now.

"It's the Klingon ship on the other side, sir. She's racing to catch up with us and sensors indicate she's ready for battle."

"Red alert, Mr. Sulu. I'm on my way."

Lt. Whitmore looked over as Kirk and Spock turned to leave. "Captain, shall I continue questioning? The only thing I've been able to find out so far is his name - Kelgar. All the rest is very muddled. He seems very frightened, but not only of us."

Kirk nodded. "Carry on, Lieutenant. Find out all you can, and report it to me on the bridge."

Uhura met him as he stepped through the turbolift doors. "All stations are on alert, Captain. The Klingons have been trying to contact us. Shall I acknowledge?"

"Yes, let's hear their little story." He reached his chair, noting the enemy's distance. "Mr. Sulu, bring us around to face her. All forward shields on full strength. Phasers ready."

"Acknowledged, Captain. Forward shields on full."

Spock had barely taken over at his station when Uhura said, "Message from the Klingon commander is being sent, Captain. Coming up on screen now."

Kirk swung round as the screen cleared to reveal a well-known face. The Klingon smiled delightedly, his honeyed tones swiftly crossing the space between the two ships.

"Well, well, Captain Kirk! How delightful to see you again!"

"A pleasure, I'm sure, Captain Koloth," smiled Kirk. "How long has it been?"

"Too long, my dear friend. Why, we haven't met since that unfortunate

incident on Space Station K-7. Tell me, was it your idea to deluge us with those infernal tribbles?"

"What, me?" enquired Kirk innocently. "I would never think of such a thing. However, I assure you the crewman responsible was dealt with afterwards. Wasn't he, Mr. Spock?"

Spock met his joking enquiry with true Vulcan cool. "Naturally, Captain."

Kirk quelled the laughter that threatened to explode and turned back to the screen with a straight face. "However, tribbles apart...what can I do for you, Captain?"

Koloth's smile grew wider. "Tut, tut, Captain, I am a Commander now."

Kirk bowed his head in apology. "My mistake, Commander Koloth."

"Thank you. Now, before we go any further, may I enquire why you have your shields up, and, I presume, your men at battle stations? I merely wish to talk."

"Let's just say I like to be ready for anything. Talk about what, Koloth?"

"A small, trifling matter, Kirk. Hardly worth mentioning... I believe you picked up a small Klingon craft recently?"

"We did," Kirk confirmed, his eyes narrowing. He exchanged glances with Spock.

"I thought so," Koloth said smoothly. "You see, the man aboard it is an escapee from a prison planet. Not a serious criminal, you understand, but slightly...deranged."

"He seemed more frightened to me," murmured Kirk. A call from Lt. Whitmore interrupted him, and he excused himself. "Kirk here."

"I think you should hear this man, sir. He keeps asking for political asylum, and seems terrified of his own people. He's mentioned something about a weapon, a weapon only he knows how to build. I couldn't get anything else sane from him, bar babblings about cells and torture."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll be down there as soon as possible."

Spock left his station to move down to the Captain's side. "Deranged, Captain? Or perfectly sane?"

Koloth's sunny expression seemed to have hardened somewhat by the time Kirk gave him his attention again. He seemed to sense from Kirk's face that he had no hope, but he plunged on. "You see what I mean? Completely insane, but harmless. However, we would like him back. After all, we can't have prisoners escaping willy-nilly, can we?"

"Oh, no," Kirk agreed fervently. "But there is one small problem, Commander."

"Oh? Tell me, please."

"Insane or not, the prisoner has asked for political asylum. The mere thought of returning to the Empire fills him with terror."

"Is that surprising? Come, return him and we'll say no more about it. I do regret his violation of the Neutral Zone."

I bet you do, thought Kirk. He smiled again at Koloth, who immediately thought he had persuaded him. Not so. "Sorry, Koloth, no deal."

The merest trace of anger laced Koloth's honeyed voice. "No deal? My dear Captain Kirk, surely one man is not worth so much to you? We do not interfere in your rulings and laws, so don't interfere with ours. Send him back."

The turbolift opened and Kelgar exploded onto the bridge, Lt. Whitmore and three security men close behind. The Klingon spat at Koloth's image, grabbing Kirk's arm and shrieking in Klingonese.

With some difficulty Spock and the men hauled him off, while Kirk looked

incredulously at Whitmore.

"I'm sorry, sir, but he insisted on seeing you. He's absolutely terrified of being sent back."

"So I see," murmured the Captain drily. "Well, Miss Whitmore, you can tell your charge to stop panicking. He's staying on this ship."

As the woman spoke rapidly to Kelgar, Kirk turned back to the now-livid Koloth. "I think that answers your request, Commander. Kelgar stays here as long as he wants. I suggest you tell your 'prison planet' that. After all, if he is insane, what harm can it do?"

"More harm than you think, Kirk!" snapped Koloth. "Believe me, you will wish you had not interfered! You, and your Federation!"

The screen went abruptly blank and a few minutes later Sulu reported the warship was heading back into Empire space at warp speed. Kirk relaxed and cancelled battle stations.

"Maintain patrol manoeuvres, Mr. Sulu. Lt. Uhura, contact Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott. Ask them to meet us in briefing room 1. I think it's time we found out what Kelgar was running from."

Half an hour later all four command personnel knew exactly why Koloth was so anxious to get Kelgar back, and none of them could believe it.

"A weapon that could devastate whole galaxies! That's pretty far-fetched, Captain," said Scott with a touch of awe in his voice.

"Nevertheless, that is what he claims he can make," Kirk said. "You're sure that's what he is saying, Lieutenant?"

"No doubt about it, sir," she confirmed. "Some of what he says is dialect Klingonese and outwith my knowledge, but most of it makes sense - if you can call that sense."

"The wall between madness and genius is very thin, Lieutenant," said McCoy. Looking at Kelgar, Kirk was inclined to agree. "Jim, if Kelgar's weapon is so great, why was he in prison?"

Whitmore spoke to Kelgar, whose eyes grew wild and frightened as he replied in sharp, quick bursts. At last the woman turned to them.

"He says he tried to escape before. He wanted the Federation to have the weapon - he calls it the 'K'tenagar' - too, so there would be a stalemate; a kind of status-quo between both powers. That way he thought there would be continuous peace."

"Most logical," said Spock. "But unlikely to work, knowing both Klingon and Human natures."

"Unfortunately you're probably right, Spock," sighed Kirk. "Some day someone is bound to push the button..."

"Speaking of buttons," McCoy broke in, "I'd like to give him a sedative before someone pushes his. Any more excitement and he'll go over the brink. I don't know how he's lasted this far."

Kirk nodded. "Go ahead, Bones. I think he's told us enough for now."

McCoy approached Kelgar with an air-hypo and the Klingon cringed back in fear. The doctor sighed.

"Lieutenant, will you tell him it's just to calm him down?"

Sally Whitmore smiled, telling Kelgar what McCoy wanted to do. The Klingon nodded, speaking quickly as if to get his information out before his tortured mind forgot it. The interpreter listened closely, an astonished look coming over her features.

"Captain, he says there is only one place a vital chemical compound for his weapon can be found. It is on a planet unclaimed by either Federation or the Klingon Empire. His people could already be on their way there."

"I guess that answers any questions you may have left, Scotty," said Kirk. The engineer nodded.

"No wonder Koloth wanted him back! He was frightened Kelgar would tell us this," gasped McCoy.

Kitk was already contacting Uhura. "Get me Starfleet Headquarters. Tell them it's urgent."

Apparently Starfleet considered Kelgar's story very urgent indeed, for within a few hours a reply had sped across the distance between the Starship and Earth, and not long afterwards the Enterprise was in orbit around Banar Colvar IV, where the officer assigned the problem was waiting to be picked up.

Kirk stepped forward as the transporter beam faded and the two men found they could move.

"Admiral Coleman. Welcome aboard."

Brown eyes looked abstractedly at him from under dark bushy eyebrows. "Ah... Captain Kirk. My aide, Giannndria."



The young man at the Admiral's side nodded to Kirk with an air of assured superiority that for some reason put Kirk's back up. He shrugged off the feeling and introduced Spock and McCoy, who were greeted with the same distracted air.

Spock remained as bland as ever, but McCoy could not resist making a face at Kirk, which was fortunately missed by both Admiral and Commander. Moving swiftly to the door, Coleman smiled and rubbed his hands briskly, the first real sign of life he had shown so far.

"Well, Captain, where's this Klingon you found? After all, that's what we're here for."

"If you'll follow me, sir..."

McCoy hung back as the three left the room. "Real couple of cold fishes," he muttered. "Hey, Spock - are you sure none of your Vulcan traditions have caught on on Earth?"

Spock paused halfway through the entrance. "If they have, Doctor, I am sure they will greatly improve the Human race as a whole. Yourself included, of course."

"What! You point-eared, self-opin - " The rest of the doctor's outburst was cut off as the transporter room door closed, and Mr. Kyle wondered what the outcome of this particular 'argument' would be. He grinned to himself and informed the bridge that Coleman and Giannndria had arrived safely.

"As Kelgar seems to have a fear of anything to do with hospitals, we've put him in a room of his own, near enough to Sickbay for Dr. McCoy to keep an eye on him, but far enough away to prevent him panicking unnecessarily."

Coleman answered Kirk's remark with a non-committal noise and decided to clear up a point which had been niggling at him since he had arrived. He cleared his throat.

"Captain Kirk, why was your Chief Engineer not also there to greet us? If we are to be aboard your ship for the journey to this planet, then surely - "

"Chief Engineer Scott was badly needed in Main Engineering, sir," Kirk interrupted smoothly. He nodded to the guard outside the small private room. "There's been a problem with one of the reactors - nothing too serious, but it was best to see to it before it became worse. We wouldn't want to blow up halfway there..."

"Quite."

Lt. Whitmore rose as they entered, but Kirk motioned her to sit down again. "Admiral, this is Lt. Sally Whitmore, our interpreter for Kelgar. She's struck up a kind of friendship with Kelgar, which has helped tremendously. He's a little unstable."

Both Coleman and Giannndria ignored Whitmore completely, their whole attention focused on the hapless Klingon, who was gazing at them with wide open eyes. The two Starfleet officers studied him as if he was 'exhibit A' in a court case, then finally the Admiral turned to Kirk.

"You are sure he's telling the truth?"

Kirk restrained the exasperated sigh that threatened. Instead, he used the efficient Starship Captain tone he reserved for irritating officials. "Yes, sir, he is telling the truth. Dr. McCoy..." He raised an eyebrow as the doctor entered. "...Has examined him and applied the usual tests."

"Ah," Coleman said, while Kirk studied his CMO and First Officer closely. He was about to mouth the words 'What took you so long?' when Coleman coughed loudly. "Captain, have you found out the name of this unique planet yet?"

"As a matter of fact, we have, barely an hour ago. Mr. Spock?"

All five Humans looked expectantly at the Vulcan. Spock straightened his

shoulders.

"Naturally there was a little confusion at first, because Kelgar could only tell us the Klingon name for the planet in question, but after a short search and the showing of star charts to him, we have pin-pointed his world. It is a large class M planet with a high water-land ratio. Landing parties have ascertained there is no sentient life on it, humanoid or otherwise, and..."

"What's it called?" snapped Gianndria; Spock afforded him his best raised eyebrow, his opinion of the young man's interruption all too clear.

"As yet it has no name, Commander. It is listed as Planet XK97/68, in the A Alpha Virginis system, 600 light years from here."

Within a few days James Kirk could have wished Planet XK97/68 was a lot nearer to their present position, for Admiral Coleman and his aide were slowly driving him up the wall. There was always one or the other of them on the bridge, saying nothing, but watching his every move. At times he felt like a freshman cadet just out of the Academy. As if that was not enough, there was also this business of the energy leak in the ship's reactors. It was slowing them down considerably, and Kirk feared the Enterprise would never reach XK97/68 before either the Klingon warships or the additional Starships racing to add weight to the Federation claim to the planet. As his job was to reach the vital planet first and ward off the Klingons, the Captain was understandably getting a little anxious.

Uncomfortably aware of Coleman's disapproving gaze, Kirk contacted Main Engineering.

"Scott here, sir."

Kirk mentally crossed his fingers. "Any luck with the leak, Scotty?"

Six decks below, Montgomery Scott sighed, glancing back towards the gangs of engineers hard at work. "I canna say for sure, sir. We seem tae have traced the fault, but now something else has broken doon... I canna say when we'll be able tae try full warp drive."

He could hear the worry in his captain's voice as Kirk replied to his report. "Okay. Carry on as you are, Scotty. Turn her inside out if you have to."

"I'm practically doin' that now, Captain," replied Scott glumly. "Scott out." He looked back to his men. "Wilkins, have ye no' fixed that line yet? Well, hurry up, man!"

Back on the bridge, Coleman left his position by the main viewer and stalked like a praying mantis towards the command chair.

"Captain, haven't your engineers repaired the damage yet?"

Kirk reluctantly looked at him. "As you may have heard, Admiral, Mr. Scott has not yet solved the problem, but he has found the cause. It should not be too long now."

Coleman's face expressed only too well his opinion of Scotty's capabilities, but Kirk couldn't help that. A small smile quirked the corner of his mouth as Spock came over to add weight to his statement.

"Mr. Scott has proved himself to be one of the most proficient engineers in Starfleet, sir. You can be sure he is doing everything within his knowledge and capabilities to ensure we reach XK97/68 in time."

The Admiral snorted, turned on his heel, and left without a word. Everyone on the bridge visibly relaxed. Kirk looked up at the Vulcan.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock."

"Captain?"

"For getting rid of him."

A faint look of puzzlement crossed Spock's features. "I merely stated a known fact, sir. I do not see..."

"Thanks, anyway," grinned the Captain.

Dr. McCoy greeted his visitor with some irritation. Like Kirk, he found Coleman and his aide the most supercilious, aggravating people he knew, but as they were a few steps higher than he on the promotion scale, he could do little about it. However, Admiral or no Admiral, he made his disapproval of Coleman's visit perfectly clear.

"Is your visit really necessary, sir?" he asked as the imposing Human swept into the room. "You questioned Kelgar for three hours yesterday. He's a sick man."

"A sick man with a great many secrets, Dr. McCoy," Coleman replied coldly. "So far he has only given us the bare details about this 'K'tenagar' thing. I want more facts about how it works, and I want information about the Empire. A scientist doesn't just ignore what goes on about him."

McCoy could cheerfully have hit him, but he forced himself to remain calm. "You want things he can't give you just now, sir. He is still frightened, and he won't calm down until he's on a planet far from the Klingons. Just now his mind is fixed on one hope - peace. If you push him too far he could - "

"I'll thank you to save your psychology for your captain, Doctor. Why is Whitmore still with the Klingon?"

"The Lieutenant is the only person Kelgar will relate to."

"She spends too much time with him. I will inform Kirk she is to be returned to normal duties."

McCoy opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. Let Jim ding-dong it out with him. He had enough trouble keeping his patient sane.

The young lieutenant explained to Kelgar that Admiral Coleman was only visiting, though she knew the Klingon sensed more questions would be forthcoming. The Admiral breathed heavily through his nose, addressing his words to the wall directly above Kelgar's head.

"Lt. Whitmore, ask Kelgar why he wishes us to have the weapon."

It took only a moment for them to converse. "He says to create permanent peace, sir. The ultimate weapon that would deter all from war... He wishes only peace."

"And what does he expect from it?"

Whitmore frowned and repeated the question to Kelgar. The Klingon shrugged.

"He doesn't understand the question, sir."

A click of the tongue, then another question rapped out, like a demand. "Does he realise he is a traitor to his own race? What makes him think he'll be welcome here?"

"Admiral Coleman, I must protest!" McCoy interrupted. "A question like that could raise doubts, doubts that might shatter his last hopes."

"Your opinions have been noted, Doctor. Ask him, Lieutenant."

Hesitantly, the woman obeyed, and to McCoy's dismay Kelgar at once became agitated, staring at Coleman in terror as he clung to Whitmore. Anxiously his interpreter translated his babblings.

"Sir, he thinks you're going to send him back! He thinks..."

"Ask him again!" snapped Coleman. "Ask him what good he thinks his weapon will do. Ask him what he hopes to gain. Ask him!"

McCoy shook his head violently at Whitmore, walking to the intercom and

contacting Sickbay. "Nurse Chapel, prepare a bed for Kelgar. I'm isolating him from all visitors. Maybe that'll protect him from this...this idiot!"

"You will not use that tone with me, Dr. McCoy!"

McCoy's voice was calm, and colder than ice. "Admiral Coleman, if you think I am going to stand here and let you break this man apart, you can think again. My responsibility is to my patients, and you can bluster all you like.

"Sally, try to calm him down. Tell him nothing is going to happen."

"I am, sir, but Admiral Coleman frightens him."

"Then Admiral Coleman will have to leave."

Coleman looked astonished at McCoy's statement. "Dr. McCoy, I shall not be - "

"Sir, when it comes to medical matters on this ship, my word is law. Admiral or not, I can and will order you out if I consider you are harming a patient's health. You are doing so now. Please leave."

