KRAITH
COLLECTED

vol. 2
EDITOR'S PREFACE

PEACE AND GREETINGS,

First off, I want to apologize for the lateness of this volume. I know I promised it for end of summer 1973, but the "best laid plans, etc.", Since I spent the summer studying Medieval English History at Oxford University, my co-editor, Debbie Goldstein was going to spend her summer typing Federation Centennial. Unfortunately, Debbie developed a pinched nerve in her elbow and was given doctor's orders not to type. Period. There went all our plans.

But all is not lost. Debbie successfully underwent surgery at the end of the summer and is now industriously typing away at Volume IV. Hopefully, finances permitting, we'll be able to have that one in print by March or April.

Since Jacqueline never got around to writing a preface to this volume, I feel I owe you a few words of explanation about the stories it contains. Federation Centennial is not one of Jacqueline's recent efforts, so if any of you are expecting great, exciting, new revelations about the Kraith universe, forget it. There aren't any.

Federation Centennial was conceived and written as an action/adventure novel aimed at a commercial market, proving to the people who publish such things that pro-ST fiction did not have to consist of script re-writes. But due to contract limitations, it can't be published pro.

Since Federation Centennial was written for the general reading public and not for a hard-core group of Kraith devotees, it is somewhat toned down from Jacqueline's usual style. Also, it was written well before the Lichtenberg/ Marshak alliance and subsequent blooming (if you'll forgive the expression) of radical ideas. Personally, it has always been one of my favorite Kraith stories, and I am ecstatic that it is, finally, in print.

"Sarsun's Argument", also in this volume, is a more recent effort, and was previously published in Babel. It is a milestone in that it marks the first of the "Kraith for grups" stories. Being privy to the events to come, I'll give you a hint -- watch "Spock" carefully. He shows up again in a very important context.

On another vein entirely, those of you who are sticklers for consistency will no doubt be annoyed to learn that the type faces change on page 13 of Federation Centennial. However, I can guarantee, that by the time you've struggled through 13 pages of broken typewriter, you will have completely forgotten about complaining. Since it was a choice between re-typing those pages and having the zine ready for ISTC 3, I think I can be forgiven for not re-typing them. Many thanks to AAA Typewriter Rentals for exchanging typers and giving me an Executive at no extra cost.

Special, special thanks for this volume goes to Mr. Harold Stack of the Natural Science Department at Montieth College, Wayne State University. Montieth, bless its heart, is an experimental college that believes in giving students two quarters of directed studies on whatever project pleases their little minds. Harold is my advisor and is giving me four, count them FOUR, credits for this volume. Up till now I've always felt slightly guilty about the time I've taken to do up the fanazines. But, for this quarter at any rate, it is schoolwork. My conscience is assuaged nicely.

Thank you, Harold.

Until next time, Live Long and Prosper and Enjoy, enjoy!

Carol Lynn
February 1974

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

ARTWORK:
Nancy Cleveland: 3, 10, 27, 39, 54, 61
Janice Scott: 23
Robbie Brown: 19, 73, 74
Mike Kucharski: 19, 23, 31
Todd Bake: 79, 80, 88
Doug Herring: 78, 92
John Benson: cover, titles

TYPOGRAPHY:
Marie Lynn
Carol Lynn

EDITOR
Carol Lynn

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KRAITH COLLECTED VOLUME II
Ceiling Press Publication No. 15 October, 1975

cost -- $3.00 fourth class postage included
Available from:
Carol Lynn
11524 Nashville
Detroit, MI 48205

THERE ARE NO TYPOS IN THIS ZINE, ONLY Lapses INTO Vulcanur
Kraith Master Plan

Explanation of the Numbering System:

al---------- stories that occur, according to internal chronology, before "Spock's Argument"
I---------- Main Stories. Eight planned, five written to date. All are titled "Spock's Something-or-other".
IA---------- Sub Stories occurring between the main stories. For example IA occurs between I and II, etc.
I(1) or IA(1)---- Sub-stories occurring as an epilog or a postscript to another story with no time break between.
A1 or AIA---- Sub-stories occurring simultaneously with another story in the series describing events relating to the other story, but not contained within the story.

Stories that appear in Kraith Collected volumes I-IV are marked KCI, KCII, KCIII, or KCIV.

Unless otherwise the author is Jacqueline Lichtenberg.

Kraith bl
Kraith aI
Kraith I Spock's Affirmation KCI
Kraith IA Shealku KCII
Kraith IB Zyeto KCI
Kraith IC Yehaena (unwritten)
Kraith ID A Matter of Priority Anna Mary Hall KCI
Kraith E The Lesson (outline only, see Kraith Creator's Manual I)
Kraith F Searsun's Argument KCI
Kraith IG The Way Home Anna Mary Hall

Kraith II Spock's Mission KCI
Kraith II(1) The Learning Experience Jean Sellar KCIII
Kraith IIA T'Zorel KCI
Kraith IIB The Disaffirmed Ruth Berman KCI
Kraith IIC Operation Transplant Lori Dell
Kraith IID ---------------- (Ruth Berman, hypothetical sequel to The Disaffirmed)
Kraith IIE Initiative KCIV
Kraith IIF Ni Var Claire Gadzikowski
Kraith IIF(1) -----------(unwritten sequel to Ni Var)
Kraith IIG Diana Pat Osborne

Kraith III The Tanya Entry Pat Zotti KCI
Kraith III Spock's Argument
Kraith III(1) The Obligation/Through Time and Tears Jacqueline Lichtenberg and Joan Winston KCIII
Kraith IIIA Federation Centennial KCII
Kraith IIIB Secret of Groskin KCIII
Kraith IIIC Coup de Grace KCIII
Kraith IIIC(1) Coup de Partie Ruth Berman KCIII
Kraith IID Jh'nfreya Debbie Goldstein and Carol Lynn
Kraith IIE Operating Manual, Anna Mary Hall KCIV

Kraith IV Spock's Nemesis KCIII

Kraith V Spock's Decision KCIV
Kraith VA ---------- unwritten Searsun story
Kraith VB ---------- unwritten Searsun story
Kraith VC ---------- unwritten Searsun story
Kraith VF Spock's Pilgrimage KCIV
Kraith VE The Maze Joan Winston (unwritten)
Kraith VF The Punishment (outline only)
Kraith VG T'Le'l's Option (outlined only)
Kraith VH Spock's Defection Sondra Marshak (outline approved)
Kraith VI Kirk's Cure-All (outline only)
Kraith VJ Beam Interlude (first draft)
Kraith VJ(1) Kirk's Auction (outline only)
Kraith VK Spock's Temper Tantrum Sondra Marshak (outline approved)
Kraith VL ------------- (somehow we've got to end this line of development)

Kraith VI Spock's Command (outline only)
Kraith VIA Ediface of Value (Outline only, may be scrapped soon)

Kraith VII Spock's Challenge (story idea only)
Kraith VIIA T' Uriamne's Decision Jacqueline Lichtenberg and Sondra Marshak (outline only)

Kraith VIII Spock's Memory (story idea only)
Federation Centennial

Jacqueline Lichtenberg

Kraith IIIA
CHAPTER ONE

Laughing gently, Amanda seized her husband's hand and pulled him over to the promenade's railing, "Oh, Sarek, just look at the view! We're enthroned at the very top of the world! It's like... it's like... oh, doesn't it make you want to hold your breath and listen to the lesser peaks pay homage..."

Catching sight of his grave, unmoved expression, she composed herself, "No, I don't suppose it does." She sighed. "But just think what you're missing!" Gathering her Vulcan-style cloak about her, she schooled her features into Vulcan repose.

"Yes, my wife," said Sarek at length, "the view is... fascinating."

They stood alone on the promenade of the ninety-seventh level of the Tower of Babel which adorned the top of the tallest mountain peak like a two mile high royal wedding cake... or like the impudently terraced Tower of Babel for which it was named. But, unlike the original Tower, this one neither threatened the sky nor collapsed into rubble but served as a neutral meeting ground for gatherings such as the current Constitutional Convention at which Sarek was chief of the Vulcan delegation.

Clasping his hands behind his back he added, "One doesn't often find such a good vantage point from which to observe the record of a planet's evolution."

Momentarily puzzled, Amanda searched the view for some clue to what Sarek meant. The ice crowned peaks marched away below them, descending slowly to distant foothills now lost in darkness. By night, the Tower's lights illuminated the raw, broken crags nearest them and the slice of silver moon etched the view with elfen lace. The promenade itself was dimly lit so she could see the striations on some of the nearer peaks. The clarity of the view was unmarred by the highly sophisticated semi-permeable force field that protected the promenade.

Then she understood. A planet's history as recorded in the strata of its rock skeleton.

She sighed, "Oh, Sarek, sometimes I think you're hopeless. But I love you anyway."

The Vulcan took that meekly and followed his wife as she moved along the terrace. On either side of the spacious walkway, benches peeked invitingly from the lush green foliage. But at this hour none were occupied and, inspite of the fatigue that weighted her feet, Amanda wasn't tempted to sit. After weeks of banquets, meetings, conferences, and speeches she was heartily sick of sitting.

She resumed her place at her husband's side and said quietly, "You know Sarek, in a few months I'll be sixty-two years old..."

"Seven months, nineteen days."

"Yes. Well, Spock is almost forty now..."

"Fifty-one point six Standard years."

"Counted in any kind of years, it's a lifetime..."

"Not quite."

"... and he's still not settled down. I keep wondering if I'll ever see a grandchild of mine. I worry so much about him. The one time he really needed us, we were a hundred light years away..."

"We were not needed. We had done our part."

"But not well. T'Pring turned his Marriage into a Challenge. She wasn't the right choice for him after all."

"Nevertheless, our part is completed. He has not requested our aid, therefore, it is no longer our concern."

"Sarek, dear Sarek. Spock is your son, yes, but he's my son too. Where can he turn now? He has your pride and your stubbornness. Would he request your aid in finding a wife... even if he needed it... desperately?"

Sarek stopped and turned to confront her. His face was all stern, verticle lines and deep shadows in the harsh light. "My Wife, it is no longer our concern. T'Pau may be trusted to fulfill the obligations of her office. If our aid is required it will be sought. Put the matter from your mind. It is not proper to dwell upon such thoughts."

"Yes, My Husband." She had learned to cherish the ideals of his culture. She'd known her words an invasion of her son's Vulcan Privacy. Yet she knew that she had instilled some of her human feelings in her child. She was perhaps the only one who understood how his human half would be suffering from his Vulcan divorce... except possibly for Jim Kirk.

They strolled on. After awhile she said, "Thank you, Sarek."

"For what?"

"For taking rooms on the M-I floor. For squeezing in time to walk out here among real, leafy greenery, in spite of the yellow lights and the Terran chill. For enduring... me... these last few... difficult years."

He considered that. Then he nodded, "You want something."

She smiled. She'd married a man of tremendous sensitivity and insight. And he'd spent forty... no forty-two Standard years studying her. "And don't you think it's time we took a vacation? A long vacation. Together."

He thought about that for ten paces more, "On Earth, you mean?"
She chuckled. "I really would like to visit Earth again. Blue sky and infinite, restless oceans. New moon hay on a summer breeze. Ponderosa pine, redwoods, and eucalyptus. Cities thronging with people ... human people doing human things for illogical, human reasons."

He said thoughtfully, "You have travelled with me everywhere I have been assigned ... Using your talent for interpreting emotional nuances for the good of Vulcan ... and of the Federation ..."

She glowed warmly. It had been years since he'd expressed any pleasure in her. Suddenly she felt her heart racing at a daring thought. His increasing awareness was always the first sign. Then his hot, dry fingers would seek hers and she would respond to his need. It always made her feel young again. But, though she looked little over forty-five, she was almost sixty-two. Would his relentless Vulcan glands drive him to take another wife ... a fertile one?

The thought chilled her. She was no Vulcan, but the years had given her an attachment to the fierce monogamy that was the core of Vulcan society. "But I'm getting old. So are you, my dear. Neither of us should work so hard or long any more. Do you realize that almost half my life is gone?"

He paused, turning to look down at her and she detected the deep tenderness behind his formal reply. "The Grace of Age Lies Comely on Thy Brow."

"Thee hides Thy heart in the Words of Others." She quoted back at him in her best Vulcanur, relying on the Universal Translators spotted everywhere in the Tower to make up her linguistic deficiencies.

Sarek replied, "This Heart Cannot Be Hidden From Thee, For It Dwells Within Thee."

She chuckled again. The subconscious telepathic link that bound them in marriage worked both ways. "I should know better than to duel quotations with you." Then another thought struck her. His choice of phrasing implied that the link was about to be re-awakened, or did it? She shook herself. Best to change the subject.

"Sarek, when will the Convention be over?"

"Perhaps ten years from now."

"No. I mean this session. I know you won't come up with a complete, new Federation Constitution this year ... you'll be lucky to hammer out something acceptable for the Centennial. Ten years is not so long for such a project. But we won't be staying here for ten years."

"I would estimate that we will be here another three or four months. The Star Fleet Subcommittee must still interview the crews of the Enterprise, Exeter, Hood and Kongo. The Enterprise is due in tomorrow. The Kongo and the Hood are already in orbit. The Exeter is due after the Yorktown and the Potemkin regain their stations."

"Then we'll be able to see Spock again."

"He will be very busy."

"I'm sure he'll find time for us."

"Re-organizing all of Star Fleet and rewriting the entire book of Star Fleet Regulations is no small task. Every Officer will be deeply involved."

"But it doesn't have to be done overnight."

"True. However, the Enterprise testimony, and particularly Spock's, will weigh heavily. He's not the only Star Fleet Officer of mixed heritage, but the Subcommittee expects him to add much to our understanding of the problem. You realize, I was appointed to the Subcommittee largely because of Spock."

"And," Amanda picked up smoothly, "after participating in such an arduous task, would it not be proper to seek refreshment and diversion?"

Sarek almost smiled, "On Earth?"

"I really would like to see Earth again."

"I will see what can be arranged. When we finish here, the Committee will disperse to hold hearings and collect testimony. Perhaps I'll be assigned to Earth."

"Thank you."

He cocked his head quizzically and looked down at her.

She ironed an incipient grin off her cheeks. When Sarek said "perhaps" he could do something, it generally meant it would be done. She was satisfied.

They walked along quietly for awhile. Amanda was still trying to construct a logical argument to convince Sarek he must ask Spock in his search for a wife.

Rounding a curve, they came in sight of a large, glass doorway that spilled cheerful light across the walk. Beyond the doorway, a vine arbor arched over the promenade, creating a dark tunnel into the night.

Suddenly, the doors flew open and eight men spilled out onto the promenade, pushing each other and laughing among themselves. They were all apparently human and all fairly young. Probably a liberty party from one of the orbiting Starships, though they weren't in uniform and might have been Babylon employees.