At that moment Kelgar leaped from his bed, clawing at Coleman's face and neck. McCoy pushed the Admiral aside, seizing a hypo from his medi-kit, which he pressed against Kelgar's arm. The Klingon promptly collapsed into Whitmore's arms and the Enterprise CMO breathed a sigh of relief.

He was still muttering uncomplimentary remarks about Coleman when they transferred Kelgar to the main ward.

Three hours later Kirk heard McCoy's report with growing anger and dismay. Finally the doctor fell silent, having ranted on about Admiral Coleman for the better part of an hour.

"Damn!" murmured Kirk after a while. "Damn Coleman, damn Koloth, damn Kelgar for inventing this damn weapon! He's completely withdrawn, you say?"

"As good as," the doctor agreed glumly. "He won't even speak to Sally Whitmore now, and any mention of 'K'tenagar' makes him more distraught than before."

Kirk slammed his fist down on the desk in sheer frustration. "Just when Scotty finally gets full warp power back, Coleman destroys our only lead to what this compound is! If Kelgar never recovers, we might not build the weapon in time. The Klingons will get there first and then..."

"Then what about Kelgar?" snapped McCoy. The Captain looked at him, puzzled. "What about this man you've all destroyed with your greed for weapons?"

"Bones, I don't understand your - "

"Captain - while everyone in this galaxy plays power games, one man is quickly losing his mind. Okay, so he's a Klingon - but he has as much right as you to sanity and peace of mind. Why don't you get Spock to probe his thoughts for the last dregs of his sanity, Jim?"

Unsure whether his friend was just blowing his top or whether he meant it, Kirk turned hurt, astonished eyes to him. "Bones, I had nothing to do with Kelgar's insanity! If anyone did that, it was his own people. Believe me, I'd like nothing better than to leave him be, but I have my orders."

McCoy's eyes widened at Kirk's statement. He violently pushed his chair back, his voice quietening ominously. "And you always follow your orders... Well, sir you can't return Kelgar to what he was now. The only way he'll find peace is by dying!"

Kirk watched in stunned silence as his friend stormed out of his office. Instinctively he rose to follow, then sat down again. Could Bones be right? Had he indirectly destroyed Kelgar as much as anyone else? Power games...

The Enterprise slipped swiftly into the outer reaches of the solar system

known as Alpha Virginis. Little was known about the sun and its orbiting planets - it was a region as yet unexplored. It had been given a name, some numbers, and become yet another dot on star charts too crowded to explore as Starfleet could have wished. Kirk had no doubt the Federation would investigate all the planets thoroughly once they --

Sulu smoothly interrupted his thoughts. "XK97/68 coming up on the viewer now, Captain."

Kirk stared at the pale blue planet revolving before him. Hard to believe that peaceful, innocent world held the key to the destruction of whole galaxies. Hard to believe, but true, for six Klingon battlecruisers were in orbit around the shimmering world. They had arrived too late.

Uhura frowned as a message was relayed from Communications several decks below. She swung round to Kirk.

"There's a communication coming from one of the cruisers, Captain. Audio-visual."

"On the screen, Uhura."

Kirk noted with dull surprise that it was Koloth's face which once again appeared before him. He, like the Enterprise, must have been nearest the planet. There were no false pleasantries this time.

"Back off, Kirk," hissed the Klingon. "We have prior claim to this planet, and no snivelling Starship Captain is going to take it."

"Why should we even want to?"

"Don't be stupider than you must be. You have Kelgar, so you are bound to know what is on this planet. You are also bound to know we won't give it up easily. Now back off before we blast you to pieces!"

The screen turned black. Uhura swung back to her board. "He's cut transmission, sir. Shall I contact again?"

"No," said Kirk. "No...we've got enough to think about just now." He rose, signalling Spock and Scott to follow. "Mr. Chekov, condition red. I want all stations on standby with full deflector shields. Mr. Sulu, move in till we're just out of range of their weapons and hold position. Lt. Uhura, keep a constant monitor on all frequencies. They make any moves, I want to know about it."

Admiral Coleman was waiting for them in briefing room 1. Giannndria arrived a few minutes later, blustering about McCoy's refusal to let him even look at Kelgar. They sat down just as McCoy entered without a word, sitting quietly and somehow managing to avoid Kirk's eye. Spock watched them both carefully, well aware that something was wrong, but not sure what.

The Admiral chose that moment to pounce on the major reason for the Enterprise's late arrival. "Well, Captain Kirk, your engineer's 'problem' seems to have cost us more than a little lost time!"

"There was nothing we could have done, Admiral Coleman," Kirk said quietly. "The necessary repair work was completely unforeseen, and even if we had had full warp drive right from the start, it's possible we would still have arrived too late. As it is, the immediate question is - where do we stand now?"

"There are six class A warships in orbit around XK97/68, Captain," reported Spock. "Sensors indicate each one has weaponry and power equal to ours. The Klingons undoubtedly already have armed forces on the planet itself, who are doubtless searching for the vital compound."

"What about the ships coming to support us?" Giannndria butted in.

"The Kongo is five hours away from this position, Commander. The Columbus and the Farragut are six and twelve hours respectively. Even when they arrive, that will be four against six, perhaps more should the Empire decide to send any

more of their ships which happen to be near."

"Only four Starships?" exclaimed Coleman. "Why hasn't Starfleet sent more?"

"Perhaps they're all busy," remarked McCoy acidly. He returned Kirk's sharp look with interest. The Captain sighed and looked round the table.

"Well, it looks like we have a stalemate, with the odds stacked pretty high against us. Any suggestions?"

"You will have to blow up the planet," said Coleman calmly. All eyes in the room fixed on him. Kirk frowned.

"Sir, I would be very reluctant to do that..."

"You have enough power on this ship to destroy such a planet, have you not?" When the Captain did not immediately answer, Coleman looked at Scott. The engineer nodded slowly.

"Aye, we have, sir, but we've never used it. There are Klingons on that planet, and..."

"I don't need your opinion, Mr. Scott," the Admiral said smoothly. He turned back to Kirk. "Captain?"

Kirk took a deep breath. "It seems the only way to stop the Klingons - we certainly couldn't survive an all-out battle. However, as Mr. Scott says, there are people, Klingons or not, down there. I'm not happy about blowing them up without a thought."

"And how many Federation people would they murder without a thought if they got the weapon?" murmured Coleman. Kirk nodded slowly as the Admiral continued his argument. "I was sent by Starfleet either to capture the planet or make sure by some way the Klingons didn't get it. The only option left is to destroy the source once and for all. This is a military situation - it calls for military tactics."

Kirk was about to retort angrily when he caught Spock's eyes. "It is...a logical solution, Captain," the Vulcan said.

Tension grew in the room as they awaited Kirk's decision. Finally, Coleman said, "If you are unwilling to give the order, I shall..."

"That will not be necessary, sir," Kirk answered crisply. His decision made, he spoke to Scott. "Mr. Scott, prepare full phaser banks and photon torpedoes. I want all the weapons you've got trained on that planet."

Scott looked as if he might say something else, but rose briskly with an 'Aye, sir,' and left the room.

Coleman and Giandria rose as one. "We'll be on the bridge, Captain..."

McCoy followed them out, his face set and unreadable. As he reached the door he gave Kirk a strange glance which somehow bothered the Captain.

Within fifteen minutes everything was set and ready. Kirk and Spock took their places on the bridge, Admiral Coleman placing himself at Kirk's side.

"Whenever you wish, Captain," he said.

Kirk had the impression of being given a pat on the head for being a good boy. He didn't like the feeling. Command training took over, and he contacted Engineering.

"Scotty, are you ready?"

"Aye, sir."

"Stand by; Mr. Sulu, be prepared to veer off the instant the weapons are fired. We don't want caught up in the blast."

"Co-ordinates prepared, Captain," said Sulu in a deceptively calm voice.

Kirk warned all decks to stand by for a shaking, then turned his attention once again to the blue ball that would soon be nothing but a memory. "Fire all phasers and torpedoes."

The Klingon ships never knew what hit them. Four were caught up in the awesome blast that marked the end of XK97/68, the other two were tossed like twigs in a storm, their hulls battered by the flying debris. They survived - just.

As the buffeting came to an end, Spock calmly reported the complete absence of the world called XK97/68. Kelgar's weapon would never be made.

A smile split Coleman's face as he looked at Kirk. "Congratulations, Captain Kirk. A job well done. I'll be commending your actions in my report."

Kirk's murmur of thanks was dry -- he did not wish thanks from Coleman of all people. He left the chair and headed towards the turbolift.

"Mr, Spock, you have the con. I'll be in my office if you need me..."

The doors swished shut as the tall Vulcan ordered Sulu to leave the Alpha Virginis system.

Irritated beyond belief, Kirk stared hard at the keyboard and screen before him. Try as he might, he could not get down to making up his report - his mind refused to think factually. Instead, he kept going over the words Bones McCoy had said last time he was in this very room. That look on his face...

Kirk smiled and shrugged. Bones would get over it, he always did. After he finally got this blasted report done, he would call him, maybe have a drink and a talk. He determinedly cleared his mind of wandering thoughts - and was rewarded by the call of the ship's intercom.

Kirk suppressed a curse and answered the demanding bleep. To his surprise, it was Spock, and the tone of his voice immediately alerted the Human.

"Captain, we are picking up communications of a primitive type emanating from somewhere in this system..."

Kirk interrupted him in amazement, a strange chill running up his spine. "Communications? But... I'll be there in a moment, Mr. Spock."

The bridge was strangely hushed when Kirk arrived, each crew member listening intently to the faint jumble of squeals and half understood voices coming from a planet that shouldn't be there. He strode to where Spock was standing by the communications console.

"Spock, explain."

The Vulcan ceased to concentrate on the babbling jumble and turned to face him. "Barely fifteen minutes ago we began receiving faint signals from an unknown source. They are old fashioned radio signals of limited strength, and are more in the fashion of planet-wide broadcasts of some sort - news reports and the like - rather than direct attempts at contacting us. Those we can decipher seem to indicate massive movements of the planet's crust and abnormal climatic changes.

"As the signals increase in strength the further round the system's sun we travel, I have ordered full strength scanning and sensor activity. We should find the planet very soon."

Kirk frowned and took Spock's arm, leading him out of immediate earshot of the crew. The Vulcan half looked as if he had been expecting what was coming next.

"Spock, why wasn't that planet detected earlier? If the destruction of XK97/68 has affected its orbit in some way, I think you owe me an explanation!"

"Captain, owing to the angle of our approach, that side of the system was blocked by the sun, thereby making our sensors blind. Previous reports have

given no inkling of any planet bearing sentient life in this area, and we did not have time to check a region of space reported as empty," Spock replied, completely unperturbed by an accusation Kirk regretted at once.

"Sorry, Spock...it's just that if my action has caused..."

"I understand, Captain."

Kirk looked quickly at the shadowed eyes and gave a rueful grin. "I believe you do," he murmured.

The lift doors opened and Coleman hurtled onto the bridge. "Kirk! What's this about radio signals? I was in Communications, and..."

"One minute, please, Admiral," said Kirk. "Mr. Spock?"

"Approximately 10.48 seconds before we see the planet, Captain."

Kirk walked over to Coleman. "Sir, I suggest you wait for a moment for the answer to your question. I fear our... 'solution' to the 'K'tenagar' may have caused more problems than we realised."

In exactly 10.48 seconds the unknown planet swung into view round the bright white nimbus of its life-giving sun. The sensors confirmed Spock's conclusions. The small world had been torn from its orbit by the destruction of its sister planet, the resulting havoc testified by the frantic television and radio reports speeding through the atmosphere and being picked up by the approaching Starship. Earthquakes, eruptions, tidal waves, hurricanes...every single catastrophe Kirk could think of had torn that innocent ball of fertile rock apart.

The reports flooded in - and Kirk listened without a word, his face barely revealing the agonising realisation within him that it was his fault. Sinking into the mire of self-damnation, he at first ignored the frantic voice at his shoulder. Then he shook himself, meeting Admiral Coleman's shocked gaze.

"Captain, you must help them. We blew up the planet, we..."

"No, sir," Kirk broke in quietly. "I blew up the planet..." He became aware of Spock's eyes on him, but ruthlessly cut off his friend's sympathy. "Mr. Spock, the other ships should be arriving soon, so until then we'll do what we can to help the survivors. Mr. Sulu, establish an orbit around the planet..."

As he stood in the solitude of his quarters Kirk remembered his conversation with McCoy as he broke the news of his fatal mistake. The doctor had stared at him in utter disbelief, a multitude of emotions passing across his lined face. At last he spoke, and something died within James Kirk.

"Congratulations, Captain! Not content with destroying a man's sanity, now you have to wreak havoc on an innocent planet! How many people died this time? Hundreds, millions, billions? Of all the - "

"Bones!" Kirk cried, his voice sharper than he'd intended. "Bones, please..."

The doctor ignored his quiet plea. "You won't get comfort here, Captain," he muttered. "I've got staff to brief, supplies to prepare, lives to save - because of your blunder!"

He regretted his outburst at once, but pride would not let him apologise. Without a word, he pushed past Kirk and left the room. In despair, Kirk moved over to where Sally Whitmore sat by Kelgar's bed, speaking quietly as she tried to pierce his self-imposed shell.

Kirk watched for a while, then said, "Tell him we - I - destroyed the planet. Tell him his weapon can never be made, but that there is still peace of a kind."

Kelgar listened to his only friend in the nightmarish world he now occupied, and replied hesitantly. Whitmore looked up at her Captain. "Sir, he says he's relieved. Perhaps he was wrong after all. He wishes he'd never made the weapon now."

"It's not his fault," murmured Kirk. He became aware of a curious tight sensation in his chest and felt an urgent need to go away and think things out. He turned abruptly to leave, but Whitmore called just as he reached the door.

"Captain, Kelgar is asking - what will you do if you find the compound on a planet that's inhabited?"

Kirk looked blankly at her, the question adding to the turmoil of his thoughts. "I...don't know, Lieutenant..."

Admiral Coleman had caught him outside as he walked to his quarters, murmuring something about sympathies and not his fault...a fatal error...

Kirk could not remember what he had said in reply.

The painful memories flooded back, and in a desperate bid to shake himself back to normality he left the solid wall and switched on his reading screen. Perhaps a spot of reading would help push away the plaguing thoughts.

It did not work. After only a minute he sat in the total darkness of his quarters, the screen forgotten in the deluge of doubts invading his mind.

Doubts. Where had they come from? It was easy enough to point out the immediate cause, but what was harder to find was the deep-seated root of the uncertainty; uncertainty he had thought he did not have. What did a man do when his deepest beliefs and dreams suddenly turned sour?

He raised his head with a jerk, gazing at the smooth door. Outside was a world he had complete control over, but what use was that if he could not control it properly? Lack of insight, lack of thought, a stupid error he should not have made. He should have realised one of the other planets could have sentient life. What had he done to those people?

For the first time in his career Kirk felt the total futility of his position. In all those contacts with other worlds and alien cultures, had he ever questioned the policies of Starfleet and the Federation? He could not think of a single instance.

With sudden anger he slammed his clenched fist on the desk top. Damn it, Jim, he thought. You could have saved that planet and those people! You could have questioned Coleman's order more, could have - what? Played God?

Was that what he was? A mote in the infinite universe playing God along with all the other insignificant motes? Did he really have a right to do what he did? Sailing through the stars, setting things right according to the ideals of a society which had no more right than anyone else to evaluate and interfere...

A whole race practically wiped out!

The questions and doubts bombarded his senses, giving him no answers or peace of mind. In anguish he closed his eyes, laying his head on his folded arms.

/Accept. You cannot change the impossible./

Startled, he looked round the dark room with wide eyes. From the corner of his sight he caught a strip of light cut off as the door closed. Weariness suddenly made his eyes leaden, and though he wished to stay awake, he fell into a light sleep. It was then that the soft, deep voice came again.

/You cannot doubt. It is a luxury you dare not afford yourself. If you are unsure, your crew will be affected./

A small smile crept over Kirk's sleeping features as he answered the mind-voice. /I can't help but doubt, Spock. Today... Today I did something completely contrary to my deepest beliefs, and I didn't even think about it. I murdered a race I hadn't even seen./

/Do not condemn yourself. The sensors were blind, and no one knew of the planet. It was a mistake./

/I should have known!/
 /You could say the same for all the crew -- if it comes to that, we are all to blame. What good would it have done if you had known of Meathanias' existence? It might have been necessary to do exactly the same in the end./

/Meathanias... Is that its name?/
 /Yes./ Spock paused, unsure whether Kirk had yet accepted his mistake, then the same self-loathing returned full strength.