 Abruptly, Amanda stopped, "Sarek, let's turn around."

He paused, "Why? We're almost back to our rooms."
"I don't like the look of that group. They're drunk."

"You recently expressed a desire to be among human people engaged in illogical actions. Has your desire evaporated so swiftly?"

"No, of course not. But ..."

"But what?"

"They're in a rowdy mood, ... and there's been so much ... ugliness lately."

"All humans are not criminals. And Sabe 1 has been free of such unfortunate incidents. It's reputation ..."

"Yes. But there is no Security Surveillance here. And a reputation is scant protection against ..."

"We've walked almost all the way around the building. It would be illogical not to continue." He glanced toward the group who were now laughing uproariously and passing a bottle around with much backslapping. "They have as much right to use the promenade as we do."

Amanda nodded, "And we have as much right as they do. Logically, I know. But do they know that? Let's at least go in these doors."

"This corridor doesn't lead to our rooms. We would have to make a wide detour," Sarak resumed walking. "Come, My Wife, it is late and there may be calls awaiting me."

As they approached the group of humans, Amanda caught the word, Vulcan, said with the knowing leer she associated with the bluest anecdotes told at stag parties. Undoubtedly, Sarak had heard even more clearly, but he gave no sign.

As they approached, Amanda squinted against the light coming from the doors. They'd been walking in darkness too long. The men were only silhouettes against the light.

It wasn't long before the humans had to part to let the strolling couple pass. Sarak, continuing at a measured pace, nodded graciously, acknowledging the group with reserved dignity.

But at the sight of the Ambassador's proud head and upswung ears, the leader of the group fell in behind him trying vainly to imitate his walk while holding his fingers in points above his ears. However, he only lurched drunkenly from side to side. His followers laughed uproariously and began imitating the imitator, strung out behind their leader in a ludicrous snake dance.

Amanda moved closer to Sarak's side, a sudden chill stiffening her spine.

Then they were through the doors and into the deeper shadows of the arbor. The silvery moonlight and ice capped peaks visible to their right no longer seemed a serene, elfen wonderland. They'd become cold, implacable manifestations of a capricious Nature. Amanda shivered. The whispers behind her back sent tight gooseflesh rippling across her scalp.

Sarak walked on, neither slowing nor hurrying. The door that led to their corridor was only a few hundred yards farther along. She wanted to run. Instead she reached out and gripped Sarak's hand in a most improper gesture. The shadowed greenery that had given her such joy a few minutes ago suddenly seemed oppressive. Danevian palm fronds tossed restlessly in the attenuated breeze casting sinister, moving shadow against the unoccupied benches spaced carelessly under the canopy of leaves.

She could hear a rustling behind them now, as if some of those men were following. Sarak returned the pressure of her hand, but she wasn't reassured.

They passed a heating vent, one of the hundreds that strove to maintain temperature and pressure on the promenade. Sarak frowned and held her hand more firmly. Now she was really frightened, but she dared not look behind.

Abruptly, two of the restless shadows ahead of them detached themselves from the greenery and barred their way. Sarak stopped. Four more shadows moved in from the sides. She sensed two more behind her. They were surrounded.

The shadows closed in. Amanda couldn't make out their faces in the dim light, but from the way they moved she could tell they had just sobered enough to make them really dangerous.

One of the shadows said, "Sae, I was right! A Vulcan and a human. What d'ya know!" His gaze dropped to their clasped hands and his leer was unmistakable. He drawled, "Hey, Vulcan." But then his voice sharpened. "You like Earthies, Vulcan. Maybe you need a few lessons how to go about it?"

While the shadow men laughed, Sarak stood poised and aloof, as if he'd accidentally walked onto a stage and expected the actors to ignore him and go on with the play.

The leader signed with one hand and suddenly a rock hard fist severed Amanda's hand from her husband's. She reeled off balance and hands grabbed her arms. Struggling, she found herself helpless against their strength.

Two other men seized Sarak's arms while a third aimed a judo chop at the Vulcan's neck. The blow landed squarely, but Sarak only shook his head and heaved himself upward, sending his captors sprawling to either side.

Then two men rushed him, bearing his back against the railing.

Amanda gasped. It was a long way down! The two men could throw Sarak's body over the railing, clear of the safety fields. For one horrible moment she thought that was what they were doing, but abruptly they swung the Vulcan around, away from the rail and held him fast while the third took more careful aim at his skull.
Suddenly, Sarek's knees collapsed. His weight bore his captor's to the floor. Then he twisted his right arm free and went for the other's shoulder, delivering a nerve pinch that dropped the human unconscious.

Another of the men rushed to grab Sarek, but Amanda lunged forward just far enough to trip him with an outstretched foot. The man holding her tightened their grip again, and the pain in her shoulder brought tears to her eyes.

As Sarek scuffled with his other captor, the thwarted judo expert raised clasped hands over his head and brought them down on Sarek's neck with all his weight behind the blow.

Instantly, Sarek crumpled to the floor at Amanda's feet. Certain his neck was broken, she loosed a scream of rage that surprised even her. She would see them all dead.

A hand clamped over her mouth and strong arms pinioned her elbows to her sides.

The leader, straddling the Vulcan's limp body, called, "Where's that bottle?"

The bottle they'd been drinking from was passed up from the rear of the group. He grabbed it and Amanda could see it was a cheap imitation of a Coridian distilled wine, complete with a basket for propping up the round bottomed flask.

The leader picked at the basket, unravelling one strand, and handing it to one of his men. "Here, pull on this."

The leader looked up from securing Sarek's legs, "We're not going to hurt him ... much. Nor you either."

"Are you coming around already." A hand want up to deliver another blow."No!"

The judo expert straightened over Sarek's body. "He's coming around already." A hand want up to deliver another blow.

"No!"

Startled, the expert dropped his arm. The leader turned to examine the recumbent form. "No. How's he gonna learn if he can't see us demonstrating the techniques. Prop him up over there."

There was a chorus of enthusiastic whoops, and a voice called, "Pass that bottle over here."

Out of the corner of her eye, Amanda saw Sarek's head come up, eyes open, watching. At least he was alive, though at the moment she thought he might be better off dead ... it would be worse for his as witness than for her as victim. Especially if his instincts were indeed about to override his logic. There was only one thing left that she could do for him, to ease the pain.

Resolutely, she closed her eyes and whispered the opening phrases of the Kalkahn Fi'i, making it loud enough that he should understand what she was trying to do. She wasn't Vulcan by birth, but she had absorbed some training over the years. Sometimes she could attain a measure of the Fi'i, the inward turning in which the mind seems to leave the body far behind. And she had no desire to experience the coming ordeal if she could retreat from it.

Faintly, as if from a great distance, she was aware that someone was saying something obscene.

She continued to chant Kalkahn Fi'i to herself and felt nothing more.
Kirk took a deep breath, glanced to his right to see that Spock had arrived safely with him, and descended from the transporter platform as he surveyed the spacious Transporter Lobby of Babel Tower. There were perhaps two hundred people using the facility but it wasn't crowded.

"Mr. Spock, do you suppose we should try to call your parents again or should we register first?"

"I believe it would be best to register first. It is early evening here. They are probably out now. We aren't expected until tomorrow."

Kirk nodded and moved out into the hall looking for somebody to question.

A smooth voice interrupted his thoughts, "May I help you, sir?"

Kirk turned to see a tall young man in a green uniform offering him an orientation tape. Kirk held out his hand to accept two of the tapes and handed one to Spock. "Yes. I am Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise ..."

The young man's face lit up with such surprise that Kirk revised his age estimate downwards. Either boys were starting to work younger these days or he was getting older.

"Captain Kirk! You weren't due until ... but, well, you're here! What can I do to help you?"

"You could direct us to the Accomodations clerk ... and a public comm units."

"Certainly. The Accomodations Clerk is located in the main lobby, just off the Concourse of Planets. Public comm units are located at every corridor intersection. Step right this way, please."

Given something familiar to do, the boy calmed down and gained back a few years maturity which comforted the Captain a bit. Kirk motioned his First Officer to follow and they trailed their guide past plushly furnished transporter platforms. The spacious feel of the elegant, civilian environment brought home to Kirk just what he'd given up to pursue a Service career, and he found himself relaxing in anticipation of a pleasant evening.

Their guide led them through one of the many classically simple, Roman style arches and into a long, red carpeted, white walled corridor. The walls were corpse like rough stucco and, as everywhere, the ceiling was constructed of contoured baffles dropped downward as if all the panels of an ordinary ceiling had fallen open on hinges. Kirk started to think of it as a Babel-ceiling.

They approached a large intersection and the guide pointed out the public comm units. Then they mounted a moving strip and rode on to the Concourse of Planets where their guide indicated the entrance to the main lobby and returned to his post.

Spock observed, "It seems illogical to place the Accomodations Clerk so far from the Transporter Lobby that a guide is required."

"Oh, I don't know," answered Kirk. "Dignitaries enjoy being escorted. It makes them feel important. This whole place seems designed to make one feel important."

Kirk glanced sideways at his First Officer to see if he'd scored with that one. Sure enough, long, slanted eyebrows arched upwards in surprise. Kirk estimated that his comment was enough to keep the Vulcan's logic circuits busy for another ten minutes and led the way across the Concourae towards the main lobby.

The Concourae of Planets was a long, wide corridor with a vaulted ceiling that created the unmistakable effect of a cathedral. To their right as they crossed the Concourae, enormous double doors, heavily carved with vines, shrubs, and trees led to the Hall of All Planets. To their left, far in the distance, the Concourae narrowed to an ordinary Babel corridor. They continued straight across the Concourae and through the archway that led to the main lobby.

Here again, there were many people moving about, but there was no sense of crowding. What better atmosphere, thought Kirk, to house touchy, possibly explosive negotiations.

As he approached the Accomodations Desk, the Captain counted fifteen staff uniforms working at screens. He chose one and identified himself.

The clerk said, "Enterprise? You're early."

"By a few hours. We wanted to get settled."

"Well, of course. I have your reservations right here, but I'm afraid the room isn't made up just yet."

"That's all right. I have some other things I want to do first."

The clerk nodded. "I'll have your room attended immediately." He turned to Spock, "And you, sir? Will you be staying the night?"

"Yes." He gave his name.

The clerk worked the computer console and then shook his head. "I'm afraid accommodations in the M-IV section are unavailable tonight. We've had some difficulties with the environment stabilizers and maintenance is working there right now. But I have a lovely room with a spectacular view in the M-I section, if you wouldn't mind the inconvenience?"

Stiffly, Spock answered, "That will suffice."
Then I'll order both your rooms prepared immediately.' Once decided, the clerk erupted into a flurry of activity, taking their voice prints and pore prints to program their door locks and providing guest cards for the credit computers as well as guidebeams that could be set to point the way to any destinations in the Tower.

At length, the formalities concluded, Kirk turned to Spock. "Well, where to now? Shall we try to at your parents on the com?"

"Affirmative."

Kirk spotted the nearest bank of com units and led the way. "Their room number is ... uh ... 225734-I, right?"

"No, Captain. It is 227534-I."

Kirk keyed the corrected number into the com board and punched for the connection reflecting that eidetic memory was often very useful. The viewscreen flashed on and off several times and finally cleared to reveal a large, square-jawed human in green Staff uniform who said in a deep, gravelly voice, "Yes? May I help you?"

Kirk blinked. Spock make a mistake?

The First Officer moved into the pickup. "I would like to speak to the Ambassador."

"I'm afraid that's impossible. May I take a message?"

"If the Ambassador is not available, I'll speak to his wife."

"I'm afraid that is impossible as well. Whom may I say has called?"

Spock frowned. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Lieutenant Southridge. Babel security. Whom may I say has called?"

One slanted, Vulcan eyebrow arched upwards. "it is extremely improbable that both the Ambassador and his wife would be simultaneously unavailable."

Kirk eyed his First Officer speculatively. The Vulcan had little use for bureaucratic pomposity, true, but still he should have identified himself.

Southridge said coldly, "Nevertheless, sir, it is so. May I take your ID number and name now or must I have this call analysed?"

Spock's face assumed that wooden impassivity that Kirk knew masked strong feelings. And suddenly, he thought he understood why Spock had chosen to fence with the human security officer. But he couldn't believe that the sense of inter-species hostility that was increasingly prevalent among civilians had penetrated the Service! "Lieutenant. I'm Captain Kirk and this is my first officer, Mr. Spock. Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing that concerns you, Captain. I've been asked to monitor all calls to this receiver. May I ask your business with the Ambassador?"

Spock said tonelessly, "He is my father."

The human's businesslike expression collapsed into unprofessional surprise. "Oh, I see! I'm sorry. You should have said so before. I'm so sorry!" He collected himself, consulted something outside the scanner range and continued, "You must go at once to the Hospital Section JQ7-C7-I."

"What's happened?" Kirk said.

"A slight accident, nothing serious. Mr. Spock, did you get that section number?"

"Affirmative. I shall go there."

The screen blanked.

"Spock, what do you suppose could have happened?"

Spock set his guidebeam. "I suggest we go and ascertain that personally."

Kirk nodded. Spock didn't seem upset but Kirk knew that the very lack of reaction indicated just how severely agitated the Vulcan was. They set off following the floating arrow mounted in the guidebeam's tiny window. It led them through corridors and turbo-lifts that Kirk scarcely noticed until finally they confronted a Hospital reception in a spacious waiting room. She said, "If you'll take seats over there, gentlemen, I'll inquire about the visitor status of the patients."

They sat. Kirk fumed while Spock inspected a point in mid-air between them and the blank door that led into the wards. Except for themselves and the receptionist, the waiting room was empty.

Presently, the doors slid aside and a short man wearing a caduceus insignia on his uniform approached looking form one to the other. "Gentlemen," he greeted and then zeroed in on Spock. "You are the son of Ambassador Sarek?"

Spock rose. "Yes, doctor. I would like to see my father."

"That should not be difficult. He'll be out shortly. My name is Harrington. Dr. Simon Harrington."

Spock drew himself to his full height, dominating the human both physically and psychologically. It was a technique
The Schillian Ambassador
&
Sarek
the First Officer had only recently mastered and, Kirk noted, he employed it well. But the Captain was very disturbed that his friend thought it appropriate in this instance.

Spock said, "Then I would like to see my Mother."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Sir. She's under heavy sedation at the moment."

"May I inquire as to the nature of the difficulty?"

"I would prefer to let your father explain. I assure you there's no cause for alarm. The Lady Amanda will probably be discharged in a day or two. If you will excuse me, I'll see what's keeping the Ambassador."

Harrington retreated with obvious relief and Spock resumed his seat. Before long, the outer door slid aside to admit a Schillian wearing Ambassadorial insignia on his carefully tailored tunic. A humanoid with the body proportions of a toad and the suppleness of a lizard, he had the dull gray-green skin of later middle age.

As the Schillian's gaze fastened on Spock and he approached with a slight limp, Kirk hastily reviewed what he knew of Schillians. Schillia was an M-11 world. A warm planet with large, shallow oceans and pleasant beaches. The Schillians were amphibians, trisexual, and telepathic. They all preferred to be addressed in the masculine gender. They were a relatively new power in space and it was they who had given Babel to the Federation. And that was nearly all he knew about Schillians.

The Ambassador bowed from the hips, "I am Ambassador Sarek. I have the pleasure of addressing...?"

Kirk rose, "I am Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise and this is my First Officer, Mr. Spock."

"The Enterprise?" He focused his independently mobile eyes on the Vulcan and raised both pairs of nictitating membranes, "Ambassador Sarek's child?"

Spock nodded.

As the Schillian was about to respond, the outer door flew open again, this time admitting Lieutenant Southridge and two security guards in Starfleet uniform and Shore Patrol armbands. Simultaneously, the inner door whispered open to reveal Sarek disentangling himself from a solicitous human nurse who seemed convinced he was an invalid.

Both Sarek and the Lieutenant saw Spock at the same moment and converged on the First Officer.

However, before Spock could offer greeting to his father, Sarek raised his right hand, fingers spread in the Vulcan salute... but toward Sarek, not Spock. "May You Live Long and Prosper, Ambassador."

Sarek bowed, "A Peaceful Life, Sarek. I am informed that distress invades your family. I am deeply grieved. I attend that I may offer my hands if there be need."

"At this moment, there be no need. Your kinsmen have done all that was required."

"Then I retire leaving only my token that you may summon me in haste should need arise." He offered his hand, two of his webbed digits extended to touch Sarek's fingers.

In that instant, Kirk noticed that Sarek's wrists were bandaged. They had done a good job matching skin tone, but the spray adhesive didn't conceal several rows of angry green welts just below the cuffs of his sleeves.

Then the Schillian was gone and Southridge took a deep breath but before he could utter a sound, Sarek's gaze fastened on Spock and they traded greetings solemnly.

Southridge smiled thinly and took another deep breath but this time Sarek turned to Kirk, "Live Long and Prosper, Captain."

Kirk returned the greeting steadily but he was becoming more worried by the minute. Was Sarek pointedly snubbing the Lieutenant?

Then Sarek turned his somber attention to the Security Officer and for a moment, Kirk thought Sarek wasn't going to offer greeting. Southridge was smoldering under the strained smile he wore.

Then, as if reluctantly, the Vulcan Ambassador included the Lieutenant and the two Shore Patrolmen in his sedate ritual and Southridge said, "Ambassador Sarek, I'm glad to see you're all right. There are a few details I'd like to clear up with you this evening, if you don't mind."

"I do mind...Lieutenant...very much. I have recorded my statement for the authorities. I have nothing further to say." He turned to Spock and included Kirk in the private invitation, "Come," and started for the door.

"Ambassador," said Southridge, "I really must insist on just one more formality. Your rooms, Sir. I must be certain there has been no burglary."

Sarek placed his hands together at his waist, fingers touching tip to tip, "Lieutenant, I've been given to understand that Babel's Security...what there is of it...is breach-proof."

That disconcerted Southridge. Kirk speculated that the man had been a Starfleet Junior Security Officer before being assigned to Babel and had probably received only the most perfunctory training in diplomacy. Finally, the Lieutenant stammered, "Y-yes, Mr. Ambassador, of course it is! But you must understand that what is unbreachable this year is so much Gornese cheese the next. We must be certain our guests retain the maximum protection possible."
Kirk nodded. Text book answer. He had the man pegged.

Sarek consented stiffly, gathered Kirk and Spock with a glance and marched out the door. As he followed, Kirk thought he detected a slight irregularity in the Vulcan's walk...as if he desired to favor both feet and would allow himself no such luxury.

Spock used his long legs to catch up with Sarek and started to question his father but was curtly motioned to silence.

A turbo-lift shunted them into the M-I quarters and they marched another thickly carpeted hallway wide enough to parade an entire Academy Graduating Class for inspection. At one of the widely spaced doors, Sarek palmed the indento-plate, keyed the voice lock and ushered them into a large living area furnished with deep, comfortable chairs and hand-crafted bentwood tables from Altair VI.

The whole room was done in shades of bronze and gold with one wall hidden by a tapestry depicting a Serengarian dragon in full color. Leaving the Security men fidgeting by the door like gatecrashers at a lodge meeting, Sarek motioned his guests to chairs and went on into another room.

Spock seated himself across from the Captain, managing to seem both at ease and at attention at the same time while Kirk took the opportunity to study his First Officer. What strange thoughts might be passing between those pointed Vulcan ears?

Kirk stiffened, shocked at himself. Even in his own mind, people were dividing into 'we' and 'they'. It was an attitude alien to his upbringing and yet, there it was, an insidious thing that proliferated in the dark recesses of the mind where conscious thought seldom ventured.

The Captain's reflections were interrupted by Sarek's return. He made a quick circuit of the room and then approached Southridge, "Lieutenant, you may report that no breach of security has occurred here."

The Security Officer drew himself up and all but saluted. "Yes, Mr. Ambassador, and thank you. I trust you will rest easily. Good evening."

Southridge hesitated. "Oh, I almost forgot, Sir. I've been instructed to post these two men outside your door tonight. I'm afraid I have no choice, even if you do object."

Sarek waved him out, "Very well then."

With the door finally closed, Sarek turned to survey his son. Spock met the gaze unwaveringly and the silence stretched until Kirk rose, "Mr. Ambassador, I see it's getting late and I have a number of things to attend to so I think I'd better go."

Still holding Spock's eyes, Sarek answered, "Captain, please don't leave yet. There is much that remains to be said here."

"In that case, I guess I can spare a few more minutes..."

Sarek faced the human squarely, all the we/they polarization gone from his manner. "Remain with us, Captain."

Kirk resumed his seat and the Ambassador paced the carpet between the two seated men. "As a Starship Captain, you know that privilege and responsibility are inseparable. But you are human. You define both 'privilege' and 'responsibility' differently than we do. So allow me to explain."

Kirk nodded. There it was again. Human/nonhuman. But this time it was merely a 'difference', and 'difference' to a Vulcan was a virtue.

"Amanda has convinced me that you are much more than a superior officer to Spock. She regards you as an adopted son. Such a relationship is a 'privilege.' And with it go many...very grave... 'responsibilities.' The time has come either to acknowledge those responsibilities or to sever the relationship."

He paused, lending his words emphasis. "I must speak now as I would only rarely and then only within family walls. I've asked you to remain with us. The choice is yours."

"If you want me to stay, I'd consider it an honor."

Silently, Sarek turned and walked away from them to stand facing the tapestry, his back straight with tension.

At length, Spock prompted, "What happened tonight?"

Without turning, Sarek selected each word painstakingly, "Amanda and I were walking on the M-I terrace here..." he nodded toward heavy gold drapes that veiled the windows. "We were attacked by a group of eight, young human males. I was bound hand and foot and forced to watch them...rape...my wife. They fled at the approach of a group of Schillians who freed me and escorted us to the hospital."

Spock's expression didn't change but Kirk felt the human/nonhuman gulf opening like a mouth threatening to swallow him. He forced himself to assume a professional detachment he didn't feel. "Did you recognize any of the men? Could you identify them if you
"No. It was too dark. However, apprehension of these individuals would in no way reduce the probability of similar occurrences involving others. They were intoxicated and had become bound in what you call the 'mob psyche'."

Spock said, steelying his fingers in contemplation, "And Mother?"

"Kalkahm Fii."

"Good. Though I had not thought her so skilled."

"I believe it was only the second time she had achieved the totality."

"The need was great. Was she harmed?"

"Physically, no. Otherwise, I do not know."

As Sarek turned to face them again, Kirk made a mental note to look up Kalkahm Fii. The translator had passed it as a proper noun.

Sarek eyed them each in turn. "There is another far more grave matter which requires attention. The behavior of those men was symptomatic of the schism which is developing between human and nonhuman members of the Federation. If any blame must be affixed, it should be to those most responsible for that schism."

Spock nodded, "At the current growth rate of the schism, I calculate a 22.6% rise in the incidence of this type of assault within the next five years."

Kirk sputtered, "Now wait a minute! Humans aren't all bad!" Here they were glibly discussing a 22% rise in a crime that had been practically zero when he was in school.

Sarek answered, "It's not a question of 'good' or 'bad'. However, your reaction illustrates our problem. This family stands in grave peril if the general rift is allowed to sunder our walls." He eyed Spock, "Tomorrow, you must speak before the sub-committee on Starfleet re-organization. Your words will be reported to higher councils where they will be weighed carefully."

"Yes, Father, I understand. I will do my best."

Sarek's eyes rested on Kirk a moment, then he said to both of them, "Go then, my sons, and meditate deeply on what must be done."

The Ambassador seemed to withdraw from the room without actually moving. Kirk thought Sarek must be more profoundly disturbed than he wanted to admit. Vulcans were so...possessive...about their women. And logic was such a poor substitute for revenge.

Almost before he realized it, Kirk found himself heading toward his own room, uncomfortably aware that the hours had flown. What had started out to be a pleasant evening had turned into a nightmare from which there'd be no waking. It was unbelievable how isolated life on a Starship could be. Racial tensions, Rape, Bigotry. Ideas so far from his ordinary thoughts that they seemed unreal.

In a numb daze, he forced himself to look up Kalkahm Fii and then, mind whirling, he threw himself onto the bed where he fell asleep only to be haunted by a nightmare of a vast conspiracy threatening to rot the very foundations of the Federation.

Chapter Three

The next morning when Kirk arrived at the Committee Room, spectators and delegates already overflowed the banked seats and filled the aisles. On the stage, the parabolic curve of the committee table—shaped after Andorian custom—looked to Kirk like a huge mouth ready to swallow any hapless creature brave enough to sit in the witness chair before it.

Among the many Starfleet uniforms sprinkled through the audience, Kirk spotted a group of Vulcans from the Kongo, a number of Andorians from the Hood and several humans from the Exeter, but no Spock.

"Captain!"

Kirk turned, searching the crowd. It was Spock's voice but where...?

Then one of the Vulcans detached himself from the knot of Kongo crewmen and Kirk saw it was Spock.

"Our seats have been reserved over there, Sir." The First Officer indicated the front row where a long, gray ribbon was stretched across several seats.

"Thank you, Mister Spock, but I was looking for you."

"Oh?" Spock's eyebrows rose in mild question.

At the Vulcan's blank look, Kirk realized he actually didn't know why he wanted to see Spock. "Uh, did you check with Scotty this morning?"
"Yes, Sir. He plans to send the last of the crew down within forty-eight hours. He has already shut down the life-support for decks eight through eleven and plans to dismantle the Recycling Auxiliaries today and start on the main filters tomorrow."

"Good." Kirk nodded. When Scotty did a thorough overhaul, Scotty did a thorough overhaul. They'd have to sit here for a good four weeks while the crew was called to testify and it was an excellent opportunity to get everyone out of the living quarters at once. In two days, the Engineer would have the whole main hull of the ship uninhabitable. He'd keep only thirty of his men to complete the maintenance work and they would have to live in the Engineering hull.

Kirk added, "Who's in charge of the computers?"

Spock said, "Ensign McClintock."

"That new boy... the one who was a Chess Grand Master at the age of fourteen?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Is he competent?"

"Thoroughly."

"But he's so young. Just up from the Academy..."

"He already holds an A-5 computer rating, Sir. With Mr. Scott in Command, he's perfectly capable of dealing with the computers."

"Provided," said Kirk ruefully, "you can drag him away from his chess boards long enough."

"Dr. McCoy tells me that McClintock should mature into a well-rounded..."

Just then a chime rang melodiously, calling the session to order and Kirk and Spock took their seats. It promised to be a long morning.

As the Chairman's proctors cleared the floor, Kirk examined the seventeen members of the Starfleet Sub-committee. Eleven were humans from Earth-colony worlds and six were nonhumans; the under-Ambassador from Rigel V, a Coridian, an Andorian; a Schillics, a Tellarite and a Zarek, the only full Ambassador on the committee. Strangely enough, the Chairman was a bald-headed human by the name of Pierpoint Adamson III who occupied the center seat of the parabolic table with the no-nonsense air of an experienced administrator. He was the Senior Attaché from Rigel II, a planet which maintained amicable relations with all other planets... which was the probable reason he was chosen. Nevertheless, a human Attaché ranking a nonhuman Ambassador...?

For the first hour of the hearing, they listened to the and the testimony of one of the Andorians from the Hood. Kirk had been too busy the last few months to follow the news reports of the testimony very closely and he was shocked by the blistering indictment handed down by the soft-spoken Andorian biologist.

Could it really be true that life in the service was that out of touch with the needs of nonhumans? If so, it was a wonder the Federation had lasted in its present form for nearly a century. Perhaps it really was time for a thorough housecleaning?

Then Kirk was called to the stand and sworn in still expecting the ends of that parabolic table to swoop in on him like the jaws of a predator. He sat down and looked out at the audience acutely aware of the multitude of recorders aimed at him. He licked his lips as the computer started to speak. "Kirk, James T., Service record: Serial number SC937-01766ECC; rank, Captain, Starship Command; commendations, Palm Leaf of Amasar Peace Mission; Granite Order of Tactics, Class of Excellence; Prantares Ribbon of Commendation, 1st and 2nd Class; Awards of Valor: Medal of Honor; Silver Palm with Cluster; Star Fleet Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry; Karogite Order of Heroism; Regular Circle with cross."

The computer stopped and the Chairman leaned forward cradling a glass of water between his hands like a staff of office. "Captain, we want you to understand that you are not on trial here. This is not a military court and we are not here to sit in judgment or to call you to account for past decisions. We have all studied the logs of your command, the Enterprise, but my colleague, the Delegate from Andoria has made the Enterprise his special interest and will speak for this committee." Adamson turned toward the Andorian, three seats to his right and nodded, "Thirlev?"

The Andorian folded his blue-skinned hands on the table and zipped his head slightly forward to aim his antennas at the Captain, "The Enterprise, under your command Captain Kirk, has encountered many situations which required moral decisions both on your part and on the part of your Senior Officers. I wish to discuss with you several of the more spectacular instances. Let me refresh your memory.

"I cite the events surrounding the recovery of the U.S.S. Exeter. You found her orbiting Omega IV. All the crew were dead of a plague which a landing party had brought back from that planet's surface. You found that the conditions on the surface immunized against the plague. But you also found Captain Tracey of the Exeter trapped on the planet. According to Starfleet Records, Captain Tracey had used his hand shaker to alter the balance of power in a local war in order to save his own life. A flagrant violation of the Prime Directive. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Finding yourself in similar difficulty, you gave the Omegan culture certain information which re-directed their development. Is that correct?"