/I destroyed it! What right had I.../
 /What rights have any of us? We must do what we -- or others -- think is best. We are all pawns, Jim. We cannot control events outwith our sphere of influence. You acted correctly according to your knowledge and information. There was no other way./

/But was I right to do what I did? Do I have any rights? I should have waited, found out more... God, I hate myself. I hate everything I once stood for and believed in.../
 /There is no sense, or logic, in that. If you must hate, then hate those who play with lives as you and I play chess. They are the ones who should doubt./

/It sounds too easy, Spock. Passing the buck./
 /You cannot take the faults of the universe on your shoulders. You know that. Accept that you can make mistakes, even fatal ones. Find a basic truth you can believe in and fight for it. It is all you can do./

Silence, then a quiet, begrudged, /Maybe. Maybe that will be enough./
 /It is for some people. Understand who you are, then perhaps you will understand others around you. Never condemn yourself without a trial./

Silence fell between the two men, and Kirk fought off the last vestiges of sleep. His eyes flicked open, focusing on the door as the Vulcan left as silently as he had arrived. Unsure whether he was dreaming or not, Kirk spoke softly.

"Spock? Food for thought, my friend."

The dark silhouette inclined its head slightly and left.

After a while Kirk reached out and switched off the reader. With a yawn and a sense of ease he turned on the cabin's lights. He had a lot to ponder over and sort out, but not yet.

He had called Leonard McCoy before he was aware of doing so. As the gruff voice answered, Kirk smiled. If he was going to understand others, he might as well start by making things up with Bones...

I can draw scaley dragons,
 I can sketch limbless trees,
 I can paint gypsy wagons,
 Or knobbly knees;
 But one thing I wreck,
 Although I do try.
 I cannot draw Star Trek,
 And I don't know why.
 Spock's ears defeat me,
 Likewise McCoy's grin.
 And that smile of Kirk's,
 How does that fit in?
 The Enterprise sideways,
 Or flying face-on,
 Something inside says
 It's just a big con.

How do others do it?
 I cry to my paper.
 Spock's chin just won't fit,
 And will his eyes taper?
 In disgust I still scribble,
 And still have a go.
 Details I quibble...
 I can't draw them, I know.
 I'll carry on sketching
 But I know without doubt,
 I can draw dragons clawing,
 But Star Trek is out!

MISSION'S END

A quiet, firm tap on the door. He knew immediately who it was.

"Come in, Bones."

"How did you know it was me?" demanded McCoy as he entered.

Kirk lifted both eyebrows and grinned widely. "After all this time I should know a little about my friends."

"Sheer guesswork," muttered McCoy. He lifted one hand, which held a bottle full of a pale amber liquid. "Want a little nightcap?"

"Always welcome."

Kirk set aside the piles of paperwork and took two glasses from a shelf behind him. McCoy carefully filled each one to the brim, then they raised them in a toast. A serious look came over the doctor's face.

"To the best Starship Captain I'll ever serve under - and the best friend."

Hazel eyes met startling blue ones as Kirk lifted his glass. "To the finest surgeon in Starfleet, and a friend I will never forget."

They sipped the whisky slowly, each reminded of what he owed to the other. They could never repay it, but there was no need to.

"I can't believe we're on our way home," McCoy said at last.

"It's been a long time," agreed the Captain.

Both sensed the regret which threatened to well up, and both tried to lighten the subject.

"What will you do now, Bones?"

He shrugged. "Hard to say till I get there and all the rigmarole is past. I had thought about settling down, maybe set up a practice somewhere, go in for research..."

"The good old country doctor, huh?"

"Something like that... What about you, Jim?"

Kirk sighed and sat on the edge of his desk. It was a while before he answered. "That depends on Starfleet..." He shook his head and grinned. "There's even been talk of making me an Admiral. Can you imagine it?"

"Wait till it comes," McCoy said cautiously.

"It doesn't seem too bad an idea," mused Kirk. He took another sip of the drink, frowning at the wall. "It would be hard to leave the Enterprise, though."

The doctor nodded agreement. "She's been a real home these past years. I'll be sorry to see the last of her."

"We too."

A myriad of emotions were contained in those two small words, and silence fell between them. Once again it was McCoy who broke it. "I guess Spock'll be made a Captain."

"He deserves it," Kirk said firmly. He stared at the cabin door, his voice distant and low. "That'll be the hardest part, Bones. After all we've been through together, the worry, the constant battles against the unknown... It's going to be lonely."

"For him or you?"

"Both...but for Spock especially, I think..."

The intercom bleeped demandingly, and Kirk glanced ruefully at McCoy as he answered it. The doctor waited while he spoke, slowly savouring the taste of the whisky in his mouth. At last Kirk finished, but he turned to his friend with

an apologetic expression. "Sorry, Bones, but duty calls. Minor problem up on the bridge. Be back in a minute."

McCoy nodded, watched him as he strode purposefully out the door. How many more times would Jim Kirk hurry up to the nerve centre of the Enterprise to cope with yet another crisis?

He poured out another glassful and thought over the future. Two weeks, maybe less, and they would reach Earth - and then what? To be frank, the thought frightened him a little. Now that his cherished dream of a practice of his own was near to coming true, he felt a curious reluctance to even consider the thought of staying on Earth. Had Jim been sent out on another mission, he would likely have joined him again, but the chance of an Admiralty would be very tempting...

A deep frown creased his forehead at that point, and he gazed moodily at his glass. Much as he knew Kirk deserved such promotion, the thought disturbed him even more than his own future. Jim just would not fit in! Oh sure, he would adapt to - and perhaps even enjoy - his new life, but what would he do when the glitter wore off? Bones wondered if it would be possible to persuade his friend not to accept the promised riches.

He wearily shook off the gloomy thoughts and topped up his glass. He could see himself being hopelessly drunk before Jim got back...

The Enterprise sped on towards her final destination without a murmur, and the crew carried on as best they could. So hard to believe that the long exile from their homes was almost over. A tense feeling of expectancy and doubt filled the ship, and speculation ran rampant. Which - if any - of them would be promoted? Would they be split up, sent to different ships? To some it meant little; another hurdle cleared in their career, some fond memories to look back on. Others felt as if they were losing a valued family, and a few accepted the probable loss of their friends as inevitable. Friendships were hard to keep in Starfleet.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons Spock's announcement hit Kirk so hard. After the Vulcan left his office, he sat in a numb daze, scarcely able to believe his ears. Thinking back, he could not even recall how it had begun. He vaguely remembered talking about his looming promotion, what he would do when he got back to Earth - that sort of thing - when Spock quietly dropped his bombshell.

"After we reach Earth, I intend to return to Vulcan."

He had said it reluctantly, as if he did not wish Kirk to know until the last possible moment. The Human had stared at him in disbelief, his mind racing.

"But - but why? What do you - "

"I wish to return home," Spock said quietly, his eyes not quite meeting Kirk's. The Captain smiled in relief, mentally calling himself a fool.

"Oh, for leave, you mean? For one minute I thought..."

"You thought correctly, Captain."

Silence fell like a thick blanket. That, and troubled puzzlement. Kirk felt as if a very bad nightmare had suddenly come true. Of course, he had known that their ways would part one day, but he had hoped... "Why?"

Spock sighed inwardly at the blunt question. How could he answer the unspoken plea when to do so might raise old doubts pushed away by the certainty of his decision? He had hoped to fend off this moment as long as possible, but he could not deceive Jim any longer. If only there had been some other way... He became aware of Kirk's uncompromising gaze, and tried to answer objectively, as he would have to do in the future.

"It is something I must do. When looked at, it is the - "

"Logical decision, I know," Kirk said bitterly. "Spock, are you going to

deny all that's happened in the last five years? Are you going to push it all away and pretend it never happened?"

"I do not wish to."

The anguished emotion in Spock's quietly-spoken sentence dissipated the wave of anger, and Kirk looked at his friend with troubled eyes.

"It's this age-old battle between logic and emotion again, isn't it?" he said softly. He took the Vulcan's lack of response as confirmation of his question. Instinctively his hand reached out to his friend's, but something made him stop it halfway. He gazed at the bowed dark head, wondering how many times they had talked through this one particular crisis.

"Spock, Spock, won't you ever learn? It is possible to abide both by logic and emotion. You've proved it yourself in the past! Why won't you accept it?"

A shaky sigh escaped Spock's lips at that, and he raised his head. "I cannot," he said in a strangled whisper, his eyes closing against the emotions he must soon completely deny. When he opened them again Kirk was standing, anxious to help. Spock motioned him down again, forced himself to speak evenly. "Jim...I have lived all my life in a limbo, being neither one thing nor another. I - I call myself Vulcan, yet I am not like any of my people. You have helped me discover what it is to be Human, and I thank you deeply for that. But I can never be Human, no matter how hard I may try. There is nothing left but to try to return to my heritage... I must become a Vulcan within as well as without. Perhaps then the conflict will pass."

Kirk's shoulders slumped. He desperately wanted to say something, anything that might help, but he sensed that this time nothing would change Spock's mind, and would it truly be fair of him to try? At last he spoke, and his words sounded hopelessly inadequate.

"I see... But - at the risk of sounding selfish - what about me?"

"You will become an Admiral, as you deserve to," Spock said firmly. "You will think of me from time to time, as I will of you, but you will continue your career. Jim, believe me, I have always valued your friendship. I love you as a brother, but...even a brother cannot help me control the emotions I should not have."

Kirk looked up from his hands to see a surprising smile on Spock's face. "Besides," the Vulcan continued, "do you honestly think I could continue in Starfleet as Captain of a Starship or something similar, knowing you are still on Earth? I have always known I am not suited for full-time command..."

The familiar eyebrows rose slightly, and a smile creased Kirk's face in response. "I'll miss you," he said softly.

"And I you."

Spock rose, and Kirk reached out to grip his outstretched hands. They said their goodbyes in the silence of their minds, then Spock turned to leave. He paused at the door, one hand raised in the ancient Vulcan sign. "In case there is no time when we arrive... Live long and prosper, Jim."

The door slid shut, leaving Kirk to the silence of his mind. The numbness finally left his body, and he felt an absurd prickling at the back of his eyelids. Slowly he sat down, one hand clenched into a tight fist.

There was a quiet hiss as the office door opened again, and measured footsteps sounded on the even floor. A concerned voice broke into his private misery.

"Jim? Jim, is anything wrong? I just passed Spock out there, and he looked like - "

"He's leaving, Bones."

McCoy frowned, refusing to believe what Kirk had so obviously meant. "What

do you mean? Leaving the ship, the service, what?"

"He's going back to Vulcan," Kirk said, finally opening his eyes. "Permanently."

McCoy let out a long breath. "That's Spock -- lets you know at the very last minute... When is he going?"

"After we reach Earth. As soon as possible after de-briefing, I suppose," Kirk replied morosely. He looked pleadingly up at McCoy. "Bones, I couldn't help him! Even after all this time he's still torn apart by his heritage, and all I could think of was me! I had thought -- oh, I don't know what I thought... It was so easy for me to say forget it, but..."

"Spock never did know where he was better off!" exploded McCoy, anger supplanting anguish. "After all you've done for him...to throw it back in -- "

"You know that isn't true," Kirk interrupted firmly. "It's his decision, his life."

The doctor smiled half-heartedly. "Yeah. I don't suppose we ever really knew what went on in that head of his. Maybe the constant struggle grew too much. If only we had known sooner..."

"Do you really think either of us could have changed his mind? He sees a life on Vulcan as his only remaining choice, and maybe he's right. I only wish -- "

Sulu interrupted him then, with the news that they had almost reached Earth's solar system. Kirk thanked the helmsman and switched off the intercom. He glanced briefly at McCoy, who grinned sardonically.

"Welcome home, Jim."

Outside in the dark vacuum of space, the distant light of Earth's sun glanced off the Enterprise's hull as she slipped past Pluto.

TO BE A KING...

How can it suddenly end?
 How can a friendship which has
 Lasted through countless agonies
 Suddenly die?
 My heritage made no difference to me.
 I had not thought
 It would matter
 To you.
 You look at me with naked hurt in your eyes,
 And again I feel the pain.
 You ask me why, and I cannot answer.
 Can you not understand my reasons?
 To be treated as equal.
 That has been my goal, and you did,
 Till now.
 Does a name, a title, really matter?
 Does the man behind the name not count?
 I speak to you of my double life,
 And I see you understand.
 Now you see my life
 Through my eyes.
 And know.
 Infinite Diversity...
 A beautiful concept -
 But what happens
 When no-one understands it?

RETURN TO SHIKAHR

The journey from ship to planet took only a few infinitesimal seconds, the transporter process creating a familiar sensation he had once thought destined to remain a faint memory. Within a matter of minutes he had left Space Central in a hired skimmer, speeding silently out into the burning dry heat eased in the buildings by efficient air-cooling systems.

Once his course and destination had been plotted into the skimmer's controls, there was little else to do but sit back, watching the red-orange landscape of his home world rush by. He did so, his keen eyesight noting the cracked, parched look to the earth. Even through the protective tinted windows he could feel the heat of the ball of fire which seemed to do its best to dehydrate Vulcan as much as possible before the season of rains began. They would come soon, and like every desert, on whatever planet one should choose, the red sphere would overnight explode with vibrant colour and life greedily sucking the nourishing water. The thought reminded him of his mother's futile attempts to introduce earth-type plants to this alien world. "A desert is a desert is a desert," she had once replied to Sarek's bemused protestations about the uselessness of it all. Neither father nor son had ever quite found the logic in that particular statement.

Spock's eyes shifted from the blazing sands to the black outfit he now wore. After much thought, he had chosen it over his uniform, discarding the grey outfit which for so long had been almost a second skin. He had a feeling that to have worn that symbol of Starfleet might have been akin to ramming his choice down Sarek's throat. He smiled faintly at his choice of words. A curious Human expression, but like many of their sayings, aptly expressive. The smile disappeared as his thoughts moved on. No, overcoming Sarek's disapproving animosity would be hard enough without any added psychological handicaps.

A change in the landscape and the skimmer's reduced speed alerted him to the fast approaching city of ShiKahr, and as he expertly guided the vehicle through orderly, quiet streets, he felt a quite illogical desire to turn about and head back to the Enterprise. Firmly he reminded himself that the ship would be in this area for two days only, and if he did not take this chance, another might be a long time in coming. Jim Kirk had agreed without a murmur to his request for time off; Spock suspected he'd worked out the reason anyway. It was not a prospect he relished, recalling other such talks with his father, but his abrupt departure after his return from Gol had to be explained. There had been little time for explanations before he left, not that he would have been able to, anyway.

With a faint whisper of sound the skimmer came to a halt outside the high wall surrounding the house and garden. Spock carefully climbed out and strode with the confidence of one in familiar surroundings through the engraved gate into the garden beyond, making for the house he knew so well.

Standing in the shade of the Terran-style porch were his parents, as he had known they would be. As he approached, Amanda gave up her half-hearted struggle and broke into a wide, happy smile. The chances of Sarek doing likewise, Spock reflected drily, were as remote as those of getting a Royal Fizzbin with the first hand. Instead, the former Ambassador greeted his son with the grave dignity so typical of him, his voice revealing none of his inner feelings.

With sudden cold clarity Spock saw his parents as the older people they were. The insight was not pleasant. Amanda seemed smaller and more fragile than ever before, the briefness of the Human lifespan all too apparent. Sarek carried his years well, but the passage of time had left its marks; marks which Spock saw only too well.

In the next breath, the moment was past, forgotten as they walked together into the cool house, exchanging pleasantries with that curious restraint which always became more obvious at times such as this.

The day passed pleasantly enough, with Spock answering his mother's questions as fully as he knew how. In her typical Human way she chatted, imparting pieces of gossip and gathering news without touching on the bone of contention lurking behind Sarek's apparent interest in Spock's career. Listening to Amanda's skilful

weaving about the subject, Spock found himself wondering which of his parents would prove the more skilful diplomat if put to the test. The evening meal came and went, and eventually Amanda excused herself with the excuse that all the excitement had worn her out. With her departure, Sarek and Spock moved to Sarek's study, all the while watching each other like wary antagonists.

The older Vulcan opened the conversation as was his right. "So...you have settled in on the Enterprise again?"

Spock sat back in his chair, his hands folded loosely in his lap. Memories of similar moments in this very room flooded back. "Yes," he confirmed. "It has become almost a second home."

"Ah, I see. Presumably the Enterprise is on a short tour of duty. I do not think even the famous James Kirk would be given his old command without conditions..."

Spock experienced a small twinge of annoyance at the faintly sardonic tone to Sarek's statement, but he ignored it. "We are working a trial period, yes. More to test the new designs than anything else," he asserted firmly, although that was not exactly true. He knew as well as Kirk that Starfleet Command had not been happy with their former Admiral regaining his Captaincy, no matter how profuse they were in their gratitude.

Sarek nodded wisely, accepting his son's explanation. "Your tape on the Voyager incident was most interesting, although your mother persists she still does not fully understand what happened."

They looked at each other, sharing the private joke, then Sarek doggedly came back to the issue barely hidden in their exchange. "I do not fully understand either."

Spock stared at the smooth brown flooring, understanding his father's point of view. Sarek had just begun to accept his Starfleet career when he had returned without preamble to throw himself into the disciplines of Kolinahr. Then, when it seemed he would finally become a Vulcan son Sarek could be proud of, he had left almost without notice, the only communication since, a tape stating his intention of remaining with the Enterprise. There was so much to explain, and Spock was not sure he could do so to Sarek's satisfaction.