Kirk conceded, "I reconnected them with the roots of their culture."

"Are you a trained anthropologist or xenologist?"
"No, Sir."

"Then, on whose expert advice were you relying when you decided that the Omega culture was indeed one familiar to you?"

"There was no xenologist in the landing party. But, the evidence was clear enough. Documents..."

The Andorian interrupted smoothly, "We're not here to argue, however tempting that may be. Let us go on."

"The planet Ekos. You found that another human, John Gill by name, had introduced a Terran culture pattern, Nazi-ism, and as a result the Ekosiens were provoking a war with the peaceful neighboring planet, Zeon. You took it upon yourself to divulge the existence of the Federation to the Zeons and to act to remove the Terran influence from the Ekosian culture. Is that correct?"

"Essentially..."

"Modern Terran culture evaluates Nazi-ism as 'wrong' culture from their own midsts. Yet you took it upon yourself to violate the Prime Directive of Star Fleet a second time in order to remove this 'wrong' culture, thus depriving the Ekosiens of the therapeutic effect of self-correction."

"The Zeons were on the verge of doing it themselves. We only helped a little. After all, a human was responsible in the first place."

"Yet, you are not a cultural xenologist nor a socio-ecologist."

"No, Sir. But I was right. Star Fleet Command concurred."

"That is beside the point. Let us move on."

A similar situation occurred on a recently explored planet where you confronted the Klingons. The balance of power between a pacifist culture and an activist culture had been upset by the Klingon's introduction of primitive firearms. Again your antitute to an initial infringement of the Prime Directive was a second and more massive violation of the Directive. Specifically, you incited the pacifist culture to violence and provided them with firearms and instruction in the use thereof. You also gave evidence of the Federation's existence. Am I correct?"

"Essentially. However..."

"Yes, I know. The human-dominated Admiralty upheld your decision. Let us continue. On the Planet Dana Iotia Two you discovered that a hundred years ago, the U.S.S. Horizon, one of the very first Federation patrol Starships, left a 'Terran book which the natives Uses upon as a cultural model. By modern human standards, this culture is a 'moral inversion'. You took it upon yourself to violate the Prime Directive again in an attempt to nullify the effects of the prior cultural infusion. On Earth, this 'morally inverted' culture was destroyed by the surrounding culture. No outside assistance was necessary. Yet you deemed it necessary to intervene on Iotia to the extent of mis-representing the Federation. Is this correct?"

"Yes, but..."

"And in the process, a device of modern technology was left on Iotia?"

Kirk reddened with embarrassment. As Captain, he was responsible for McCoy's loss of his communicator. "Well..."

"Tell me, Captain, on the planet Iotia, on whose expert opinion were you relying? Your Science Officer's?"

"No, Sir...he and the sociological computers were completely baffled."

"I see..."

"But..."

"Yes. The Admiralty upheld your decision. Reluctantly. Though the Federation Council may yet overrule."

"Let us proceed to the planet Triskelion. Here we have a case of a different nature. No previous violation of the Prime Directive had occurred and it is still a moot point whether the Directive applies to Triskelion due to the fact that they possess advanced technology of a star-spanning capability. However, you again took it upon yourself to pass judgment on the existing order and, finding it wanting, you undertook to change it. And you succeeded. Is this correct?"

"Slavery..."

"Yes, of course. Now, these five cases are typical of your various decisions when dealing with non-human cultures. Let me point out several similarities. In each case you singlehandedly passed a value judgment on a non-human society. In each case you took action to mold that society into the form of human social health lauded by modern Terran culture. In each case, the First Officer's Log records doubts about the necessity of your chosen action. In each case, the human dominated Admiralty upheld your decisions. I ask you now, are you totally satisfied that you did the 'right' thing in each case?"

"Yes, of course. Now, these five cases are typical of your various decisions when dealing with non-human cultures. Let me point out several similarities. In each case you singlehandedly passed a value judgment on a non-human society. In each case you took action to mold that society into the form of human social health lauded by modern Terran culture. In each case, the First Officer's Log records doubts about the necessity of your chosen action. In each case, the human dominated Admiralty upheld your decisions. I ask you now, are you totally satisfied that you did the 'right' thing in each case?"

"Yes, I am..."

"Your First Officer, Mr. Spock, is a Vulcan whose view of morality differs from yours. Did he ever express his views to you while you were making your decisions in these cases or in any similar cases?"
"Yes, he has on a number of occasions, though I don't recall specifically which."

Thirlev consulted his notes and supplied, "Beta Three. The destruction of Landru, for example. The First Officer's log records an objection to your planned violation of the Prime Directive. It also records your reply, "Thirlev read, "as having been that the Prime Directive applied only to living and growing cultures. Nowhere in Starfleet regulations is such a qualification made...and if it were, I don't see how a non-xenologist could judge the critical rate of growth. Your First Officer's judgment seems, to me, to be sound. Have you ever sought his council on such matters?"

Inwardly, Kirk groaned. "Mr. Thirlev, a Captain must make his decisions in the solitude of Command. He must sit in moral judgment on himself..."

"Yes," Thirlev glanced at the audience then back at Kirk, "Again, a typical human attitude colors your judgment. An Andorian Captain seeks council wherever it may be found and is constantly judged by his crew. He cannot isolate himself and an aura of pseudo-infallibility as do human Captains for he would then lose the respect of his crew...and their confidence."

Thirlev consulted his notes once more and Kirk considered the blue-skinned humanoid in a new light. Perhaps the long-winded diplomat knew more about Starship command than Kirk had thought. It was true that Andorians were rare among the Command trainees. Though many were undoubtedly competent enough, they seemed able to hold the respect only of other Andorians. Perhaps the real problem was lack of inter-cultural understanding. It was a new thought, and Kirk filed it for future consideration as Thirlev resumed.

"Captain, think carefully now. In every instance where you have been forced to make a moral decision, do you feel that you have represented the Federation fairly and properly by relying so strongly on your human sense of values?"

"Yes," answered Kirk without hesitation. "I must believe that or I could not function."

"Ah, human psychology again."

"And what other psychology do I have? What other values do I..."

Thirlev interrupted the budding tirade smoothly. "Let us move on to my last point. In each of these instances we have just discussed, you were forced to deal with an urgent situation without taking time to consult higher authority. In each case, you dealt with nonhumans who were not members of the Federation. The last case that I wish to examine concerns a nonhuman Federation member in an instance where you were in touch with the Admiralty."

"I refer to the events that occurred on your way to the inauguration at Altair VI several years ago."

Kirk stilled, casting an anxious glance at Sarek. The Vulcan Ambassador had remained immobile during the grilling, eyes fixed firmly on his clasped hands. Even now, he didn't move, but Kirk could see the increasing tension, the iron control.

Thirlev ploughed on, apparently oblivious to his colleague's pain. "In this instance, you received direct orders from Admiral Komack at Star Fleet Command to proceed to Altair VI and to arrive in time for the rescheduled Inauguration Ceremonies. Correct?"

Dry mouthed, Kirk only nodded.

"You then requested permission to divert to Vulcan which would cause you to arrive late for the rescheduled ceremonies. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Permission was denied?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I diverted to Vulcan."

"In direct violation of the orders of Star Fleet Command?"

"Yes." "Why?"

Kirk clenched his jaw and swallowed hard.

"Why, Captain? Why did you risk your career to violate a simple order to take your ship to a certain place for a good reason?"

"Because my Chief Surgeon insisted my First Officer was in grave peril if he weren't taken to Vulcan immediately. The appearance at Altair of my ship wasn't worth more to the Federation than the life of a highly trained Science Officer."

"In your judgment."

"In my judgment, yes. " Kirk was sweating now.
"And the only thing that vindicated you was the intervention of a highly respected Vulcan official?"

"Yes."

"You consider that your own individual judgment is sharper than that of the Admiralty?"

"No, Sir. In that instance, the Admiralty was not in possession of all the facts."

"Which were?"

"That it was a matter of life or death against a mere political flourish."

"Why wasn't the Admiralty informed?"

"Because..." Kirk stopped. He'd been about to say Komack hadn't given him time to explain, but that wasn't so.

"Why, Captain?"

Kirk bit his lip. Anything he said would be an unthinkable breach of Vulcan propriety.

"You hesitate to answer? Why Captain? Why do you hesitate to answer so simple a question? Do you, perhaps find yourself in a moral dilemma?"

Kirk met Thirlev's eyes across the fifteen feet of stage that separated them. The Andorian knew! He knew all the answers already!

Thirlev propped his elbows on the table and folded his blue-skinned hands, leaning his chin on them as he regarded the human penetratingly. "Captain James T. Kirk who has acted with swift decisiveness in matters involving whole civilizations, who has based his decisions unhesitatingly and exclusively on his human values, and who has just testified that he is satisfied with the results of his value judgments, finds himself in a moral dilemma? How could this be?"

Kirk met the Andorian's gaze steadily, letting the question pass as rhetorical. Now he understood. Thirlev was using him to do some personal ex-grinding...with Federation-wide news coverage.

Thirlev raked a triumphant glance across the audience then regarded Kirk, "Could it be, Captain, that your dilemma involves...Vulcan values?"

"I wouldn't say so, no. Or, only insofar as Vulcan and human values overlap. I'm not a physician so I'm not protected by the Hippocratic Oath. But, if a non-physician comes into possession of information which should be available to a physician, he should be protected, at least by the spirit of Hippocrates. And remember, Hippocrates was not only human...but Terran well!"

That seemed to surprise Thirlev who again consulted his notes while everyone waited. Kirk allowed himself to feel triumphant. Human ethics may be under attack here, but humans had made some of the greatest...and most widely accepted...contributions in the field of ethics.

But then it was Kirk's turn to be surprised. Thirlev looked up as if mildly confused. "Hippocrates? Oh, yes, now I remember. The Terran Thonval, The Terran Sukar, The Terran Gind."

"I addressed the audience. "Need I go on? Surely, we all recognize one of these names. Great men of Andor, Vulcan, and Tellar...and even Terra. Interesting that Federation law recognizes only the Hippocratic Oath. In this case, I would expect the Oath of Sukar would be a more appropriate citation."

Thirlev aimed his antennae at Kirk, "Though the Hippocratic Oath cannot apply to you, Captain, since you are not a physician, the Oath of Sukar would apply if Federation law but recognized it. Interesting you didn't think to invoke it. But the question remains. Why didn't Admiral Komack grant permission to divert to Vulcan?"

"Because he didn't realize a life was at stake."

"Then the question becomes, 'need he have been told that a life was at stake?'"

Thirlev now addressed his colleagues around the table. "The answer, Gentlemen, is 'no'. He need only have been told that a Vulcan had requested home leave. That request should have been sufficient to bring a Starship all the way across the Federation...at warp eight if necessary...no questions asked. Captain Kirk had to jeopardize his career because Star Fleet regulations are inadequate.

"Because Star Fleet regulations are oriented to the needs of humans, countless nonhuman members of the Service are daily put through personally agonizing experiences...which are totally senseless. Because of this deplorable situation, Captain Kirk had to risk his career...to save the life of his First Officer. I submit, Gentlemen, that had there not been longstanding...friendship...between the human Captain and his Vulcan First Officer, that First Officer would be dead today...an incalculable loss to Star Fleet, to the Federation, and to Vulcan."

"Now, I ask you to consider what would have happened had the Vulcan in question been an Ensign assigned to a research laboratory instead of the First Officer of the ship?"

He paused eyeing each of the Committee in turn. "I submit that this is one reason so few Vulcans volunteer for Star Fleet. I have documented evidence that on twelve other occasions, Vulcan Star Fleet Officers have undergone even worse experiences. There have been two cases of unexplained deaths of Vulcans who were taken ill and hospitalized following denial of their requests for home leave. Yet Star Fleet regulations have not been changed in spite of the repeated requests of the Vulcan authorities.
"Under similar circumstances, Andoria would have withdrawn from the Federation. Andoria's official sympathy lies with the Vulcans." He swung back to Kirk, "Captain, do you have any further comments you would care to address to the Committee?"

Kirk felt he must be filled with things to say. Every time he'd started to speak, Thirlev had cut him off. But now, all he felt was a kind of battle-shock from the verbal whipping. Human values? Of course, he'd used human values. What others did he have? But there were others... What was he trying to defend, anyway? Himself? He wasn't on trial. The Admiralty? No. They didn't need defending. Star Fleet Regs? He was becoming more and more convinced they were grossly unfair. Humanity in general? But he'd lived his whole life on the principle that there was no race-based inequity in the Federation. Confused, he shook his head.

Thirlev said, "Thank you, Captain. You may step down. Mr. Chairman?"

Dazed, Kirk climbed to his feet.

Adamson said, "Captain, you will be provided with a tape on which to submit any further comments you'd care to make. Please hold yourself available for recall and consultation. Thank you."

As Kirk moved toward the stairs leading down from the stage into the audience, Adamson took a sip of his water and announced, "The Committee calls Mr. Spock, First Officer of the Enterprise."

It was what everyone had been waiting for and there was a general stir of excited comments as Spock stood aside to allow the Captain to descend before mounting the stage. As they passed each other, Kirk thought he detected an approving twinkle in the Vulcan's eye.

The computer ploughed through the list of Spock's commendations with relentless thoroughness: Vulcan Scientific Legion of Honor, Awards of Valor, thrice decorated by Star Fleet Command, Prantaries Star of Wisdom, Nobel Laureate of Science, Medusan Cross of Honor, Starfleet Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry, the Antares Order of Valor, Star Fleet Cross, and on and on through honorary doctorates and earned doctorates some of which Kirk couldn't recall hearing before. When the mechanical voice finally stopped after A-7 Computer Expert, the audience heaved a collective sigh.

The Chairman cradled his glass of water between well-manicured hands and said, "Mr. Spock, you are not the first Star Fleet Officer of mixed heritage to be called before this Committee, nor will you be the last. However, in view of your distinguished record and unusual position, we consider your testimony extremely important. Please bear that in mind." He turned to the Andorian, "Thirlev?"

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman."

"Spock, did you hear my discussion with Captain Kirk just now?"

"I heard your discussion."

"Were you present at the time of each cited occurrence?"

"Yes."

"Had you been in Command of the Enterprise on those occasions, would you have issued different orders? Would you have taken different action than Captain Kirk elected?"

"Possibly." Spock eyed the Andorian levelly. "And possibly not."

Thirlev consulted his notes. Kirk thought the Andorian had expected an unqualified affirmative and was now confused. Apparently he didn't know Vulcans very well, after all.

Thirlev found his place. "You recall the events at Cestus III when you discovered the base destroyed?"

"Yes. The Gorn thought our occupation of Cestus III was an unwarranted incursion into their territory."

"Precisely. But when you arrived at Cestus III, you didn't know that. All you found was a destroyed base and a hostile enemy ship. The Enterprise gave chase. What was Captain Kirk's avowed purpose in pursuing the Gorn ship?"

"He wished to destroy it."

"Did you oppose his viewpoint?"

"Affirmative."

"Did you express your opposition... even before you knew the Gorn attitude?"
"I did."

"Did Captain Kirk heed your advice?"

"No. He advanced counter-arguments which he considered convincing."

"But he was wrong?"

"He had been hasty. He changed his mind when he discovered that the Gorn felt themselves to be the aggrieved party. He was instrumental in opening diplomatic relations with the Gorn and with the Metrons, also."

"Yes, of course. After the incident of the Gorn misunderstanding, did Captain Kirk seek your advice on moral matters?"

"Occasionally."

"Did he ever accept your viewpoint?"

"Rarely."

"Did you make a habit of offering your evaluation of the ethical aspects of Command Decisions?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Captain Kirk makes his own decisions. Where knowledge is required he seeks advice of his specialists, but he regards evaluation as his responsibility."

"A very human attitude."

"Indeed. But a highly successful one. My training has been primarily in the sciences. I was not originally trained for command. The Captain's training has always been oriented toward command and he is an excellent Captain. There is much that may be learned from such a man."

"You originally chose Star Fleet Sciences as your career. Did you not realize that such a choice would eventually lead you to Command Rank?"

"I did."

"And you have commanded the Enterprise quite ably on a number of difficult occasions?"

"My record speaks for itself."

"Spock, why did you choose a Star Fleet career?"

"It is illogical to fail to develop one's abilities."

"Has Star Fleet made optimum use of your abilities?"

"Yes. To the extent which it is able to do so."

"Has your Vulcan ancestry ever caused you excessive discomfort in your daily life in Star Fleet?"

"Yes. On numerous occasions."

"I would like to request that you submit a list of representative incidents to this Committee sometime within the next few days. Will you do that?"

"Affirmative."

The Andorian consulted his notes again. An unnatural hush gripped the audience. Someone coughed. Finally, Thirlev said, "Spock, I want you to consider carefully now. Has your Vulcan ancestry ever been a handicap to you in gaining recognition in Star Fleet?"

Unhesitatingly, Spock said, "No."

"Do you expect to rise above the rank of Captain?"
"I have the ability."

"Do you expect the Admiralty will recognize that ability?"

"They may, but that is not the determining factor."

"What is the determining factor?"

"Whether there is a place for a Vulcan flag officer. One thing I have learned from Captain Kirk is that Command consists of more than making correct decisions. A Commanding Officer must have a certain talent for interpersonal relationships... if he is to command a crew of humans.

"Do you have that talent?"

"I do not know."

Thirlev consulted his notes, tapping angrily at the reader controls as if Spock wasn't giving the expected answers. Kirk noticed that the Andorian never cut Spock off in mid-objection and Spock seemed to be using that to lead the questioning in spite of Thirlev's remarkably thorough preparation.

The diplomat found what he'd been looking for. "Spock, on one occasion you noticed a sudden change in Captain Kirk's behavior and simultaneously a woman who was said to be suffering from radiation poisoning claimed that she was Captain Kirk... that the Captain's mind had been transferred to her body. Do you recall that occasion?"

"Indeed."

"How did you determine that this improbably circumstance was in fact true?"

Spock stiffened. For the first time, Kirk noted a reluctance to answer Thirlev's barbed questions. At length, he replied, "By a Vulcan mind-touch."

"You were absolutely certain of your identification?"

"Absolutely."

"At that point, what legal steps were open to you to restore your Captain to the bridge of his ship?"

"None."

"Why?"

"Telepathic evidence is not admissable in a court of law... nor is it acceptable in a court-martial."

"Is this how Star Fleet makes optimum use of your abilities?"

"I freely admit that the law should be changed. Many other changes should also be made. But let us not destroy the good with the bad. Remember, the Federation was originally designed to govern the Earth Colonies. Only after the nonhuman membership had grown to ten percent was the legal structure changed to accommodate nonhumans. But those changes were made by humans. The philosophical structure of the Federation is still primarily human even though nonhuman members and affiliates now outnumber the human members.

"But... the Federation is unique in our part of the galaxy. It is viable. It is vigorous. It is governed democratically. And it is relatively peaceful. Do we want to change that?"

Thirlev said, "No. Of course not."

"Then we must identify the factor which makes the Federation viable before we make wholesale changes in its structure. Do you know what that factor is?"

"No," said Thirlev, "I don't."

Spock addressed the Committee. "As you may know, I am an amateur student of Earth history. My interest in Earth was sparked... mainly... by the threat humanity poses to the Vulcan way of life.

"Throughout their early planet-bound history, humans searched for a form of collective government which would allow their nations to live in peace. Empire after empire took over the territory of many nations. In each case, the conquerer imposed his values, his religion and his mores on the conquered.

"And in each case, the conquerer was destroyed. This cycle continued until the spectre of world holocaust brought humanity to its senses and a world government was established. In outline, Earth's history is not unlike that
of many nonhuman worlds. But then, Earth began massive colonization of other planets... a much more massive effort than any other modern race. A much larger governmental agency was required and humanity constructed the Federation.

"The United Federation of Planets does not conquer by force of arms. But the other activities of twenty-third century humanity are disturbingly similar to those of their ancestors." He let that sink in for a moment as his gaze drifted pointedly across the audience. The innuendo was unmistakable. Everyone had heard what had happened to Amanda.

Thirlev took a breath, but Spock cut him off, "Forty-three percent of the Federation population is of Earth Ancestry. Seventy-four percent of Federation commerce is owned by that forth-three percent. Obviously, humanity is remarkably successful. They have constructed a government which allows them to live with their highly aggressive natures... without waging war. Though they no longer impose their religions and mores on the 'conquered', they have not eradicated their tendency to sell their values with their merchandise.

"And herein lies a difference between humans and nonhumans. Few nonhuman races have colonized so extensively in recent times. Few nonhumans engage in commerce with such single-minded acquisitiveness... and few have such strong tendencies to sell their values with their merchandise. Though many nonhuman races have had space travel long before humanity came into space, no nonhuman race constructed the Federation or a viable counterpart.

"I ask," he addressed the Committee, "if perhaps it isn't humanity's confidence in their own values that is responsible for the peace in the Galaxy today?"

"The Klingons and the Romulans rule Empires as diverse as the Federation. But they are constantly engaged in internal and external wars while we live in peace with the humans who are destroying our values wherever they differ from the human norm. A most curious circumstance."

Spock paused to survey the audience and Thirlev pounced, "Are you suggesting that telepathic evidence should not be admissible in a court of law?"

"No. That is one change I strongly advocate. However, if I do not understand why the Federation is viable, how can I say what will destroy its viability?"

"Are you saying we should allow humanity to destroy our cultures?"

"Not at all. Every culture should defend itself. The question is, with what weapons and to what purpose?"

"You do not believe that we should risk destroying the Federation in an attempt to defend ourselves?"

"I do not."

Thirlev consulted his notes once more, then looked up, "Do you have any further comments you would care to address to the Committee?"

"I do not."

"Then you may step down." Thirlev turned to the Chairman conceding the floor, "Mr. Chairman." Then he sat back, his thin form almost swallowed by his chair. He looked exhausted.

Adamson shook himself as if awakening from a daze, "Mr. Spock, you will be provided with a tape on which you may submit further observations. Please hold yourself in readiness to be recalled for further questions. Thank you."

"Next, the Committee calls Captain Sutar of the U.S.S. Kongo."

Spock descended nodding cordially to Sutar. Then he caught Kirk's eye and raised one brow in question as he continued down the aisle toward the exit.

Kirk was torn between a desire to hear the Vulcan Captain's testimony and a desire to go with Spock. Well, he thought, he could listen to a tape of the session later. He rose and followed Spock out the door onto the Concourse of Planets.

"Mr. Spock. Where are you going?"

"To the hospital. Sarek will be busy the rest of the day with the hearing."

"Oh, yes. Amanda may be getting lonely."

The Vulcan gave him a penetrating glance and continued walking. Kirk paced him and said, "I'm sorry."

Spock stopped and faced the Captain, head cocked quizzically to one side, "Sorry? Why?"
"For making light of a very serious situation." He shook his head, "Look, Spock, I honestly don't think I've ever been so devastated by any... well, I mean, it's horrible... what happened to Amanda."

"Horrible?" The Vulcan walked on slowly, savoring the descriptive. "Yes, perhaps. I don't know."

"Well, I know. And it is horrible. Spock, why don't we ask Bones to come and have a talk with her?"

Again the Vulcan stopped to regard Kirk, "Doctor McCoy? Why?"

"He's... well, he has a terrific bedside manner when he chooses to use it. He's a damned good psychiatrist, and Amanda respects him."

"You mean to consult him professionally?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"I couldn't do that without Sarek's consent."

"Amanda's not a child. If she wants to talk to Bones, she'll talk. If she doesn't, she won't. I just think we ought to go tell him what happened."

"He's probably heard by now. It was on the morning news."

"There's plenty that wasn't on the morning news. Let's go talk to him."

Spock hesitated again, then took the corridor that led to the transporter lounge, Kirk right on his heels.

CHAPTER FOUR

Craning his neck, Kirk searched above the sea of bobbing heads for a familiar profile. "There he is, Bones. Over by that alcove."

The Captain pointed and McCoy followed his finger. "That's Spock, all right. Let's go."

They threaded their way through the crowd and drew up beside the Vulcan who, together with many others, had paused to watch a large viewscreen at the back of the alcove.

It was Babel's Evening News with a Tellarite reporter interviewing the chairman of the Jurisprudence Committee who was also the Chief of Delegation from the Centauran Worlds, one of Earth's oldest and most influential colonies.

"Ambassador Cunard," challenged the blunt-snouted reporter, "it is said that the Jurisprudence Committee does not favor admission of telepathic evidence to jury trials even where at least one of the disputants is telepathic... is this correct?"

"Yes, it is..." Cunard's studies self-assurance seemed to waver under the Tellarite's belligerent gaze.

Seeing this, the reporter pressed his advantage, "I've also been informed that the Committee favors the admittance of the Vulcan Oath-Binding as a substitute for bail security in certain criminal cases. Do you personally favor such a recommendation?"

"Possibly... strictly on a trial basis, of course." But it was obvious that he thought little of the chances of it becoming permanent.

"Would you view such a move as a change in human policy toward nonhumans?"

"There's no such thing as 'human policy toward nonhumans'. The Federation is an association of civilized worlds. There is no racial dichotomy."

Kirk felt someone move up behind him and turned to find Sarek, Amanda and a Babel-uniformed man watching the newscast with him. As he turned back to the screen, the Tellarite was saying, "Ambassador Cunard, the Andorian Ambassador has called the attack on the Vulcan Ambassador's wife a shocking crime, but hardly surprising in view of the human attitude toward nonhuman values. Just what is the 'human attitude toward nonhuman values?'"

Cunard coughed nervously, "Respect. Nothing but the highest respect. In general, all humans share a deep reverence for other people's ways of life. I personally don't understand all this talk about values. The greatest damage
is done by the disproportionate publicity given to every incident, however minor."

The Tellarite's blue snout twitched. "Then you think this attack on the Vulcan Ambassador is a minor incident that's been over publicized?"

Cunard squirmed. "Yes. Definitely. Is not respect for privacy a Vulcan value? And, after all, nobody was actually hurt." He looked pointedly at the Tellarite whose own people were well known for their volatile spirits. "Humans are not the only race whose normally law-abiding citizens are subject to crimes of passion. In fact, Vulcans are the only people who do not admit the existence of such crimes among themselves."

As if on cue, the reporter swiveled his stout body to face directly into the pickup and said, "Thank you, Mr. Ambassador and good evening, guests of Babel."

The screen went blank and the tiny alcove erupted with a dozen conversations as the listeners dispersed. Soon Kirk and McCoy were left facing Spock and his parents. Amanda was indignant. "Not actually hurt! Where does he get the nerve to talk about Vulcan privacy and then to imply that any Vulcan could ever behave ...?"

Sarek interrupted firmly, "Ambassador Cunard has a right to express his opinions, however ignorant he may be."

But Kirk detected an iron control under the diplomat's mild tone. The morning's hearing had certainly taken its toll. The man in the Babel uniform who'd been standing at Sarek's elbow apologetically cleared his throat and stepped forward. Kirk looked directly at him for the first time. He was a small, middle-aged human who spoke in quick, breathless bursts. "Mr. Ambassador, I would like to assure you that Babel is doing everything possible to apprehend the guilty parties."

"I'm certain you are, Mr. Hilcron," replied Sarek absently. "Allow me to introduce Captain Kirk of the Enterprise, his Chief Surgeon Dr. McCoy, and his First Officer Commander Spock."

Hilcron bowed to each in turn, ignoring the Vulcan custom of placing the employee above the employer in social status. "Welcome to Babel, gentlemen. I am Kerb Hilcron, Manager in Residence at Babel. I'm here to make your stay with us as pleasant as possible."

Kirk said, "I'm sure you will. Babel is certainly an impressive place."

Hilcron nodded eagerly. "We do try, Captain. We do try."

Mr. Hilcron," Sarek eyed the blanked viewscreen abstractedly, "you mentioned that Babel has KirTohn Tsu'."

"What? Oh the Vulcan restaurant ... yes ... but I thought ..."

"I've reconsidered. When are they serving tonight?"

"In about half an hour. The staff arrived only this morning. We always try to open the KirTohn when we have a large number of Vulcan guests. But we've had such embarrassing trouble with the M-IV environmental controls ..."

"Yes. We understand. These things do happen." But Sarek was still not looking at his companions. It was most unusual, thought Kirk, for a Vulcana to change his mind.

"Oh, that reminds me," said Hilcron into the awkward silence, "Mr. Spock, I really must personally for the dreadfull inconvenience we've caused you. The whole M-IV level is still practically uninhabitable. I've had to put all the Vulcans into M-III and M-I accommodations."

Spock nodded, "When do you expect to have the malfunction corrected?"

I'd like to say definitely by tomorrow ... but actually I just don't know. Which reminds me. Mr. Spock would you be so kind as to stop into my office tomorrow morning? There are a couple of matters I'd like to discuss with you."

Kirk nodded and started to form an urbane reply, but Sarek suddenly rejoined the group. "Mr. Hilcron, do you know the coordinates of the KirTohn Tsu'?"

"It's at DTK-1742-1V."

Spock said, "But that's on the M-IV level ..."