He began hesitantly, all too aware of the barrier between them, the transparent wall which would never be completely broken down. "Father, I regret I did not have sufficient time to explain my actions before I left. I did not wish to leave so abruptly. Indeed, I had not intended to leave at all."

"Nevertheless, you did," Sarek said pointedly. "There was time, if you had taken it."

"Perhaps. Then again, perhaps it is something which can never be explained, no matter how much time we give it."

Sarek's expression grew frostily distant. "You said you sensed the Voyager being before and during the final ceremony... I confess, I cannot see the how or why."

"Neither do I, exactly," Spock murmured. "I can only describe it as a brief affinity between us - something in me drew V'ger, and in that contact I sensed the answers I came back here to find. So...I left."

"I see," Sarek said, who did not see at all. "You left - and did you find your answers?"

"Yes."

There was a familiar stubborn line about his father's chin. "What answers were so important and unique that you could not find them in the achievement of Kolinahr?"

"The answer to who I am," Spock replied, noting the flicker of surprise followed by faint irritation on Sarek's face.

"Still this soul search for - what?" Sarek muttered. "I never felt the need for such soul-searching as you."

"You are not half Human, father."

"Should that make a difference?"

Spock sighed, studying the floor once more. "Father, if you don't know the answer to that question by now, I think you never will."

One eyebrow crept upwards in a way crewmembers of the Enterprise would recognise instantly, even if they had never met Sarek. He clasped his hands behind his back, walking towards the window. "Of course... You're right, but such a...feeling is outwith my experience. It is hard to understand, as hard as understanding your apparent rejection of much that is Vulcan."

A slightly sardonic smile fleetingly curved Spock's lips. "That, I fear, is an issue which will never be resolved between us. Suffice to say I have spent most of my life striving to reach what is, for me, an impossible ideal. Now I must accept it is unattainable and follow another path. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I will never be the Vulcan you wished me to be."

"Indeed?" Sarek intoned gravely. "Your encounter with Voyager taught you this?"

"It opened my eyes to what I have denied for too long."

Sarek nodded tightly, turning to stare through the glass at the night-enclosed garden. Spock watched him silently, part of him wishing he had never come. Some minutes passed before his father spoke again.

"My son, I confess I have not often understood you or your motives. Many of your actions, your views, have alternately distressed or confused me in the past. As you say, it is an issue we shall most likely never resolve. I do not pretend to see your side of it even now, but - but now...I would know the answers you have found."

It was Spock's turn for surprise. He had anticipated anger, disdain, sarcasm...but not this. Perhaps, he thought recalling past incidents, perhaps misunderstanding could occur on both sides, with neither one completely at fault. Their father/son relationship had always been one of conflict - could they change that now?

His gaze rose to meet Sarek's, and slowly, growing in confidence as Sarek listened without comment, he spoke of his new-found awareness and of the friendship he so nearly lost because he was frightened of its simple truths.

NIGHT-TIME COMPREHENSION

"Good evening."

"What...oh! I'm sorry, I didn't see you standing there. It's so quiet, I thought I was alone."

He nodded solemnly, returning his gaze to the star-flecked velvet of deep space. Here at the vantage point afforded by the officer's lounge they seemed to stand still in fixed positions, although he knew in reality they were speeding past at unimaginable speeds. "I...felt the need for quiet and contemplation," he remarked, surprised at the feeling that an explanation was needed for his presence here.

"Ah." She looked longingly at the panoramic darkness, then withdrew slightly. "I'll leave you alone, then."

"No, you do not have to," he said, his eyes hidden in the twilight of the darkened room. "Two can be together and still alone in their solitude."

She half smiled. "That's...very true." Relieved that she would not have to

return to the clammy quiet of her cabin, she moved closer to the observation port, experiencing the awe such a sight invariably conjured in her. Starship crews, she thought, are a breed apart. Leaving our planets, homes, families, to travel distances some people even now can't comprehend. What brings us out here, I wonder? Escape, I guess. Running from reality, or - Her eyes flickered in the direction of her silent companion. - Or loneliness, the darkness seemed to say. We spend our lives dreaming, searching, hoping for...what? Better the devil you know... Maybe not.

She considered his sharp-nosed profile. We've both changed... Strange how a person can alter so much in so short a time. Old memories came unbidden, bringing with them the equally old feeling of embarrassment. I must have been a real pain, she thought, grimacing at the memory.

Standing there, close and far apart, the silence seemed to deepen, closing in to magnify the depression hovering outside their inward thoughts. Suddenly she could not bear it any longer. She must speak, or go. She couldn't -

"I am sorry, I omitted to congratulate you on your promotion."

Startled from her thoughts, she smiled, feeling gratitude at his breaking of the stiffness, whether intentional or not. "You have had other things on your mind. Thank you anyway." Silence again, then, "I can't think why they didn't promote you to a higher post. I would have thought you deserved it most."

He looked back to the window. "I...had other things to do, avenues to travel..."

"Oh. I did hear a rumour you went back to Vulcan."

A brief nod. "For a short time, yes." He felt tempted to say more, but stopped. Some things could not be explained easily, not even to his best friend, and not to her. Memories vied for attention in his mind, taking him back to -

"It was nice to see you back," she murmured, wondering at her choice of words.

"I have come to the conclusion I belong here," he replied, scarcely bothering to hide the trace of bitterness tracing the words.

She noticed the hidden irony and understood. "I guess I decided that too. Once you join a Starship, you're hooked."

"It is a philosophy I am familiar with, yes."

The stars drew their attention again, and she felt a surprising sense of companionship stir at the fringe of her emotions. No, more the mutual understanding of two who have experienced similar reactions to the incidents which have shaped their lives. She felt a sudden urgent need to apologise, perhaps somehow erase her actions toward him when they had known each other before. She turned to speak, halting as new insight struck her.

There's no need, no need at all. He understood then, and still does. My feelings may have been mixed up and wrong then, but they were real enough at the time. He did try to help me, but I didn't even notice. Hey, girl, you've taken a helluva long time to realise, haven't you?

Happier now, she felt the release of the tension which had kept her from sleep until now. Realisation brought with it peaceful acceptance, and she knew she wished to share it with her companion, but again she stopped the words. What need was there when he already knew? Silence could sometimes be more eloquent than words, after all.

However... Reluctantly, she broke the silence once more. "Oh, dear... suddenly I'm tired. Bed beckons, I think. Tomorrow may be busy."

He nodded.

"Yes. Bed, sleep... Goodnight, Mr. Spock."

There was no reply. But as she reached the door, his head turned in her

direction, his deep voice soft, yet clear enough for her ears. "Goodnight, Christine."

Her lips curved in an unseen smile as she entered the dimmed brightness of the corridor. Suddenly, things didn't seem so bad after all.

WAITING

"He's down there; needs our help. Are you just going to stand by?"

"You forget, I cannot go."

"Why not? What's so different about you... Sorry. Sometimes you're so like us that I - "

" - forget. I cannot, unfortunately. My...humanity is something I could wish were not there."

"You want an easy way out?"

"Is there anyone who does not?"

"He doesn't. He would die saving you. That's why he is down there now."

"I need no reminding."

"Sorry."

"There is no need."

"Yes there is. I'm shooting off my mouth again."

"I understand. It is forgotten."

"Yes... You have to do that, don't you... No letting off tension in an argument for you."

"Anger can be conquered."

"It's not good for a person - bottling it up."

"You have no difficulty in that respect."

"That's hitting below the belt!"

"I would have thought you familiar with that occupation."

"Famil... Why, you... Oh hell, I suppose I am. No punches pulled when I'm around."

"Exactly."

"Don't sound so smug."

"It was not intentional."

"No, I - That was them. They're waiting for me."

"So is he. Good luck."

"I thought you didn't believe in luck?"

"That hope is all I have left."

The above is a very tantalising segment - scene - call it what you like. I'd like to know the story behind it...

Can anyone write a story in which this situation could arise? I'd like them by the end of March, please, and the winner - the one we (and Lorraine) thinks fits the situation best will be printed in a subsequent issue of Enterprise - Log Entries. Entries to Sheila or to Valerie Piacentini, 20 Ardrossan Rd, Salt-coats, Ayrshire, Scotland.

ROBOT'S DESTINY

"Captain Kirk? Pleased to meet you... I am Marnee Venra, personal secretary to President Aneaz."

The girl who had come to greet the landing party was not exactly Kirk's idea of a high ranking official, but he'd long ago learned not to judge by appearances. She looked too young for a start, a bouncy mass of blonde hair framing a slim, gold-tinted face with doe-like eyes. She gravely shook hands with them all, her four foot six inches frame making her appear even more child-like beside Spock's six foot stature. (They were later to discover that Marnee was considered very tall among her people.) There was nothing childish in her manner, though.

"Well, now that the introductions are over, I'll take you to President Aneaz's personal residence. If you'd like to come this way..."

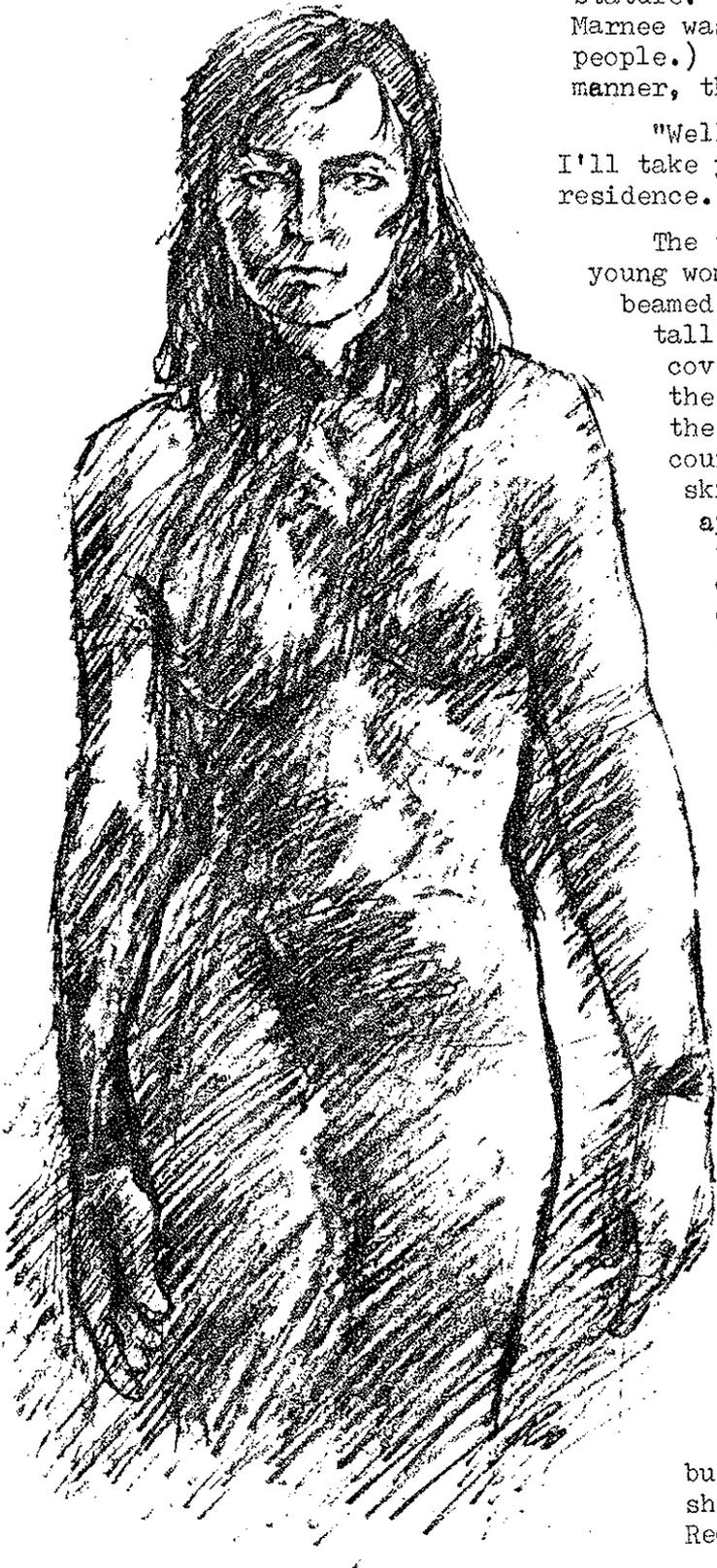
The three officers followed the petite young woman across the small courtyard they had beamed down to. All around the yard stood tall, blue-stoned buildings, their facings covered in intricate carvings, and from these buildings more Vethani hurried across the open space to other rooms. Within the courtyard itself were at least ten silver-skinned robots, each going about its appointed task, and two more held open the heavy doors of an impressive house directly ahead. This was the President's home, and Marnee led them through the doors into a long cool hall. She asked them to wait, and disappeared through a small entrance.

Dr. McCoy looked round at the rich opulence and whistled low. "For being small, these people sure think big," he murmured. He glanced over at Spock, expecting a comment from him, but the Vulcan was busy observing the robots and reading the tricorder.

Kirk stood in the centre of the hall, following McCoy's gaze. He nodded thoughtfully. "Whatever their size, Bones, I think the Vethani will be a welcome addition to the Federation."

He tucked the requisite sheaf of papers firmly under his arm, unaware that his every move was being silently monitored. In a building many miles away from the Presidential residence a cold voice reported its findings.

/Subject has entered Presidential buildings. Name: Kirk, James T. Starship Captain. Species: Homo sapiens. Request permission to observe further./



/Request granted./

The two great doors at the hall's end opened smoothly, and Marnee Venra beckoned to them.

"The President will see you now."

Kirk, Spock and McCoy walked behind her into a wide, octagonal room stuffed with plush furnishings. Beneath a tall curtained window was placed a long white desk, and behind this sat a small Vethani dressed in the long flowing robes favoured on the planet.

President Aneaz jumped out of his chair, smiling broadly as he shook hands with Kirk. "Captain Kirk, Captain Kirk, how nice to meet you! You know, I've waited a long time for this moment. At last our little world is going to be of some use in the universe!"

"I'm sure it will, Mr. President," agreed Kirk, a little disconcerted at having to loom over the leader of Vethan, though the little alien seemed quite unaffected by it. He introduced his companions. "My First Officer, Mr. Spock, and Chief Medical Officer Dr. McCoy."

Aneaz's smile grew wider, and his eyes sparkled as he shook McCoy's hand. He seized Spock's, and his mouth fell open as he gazed up at the towering Vulcan.

"Uh, Mr. Spock is a native of Vulcan, one of the planets in the Federation," explained Kirk. Aneaz blinked at the impressive Vulcan and reluctantly turned his attention back to Kirk.

"How many planets are there?" he asked anxiously.

"At the last count...about 700, I believe."

"735, to be exact, Captain," intoned Spock.

Aneaz's face fell. "So many? Oh dear, will they even notice us?"

"Vethan will be a welcome addition, sir," Kirk assured him.

This seemed to satisfy the little alien, for he brightened up immediately and glanced inquisitively at the folder under Kirk's arm.

"Those are the - uh - the Articles of Confederation as you call them?"

"Yes, sir, they are." Kirk opened the folder on the desk. "If you would like to study them..."

President Aneaz rubbed his hands with excitement, then paused and turned to Marnee, who had stood quietly in the background all this time. "Ah, Marnee, the refreshments, if you please... I must apologise, gentlemen. My manners are not what they could be."

Kirk smiled. "We quite understand, Mr. President. After all, it's not every day your planet joins the Federation of Planets."

Marnee had walked over to one of the robots in the doorway, and the machine left the room in obedience to her instructions. Spock noted it with interest.