"Yes. But it's near a main duct so we're supplying air from the M-I level. It will be a bit chilly for you, but I'm told the food is excellent."
"I imagine it is," said Sarek. "Thank you, Mr. Hicron."

"Yes, yes, of course. My pleasure. I'm sorry for any inconvenience. May I bid you a pleasant evening..." he bowed his way around the group and hurried off about some other pressing duty.

When the manager was gone, Spock said, "Father? Are you certain you want to go to KirTohn Tsu'? We had planned..."

Amanda said, "I've never been to KirTohn Tsu'. I think I'd like to go."

Reluctantly, Spock conceded, "We do form a group of sorts." Setting his guidebeam on the coordinates he led the way.

When they stepped out of the turbo lift, they found themselves in the midst of a systematic disarray that reminded Kirk of the current condition of the Enterprise under Scotty's zealous hands.

To their left, an airtight bulkhead closed the corridor, while along the walls, access panels were open, spilling pipes and bundles of colored components across the floor. But their were no workmen in sight.

Ahead of them a bead curtain screened a narrow tunnel that seemed molded from frosted ruby. Father and son led the way through the curtain and now Kirk could see it wasn't a bead curtain, but a bell curtain. Each bead was a tiny, hollow sphere, some as small as a pea, others the size of tangerines, and each intricately carved and tuned to a shimmering harmony. They rounded a curve, went through another bell curtain and entered a triangular waiting room.

The floor and walls were fashioned of the same deep ruby material as the corridor, but here the walls glowed, lending the air an almost tangible luminescence.

Kirk counted thirty-two Vulcans, some seated on ruby benches, some standing talking softly as they waited. Gravity here was set at the Vulcan norm, so when Sarek gestured them to be seated, Kirk and McCoy seized the opportunity gladly. While Amanda took a seat opposite them, Sarek and Spock stood peering into the darkness beyond the inner bell-curtain.

"Amanda," said McCoy, "just what is KirTohn Tsu?"

"It's a blend of a very ancient tradition with modern philosophy... a peculiarly Vulcan sort of blend. For example, this room is triangular, the next is circular. Topologically identical, yet functionally complementary. Sound familiar?"

McCoy snapped his fingers, then looked apologetically sheepish when twelve pairs of eyes turned to stare at him. When the attention dispersed, he said quietly, "The IDIC."

Amanda nodded. "Yes, representing infinite diversity in infinite combinations. If you'll notice the ceiling...?"

"It's hemispherical," said Kirk.

"When the KirTohn opens, the ceiling will show a view of the night sky of Vulcan. It represents the universe itself, of which all of us are a part. When you think about it, gazing into the night sky is a very humbling experience... but also very ennobling. In Logic, the universe, what Sarek called the Set of the All, has a special significance."

Kirk frowned, trying to recall what he knew of the Philosophy of Nome, meaning All.

"Why all the red color?" McCoy looked around at the walls which reminded him of the expanse of red curtains in Spock's quarters aboard ship.

Amanda answered. "The Vulcan eye doesn't perceive red the same way we do. I've been told this appears as a peculiar not-light that sheds light. KirTohn is the name of the color in one of the pre-Reform languages."

McCoy nodded. "The Vulcan eye is adapted to light with a stronger blue component, but can distinguish shades of red well down into the infra-red."

"The bells," said Kirk. "They must have some significance too?"

"Yes, they do. But I don't understand tonal symbology well enough to explain it."

McCoy pursed his lips. "you seem to understand quite a lot about Vulcan."

Kirk thought Amanda blushed at that but the red shadows made it hard to tell.

"Thank you, Doctor. Thank you for... everything you've done for me." She smiled quizzically, "I'm not accustomed to flattery any more."
As Spock detached himself from the doorway and came to stand behind her, McCoy said, "I didn't mean to flatter."

"Then," she assumed a Vulcan severity, "your statement was merely inaccurate. What I do not understand far outweighs what I do."

"Your knowledge," said McCoy matching her severity, "seems an incredible accomplishment to me." He cocked an eyebrow at Sarek's back. "What I do not understand is why Sarek chose to bring us here. It doesn't strike me as the sort of place the tour guides take offworlders."

"You are correct, Doctor," said Spock balancing on the balls of his feet. "The KirTohn Tsu' is a very... Vulcan ceremonial. It is intended to create harmonious unity among a small group of disparate strangers. There is a disparity among us, intensified by this division of humans from non-humans. So we do form a group of sorts."

A sudden rippling of bells announced the opening and the lights came up in the adjoining room and the dome overhead became a glorious desert sunset in throbbng complement to the ruby walls.

Sarek rejoined the group as ten young girls marched in, creating cascades of music with the bells that adorned their swishing red robes. The hostesses broke up and moved out among the groups of guests to marshal them through the bell curtain and into the round dining room.

Standing just inside the curtained doorway, Kirk looked around but could find no tables. The center of the room was a circular dais mounted by a triangular stairway, the point of which was just off center of the dais, the IDIC motif once more. Two intersecting bell curtains divided the dais into four segments in each of which sat a musician playing a stringed instrument. Still craning his neck unobtrusively, Kirk followed their hostess too one of the many bell curtained doorways that lined the walls. Then he saw that all the tables were set in private booths partitioned from each other and from the main floor. The table in their booth was semi-circular with all five places set on one side only so that the diner's backs would be to the central room. Before them, on a pedestal in front of an expanse of red drapery, sat a figurine presiding over a long trough in which a low fire glowed redly. Above the figurine, a mirror reflected the main room and the night sky visible through the bell curtain behind them.

Kirk thought the fire must be the same as the one Spock kept in his quarters aboard ship. If so, it was the cold fire Vulcans called the Culling Flame and was used primarily to enrich that meditation trance as necessary to the Vulcan mind as dreaming to the human.

The hostesses retired as a group and Kirk started to ask about the flame, but before he could utter a sound Spock clamped a hand on his wrist and then made a quick, negative gesture, rejoining his hands in the position of contemplation with his elbows propped on the table before him.

For the first time Kirk noticed he'd been seated between Spock and Amanda while Sarek was placed between Spock and McCoy. It was by far the most awkward arrangement he could imagine and he had no idea how it had come about.

Presently, the hostesses returned bearing trays heaped with hot and cold delicacies in multitudes of red glass dishes which she deposited before them with elaborate ceremony. They ate in the Vulcan customary silence that was not awkward but companionable.

At length, the last course of the meal had been cleared away and Spock said, "The liktyeu was excellent."

Sarek answered, "It seemed too highly spiced for me. However, the torniel was superb."

"I found everything done to perfection," added Amanda diplomatically.

Bracing his elbows on the table, Sarek steepled his fingers and regarded the red, glowing fire before him, "Yes, as a whole the meal attained a satisfactory standard of excellence. An excellence unmatched by other events of the last two days."

"Events," Spock frowned dubiously, "Cannot be compared to cuisine."

"No? I submit that there is a reasonable basis for constructing an analogy. A meal is the end result of a time matured blending of basic ingredients. A social event is the time matured result of a blending of basic ingredients. The basic ingredients of a meal are extracted from the biosphere while events may be composed of ideas extracted from what might called the psychosphere. Organic substances nourish the body; ideas nourish the mind. A meal occurs at the interaction of the body with blended foods. A social event occurs at the interaction of the mind with blended ideas. A chef creates meals; a diplomat creates events. The analogy is of the variety dijyket."

"Yes, I see," conceded Spock, "a tenous, but valid, dijyket."

Feeling mischievously illogical, Kirk interposed, "The meal was excellent, but I can think of one of matching quality that occurred only this morning."

McCoy leaned forward to view Kirk around Sarek's steepled fingers. "And what would that be?"

"The way Spock looked Thirlev's goose at the committee hearing.\"
Spock's eyebrows rose as he considered that and Kirk felt obliged to add, "Yes, Mr. Spock, you served stuffed Thirlev on a silver platter."

"Indeed."

McCoy nodded enthusiastically. "That you did, Mr. Spock. I saw the tape. The way he went after Jim, I didn't think anything could stop him."

"Yes, Spock," said Amanda, "you did a splendid job of defending humanity."

"Really? That is interesting."

Kirk said, "You seem surprised."

"I am surprised, Captain. I was under the impression that I had done just the opposite."

"Which side are you on, Spock?"

"Both. Of necessity, Doctor. There are a large number of grave injustices built into the Federation. Many are the result of basic human character traits ..."

"For instance?" prompted Kirk.

Spock steepled his fingers, elbows propped on the table, and stared into the ruddy flame before them. "Most non-human species possess a fairly constant reproductive drive, directed only at their own females. It is true that some non-humans have been known to attack strange females, but only humanity has been known to do this in groups. And only with humans is such activity considered merely criminal and not perverted."

There was a long silence while each waited for the others to make some comment. Even if the purpose of the KirTohn Tsu' was to emphasize differences, Spock was surely overdoing it. "Spock," said Kirk, "do you remember when that energy being transported a group of Klingons onto the Enterprise and set us to hating each other in order to feed on our emotions?"

"Indeed I do, Captain."

"Even you felt a brief flash of racial bigotry. Doesn't the current situation seem hauntingly familiar? Almost as if an outside force were pitting us against one another ..."

Spock was silent, thinking.

"Jim, you're right!" said McCoy. "It does seem we're reacting all out of proportion. Certainly there are injustices, but they are not intentional. And they can be corrected. Legal flaws are no reason for individuals to square off for a fight on first meeting. And I've seen far more of that here on Babel than I ever thought possible."

Sarek stared fixedly into the flames. "You miss the point, Doctor, as badly as Ambassador Cunard. The origin and method of discovery is irrelevant. A flaw is a flaw." He placed both hands flat on the table and pushed himself to his feet. "It was a mistake to bring you here tonight. I can see that my continued presence has no meaning. Spock, you will see your mother safely to her door. Good evening, Gentlemen."

The Ambassador turned and marched out of the curtained alcove, across the circular room and disappeared, stiff-backed, into the darkened waiting room beyond. The others turned to watch him depart and then stared at each other.

"He must be ill," said Amanda. "Spock go after him."

"Mother, I cannot. I have been instructed to escort you."

"Spock," she said pleading, "it is forbidden to leave the KirTohn Tsu' before the t'kromaa'e."

"Yes, mother. But it is also forbidden to construct t'kromaa' without a firm toma. Our group has failed to coalesce. Our presence here no longer holds meaning. I suggest we leave before the ceremonies begin."

"But, Spock. Couldn't you ..."

"I could conduct. But it would be an exercise devoid of meaning. We have failed. We should leave before we disturb the others."

She rose, "Very well. We will try again another time."

Kirk and McCoy followed them across the star-domed chamber.
"Goodnight, Mr. Justice," said Ambassador Iram Cunard to his companion.

"Goodnight, Mr. Ambassador, and thank you. It has been a very rewarding evening. Perhaps we can have dinner again sometime?"

"Perhaps," said Cunard perfunctorially.

The two men parted at the corridor intersection and Cunard made his way toward his rooms. The Jurisprudence Committee could make recommendations which would send every attorney in the Federation back to school for a year... not to mention those sitting on the benches of the High Courts. Larkin of all people should realize that, thought Cunard. All this furor over the Vulcan Oath-of-Honor, for example. Not half the people favoring it realized the chaos it could create... the precedents...

He palmed the lock of his door and didn't bother to turn on the light. The bright lights that Tellarite reporter used had already given him enough of a headache for one day. Or perhaps it had been the man's staccato belligerence. Whatever the cause, Cunard knew he'd said the wrong thing in the wrong way and now had a first class migraine as reward.

His first warning of danger was the whistle of something whipped through the air behind his head. Automatically, his right hand dropped to the sheath of his ceremonial dagger as he crouched, turning.

The object crashed into his right shoulder, numbing the arm as if the shoulder were broken. Cunard grabbed his dagger out of his numbed hand and jabbed into the air where his assailant must be.

The sharp point of the dagger connected with live tissue and he drove it forward and up, hoping to penetrate a vulnerable torso. But the unseen attacker danced back too quickly, a vague shadow in the dark room, now that the door had closed.

The Ambassador crouched into his best left-handed stance, his useless arm dangling as he peered into the blackness. The assassin must have hidden across the hall and followed him into the room. Well, it had been many years since he'd duelled. but his reflexes were still good.

Perceiving a shadowy form against the black background, Cunard lunged and felt his dagger connect, slicing through fabric and skin. But then his assailant was gone again and he was left only with a vaguely familiar smell... flat... acrid... alien.

He turned, trying to follow shadow against shadow. How could his opponent see him in the dark? Infrared lenses? Nonhuman nightvision? He could dazzle the coward if he could get to the lightswitch.

Licking his lips nervously, he calculated the distance to the panel. He brought the dagger to his nose... that smell... he had it. Vulcan blood. That was the smell of Vulcan blood. No chance of dazzling a Vulcan...

Suddenly, he heard a whisper to this left as if someone had brushed against a chair. He whirled and lunged again... but he never finished the motion.

Steel-hard fingers closed on his neck and severed his spinal column as cleanly and painlessly as a surgeon's incision.

He never felt his head hit the soft edge of the chair.

CHAPTER SIX

Kirk marched along the busy corridor beside his First Officer, still blinking sleep from his eyes and smothering yawns. "Mr. Spock, I'm sorry I spoiled the dinner last night."

"There is no need to apologize, Captain."

"Sarek must have been... well, no, not angry but at least displeased with me."

"Negative. The group fragmented spontaneously."

"That may be, but why did he rush off like that?"

"We all have needs."
"Ummm," Kirk recognized Spock's phrase as a formal barrier of privacy, so he changed the subject. "So why do you suppose Hilcron needs us?"

"I suggest we ask him." The Vulcan gestured at the ornate door that barred the end of the corridor... Hilcron's office.

Within, they faced a gleaming counter that divided visitors from the neat rows of desks. Presently, one of the staff clerks noticed them and came to the counter, "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"We're here to see Mr. Hilcron," said Kirk.

"I'm sorry, but the Manager only sees people by appointment."

"We have an appointment..." said Kirk.

"Oh? Your names?"

Kirk told him and the clerk checked a list. "I'm sorry, but you're not on the calendar and the Manager is in private conference just now."

"Perhaps," suggested Kirk, "you should tell him we're here." The Captain wasn't accustomed to being given the runaround.

"Mr. Hilcron has asked not to be disturbed. I've no idea when he'll be free."

Spock said, "Why don't you flash the announcement on his viewscreen for just a moment? That shouldn't be too disturbing."

The human clerk gave the Vulcan a peculiar glance and then shrugged and turned to his desk. Kirk thought possibly Hilcron had instructed his staff to be especially careful not to offend nonhumans.