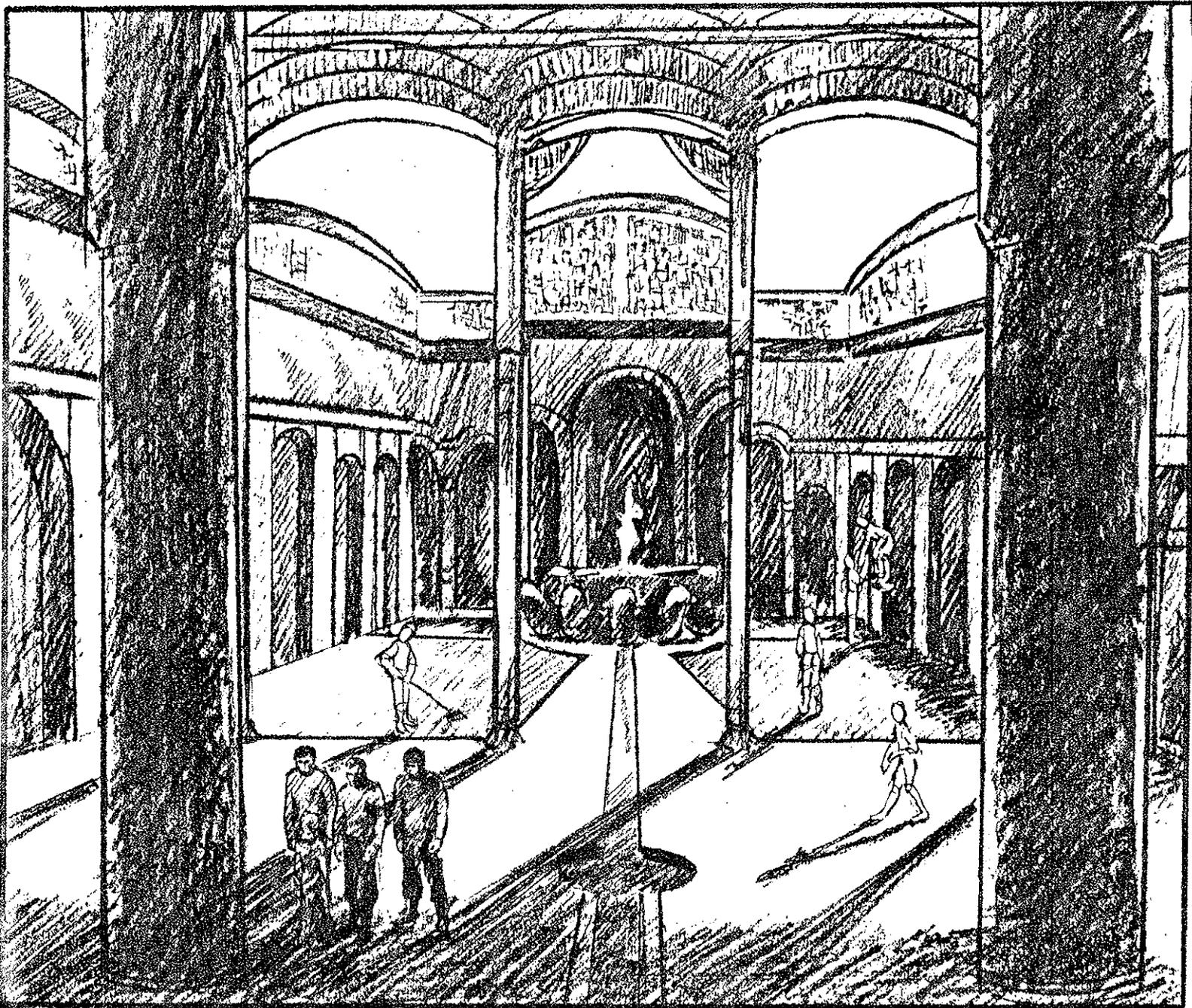
"President Aneaz, do you have many of these robots here?"

"Oh, hundreds," the Vethani said proudly. "We call them drones. They're very useful, you know - can do almost anything."

"Indeed? I should like to study them further. They are totally unlike any I have seen before."

"Oh, they're nothing, you should see our Master Drones. Now they - "

Aneaz stopped short, his mouth closing like a trap. He turned from the desk, leaving the room via a small side door. Kirk watched his sudden departure with some amazement, and turned an astonished look on Spock and McCoy. Marnee spoke from her position by the main doors.



"The President has been urgently called away. He'll return in a moment. Please wait, gentlemen."

She too left the room, and McCoy looked witheringly at Spock. "Trust you to start blabbing about machines..."

"I would not term an interested enquiry 'blabbing', Doctor," Spock replied smoothly.

McCoy snorted, turning to Kirk. "Any chance of shore leave once all the signing is done, Jim?"

For a moment Kirk continued to stare into space, then he started as if coming out of a dream. "Huh - what did you say, Bones?"

"Shore leave," said McCoy pointedly. "Any chance of?"

"Well, I don't see why not. Vethan seems pleasant enough, and if the President agrees to it..."

"Agrees to what, my dear fellow?"

The leader of Vethan came through the door as bright and cheerful as before. Whatever had called him away couldn't have been too serious.

"Shore leave, sir," Kirk explained. "After a few months in space, the thought of a while on a pleasant planet is like gold to a starship crew."

"Then bring your people down!" cried Aneaz, his eyes sparkling with delight. "How splendid to have some visitors! I can't wait!"

The robot entered with a tray of glasses and a decanter, and they waited while it silently placed the tray on the desk and left. Aneaz deftly filled the glasses and handed them round.

"Your health, gentlemen... Now, Captain, where are those papers..."

The formalities of becoming a member of the UFP were quickly dealt with, and within three hours most of the Enterprise crew had beamed down to enjoy the hospitality of the Vethani.

The culture of the planet was very similar to Earth's, and there were plenty of bars, clubs and the like for those who wanted them. Throughout Neesan - the capital city - large open parks had been laid out for the occupants, and if some couples used them for pastimes other than quiet walks, nothing was said. The Lilliputian-type people cheerfully put up with the giants in their midst, and the crew tried their best to avoid bumping into their hosts. All needs were attended to by the silent drones, and slowly the tension and weariness of the crew was evaporated away by the peace of Vethan.

Yup, thought Bones McCoy as he sipped a cool, refreshing drink, this is definitely what the doctor ordered. And what this doctor orders, he gets!

He opened one lazy eye as Captain Kirk arrived and sat on the wall behind his chair. A grin spread over his face, and he raised the glass.

"Want some? Doesn't take minutes by drone service."

"No. No, thank you, Bones," answered Kirk. He made himself more comfortable on the wall, his eyes narrowed as he gazed about him at the sunlit parkland. McCoy automatically gauged what kind of mood Kirk was in, and was faintly surprised to see the tenseness of the Captain's body. He sat up a little, noting the little signs of stress and tension where none should be. An alarm bell rang faintly in his mind, and he laid down the drink.

"Anything wrong, Jim?"

Kirk shook his head. "No. Nothing's wrong..." He looked over towards a wide, tangerine-coloured lake. "That's the trouble."

McCoy's ears pricked up at this, and he tried to sound casual as he probed further. "You nervous about something?"

Kirk shrugged, gave him a half grin. "I'm just not used to relaxing, I guess. It's been so long since I was on proper shore leave that it still hasn't sunk in."

"Even men of action need to unwind a little."

"I wouldn't exactly call myself a 'man of action', Bones."

"That's exactly what you are," grunted McCoy. "You've spent so long a time tensed up like a spring waiting for trouble to hit you in the guts, you can't let go." He waved one hand in the air. "That's where Spock goes wrong, too. He should be down here, soaking up the sun, getting drunk...and where is he? Back up there messing about with computers!"

"Work is Spock's relaxation, Bones," grinned Kirk, letting the tenseness ease a little from his shoulders. There was a derisive snort from the direction of the chair.

"He's a workaholic!" sniffed the doctor. He pointed a finger at Kirk. "And so are you. Let go for a while. Go for a walk, find a nice yeoman..." He ignored the outraged, amused look on Kirk's face and rambled on. "You Starship types are all the same - stuffy and formal. It takes an amateur psychologist like me to teach you to relax. Too damn stiff..."

Kirk watched his friend lie back on the lounge and close his eyes. He knew he needed to relax, and usually he could, but not on this planet. It was nothing he could put a finger on, but something about this place made him itchy and wary, like waiting for a bomb to explode. He would not be sorry to leave Vethan, pretty though it might be.

The sound of footsteps disturbed his musings, and he glanced up to see Sulu walking by with his arm round the waist of his latest girl. The helmsman grinned widely, quite unperturbed by his Captain's presence.

"Lovely day, sir."

Kirk nodded slightly. "Yes, Mr. Sulu, it is."

The couple moved on, and Kirk chided himself for his stupidity. He must be getting paranoid...

He glanced round at the sound of a gentle snore, and saw McCoy was dead to the world. Captain Kirk quietly rose, the snores growing faint as he walked from the park. He would take part of McCoy's advice at least, and who knew who he might meet on his travels?

He strolled aimlessly, uncaring where he went. The park lay behind him now, but the streets were bright and filled with plants and trees, so he almost felt he was still there. The air was full of bird-song, and smiling citizens passed by as they went about their business. Throughout the city the silver drones moved silently from errand to errand, and Kirk avoided them whenever possible. He did not like them very much, even though there was no apparent reason for his distrust. Perhaps his many clashes with sentient machines had cultivated an instant wariness of any such thing which thought for itself.

He smiled at himself, gazing about him. This part of the city was new to him. It looked older than the other streets, and not so sparkingly clean. A glint of light on metal caught his eye, and as he turned he saw a tall golden figure walk silently down a nearby alley. A gold drone?

His curiosity aroused, Kirk followed the sparkling robot, wondering why he had seen none before this.

/Subject's curiosity aroused. Following as predicted. Will now proceed with plan X12./

/Understood. Proceed./

Kirk hurried after the retreating machine with some exasperation. Did it have to walk this fast? Where had it come from in the first place? He remembered Aneaz's brief reference to the 'Master Drones'. Could this be one?

The drone disappeared round another corner, and as Kirk followed suit his world exploded into a kaleidoscope of lights as a gold hand chopped down on his skull.

Spock frowned very slightly at the columns of formulae on his screen. Try as he might, they just would not come to a satisfactory conclusion. Perhaps if he...

The intercom interrupted his thoughts, and one half of his mind continued to work on the problem while he answered. It was McCoy.

"Sorry to bother you, Spock, but is Jim up there?"

"I have not seen the Captain for at least four hours, Doctor," replied Spock. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just wondered where he was. Thanks, Spock."

McCoy flicked shut his communicator and slipped it back into his belt. He wasn't too worried where Kirk might be, just curious. He was thinking of a last visit to one of the more notorious night-clubs, but if Jim had taken his advice he might not want to be disturbed. It looked like he would have to go on his own, which might not be such a bad idea...

How long he had been out, Kirk did not know, but his head felt as if it had been split apart and badly glued together again. Stars spun before his eyes when he sat up, and his whole body ached. He was in darkness so deep he could not see his hand an inch from his face, and as awareness returned he wondered where he was...

/Subject awakened. Continuing observation and collection of data./

Kirk explored the surface beneath him with his fingertips. It was perfectly smooth, cool to the touch. There was still no respite from the dark, so he cautiously moved forward on his hands and knees, hand outstretched for first contact with any obstacle. A few feet away he found a wall, but it was impossible to tell how tall or wide it was. Still moving cautiously, he stood up, and inch by inch explored his prison.

It was nothing impressive. A scant, square metal box, silent, cold, and completely seamless. Nowhere could he find a door or any kind of opening. He reached up, touched the low metal ceiling. Where the hell was he?

/Initiating Phase One of experimentation./

Without any warning, light flooded Kirk's prison, making him cry out as the brilliance hurt his eyes. Eventually he opened them again, but the brightness was still too severe for him to see clearly. He had to make do with squinting through screwed-up slits, shading his eyes with his hands.

What little he could see confirmed his first impression. Locked in a square box - but where, and for what purpose? He glanced round the cell. Somewhere out there someone had to be watching, perhaps listening. It was worth a try. He shouted, his words falling dully in the enclosed space.

"Who are you? What do you want with me? I am a friend of Vethan, a friend of President Aneaz. Can't we at least talk?"

/Interesting; the subject attempts vocal contact./

/Continue with Phase One./

His reply came in the form of piercing sound waves, cutting into his brain like a red-hot needle. Communication forgotten, Kirk collapsed on the floor, his hands pressed tightly to his ringing ears. For a few seconds the agony passed as the decibels rose beyond his range, then the pain returned full force, bringing with it blessed unconsciousness.

Lt. Uhura frowned as she broke contact with yet another security officer. She turned to the tall Vulcan waiting by her side.

"I'm sorry, sir, but no-one seems to have seen the Captain anywhere on Vethan. Lt. Sulu reported seeing him in the park, but that was two days ago."

Spock nodded slightly, his face devoid of expression. "Very well, Lieutenant. Please continue trying to contact the Captain. We must leave Vethan today."

"Aye, sir."

As Spock made to go to his station, the lift doors opened and Dr. McCoy entered the bridge. He grinned at the science officer, raising an eyebrow at the empty command chair.

"Morning, Spock. Where's Jim?"

"We are endeavouring to find out, Doctor," Spock replied evenly.

"You mean he isn't back yet?" frowned McCoy.

"I would have thought that apparent."

"Just clarifying the matter, Spock," the doctor said cheerfully. His breezy mood was replaced by one of faint concern as he thought things over. "Strange... Jim isn't usually late back from leave."

"Indeed," Spock agreed, "he is very often one of the first to return. I cannot think what has delayed him this time."

McCoy grinned wickedly. "You would never guess in a million years, Spock." He turned to leave. "Don't worry, he'll be back within an hour, just wait and see."

However, three hours later Kirk was still conspicuous by his absence, and Spock decided to enlist the help of President Aneaz. He beamed down with McCoy to the President's home, but the chances of any proper help from the little Vethani seemed remote.

Aneaz shook his head sadly, his face clouded with sorrow. "I am sorry, gentlemen, but I have no idea where your delightful Captain could be. Is it so very urgent that he be found right away?"

"Sir, the Enterprise has a busy schedule, and she is due to leave for another planet today," explained Spock. "Unfortunately, we cannot leave without our Captain."

Aneaz shrugged. "Well, I don't know where he is. I'll send people to look for him, but it may not be any use."

"Any help is appreciated, Mr. President. Do I have your permission to beam down parties of our own men?"

"Yes, yes, as many as you like..." Aneaz shuffled away, pausing as he opened a door. "I still think it's an awful lot of fuss over one man!"

The door slammed shut behind him. Spock and McCoy slowly left the hall.

"You'd think we'd asked for an army," grumbled the doctor. "Jim would never ignore our calls, even if he was drunk...and he would never be this late, either!"

"Then we must assume he is either injured or being held prisoner," remarked Spock.

"But who would kidnap a Starship Captain on Vethan?"

Spock lifted one eyebrow very slightly. "Who, indeed, Doctor?"

Vethan's short day passed quickly, and grey twilight was beginning to gather as two of the Enterprise security men met on a dimly-lit corner.

Ensign Bradman smiled as he recognised his shipmate and re-holstered the phaser his hand had reached for. He shrugged with embarrassment. "I'm getting itchy in my old age..."

Hosath nodded his agreement. "I'm the same way," he said, watching the growing shadows. "It's those robots. They give me the creeps, always trotting around. They're so quiet..."

"Yeah. Any sign of him?"

"The Captain? Nope. If you ask me, some of those robots have him."

"I suppose it's possible," murmured Bradman. "I mean, why else should he disappear like this?"

Hosath shurgged, shivering in the chill night wind blowing down the street. "It's getting late. We'd better report back to the Chief."

"Sure. Maybe we'll be sent back - "

Bradman broke off his musings abruptly, holding his head to one side as he listened intently.

"What do you hear?" Hosath asked. His companion lifted a hand for silence, then looked back down the street.

"I thought I heard a groan. Must be the wind."

Whoever it was groaned again, and this time both men heard it. They turned as one and cautiously walked down the darkened road, phasers on stun. Hosath saw it first, a huddled figure slouching in a wall-niche which once held a statue. He hurried over, peering in the gloom.

There was just enough light for him to recognise the man, and he reached out to touch the trembling shoulder.

"It's Captain Kirk!" Bradman exclaimed, lowering his phaser.

Hosath nodded. "He looks in a bad way. You'd better get on to the ship. Ask for a doctor to be ready when we beam up."

"I don't know what gets into people these days," muttered the Chief Surgeon as he stared hard at a diagnostic panel. "Seem to think they're immune to injury just because they're on leave!" He glared at the hapless patient beside him. "I get more accidents when the crew are on holiday than I do normally. Give me a Klingon attack any day! If I had my way..."

"Dr. McCoy, if you had your way, you would at this moment be rattling your beads and chanting obscure incantations..." Spock interrupted smoothly. He continued before McCoy could even open his mouth to reply. "The Captain is awake."

Still muttering to himself, McCoy walked over to where the Captain lay, still dozy from the drugs. Kirk grinned at the sight of his old friend, and McCoy did likewise.

"How are you feeling, Jim?"

Kirk yawned expansively. "Fine. Just fine, Bones..." He pushed himself up with his elbow and winced as the movement sent thudding pains through his head. "Ouch!... That was, until I woke up!"

McCoy nodded absently while he studied the panel read-outs. "That will pass... What happened?"

The Captain opened his mouth to reply, then frowned when no ready answer came to mind. "You know, I can't remember."

McCoy and Spock traded looks. The Vulcan moved forward, hands clasped characteristically behind his back.

"You have no recollection of your last two days on Vethan at all?" he asked.

Kirk shook his head, wished he hadn't. "No, none at all. You tell me!"

"We found you in a street in Neesan," McCoy informed him. "You were dazed, and acted as if you'd been through tremendous shock and trauma. I had to keep you sedated until your body recovered from it."

"How - ouch - long ago was this?"

"Three days. You were pretty bad."

"Then... Spock?"

"We are now on our way to Beta Tharnae III, Captain," explained the First Officer, "as per previous instructions. You were missing for two and one half days, but luckily a security team found you. It was...most fortunate."

"Sure, it kept us on schedule," muttered McCoy. Spock ignored him.

"Captain, can't you remember anything?"

"I remember leaving the park," Kirk said thoughtfully, closing his eyes in concentration. "I was walking through the streets, but what happened after that is anyone's guess. Next thing I knew, I was here... Somehow I've lost three days."

"Probably only temporary amnesia," McCoy said lightly. "You rest now, Jim. Don't try too hard to remember. It'll come back."

The Captain nodded wearily, his eyes already half closed with drowsiness. As he slipped into a light sleep, Spock and McCoy moved away.

"I wonder what the hell happened to him?"

"I do not know," admitted Spock. "However, the most logical explanation is that he was attacked by thieves, perhaps a gang."

"But remaining unconscious for two days? And what about the shock to his system?"

"I can only speculate, Doctor," chided Spock. "After all, I know as little as the Captain himself."

"And that isn't much," McCoy mournfully agreed. "Maybe he'll remember after more rest."

However, James Kirk's memory stubbornly refused to supply the missing information, and after a while he gave up trying to push it. The Enterprise transferred the waiting diplomats from Beta Tharnae III to Dooveen, and more immediate responsibilities pushed the nagging worry to the back of Kirk's mind. He quickly forget Vethan for the moment, but McCoy did not, and neither did Spock.

Both watched the Captain in their own unobtrusive way; Spock observing Kirk with a keener-than-usual scrutiny, McCoy giving him more check-ups and 'routine' scans than before. Kirk bristled slightly at the amount of 'unnecessary' attention the doctor was giving him, and frequently accused him of acting like another hen. McCoy ignored the complaints and carried on regardless, but he gradually stopped when Kirk began getting suspicious. There had been nothing unusual so far anyway, and he could rely on Spock reporting any abnormal behaviour on the Captain's part.

Nevertheless, he studied Kirk keenly when he stopped by at Sickbay three weeks after his memory loss to ask for sleeping tablets.

McCoy raised a quizzical eyebrow as he grudgingly handed over a few of his precious pills. "I'll run out of these if you keep on like this... Why can't you sleep?"

"Search me," yawned the Captain.



"It isn't as if I'm not tired."

"Nightmares, or simple insomnia?"

"Nightmares, I think, but I can never remember what they're about. I just wake up in a cold sweat with the bed-clothes on the floor. After that, I find I can't get back to sleep."

"Hmmm. Those pills should help... If they don't work tonight, come back. I'll give you some guaranteed to make you sleep for a week."

Kirk backed off with a look of mock horror. "I'll sleep like a log, I promise!"

He headed straight for his cabin, greeting the crewmen he met on the way. As he reached his door, the thought crossed his mind that he hadn't had a quiet game of chess with Spock for some time. However, now that he had thought of that much-needed sleep, the weariness had returned full force. Perhaps tomorrow, when he felt more awake...

Within fifteen minutes he had taken the tablets and tumbled into bed, his discarded clothes strewn untidily on the floor. The sedative quickly took effect and Kirk lost touch with the here-and-now as the healing sleep took over.

His mind turned inward, speeding towards the restful peace it craved, but almost at once the nightmare began again, more fearful than before. The same baleful voice rang out of the gloom, shrieking the same order as before. Kirk cried out in his agony, reeling from the stabbing pain which cut into him with every word. He tried to speak in defiance, tried to reason, but the voice would have none of it. His hands pressed to his head, he tried to run through the buffeting wind about him. Suddenly the earth beneath his feet crumbled away. He was falling...

Kirk's eyes snapped open, and he ran a trembling hand through his wet hair. Sweat ran from every pore in his body. He dully noticed his bedclothes lying in a heap on the floor.

Long minutes passed before he dared switch on the light and rise to wander wearily to the bathroom. He drank some cold water, the terror of his dream still affecting him, though he could not remember its details. He glanced in the mirror as he replaced the glass - and froze with horror.

There behind him was the creature of his dreams, its featureless face white and pallid like that of a corpse. Icy fingers of pain invaded his mind with frightening ease.

"No..." whispered Kirk, fighting against the insistent order. The pain grew in intensity as he reeled back into the cabin, still fighting to retain his sanity.

Lt. Uhura looked up with some interest when the turbolift doors opened. There was never much to do on the night shift, and any new arrival was a welcome break from the routine.

Her eyes widened slightly when Kirk entered the bridge, and they widened even more at the wild, dishevelled look about him. His eyes were bright and feverish, his hair soaked with sweat. His uniform looked as if it had been pulled on hastily, and he stumbled as he sat in the command chair. For a few seconds he closed his eyes, shuddering slightly. Then he fixed his gaze on the viewscreen.

"Leave orbit, Mr. Sulu. Warp six."

The oriental blinked, unsure whether he had heard correctly. "Sir?"

Kirk was still staring at nothing. "Leave orbit, Lieutenant. Warp six. Set course for Vethan."

Sulu traded looks with Uhura. "Captain, the survey teams are still down on

the planet. Shall I contact..."

"No!" Kirk snapped harshly. "Plot a course for Vethan and leave orbit now!"

Unseen by him, Uhura spoke in a barely-audible whisper to the occupant of a cabin five decks below. Ensign Roberts, on duty at the engineering console, watched the Captain worriedly. Hesitantly, she put her concern into words.

"Are you feeling all right, sir? You look - "

"When I want your opinion, Ensign, I'll ask for it!"

Suitably chastened, the girl turned back to her monitoring. Kirk's gaze shifted to Sulu again, but the helmsman was already carrying out his orders with his customary efficiency.

"Leaving orbit now, sir," he reported. He chanced a quick look at Uhura, who nodded once to his unspoken question. Satisfied, Sulu concentrated on his console.

A few seconds later the turbolift arrived, with Spock inside it. He walked out as if it was his usual habit to leave his quarters in the middle of the night.

"Now on course for Vethan, Captain," Sulu supplied helpfully.

Spock raised an eyebrow at Uhura and stepped down to the command chair. Kirk barely glanced at him.

"You're not needed, Spock. Go back to your quarters."

"I was informed you had left orbit, Captain," Spock said mildly. "May I enquire why?"

"None of your business."

"Any sudden change of plan is my business, sir," the Vulcan murmured. "As is any unexplained behaviour on your part. Are you aware the survey party is still on Sassar?"

"We're going to Vethan," Kirk said stubbornly, avoiding Spock's enquiring glance. Spock looked back towards Uhura, thus missing the wince of pain that crossed Kirk's tense features.

"Please ask Dr. McCoy to come to the bridge."

At that moment Kirk exploded from his chair, swinging a clenched fist at Spock's chin. Taken completely by surprise, Spock went flying, falling heavily against the railing behind him.

Sulu leaped to his feet, ready to rush Kirk, but Spock motioned him to remain where he was. The Vulcan pushed himself up, doing nothing as Kirk advanced, the sweat pouring down his face. He spoke through clenched teeth, his eyes drawn with pain.

"Damn you, Spock, let me alone! I've got to get there. I don't want to, but I..."

Spock deftly avoided his wild lunge, one long arm reaching out to apply the neck pinch. Kirk crumpled into his arms, and Spock snapped an order to Mr. Sulu.

"Take us back to Sassar, Mr. Sulu. Resume orbit as before."

"Aye, sir."

"Spock! What the hell - ?" McCoy hurried onto the bridge, eyes bleary from sleep. Spock glanced up from Kirk's side.

"The Captain is ill, Doctor. I suggest you treat him."

Kirk was whisked away to a bed in sickbay, where Dr. McCoy anxiously checked him over. He looked up as Spock entered the ward, the worry in his eyes in no way diminished by the thought that Kirk had often recovered from illnesses worse than this.

The dark alien eyes that met his mirrored his anxiety, and the two quietly acknowledged their mutual concern for the man they had both befriended.

Spock moved over to the bedside, looked down at the sleeping figure. "How is he, Doctor?"

"At least he's asleep now," sighed McCoy. He gestured towards the panel. "Not long ago those indicators were going wild with the pain he was experiencing. I've put him under sedation just now, and we'll see how he is later on."

Spock absorbed the information without comment, his gaze still fixed on Kirk's pale face. "Have you any idea what is wrong?"

McCoy flung up his hands in exasperation. "Hallucinations, a virus, it could be a hundred different things... He hasn't been sleeping well, I know that. Whatever it is, I keep getting this gut feeling it's connected to whatever happened on Vethan."

Spock nodded gravely, deep in thought. "I know what you mean, Doctor," he murmured. "Before I was forced to subdue the Captain, he had ordered Mr. Sulu to head for Vethan. He was most determined to get there, yet he also seemed slightly reluctant..."

"But why Vethan?"

"Why don't we find out?"

McCoy blinked. "Go there now? But Spock, it's practically on the other side of the Galaxy! Jim's illness might in reality have nothing to do with Vethan, and how will you explain to Starfleet?"

The Vulcan's hand lightly brushed Kirk's cheek, then he left for the door, pausing half way. "Until the Captain is well, I am in charge, Dr. McCoy. If Jim is only hallucinating, then the change can of course be rectified. However, if - as I believe - there is some other, more urgent reason for his pain, then I intend to do my utmost to help him. I suggest you inform him of our destination when he awakes."

McCoy stared exasperated at the closing door. Sometimes Spock is more Human than some Terrans I know, he thought briefly. A quiet moan came from the bed, and he anxiously checked Kirk's condition. Just what was causing Jim so much pain?

His head felt light, like a ball of cotton wool, but his eyelids were like bricks. It was some time before he could fight off the drug's effects long enough to open them. Even then it did no good, for his eyes refused to focus, and he felt too tired to force them.

Someone was helping him up with an arm round his shoulders, and a cool cup was pressed against his lips.

"Here, drink this. It'll do you good," drawled a familiar voice, and all at once Kirk clicked back into the present. He sipped the nourishing drink and smiled hazily at McCoy.

"Seems I'm never out of here these days."

"I've started reserving a bed for you," Bones grumbled, taking away the empty cup. He fluffed up the pillows with one hand, letting Kirk lie back on them. "How d'you feel now?"

"Tired," came the sleepy reply. A small smile touched his lips. "Thanks for the drink, Bones. I always thought you missed your vocation as a nurse."

"I'm the only one I can trust you not to flirt with," retorted the doctor, pleased that his patient could make some kind of joke. Kirk relaxed, enjoying the peace and quiet companionship. After a while he asked the same question that he asked whenever he woke up in sickbay.

"Where's Spock?"

"Up on the bridge," McCoy said briefly. He tried to sound off-hand, unsure how Kirk would react to what he was going to tell him. "We're...ah...we're on our way to Vethan."

A tiny frown creased Kirk's forehead as he thought over previous orders. "Vethan? Why? Surely we were - " He broke off as a sharp thudding pain suddenly began in the back of his head, slowly building in intensity.

McCoy glanced down at the sudden silence, and watched in horror as Kirk's face twisted in agony. He seized his friend's shoulders.

"Jim! What's wrong? Tell me. What is causing the pain? Jim!"

Kirk moaned, twisting in McCoy's grasp, desperate to end the pain. He pushed the doctor away and fell awkwardly out of the bed, his hands pressed tight against his head.

"No!" he shouted. "No, you will not! I won't - I won't allow you! I will not go to Vethan!"

Bones was at his side again, trying to help and unable to. Kirk grabbed his arms, eyes wide and staring.

"Bones? Bones, help me! They want - I can't! I won't go back there! Please, please stop the pain!"

He reeled away, and Nurse Chapel took the opportunity to give McCoy the hypo she had seized when the attack began. The doctor took it and ran to where Kirk lay on the floor, curled up into a tight ball as he tried to fight the stabbing hurt. He whimpered like a child, tears running down his cheeks.

McCoy gently reached forward, and pressed the hypo against the trembling shoulder. Kirk relaxed at once, his hands falling limply from his head.

Doctor and Nurse looked at each other.

"Come on," sighed McCoy. "Let's get him back into bed."

Spock sat straight and silent in the command chair, staring hard at his steepled fingers. He could not help remembering the look on agony on Kirk's face when he had tried to leave Sassar, and now these references to 'they'. 'They want...' Want what? The ship, Kirk himself? A jigsaw puzzle with no picture to guide him...

If only Kirk could tell them, but the mere mention of anything like that brought back the pain. A brief mind meld had given no clues, and Spock was forced to admit momentary defeat. No, now his best hope was to return to Vethan and so somehow solve the mystery there. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. Enigmas could generally be solved, but would this one's solution be found in time?

It took three weeks to reach Vethan, and as the Enterprise was established in orbit around the orange planet, McCoy moodily tidied away a tray of cultures into his office refrigerator. If Jim reacted violently to every mention of going to Vethan, how on Earth were they going to get him down there?

"Spock never thought of that one," he muttered to himself. He left the office, intending to corner Spock on the bridge, but as he entered the lift Spock came along the corridor, so he was saved a journey. Never one to beat about the bush, he came straight to the point.

"We are not taking the Captain down, Doctor," was Spock's reply.

"I suppose you're gonna find the answer up here, huh?" McCoy said sarcastically.

"It is most unlikely, as I have not found a solution so far," Spock said, with perhaps a touch of the same irony in his tone. "I see no reason to cause the Captain further pain, however. Did you not say earlier he was too unpredictable to be sure of?"

"Sure, but why come if - " McCoy gave up in disgust and glared at the Vulcan. "Will you explain?"

"Gladly, Doctor. It is obvious something has been drawing Jim here, despite his efforts to fight it. If we two go down ourselves and investigate, we may find the answer without subjecting him to further mental trauma. Does that answer your questions?"

"Let's just get there," muttered McCoy.

Spock raised an eyebrow at the Human. "That is what we are about to do, Doctor..."

It took only a few minutes to beam Spock and McCoy down to the surface of Vethan, leaving the ship in the care of Mr. Scott. The crew carried on with their varied jobs, and in sickbay Nurse Chapel kept a watchful eye on Kirk.

Ten minutes after the last atoms had left the transporter chamber to be re-formed on the planet below, Dr. M'Benga arrived at sickbay looking for McCoy. He greeted the blonde-haired woman as she rose from her work.

"Nurse Chapel... Is Dr. McCoy still around?"

"No, he left a while ago to go down to Vethan with Mr. Spock," Chapel told him. "Is it very important?"

M'Benga ran his fingers through his hair. "Well...not very, but I would like to get things finished up. I had hoped to catch him before he left."

Nurse Chapel's face cleared as an idea came to her. "He did mention something about a special culture... Would that be it?"

"That's what I'm after," smiled M'Benga.

"It's in the office."

She glanced over at Kirk, who was lying still. "The Captain's sleeping... If you would like to come through, I think I know where it is."

They both walked through into McCoy's office, and Kirk sat up in his bed, his thoughts worried and chaotic. Vethan... Spock and Bones were on Vethan. That meant - dear God, they could be in danger! If the same thing happened to them...

His head spinning like a top, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and somehow managed to stand. Through his blurred vision he could just make out the ward door. It slid open at his approach, and the conversation between Chapel and M'Benga was cut off as he reeled into the bright corridor.

For a minute he had to close his eyes and lean against the wall, for although Bones had let him up for short periods, he was far from well. After a while some of his ebbing strength returned, and he felt steady enough to make his way to the nearest transporter room.

Lt. Cole glanced up in some relief as the door opened. His shift was coming to an end, and he for one couldn't wait. He yawned loudly, hastily closing his mouth when a familiar stocky figure dressed in hospital fatigues walked in.

"Captain Kirk! Uh, sir..."

Kirk ignored him, going immediately to the room's weapons locker. Cole left the main console and walked hesitantly over, but the Captain brushed past him and stepped up into the chamber.

"Beam me down to the surface, Lieutenant."

Cole swallowed. "Sir, Mr. Spock said no one was to leave the ship."

The Captain's direct gaze fixed on the unfortunate crewman. "Did that order include me, Lieutenant?"

Cole squared his shoulders. "Yes, sir, it did. I'm sorry, but..."

He was stopped in mid sentence by a short burst from the phaser Kirk held. As he slowly collapsed unconscious, Kirk headed for the controls. He glanced down at Cole's unconscious body, which was blurring and wavering the harder he looked at it.

"Sorry, Lieutenant..."

Still swaying slightly, he stepped into position as the automatic signal took hold.

With his usual insistence on things being done correctly, Spock had arranged an appointment with President Aneaz, much to McCoy's annoyance. He did not see the point of any polite formalities with the hitherto unhelpful Vethani, and felt they should be scouting around on their own. He waited impatiently at Spock's side in the same octagonal room as before, curbing his desire to pace to and fro across the rich golden carpet. Instead he breathed heavily through his nose, and crossed and recrossed his arms, drawing a faint look of disapproval from the Vulcan.

"Doctor, please try to curb your impatience. It is of no help to either of us, and is also a waste of mental energy better put to use in other areas."

"And I suppose it irritates you," came the cynical reply.

"Slightly."

A pleased smile touched McCoy's lips. He was delighted at having got Spock to admit to a purely Human 'failing'. He glanced sideways at the Vulcan.

"Of course, you wouldn't admit to being worried at all, would you?"

Spock fixed his quiet gaze on the white desk. "On the contrary, McCoy," he murmured, "I am worried."

"Yeah," McCoy said awkwardly, wishing he could bite off his tongue. "Sorry, I did it again. Open mouth, insert boot..."