A few moments later, a door in the far corner flew aside and Hilcron plunged out into the sea of desks. His uniform drooped around his sturdy body while his hair stood up in sharp, gray spikes testifying to the long, hard night he'd put in.

"Come in, gentlemen, come in. I'm glad you thought to stop by," He slid a section of the counter aside to admit them. "I was about to call you."

Kirk said, "You did ask to see us, Mr. Hilcron, but if you're too busy..."

"I asked to see you? Why yes, I remember now. But so much has happened since then. Come into my office where we can talk."

Kirk and Spock followed the manager between desks and into the office where green carpet, large chairs and an enormous oval desk created the spacious atmosphere that was Babel's trademark. At the moment, however, two uniformed staff members presided over portable computer consoles while a civilian looked on from his seat at the end of the oval.

Hilcron collapsed into the largest chair and gestured his new guests to the two remaining places near the other end of the table. "Gentlemen, this is Justice Larkin of the Federation District Court of Babel..." the civilian nodded ponderously. He was a large man in his mid-sixties with a full head of shockingly white hair offset by a richly tanned, deeply creased face.

Indicating a lanky redhead at one of the consoles, Hilcron continued. "And this is Captain Tyler, my Chief of Security...and." he gestured toward the remaining man, "you've already met Lieutenant Southridge."

Seated behind the desk, the small Manager seemed to dominate the five larger men as he said sternly. "Captain, Mr. Spock, this is a top security matter, and I must ask you to refrain from commenting on it outside of this office... at least temporarily."

"Of course, Mr. Hilcron," agreed Kirk.

Spock nodded in turn.

"You see, gentlemen, we have had this past night...for the first time in Babel's history...a murder!"

Kirk said, "Who's been murdered?"

"Ambassador Cunard."
"Are you quite certain," said Spock, "that it was murder?"

"A man cannot break his own neck in that fashion."

"In what fashion?" asked Kirk.

"Doctor Harrington has described it to me as Tal Saya, or something very similar." He turned his fatigue-rimmed eyes onto Spock. "I know Vulcans don't have a monopoly on neck-breaking techniques, but there are other circumstances that point to Vulcan hands."

Kirk prompted, "Which are...?"

But Southridge interrupted. "Mr. Hilcron, I have the lab report on that blood specimen. It's a Vulcan type... T-Negative. They're still working on the other factors."

Hilcron turned to his Security Chief. "Tyler, show us a list of all Vulcans on Babel with type T-Negative blood."

Tyler punched the command into his data unit and shoved a small viewscreen out onto the table where they could all see it. "Here you are, Sir."

The screen flashed a rainbow then settled down into a printed list... containing just two names, Spock and Sarek.

Hilcron shook his head annoyed. "That's impossible, Tyler, check it."

"Yes, Sir."

Spock said, "It is possible, Mr. Hilcron, that the readout is comprehensive. Less than two percent of all Vulcans..."

"Possibly, Mr. Spock, but that blood sample was taken from Cunard's ceremonial dagger which was found near his body."

"You mean," said Kirk, "you think he was defending himself and wounded his assailant?"

Larkin cleared his throat. "Let us not jump to unwarranted conclusions..."

But Tyler interrupted, "In court, we will plod through the case in a thoroughly logical manner, but while I'm chasing a murderer, I'll leap to whatever conclusions seem intuitively justified."

"Tyler," said Hilcron. "do you have the correct list, now?"

The Security Chief forgot his indignation and checked a screen at his elbow, "Yes, Sir. You're looking at it."

Hilcron snorted, "This is absurd. I know that both the Ambassador and Mr. Spock were at the KirTohn Tsu at the time of the murder."

Spock said, "And when was that?"

"Twenty-one-hundred, plus or minus five minutes."

"We left the KirTohn thirty minutes earlier.""

"But...but...that's impossible...they didn't finish until..."

"We left early."

"I thought..." Hilcron frowned. "Oh, this is terrible."

Tyler worked his computer controls briskly, the keys making tiny clicks that tore into the silence like the ratchets on the Andrinian Wheel of Doom. "Mr. Spock, I'm afraid you'll have to submit to a physical examination for wounds. And so will your father...if we can find him."

Kirk said, "Call his suite."

"We have. He hasn't been home all night and he doesn't answer the paging system."

"You mean," said Kirk, "your security system can't even locate a man known to be on the premises?"

Hilcron recoiled indignantly, "Captain Kirk, Babel is NOT a prison or a Starfleet Base. Our security systems are designed to guard our guests' privacy...not to spy upon them. In that, Babel is unique in interstellar diplomacy and..."
Kirk raised a placating hand. "Yes, of course. Babel's reputation is unimpeachable..."

Hilcron subsided. "And at this time we are so crowded we can't spare personnel to search for someone who doesn't answer the pages..."

Spock interrupted. "Crowded, Sir? I understood you were operating at one-third capacity. According to the figures in the Enterprise databanks..."

"Our limiting factor at the moment is trained staff, not space. This is the largest gathering we've had since the Coridan Admission. We have delegations from every Federation member. alternates, secretaries, witnesses called to testify, lobbyists, hoards of newsmen and five, count them, five Starships sending down liberty parties. I have five hundred borrowed employees from Hilton Rigel, Hilton Earth, and Hilton Deneb... but with the trouble on the MIV levels, I just don't have the staff to cope with all of it. That's why," he turned to Kirk. "I asked you both to come up this morning. I was hoping you could spare me a few life support technicians."

To Spock, Hilcron said. "And seven of my technicians have asked to invite you, personally, to look over the problem. Your reputation..."

Tyler interrupted. "Yes, but I'm afraid that's impossible... at least until this business is cleared up."

"My crew," said Kirk, "is at your disposal. I'll tell my maintenance chief to send you ten men."

Tyler's viewscreen flashed and he announced, "Dr. Harrington is here."

Southridge rose to admit the Doctor who looked as if he hadn't slept since treating Sarek and Amanda. He glanced once around the grim faces and sighed. "Where's the emergency?"

"We need your certification that Mr. Spock has not received a knife wound in the last twelve hours. You may use my study," said Hilcron gesturing toward a door in the corner.

Harrington led the way to the study saying, "You'll have to disrobe completely, Mr. Spock..." and the door closed behind them cutting off the doctor's soft voice.

"You're wasting the doctor's time," said Kirk. "Spock's blood has several easily identifiable human factors."

"I know," replied Tyler. "but it's my job to get all the evidence."

"Besides, Spock and I were with Amanda in the Ambassador's suite at the time of the murder."

"Was the Ambassador with you?"

"No."

"Why," interposed Southridge, "did you leave the Kirton Tsu early?"

Kirk bit his lip. "Justice Larkin, do I have to answer that?"

"No, Captain. This is not a trial nor even in Inquiry. I am here because, except for the murderer, I was the last to see Ambassador Cunard alive. We are all very anxious to identify the killer before the public learns of the incident."

"I can see that," Kirk sighed. Spock would, no doubt, describe every detail of the evening with tricorder accuracy, so there was no real harm. "Ambassador Sarek decided that we were unable to participate in the ceremonies, so he left. Then we all left."

"You left after the Ambassador?" asked Tyler.

"Yes."

"Did you see the Ambassador afterwards?"

"No. He was gone when we reached the corridor, so we escorted Amanda home and stayed with her to keep her company."

"Until the Ambassador returned?"

"That was our intention, but he didn't come."

"What time did you leave?"

"Just before midnight. We figured he'd be along any minute and we were all very tired."

Tyler nodded thoughtfully and tapped the keys of his computer. "Do you know if Sarek saw Cunard's interview on the evening news last night?"

Kirk hesitated, but Hilcron provided, "Yes. He saw the last part of it. I was with him at the time."

Tyler turned to the Manager, "Did Sarek seem... upset... by Cunard's statements?"

"No. Not at all... but then, you can never tell with a Vulcan."

"True," said Tyler, "but right after that he breaks custom by leaving the Kirton Tsu early. And you can't tell me he wasn't upset by the attack on his wife. A classical motive - opportunity - method, coupled with his disappearance, it is, well, indicative..."

Spock's voice interrupted, "...indicative of nothing more than that further investigation is required."

"Yes, of course," said Tyler. "But we've got to find Sarek first. Do you have any idea where he could be?"

"No," said Spock taking his seat again.

Harrington made his formal statement into Tyler's computer pickup and clicked off the machine. Tyler said, "Thank you, Doctor." And when Harrington had left, he turned back to Spock, "Can't you guess where Sarek might have gone?"

"Wherever he's gone, he'll return to his suite eventually."

"We've stationed a guard, but we can't spare many more men for such jobs."

"Mr. Spock," said Hilcron, "there's no further point in your remaining here. Since the Doctor's findings were negative, we've no legal grounds to detail you." He turned to Kirk. "Captain, why don't you both go and look for Sarek. The sooner we find him, the sooner we can clear him and find the real murderer."

Kirk rose. "I think we'll do that, Mr. Hilcron."

"Just don't mention this to anyone," the Manager cautioned. "We've got to have some answers before people start asking questions."

Southridge escorted them out with poker-faced solemnity and, when they were once more marching along Babel's wide corridors, Kirk said, "Tal Saya is the technique we suspected Sarek might have used on Ambassador Gav... given sufficient logical motivation."

"Indeed."

"Spock, Sarek seemed very disturbed last night. First he didn't want to go to the Kirton Tsu; then he wanted to go; and in the end, he left early and just disappeared. Do you think he was disturbed enough to do... something like this?"

Kirk thought he detected an expression of pain cross Spock's face. "If my father found it necessary to end a life, the reason must have been... compelling. As far as I am aware, no such reason was known to him when we saw him last."

"Compelling?" repeated Kirk. "He seemed disturbed enough to be compelled by something. I can't imagine what logical..." Kirk stopped in his tracks as if impaled on a sudden thought.

Innocently, Spock asked, "Yes, Captain?"

But Kirk suspected his First Officer was concealing triumph at having conveyed a message without speaking an improper word... and if any word about pon farr were improper, how much more so a word spoken by a son about his father?

The Captain began to walk again, considering. If Sarek were indeed compelled by emotion rather than logic at this moment... how long ago had it started? Before the rape? If so, the experience must have been...well, even mentally deranging. Even so, the Captain knew that Sarek would consider himself responsible for his actions, no matter the reason. But it just didn't make sense. Why would Sarek turn on Cunard? Unless... unless he had discovered that Cunard was in some way responsible for the attack on Amanda. Then Vulcan emotion might have driven him to strike back. But that would be a demonstration of just the sort of 'crime of passion' Cunard had accused Vulcans of concealin.

Kirk shook himself. No. He just couldn't believe Sarek might be guilty. "Well, shall we try the roof first and work down? There are a number of all-night restaurants and entertainment centers up there."

"A creditable suggestion, Captain. As you know, it is my father's way to seek out high places for deep thoughts."
Kirk and Spock emerged from the turbo-lift onto the lowest terrace of Babel's roof. Beyond the parapets, the mountain peaks fell away below them like waves defeated by the cliffs of a Berengarian atoll. Kirk dragged his eyes away from the view to examine the Directory's schematic diagram.

The roof was occupied by twenty luxurious restaurants and nightclubs housed in a conical tower served by two interlaced spiral ramps, one climbing the cone clockwise, the other descending counter-clockwise.

Kirk pointed to the schematic before them. "The upper levels are mostly bars. Hardly the type of place I'd expect to find Sarek. I'll start at the top and work down. You start at the bottom and work up. We'll meet at Raphael's, here in the middle." He tapped a glowing blue sign that read 'Seafood and Salad Specialties From Twenty Worlds'. "That looks like a good place to have lunch and decide on our next move."

"Agreed."

"Let's go." Kirk marched to the nearby up ramp and stepped onto the moving strip thinking grimly that if the men who'd attacked Amanda had decided to eliminate Sarek, just in case he could identify them, then he and Spock might well find themselves on an urgent rescue mission.

The Captain rode the ramp to the top of the cone, giving each open-fronted restaurant a cursory glance. Most of them were about half full and entertainment was being offered in many of the bars. He noted the preponderance of Starfleet uniforms in certain spots, especially in the casinos where liberty parties gathered to fraternize with their opposite numbers from other ships.

Every so often, he passed a cluster of benches set out on a small balcony. Some were occupied, but none of the occupants was Sarek.

At the top, the Captain followed the moving strip under a glowing rainbow arch to the Sky Room which occupied the entire top of the cone, roofed only by a forcefield dome so that nothing obstructed the magnificent view. Calculating the expense of maintaining that dome, Kirk estimated the cover charge and felt way out of his class. Fortunately, he didn't have to enter to see that Sarek wasn't there.

He walked around the dome, alternately casting glances at the majestic view and scanning the interior while self-consciously trying to seem disinterested.

Finally, he placed his hands on the railing and took a deep breath, drinking in the view. Here he was truly at the top of the world. He wished he'd brought Spock up here. He'd like to hear the Vulcan reaction. A computer couldn't fail to be gripped by it.

Then, resolute, he mounted the down ramp and followed a sign to the Aerie. Soon, he came to a large terrace surfaced with undressed stone. The entrance was a gaping cave mouth protected by a windscreen driven up from a grid in the floor and sucked into a grid in the ceiling. Primitive... but less expensive than a forcedome. However, Kirk judged that the noise would discourage Vulcans from choosing to dine at the Aerie.

He ducked into the cavelmouth, let his eyes adjust to the dimness and looked around. As he'd suspected, of the nearly twenty patrons, not one was Vulcan.

He went on down the ramp toward the Earth Room. Here, the entrance was closed by a heavy glass door swung on hinges. He pushed it open and was confronted by a potpourri of motifs, garnered from the early days of the Earth colonies. There was very little that suggested the planet of his birth to him.

When his eyes became accustomed to the confusion, he surveyed the customers, paying special attention to those seated in dim booths along the back wall. The three men standing at the bar looked like reporters to Kirk, so he quickly scanned the group at the Roulette table sniffed the aroma rising from a rotisserie on which a side of beef turned and decided this was not a place where he'd be likely to find Sarek.

Nevertheless, when one of the uniformed attendants approached to inquire, "May I help you, Captain?" Kirk replied, "Perhaps. Have any Vulcans been here recently?"

The attendant, a human... Kirk judged him to be about forty... said in a deep, cultured tone, "No, Sir, not here, Sir." His emphasis was so delicate that at first Kirk didn't realize what was meant. Then, the set of the attendant's features penetrated. He'd been discreetly informed that such people did not patronize this establishment.

Kirk nodded smoothly. "I'm Captain Kirk of the Enterprise. Some of us wanted to get together to give a birthday party for my Science Officer. He's a student on earth history, you see, so we thought this might be a good place for it. Do you have facilities for a private gathering of about thirty?"