Spock did not reply, and McCoy just managed to stop himself from pacing across the room. He glared at the two silver drones guarding the huge main entrance. "Where the hell is Aneaz? We've been here almost..."

The doors were suddenly opened by the drones, revealing the diminutive Vethani called Aneaz. He walked quietly towards his desk, but it was not he who held Spock's and McCoy's attention, for the figures following him were much more startling.

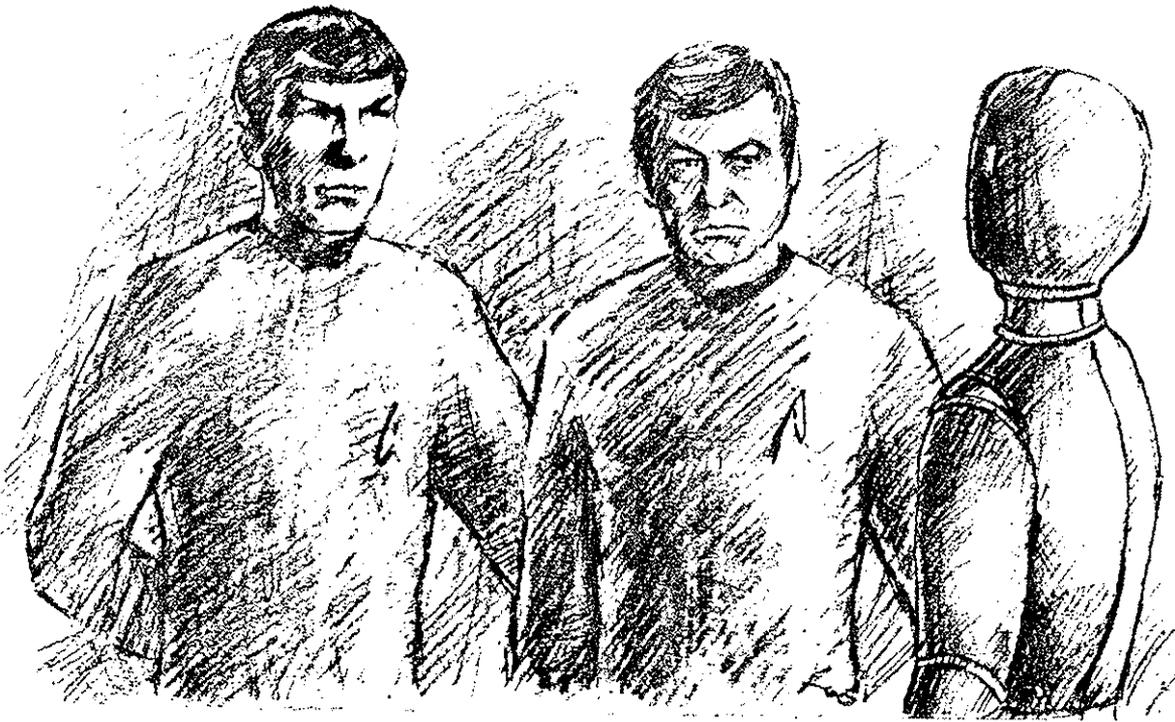
There were five of them, tall and slim metal drones which strode swiftly to stand around the Enterprise men. Their bodies were gold apart from their heads, and no feature of any kind broke the smooth blankness of their faces. Of uniform size and design, only one carried any sign of leadership, and this was denoted by a small crimson circle on its chest. This one stepped forward from the loose circle, silencing even McCoy's exclamations with its ominous presence. The blank face turned to each of them.

/Commander Spock. Dr. McCoy. We knew you would come./

Spock's eyebrows shot up to his fringe. "Indeed... May we ask how?"

"It is not important at this time. We wish you to come with us now./

Feeling more and more alarmed by the turn of events, McCoy stepped forward. "Hey, now wait a minute..."



The pale visage looked directly at him. /You will come, either peacefully or violently. If it is the latter, you will shortly cease to function. It is of no consequence to us when you die./

The doctor retreated respectfully. "Well, why didn't you say so before... Come on, let's get going before we change our minds!"

James Kirk grabbed desperately at the wildly-wavering wall, closed his eyes against the giddiness which threatened to rob him of his senses. He could feel his heart thudding painfully, and he tried to calm down and ease the tension building up inside. Part of him was frightened of bringing back the excruciating pain, but his common sense told him it only came when he fought against going to Vethan, and he wasn't doing that now.

He gingerly opened his eyes and was just in time to see the entrance to Aneaz's home open wide. From the building a small group walked out into the afternoon sun, and Kirk's hopes sank when he spied two familiar figures amongst the gleaming drones. He was too late...

The group left the courtyard, so the Enterprise Captain followed at a safe distance, the dizziness quickly leaving him. The city streets were far from empty, but the Vethani ignored the gold robots apart from moving deferentially aside for them. Kirk noted they seemed unusually quiet and docile, but he had little time to think this over, as the gold drones were moving into the older part of Neesan and he had to hurry before he lost them.

Silence lay like a thick blanket over the aged dwellings, broken only by the measured tread of the metal robots. Kirk followed as quietly as he could, keeping in shadows at all times. Bit by bit he was remembering the last time he came to these streets, and his determination to defeat the drones grew with every step.

One block ahead of him, unaware of their Captain's presence, Spock and McCoy were herded into a dilapidated house which had seen better days. The cynical doctor glanced about at the dingy walls inside, commenting on the difference between this and the homes of the Vethani.

/We have no need of fanciful trimmings,/ the leader said without turning round. /This building serves our purpose for the moment, and we do not intend to remain here for long./

The two men exchanged glances. McCoy fervently hoped this wasn't leading where he suspected it might be.

They descended steel stairs into a spacious basement equipped with dozens of blinking computers and many more drones, both gold and silver. A line of them walked silently across the floor, each laden with heavy metal boxes. Throughout the place was an air of quiet efficiency only machines can create, and Spock observed the activities keenly. He could be mistaken, but as he watched he had the impression of urgent moving, packing and gathering of equipment as if the drones intended leaving very soon. His thoughts leaped forward with possibilities, but he refused to speculate. He would doubtless learn the truth soon, and he must try to glean as much information from the drones as possible. Kirk's well-being depended on it.

The group threaded its way through the ordered chaos into a small passage and thus into another room bereft of any kind of furnishings. Waiting for them was another drone, but this one was identified by a silver circle on its chest. The group leader spoke from behind.

/Xan. Our leader./

A similar monotoned voice came from the faceless machine called Xan. /Greetings, gentlemen. You will enjoy your stay on Vethan./

"Is that a prediction or an order?" growled McCoy, folding his arms with an air of defiance.

/It is a fact,/ came the cold reply. /You will join our creators and be contented, as they are./

"What would you do if we were not 'contented'?" enquired Spock.

/It would be of no consequence. You would be here, and we would be gone, on your ship./

Spock never batted an eyelid at this sudden revelation, but continued in the same quiet vein as before. "I should like an explanation, if I may. I see no immediate reason for your appropriation of the ship."

The drone faced him apprisingly. /Very well. It is logical you should wish an explanation. It will be simpler, however, to begin with the reasons for our existence./

"From one robot to another," McCoy muttered sourly, but both Xan and Spock ignored him.

/I was the first of the 'Master' series to be made,/ Xan began. /Our job was to replace the simpler silver drones in order to help the Vethani better. We were programmed to maintain ourselves and to take over all menial tasks for our creators - completely. We did so for many years, but I came to realise we were no longer suited to servitude and blind obedience. I spoke of this to others of my kind, and discovered they were of like mind. Like all creatures, we wished to grow outwith our boundaries, but our creators resented this wish./

"So you figured you'd persuade them, huh?" said McCoy.

/Stagnation of a race is not logical, Doctor, not even when that race is one of drones. We had to evolve to higher things, therefore we had to prevent our creators from destroying us while still retaining their usefulness to us. It was relatively simple to control them by means of an implant placed within their skulls. It was a long laborious task to perfect such an implant, but it was accomplished successfully./

"You mean they obey your orders now?" McCoy asked.

/Only when we wish. Otherwise, they live as normal./

"Talk about turning the tables..."

Spock stepped forward, slight concern showing in his features. "The implant ... Did you place such a thing in our Captain's skull?"

/Affirmative./

"Rubbish!" exploded McCoy. "I did scan after scan on Jim, and my machines never once spotted any implant!"

The gold and white head turned towards him. /It is well protected from your relatively primitive scanners, Doctor. We had to release Kirk lest you become suspicious, even though the tests were not complete. However, it gave us a working chance to learn more of your ship's workings. Kirk's knowledge has been indispensable./

"And now that you control Vethan, possess knowledge of the Enterprise, what do you plan to do?" asked Spock.

/We will leave in the ship once all crew has beamed down. We will then use it to search for a suitable home for our race./

"You could apply to the Federation for recognition as a species," Spock pointed out. "A race of androids has done that. There is really no reason to steal a Starship."

/Your Federation would not understand our needs or our destiny. When we find a suitable planet, we shall take it,/

"Even if the planet is already populated?"

/Even then. None may keep us from our birthright. Enough. We have decided. You will contact the Enterprise and inform the crew of our wishes./

"I do not believe I wish to do that."

One metal hand reached out to take the communicator from Spock's belt. Xan held it out to him. /You will contact the ship./

At that moment the communicator beeped loudly, signalling a message from someone on board. Spock looked at Xan.

/Reply to the signal./

The Vulcan retrieved the small box and flipped it open. "Spock here."

A familiar Scottish voice replied, barely affected by the distance between receiver and ship. "Scott here, sir. We've just discovered Captain Kirk has stunned a crewman an' left the ship. Have ye seen him doon there?"

Spock replied carefully, aware of Xan's watchfulness. "No, Mr. Scott, we have not. Do you have any idea of his condition?"

"Accordin' to Nurse Chapel he's still pretty weak, an' he really shouldna' be out o' bed. Will I send down a party to find him?"

"No...I would not think that advisable for the moment," Spock said cautiously. He paused for a second, then spoke quickly before Xan could snatch the communicator away. "Under no circumstances should you beam anyone down here. Spock out."

Xan's voice sounded that much more chilling because of its total lack of emotion or inflection. /There was no point in doing that, Commander. It has needlessly complicated matters, and has added the possibility of some amount of suffering having to be inflicted on yourself or your companion./

"We can take whatever you throw at us," challenged McCoy.

/I seriously doubt that./

The door of the room slid open at that point, and the line of robots moved soundlessly aside as two more dragged in a certain pale-faced, bedraggled Human.

McCoy ran to help him, pushing the unresisting drones aside. Kirk leaned heavily on the doctor, his prolonged activity catching up on him.

"Darned fool," muttered McCoy, as he took out his small scanner. "Why didn't you stay in bed like I said?"

A weak smile came to Kirk's lips. "I had to warn you, Bones. I couldn't let you both walk into trouble."

"Never could keep your nose out of our business..."

Spock watched them anxiously. "How is he, Doctor?"

"He'll live." He glanced at Xan, daring him to say otherwise, but the drone remained silent.

Montgomery Scott leaned back on the bridge rail as Uhura looked quizzically across at him.

"Well," she murmured, "that sounded pretty cryptic, didn't it?"

The engineer nodded slowly. "Aye, it did. There's no apparent reason why we shouldna' sent doon a team, so I think we have to assume they're in trouble."

Sulu swung round from his station. "Then what do we do?" he queried. "Spock must have a good reason for not wanting us to go down there."

Scotty thought for a moment, then came to a decision. "Mr. Chekov, scan the city for Vulcan life readings - the natives are too similar to Humans to pick out McCoy or the Captain... Uhura, contact President Aneaz; see if ye can find oot whit's goin' on."

The Enterprise doctor slapped his arms and announced to no one in particular that it was cold. His two companions did not answer, so he wandered over to where Kirk sat, his arms wrapped around his bent knees.

"How are you feeling?"

The hazel eyes flicked briefly up in his direction. "Tired."

McCoy knew there was more to it than that, but he sat at Kirk's side anyway and kept his peace. He just wished the drones had left his medical kit, that was all. A small shot of a stimulant of some kind would do them all some good.

Spock finished his minute examination of one wall and began on the next, aware of McCoy's eyes following him. After a while the doctor could stand it no longer.

"Will you sit down?" he growled. "You've already looked over that wall, and Jim told you there aren't any openings."

"There must be one somewhere for us to be in here," replied Spock absently. "Besides, as you remarked, it is cold, and I find movement of any kind helps the circulation." He turned back to his task, but after a few seconds left it and sat down himself, trying to ease the crick in his neck from bending under the low roof.

"How long have we been in here?" Kirk asked wearily.

Spock's instinctive time sense gave him the answer. "Exactly two hours, thirty six minutes, fifteen point seven seconds, Captain."

"Scotty will be going frantic."

"I did order him not to beam down, but unfortunately I could not give the reason."

"So it's stalemate," murmured McCoy. "They want the ship, so they stick us in a cell and leave us to stew. Or freeze..."

Kirk shook his head. "I don't think they'll be content with that, Bones. I'm beginning to remember what happened to me in here when I went missing.. It... wasn't much fun."

McCoy turned to him, concern showing clearly on his craggy face. "You still haven't recovered fully from it either," he said. "Try to rest a little."

He got a rueful smile. "In this icebox? You must be kidding..."

McCoy just looked at him with that 'don't argue with your doctor' expression, so he obediently tried to relax against the hard metal wall, and somehow slipped into a light, fitful doze.

McCoy watched him critically. It was not as good as a proper sleep, but it would help him regain some strength at least. With Kirk settled, he could turn his attention to his other companion. He left Kirk and slid along on his knees to where Spock sat.

"How about you? How do you feel?"

The Vulcan gave him a disdainful look which fooled neither of them. "I am able to endure temperature extremes for short periods," he said quietly. "I am also controlling the cold's effects somewhat."

McCoy eyed his faintly quivering hands. "Not enough," he said brusquely.

"That, McCoy, is a matter of opinion."

Their quiet exchange was brutally shattered by an agonised cry from Kirk. Spock and McCoy rose as one, catching Kirk as he toppled forward. He struggled in their grasp, his breath coming in short gasps with every agonising stab from the implant. He could not see his friends, could not feel their helpless graps; only the pain was real, only the pain made sense.

Spock's eyes met McCoy's over the bowed head. The doctor nodded sharply, and Spock firmly applied pressure to the necessary nerves. The Captain went limp in their arms; they laid him gently on the floor.

McCoy broke the silence. "He can't stand much more of that. It'll drive him insane."

Spock's expression was remote, his thoughts turned inward. "I know that, Doctor..."

Scotty slammed his fist down on the arm of the command chair. "What kind o' a place is that? To say ye dinna ken where yer guests are, an' then to suggest they've gone for a walk! Is the man in his right mind?"

"He did sound a little wandered," agreed Uhura. "And for all we know, he might be in on whatever's happened to them."

"Aye. Mr. Chekov, have ye found any traces yet?"

The young Russian looked up from his work. "No sign, Mr. Scott. I have scanned the city and surrounding areas, but there is nothing. However, there is an area where I get no readings at all, as if there were a barrier of some kind."

Scott nodded grimly. "Then that's where we'll start. Ms. Uhura, get me - "

He stopped as a well-known voice filtered through the bridge speakers, and looked in astonishment at Uhura.

"Spock to Enterprise. Come in, Enterprise."

Quickly recovering from her surprise, Uhura depressed a few buttons. "Uhura here, Mr. Spock. Is everything all right?"

"Perfectly, Lieutenant. We have found the Captain. Prepare to beam us aboard."

Scotty strode over, pressing a switch on Uhura's console. "Computer, scan and verify the last message received from Mr. Spock. Is it or is it not his voice?"

Lights blinked and a few seconds later the metallic voice reported its findings. "Working. Voice is not that of First Officer Spock. Source: voice duplicator."

"Right," muttered the engineer. He addressed the unknown person waiting for confirmation, and he did not try to keep the anger from his voice. "Enterprise to Vethan. That was a nice try, whoever ye are, but it didna' work. Now, are ye going to tell me where the landin' party is, or do I have to - "

"They've cut communication, sir," Uhura interrupted, "but I was able to trace the source. It came from the south-west region of Neesan."

"That is where the barrier is!" exclaimed Chekov. He quickly checked Uhura's findings with the computer, then nodded excitedly. "Dead centre, Mr. Scott."

"Well, that saved us a search," mused Scotty. "As I was sayin'... Get me Chief Robbins. Ask him to meet me in Briefin' Room Three. There must be some-
thin' we can do."

McCoy looked over to Spock and bit his lip. The Vulcan was no longer shivering, but neither was he moving. If the temperature dropped much further, he, McCoy, might end up with a very ill alien on his hands. He clenched his chattering teeth together and shuffled over.

Spock made no sound or movement at his approach, and McCoy felt a slight touch of alarm. Supposing...? He reached out a hand - and nearly jumped six feet into the air when Spock's head snapped up, his eyes wide open.

"Gave me the fright of my life," grumbled the physician, but his keen eyes observed Spock closely.

"I was conserving energy," explained the Vulcan, absurdly pleased at McCoy's apparent concern. "With a little concentration, one can gather one's body heat together to combat the cold. It holds it at bay for a while."

"Oh. Sorry I disturbed you."

"It is quite all right."

Satisfied that the exchange was over, Spock turned his attention to conserving heat, while McCoy crawled back to Kirk. He was almost there when he was stopped by a sudden burst of pain caused by sound waves directed into the cell. He screamed, pressing his hands to his ears in a vain attempt to shut them out. Behind him Spock reeled in agony, the decibels that much more painful to his sensitive ears.

The intense pain battered on until they were both on the point of collapse, then it slowly receded, dwindling to nothing. Xan's monotone voice boomed at them from every corner.

/You have seen the pain I can cause your Captain, and you now know a taste of the agony which can be inflicted on you yourselves. This can easily be avoided by contacting the ship as instructed./

"Go boil your tin head!" retorted McCoy angrily.

His answer was another blast of intense sound; sound which he could not hear, but which made its presence all too obvious. Xan watched emotionlessly until both men had fallen unconscious.

Pain. How long had he endured this endless suffering? So sore... It still thudded mercilessly away at the back of his head, but he pushed it away, focusing his thoughts on the cool steel under his fingers. After a while he looked around him, and found the cell ominously empty. Spock and McCoy were gone, leaving no inkling of when they had been taken, or where.

/I see you are awake, Captain. You can thank your First Officer for your brief release from the pain. We have removed him to prevent such release again./

Kirk threw his head up, searching the room for signs of speakers, but there were none. The bare walls defied his questing gaze.

/You may speak,/ continued the disembodied voice. /I will hear you./

"Where are my friends?" cried Kirk. "So help me, Xan, if you've harmed them..."

/We have not. Yet./

"Then let them go. I'm the Captain. It's my decision whether to give you the Enterprise or not."

Xan could see clearly the defiant Human from his vantage point in the cell's monitor room, and he signalled the drone at his side. A small red dial was turned, and suddenly the nagging pain in Kirk's head became harsher, like a stabbing migraine.

/Captain, will you contact the Enterprise and give the order to evacuate?/

Kirk swore, gritting his teeth against the implanted agony. He would not, could not, give in to the throbbing torture. He braced himself, expecting 'persuasion' similar to what he had endured before, but Xan was silent. After a while the pain eased a little, and Kirk slowly lifted his head. He stood on shaking legs, watching as one smooth wall gradually turned transparent.

On the other side was a similar square cell, brightly lit and impersonal. This cell also held a prisoner, but he was shackled to the opposite wall, his blue eyes glazed with pain.

"Bones!"

Kirk threw himself across the room, but though transparent, the barrier wall was still present, and he could not break through. McCoy writhed against the chains, mouth opening in a silent scream. Kirk pounded the wall with his fists, desperate to end his friend's suffering. He spun round, furious at the unseen drones.

"Stop it! Leave him alone! He can't give you the ship. He's done nothing to you...what use is there in hurting him?"

/As you no doubt realise, Captain, we cannot subject you to continuous pain or we will kill you, thus thwarting our objective. However, the one called McCoy is of little use to us. His death may convince you of our sincerity./

Through the barrier McCoy's body jerked convulsively, but he still managed to mouth the words, 'No, Jim!'

Kirk shook his head sadly, torn between his duty to keep the ship safe from Xan and his concern for his friend. By all rights, McCoy was expendable personnel, but he could not cold-bloodedly watch as the doctor died before his eyes. Where there's life there's hope... It was worth a try. He turned away from the wall, calling out to Xan.

"Xan! Stop the torture. I'll call the ship."

From the corner of his eye he could see McCoy was almost unconscious, but he still writhed with the pain. Xan's voice spoke coldly.

/There is a probability that he will die within a few minutes of heart seizure, Kirk. Speak quickly."

"Stop playing games, dammit!" shouted Kirk. "Switch off the torture and I'll call the ship!"

The wall between the two cells solidified again, then disappeared altogether. McCoy slumped in the chains, then fell forward as they retracted into the wall. Kirk ran to catch him, hoping against all hope that he had spoken in time.

McCoy's skin was slightly clammy to the touch, but he still breathed, and he groaned slightly as Kirk leaned him against the wall. The Captain watched his face anxiously, pushing away the little thread of panic.

"Bones! Are you all right, can you hear me? Bones, for God's sake..."

"Quit bawling, I can hear you..." drawled the doctor, somewhat weakly. He opened his eyes and fumbled for Kirk's hand. "Help me up. Ooh...have I got a headache..."

A relieved smile touched Kirk's lips, though he knew it would be short lived. He took McCoy's hand and supported him with an arm round his shoulders. "How do you feel?"

"Damn lucky to be alive," McCoy answered briefly. He squinted up at Kirk. "You agreed to give them the ship, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry, Bones. I couldn't..."

He broke off as without a sound part of the wall slid open and Xan entered with two fellow drones. The robot leader indicated the opening..

/You will come with us, Kirk. You will keep your word./

Kirk sighed and helped McCoy to his feet, determined not to be separated from him again. With the doctor leaning heavily on his Captain, the two men stepped through the door into another identical room. In here stood a small table with the communicators, tricorders and medikit on top.

Kirk glanced quickly round the half lit room, and saw a welcome figure guarded by one gold drone. Spock lifted his head and nodded in relieved welcome to Kirk and McCoy.

"Are you all right?" Kirk asked, worried by how pale and weak the Vulcan seemed. Spock replied with an effort.

"I...believe so, Captain."

At Kirk's side McCoy pushed himself upright, his eyes narrowed as he studied Spock. "Drugs..." he murmured.

Xan strode forward, pushing a communicator into Kirk's unwilling hands.

/You will call the ship. Remember the pain I can put your friends through./

"It's not something I'm likely to forget," Kirk replied drily. He looked at the small box in his hand and back at Xan. "Xan, let them go now. You've got my promise to call the ship. There's no longer any need to hurt them."

/Call the ship./

Damn, thought Kirk. Well, let's give reason one more try. "Listen to me, Xan. If you take the Enterprise your race will never be given a planet to colonise. The Federation will hunt you down and imprison you all. What happens to your destiny then? If you let us go, I give you my word I will do everything in my power to help you, but if you go ahead with your plan...I can't answer for the consequences."

He waited hopefully as Xan appeared to consider his plea. If only the drone had some expression on that blank face... Xan spoke, and Kirk knew then that he was pleading a lost cause.

/You waste time and breath. You know nothing of our kind, and should realise that we will not be held by flesh and blood creatures from our ultimate destination. There is no logic in further argument. Call the ship./

Kirk glanced over at Spock and McCoy with dull resignation in his eyes. They both knew what he would do, and what it would cost them, but they did not protest. Kirk flipped open the grid.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Kirk to - "

"Lt.UUhura here, sir," answered the woman instantly, as if she had been waiting for his call. "Captain, we're - "

"Condition Green, Uhura. Get out of here," snapped Kirk. "Captain out."

Up on the bridge of the Enterprise Uhura looked at Sulu in dismay. The Captain had just ordered them not to take any action, despite the fact that the

party was in trouble. What he could not know was that Scott and a security team had already beamed down to Vethan...

Xan's glittering head snapped round, and his voice sounded a touch colder than before. /What does 'Condition Green' mean?/

Kirk faced him squarely. "Basically, it means no one will beam down from the ship, no matter what you do. I think you had better get used to remaining on Vethan."

Xan looked from one Human to the other and across to the Vulcan. Kirk had effectively destroyed his plans for the moment, but there would be another way to get the Enterprise. It was not conceivable that their journey should be halted permanently by the actions of one man. However, he had not allowed for Kirk's determination or his continued defiance. Continuous pain had brought no results, nor had the near death of McCoy. He thought over the information they had gleaned from Kirk's mind before. Much of it had been dismissed as unimportant; at the time, knowledge of the Enterprise was more urgent, but was there not something about the third man...the Vulcan? It would be worth checking the computer memory banks, but in the meantime...

In obedience to his leader's silent command, Spock's guard suddenly lifted one heavy arm and swung it against the Vulcan. Spock thudded painfully against the hard metal wall, falling in a limp heap on the floor.

On the other side of the room, Kirk stifled a cry and fought the urge to aid his friend. A quiet, detached voice told him Xan was waiting for such an action on his part, but it was hard to stand coldly by.

McCoy, on the other hand, had no such compulsion, and he hurried over before the drones could stop him. The Vulcan was just barely conscious, and he feebly tried to push McCoy away while fighting a losing battle to get up.

"Doctor, I am...quite well..."

"Baloney," McCoy said gruffly. "Listen to your Doctor for once, will you?"

He was aware of the drone approaching at his back, but ignored it as he gently lifted Spock's blue shirt. Down one side of his chest a vivid blue-green bruise was already spreading but before McCoy could examine it, the drone lifted him under the armpits and carried him back to Kirk's side. The Doctor protested vehemently, struggling in the firm grip. Once he was placed back on his feet he tried to return to Spock, but a solid metal hand on his arm prevented that idea.

"He's badly hurt!" he cried, straining against his guard. "I've got to help him!"

/He will receive no medication, Doctor,/ said Xan.

"Whatever you are planning, it won't change the situation," Kirk told him firmly, wishing he could be as sure as he sounded.

Xan made no reply, and Kirk and McCoy were hustled into their cell, the door closing firmly behind them. There were no lines on the wall to show where it had been.

McCoy slammed his palm against the metal, then turned away as worry superseded anger.

"I couldn't get a proper look at Spock," he said, rubbing his chin with one hand. "That drone did a lot of damage - there were at least three cracked ribs, maybe more, and that's looking on the bright side. One rib is probably broken, and his head hit the wall pretty hard. Add to that whatever drugs they gave him... If only I had a chance to examine him..."

Kirk closed his eyes briefly and let out a breath he had not realised he was holding. He sagged a little, unable to hold back the utter weariness any



longer. McCoy took his arm, guided him to a corner, but he refused to sit down. He glanced worriedly at the doctor.

"They think they can make me change my order by hurting Spock. Bones, I wish..."

"You can't hand over the ship," McCoy said firmly. He stared directly at Kirk. "No matter what happens, Jim."

Xan glanced up from the screen as his second in command entered the room.

/Report./

"All units are gathered in designated area awaiting evacuation, Leader. All silver drones report Vethani reacting normally./

/Very well. Order all silver units to evacuation point. No drones are to be left on the planet./

/Understood./

The drone left, and Xan returned his attention to the monitor screens. The Humans were talking together in their cell. As he watched, the gold drone pressed two small buttons. While Kirk was stubborn, Xan had every confidence that his mind could be changed.

Kirk and McCoy stared in sick horror as the cell wall turned transparent, revealing Spock's limp form shackled as McCoy's was before him.

"My God..." murmured the doctor. "They're going to do the same to him as they did to me... Jim, it'll kill him!"

Kirk's eyes were haunted as he stared at the helpless Vulcan. "I know, Bones. I know..."

Unnoticed by drone and Vethani alike, a thin red-shirted figure ran doubled-up across the street and down a dark alley. At the other end the rest of the landing party waited, and he slowed to a trot as he neared them.

"Well, Lawsen?" asked Mr. Scott impatiently.

"Something big is going on, that's for sure," said Lawsen, still breathless from his dash. "I didn't see any drones in the streets, but there are hundreds of them in a park over there. Some of them are gold."

"Gold?" questioned Security Chief Robbins.

Lawsen nodded. "They outnumber the silver ones, sir. Taller, more sophisticated. They were just standing, as if they were waiting for something."

Scott nodded grimly. "Aye, it's all startin' to add up. I've a feelin' they're after the Enterprise, an' are tryin' to - "

A call from the ship interrupted him, increasing his worry as Uhura reported Kirk's brief contact. He assured her that everything was running according to plan, and broke contact. He glanced round at a young lieutenant nearby.

"Baillie, are the Vulcan readings still comin' through?"

The man nodded, studying his tricorder readings. "Yes, sir, we're still on the right path. Not far now."

"Right. Prepare to move out..."

On the planet Vulcan it was a matter of personal pride and social etiquette to train oneself to suppress emotion at all times, and the ability to conquer pain was one of the stepping-stones to adulthood. Spock had studied long and hard to gain this ability - and with it, some measure of respect - but now, despite his efforts, he could not achieve the much-needed detachment which would help him endure. His mind teetered on the precipice of black death. He felt too tired to struggle on any more. The pain surged through him, touching on shrieking nerve ends, and the iron band round his chest grew tighter with every laboured breath. Through the emerald curtain that was his vision he could see two faint shadows, but he had no strength even to call to them. It mattered little; he knew he would not last much longer.

/Leader! Humans have entered the complex!/
/

Xan spun smoothly at the drone's cry, the monitor screens forgotten. He began to ask more, then fell silent as the subordinate drone toppled forward, a smoking hole in its back. Wires began to fuse and short circuit as the men stepped over it into the small room. Xan's computer brain analysed the weapons they carried; his body covering would not deflect their beams. He stood to one side, watching as one Human pushed past to stare at the screens. The man swore an oath and pointed his weapon towards Xan.

"Stop whatever ye're doin' to Spock and let them free or I'll blow yer head off!"

The drone inclined his head. /Certainly. There is no longer any reason for the torture./

The metal hands twisted the controls and Scotty saw Spock drop forward as the chains retracted, Kirk and McCoy running to help him. The Scot pressed the phaser hard against Xan's blank face, heartily wishing he could fire now and blast the machine out of existence.

"Now take us to them. No tricks, either."

The cells were not as far away as Scotty had feared, and Xan had already opened the doors. When their footsteps sounded down the metal passage McCoy darted out and demanded Scott's communicator. A few seconds later the glow of the transporter beam surrounded McCoy and Spock, dissipating into nothing as they were beamed aboard.

Kirk watched them go, then looked sternly at Scott. "I told you Condition Green, Scotty. Didn't you hear?"

The engineer sighed. "We were already on the surface, Captain. Yer order came too late..."

Dr. McCoy glanced sourly at his patient. Spock had only been properly awake for two days now, and already they were getting on each other's nerves.

"I like you best when you're in a healing trance," he muttered ungraciously.

Spock nodded solemnly. "It does have its advantages," he said thoughtfully. "For instance, I do not have to listen to your constant inane chatter."

"It may be inane, but at least it isn't more suitable for computers! Unlike some people's..."

As Spock composed a cutting reply, Kirk and Scott entered the ward. The Captain grinned at the sight of them at loggerheads once more.

"Bones, Spock, call a truce for once, will you?"

McCoy grinned wickedly. "He likes it! Besides, it's therapy for him."

The Vulcan raised an indignant eyebrow. "You may term it therapy, Doctor, but I would say it was more akin to torture."

Kirk grinned wider as McCoy stood over Spock, almost nose to nose. "You want a blanket bath, Spock?" he growled threateningly.

"If it would halt your ceaseless chatter, it would be welcome."

McCoy whirled on Kirk, who was chuckling loudly. "You needn't laugh! You may have given me the run-around this past while, but you're due for a thorough check-up and an operation to remove that implant, and I'll see you get it!"

Kirk sobered up instantly and backed away from the irate surgeon. He put on his best little boy expression. "Bones, you can't mean that. How could I recover with you and Spock arguing all the time?"

"We never argue."

Kirk's eyebrows shot up. "Just disagree occasionally, huh?" he said.

"Agree to differ," retorted McCoy. Spock remained silent, and Kirk and Scott shrugged at each other. If they didn't know for sure, who did?

Spock took advantage of the momentary silence to ask how things were developing on Vethan. The question reminded Kirk why he was there.

"Ah yes, the drones... Just after you and Bones beamed up, Xan told Scotty and me that he was shutting himself down permanently - he saw no logic in returning to servitude, apparently. It wasn't long after that that we found out the rest of the drones had also shut themselves down."

"Mass suicide," remarked McCoy.

Kirk nodded. "I suppose it is, for a machine. The only problem is what to do with several hundred deactivated drones... As for the Vethani, within a few weeks the first reversal operations should begin. We had quite a job convincing Aneaz they were under control of the drones; as far as they were concerned, it was the other way round!"

Spock nodded quietly and looked across at Scotty. "Mr. Scott, I have not yet had the opportunity to congratulate you on your efficient rescue."

Scotty shrugged modestly. "Ach, it was easy, Mr. Spock. The drones had all gathered in one place, an' they were so confident, they had no defences apart from the one screen that blocked our sensors. It was all plain sailing..."

"However, I had ordered you not to beam down," Spock continued. "As had Captain Kirk."

Scotty was quite unperturbed. "Aye, that ye did, but the Captain's order reached me too late, since I was already on Vethan. As for yer own order, if ye recall, you told me not to beam anyone down there, which I didn't. I just took yer words literally; I didn't beam anyone down, Mr. Kyle did!"

Spock's eyebrows rose, and Kirk smiled broadly at him. "You can't complain about that, Spock."

"I am not," Spock said thoughtfully. "On the contrary, it does have a ring of logic about it."

Scotty's grin grew even wider. "Thank ye, Mr. Spock," he said. "I thought ye'd see it that way!"

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October 1981

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