"Yes, Sir. We'd be delighted to serve you. Reservations are available through the Accommodations Clerk."
There is a bank of Intercom Units right over there," he indicated a dim corner and a door labeled, 'Rest Rooms'.

Kirk said, "Thank you. I'll call in after I've spoken to the others." He gave one more look around, then marched out the door. As he turned to let the door swing shut, he saw another attendant approach his informant and gesture excitedly after him. Good, he thought, let them stew. It was a wonder the first fellow hadn't connected him with Spock, but then not everybody knew that his First Officer was also his Science Officer. Now he was glad he hadn't brought his friend up here.

Glancing once more behind, he caught sight of the rapidly growing argument he'd started. Eventually, someone would tell them Vulcans don't celebrate birthdays. Kirk felt a dry chuckle building but he pulled his face straight and stepped onto the down ramp toward the next place. The Grotto.

Here the walls were decorated in the sea-cave motif popular on some of the Rigilean colonies. Green coral was festooned with a feathery purple moss that writhed in the air currents. The rear half of the floor was a large pool of clear water lit from beneath by a bluish glow.

To the right of the entrance, broad steps led down to a lower level tavern where it was possible to see into the pool through its transparent sides. Kirk wandered toward the edge of the pool to read the small print on a sign posted below the "Lunch Now Being Served" sign.

He read, "Class M-II patrons are allowed to swim provided regulation tank suits are worn. (see the Rest Room Attendant.) Please do not eat the display fish." Then in smaller letters, "No copulating. No defecating." Then in still smaller letters, "The management regrets these unreasonable regulations. However, may we respectfully point out that private facilities are provided atGQX-1983-II."

Kirk had served briefly on an M-II ship as a Third Officer. He didn't remember any such facilities being provided for the amphibians. Perhaps Starfleet was unduly harsh on M-II's.

A musical chord sounded behind him and he turned to see a Schillian dressed in little more than a wispy loincloth mount the central dias to join another Schillian who was seated at a harp-like instrument. The musician struck out a strong rhythm and the singer joined with an inarticulate melody that reminded Kirk of mermaids and sirens. Schillians were M-II class amphibians and so right at home here. They were also trisexual telepaths who didn't like being thought of as "she." But this singer seemed very feminine to Kirk in spite of the lack of mammalian curvature. There was a delicate grace in the supple body that transformed the toad-like proportions into beauty. Even her voice was a sultry contralto.

He shook his head to dispel the impression and drove his mind back to business. It was obvious this place catered to the nonhuman guests, so he might very well find Sarek here. And, thought Kirk, they'd better find the Ambassador soon, too, or there'd be hell to pay. He hoped Spock was having better luck.

The musician struck a sour chord and the singer stopped, favoring him with an offended glare. While the musician tuned his instrument, the singer scanned the handful of early customers waiting to be seated and then descended from the dias purposefully. "Captain Kirk, you seek one who wished not to be sought."

Kirk remembered the apparent understanding between Ambassador Sarsam and Sarek. And it had been Schillians who'd rescued Amanda. Could Sarek have taken refuge among the Schillians? He said, "You might put it that way."

"Last night there was one like unto the one you seek meditating on the private balcony," 'he' gestured to the left and Kirk turned to see loops of hanging moss that curtained a darker entrance. The Schillian added, "Search might avail."

When Kirk turned back to thank the singer, 'he' had returned to the dias to continue the rehearsal. With one last glance at the Grotto, Kirk plunged through the moss and into a dark tunnel. When his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw that it appeared to be cut out of living rock with a channel in the center of the floor carrying a stream that flowed into the grotto's pool. Painfully, Kirk could hear the rush of a waterfall in the distance.

As he followed the tunnel, he passed signs indicating rest rooms, intercoms and kitchens. Toward the end, he came upon a cascade that fell across the exit onto a balcony where Babel's sun made rainbows in the spray.

There was only one way out onto the balcony...through the falling water. Kirk approached, squinting against the spray. Then, when he saw the non-skid stripping on the other side of the catch-basin, he hopped across and out into the noonday sunlight.

Momentarily dazzled, he waited for his eyes to adjust. The balcony was warmed by hot air flows from grids hidden behind potted plants. Benches and chairs were scattered among the foliage that screened the balcony from people below, but the place was deserted except for a Vulcan who sat gazing out over the mountain peaks. His elbows were propped on the chair arms, hands clasped, two fingers raised in the familiar manner.

Kirk approached cautiously, unwilling to disturb a stranger. But when he got closer, he saw it was indeed Sarek...and on the back of his right hand a long, jagged scratch was just beginning to heal.
The Captain moved into the edge of Sarek's field of vision and stood waiting to be noticed while the doubt that had
been nagging at the back of his mind flowered.

Meanwhile, Spock walked out of the ninth place he'd checked, and took the up ramp to Raphael's. The front
entrance was built to resemble an ancient, square-rigged sailing ship moored at a dock complete with a strip of dark
water sloshing between dock and hull. A glowing sign admonished customers to beware of the swaying deck.

Wondering what happened to patrons who fell into the ersatz ocean, Spock negotiated the plank and stepped aboard.
There was a momentary blackness, then his vision cleared and he found himself in an enclosed room decorated in the
style of Earth's ancient oceanfront taverns. "Fascinating," he thought, "a holographic projection."

The deck under his feet had the unmistakable sway of a floating vessel and around the walls, rows of portholes
held a view of a nineteenth century waterfront... San Francisco, if he was any judge. The coordination between the view
and the sway of the deck was perfect, but the illusion was shattered for him by the lack of appropriate odors.

Eleven years ago, he'd been stationed briefly on Earth and he'd visited San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. He'd
gone there impelled by curiosity; he'd stayed from fascination; and he'd departed with a permanent aversion to the pungent
stench of Earth's oceanfront. Here, there was no trace of any of those odors.

The Vulcan examined the handful of customers with care. Seven men were gathered around the bar... three of them
wore Babel staff uniforms, the other four seemed to be off-duty Babel maintenance personnel. They were all human.

Several of the tables were occupied by diners, among them five Starfleet uniforms from the Kongo and the Hood.
All the patrons were human.

He took a seat at a table for two where he could easily watch both the entrance and the arch that led to the service
corridor. He calculated he had about fifteen minutes to wait, so he busied himself trying to discern the repetition of the
ship's sway pattern.

Shortly, the bartender approached Spock's table, "This table is reserved for customers, Sir..."

"I'm waiting for someone. We'll order when he arrives."

Spock didn't need any telepathic sensitivity to see that the waiter was restraining himself from open rudeness. He
dropped the menu on the table, nodded frostily and went back to the group at the bar, his authentic leather boots raising
hollow echoes on the authentic woody deck.

Still waiting for the sway-pattern to repeat, Spock turned part of his attention to the menu. It was printed on a
seemingly appropriate stock, and in English only.

He read through the offerings, noting wryly that the items that might have interested him were crossed out or
marked for the evening meal only. The message was plain enough.

Then, he felt the sway-pattern of the deck begin to repeat. A ten minute tape. He doubted if any of the humans would
notice even after several hours.

The bartender came back, wiping his hands on his authentically wilted apron, "Sir, are you quite certain you wouldn't
care to order something from the bar?" His tone implied 'order or leave... preferably leave.'

Spock said, "You may bring a Saurian Brandy."

Craftily, the man said, "Any particular vintage? I would recommend Jubilee Twenty."

"Jubilee Twenty is rather flat. Do you have Fifty?" He knew that was one of Kirk's favorites.

"Yes, of course. We carry the very best private stock." His tone said it would cost this particular customer plenty.
He went back to the bar.

Spock expected Kirk at any moment, but he hadn't appeared by the time one of the maintenance men followed the
bartender back to Spock's table. Just as the bartender was about to present the drink on a cloth-covered tray, the other man
stumbled and shoved the bartender toward Spock. The glass tumbled onto the tablecloth and bounced with an un-authentic
resilience.

Rising to his feet to avoid the spilled liquor, Spock caught the bartender's shoulders and set him back on his feet.
"My apologies," Then he scooped the glass off the edge of the table and placed it back on the tray. "It appears you must
refill this."

The bartender scowled, "You haven't paid for the first one, yet."

Spock eyed the maintenance worker's green coveralls. "I shall... on delivery."
The workman glowered at Spock as if it were the Vulcan's fault he'd tripped over his own feet. Spock donned his most innocent expression. "Don't look at me, Vulcan. I only came over here to ask where the rest rooms are."

The transparent excuse hung limply in the silence. When it became obvious that it was harder to provoke a fight with a Vulcan than he'd thought, the workman said, "Look, I'm not going to pay for your drink."

"I didn't ask you to," said Spock. "And, as yet, I have received no drink." He covered the spreading stain on the tablecloth with one of the cloth napkins, noting that the absorbancy was not like any natural fibre. Then, he seated himself, plainly declining the gambit.

One of the other maintenance workers detached himself from the group at the bar and approached, followed by the others in a tight knot. "I saw the whole thing. This one," the lead man pointed at Spock, "tripped Frank, here," he indicated the bartender, "and Frank's feet tripped Bart," he gestured at the first maintenance worker.

All the customers were watching now. The Star Fleet men traded glances across the room, ready to come to Spock's aid, but the Vulcan raised his hand in a gesture meaning, "Let me handle this." Then he waited for someone to make the next move.

One of the others from the bar spoke up, "That's right. We all saw it."

The bartender switched his gaze to Spock. "That's what it felt like to me."

Spock's personal inclination was to pay for the drink to avoid a conflict. But he knew it wouldn't work. The price of the drink wasn't the issue. They wanted him to leave and spread the word to other Vulcans not to come here.

Spock knew this was the beginning of just the kind of ugliness the Federation couldn't afford. Also, it was strangely uncharacteristic of the prevailing Federation culture. He couldn't understand how it had gotten started. But, apparently, it was well developed, at least here on Babel.

Bart said, "I always knew Vulcans were fist-shy, but I never knew them for cowards..."

"Your ignorance," observed Spock, "may well be based in sound fact."

When he'd deciphered that, Bart said, "Tripping a waiter when he's not looking seems pretty cowardly to me."

"Indeed," said Spock agreeing enthusiastically. He was looking straight ahead, across the room at the portholes, apparently paying no attention to the threatening formation the humans had taken about his table.

The workmen traded glances, then Bart frowned. "Are you calling me a liar? Where I come from..."

Spock interrupted. "Where I come from, accurate observation is a highly prized art. Those who lack the skill are required to rely upon others of proven ability."

The bartender said. "Look, this is getting us nowhere. Pay your bill or leave."

"Shut up, Frank," said Bart. "This," he glanced at the two lines of gold braid on Spock's sleeves, "Commander is calling me names in fancy language and I don't like it."

Spock sat quietly, timing the swaying of the ship, ready to move instantly. Bart walked around in front of the table. "Look at me when I'm talking to you, Vulcan. Didn't Star Fleet teach you any manners?"

Spock didn't move.

Another workman said. "Look, Vulcan, you owe my friend here," he indicated Bart, "an apology."

The bartender added, "... and me the price of a Saurian Brandy. Three credits."

Spock rose and addressed Bart. "Sir, if I have offended you, I apologize most sincerely." He sat down, "I will tender payment for the drink upon delivery."

"It's due now," said the bartender.

"I disagree."

The other workmen grabbed Spock's chair and Bart said, "Stand up and pay the man."

As the chair was jerked from under him, Spock stood, but made no move to obey.

Bart repeated, "Pay the man or I'll take it out of your yellow skin."
Still with his eyes fixed on the far row of portholes, Spock gauged the roll of the deck. "There is no easily
defined relationship between skill in close-order combat and skill of accurate observation. However, those accomplished
at the latter are likely to excel at the former."

The bartender glanced disgustedly at the ceiling translator. The First Officer added, looking directly into the
bartender's eyes, "I was speaking English. The translators cannot give you concepts which you do not already possess."

The second technician said hesitatingly, "Frank, I think he just called you stupid."

Bart said, "That's what it sounded like to me."

Another workman said, "Are you going to let him get away with that?"

In the far corner of the room where two men from the Kongo were sitting, Spock heard the twitter of a communicator
opening. He declared, "I will not pay for merchandise which was not delivered."

Suddenly, the bartender growled, "Get out of here, and don't come back."

Obediently, Spock started to turn toward the entry, but too late, he sensed a foot placed to trip him. As he skipped to
avoid falling, two hands slapped his back sending him sprawling into the bartender who fell backward bringing his knees up
into Spock's stomach, using the momentum to boost the Vulcan over his head.

Spock tucked his head in and took the roll on his shoulders, coming around onto his knees. Bart launched himself
at the Vulcan, a snarl on his face and a hard glint in his eyes that would have chilled the stoutest human heart.

Just then, the long awaited pitch of the deck came, throwing Bart off balance, Spock sidestepped the lunge and with
his right hand, got a grip on Bart's right shoulder from behind applying enough pressure to drop a human. But, the work­
man twisted away. As the contact broke, Spock's fingers brushed Bart's neck and the Vulcan received a strong impression
of raw viciousness, like a predatory animal, together with a wariness born of fear and, yes, and hatred.

Before the Science Officer could recover his balance, another man jumped him from behind and a second threw a
kick that would have been lethal had Spock not caught the boot in both his hands.

At that moment, two of the men from the Kongo tore the kicker away and Spock rolled free. But the bartender
hauled the Vulcan to his feet and launched a left jab at Spock's jaw.

Blocking with his right arm, Spock searched for Bart and found him running for the exit. Instantly, he launched
himself in a flying tackle, hitting the fleeing man just below the knees. Momentum carried them through the holograph
and out onto the terrace.

Snarling, Bart kicked at the Vulcan's face and Spock was forced to let go. Stumbling, he gained his feet, lep't the
strip of water, and lunged. But Bart was running down the ramp, dodging through a group of Star Fleet men and in a
moment had disappeared into the crowd at the next level down.

The First Officer stumbled full tilt into the Star Fleet men and strong hands gripped his shoulders. A voice said,
"Sorry, Commander," in a very unregretful tone.

Spock straightened up to see that he'd met a full contingent of Shore Police from the Hood. He glanced down the
ramp after his quarry and saw him melt into the crowd around the turbo lifts.

Two of the SP's went into Raphael's while one of the remaining three said, "All right, Commander, let's go."

Spock nodded, "Very well," and started down the ramp, the three in close order behind him. When they reached
the roof level bank of turbo lifts, he turned to glance back. In front of Raphael's, he could see the glint of gold among the
SP's red and he was certain it was Kirk. Then the silver sashed black tunic beside the Captain came into sight, and just
before the lift doors closed, shutting off his view, Spock knew it was Sarek beside the Captain.

Chapter Eight

"But, Mr. Hilcron," said Kirk for the fiftieth weary time, "at least you could let Spock go. Granted you have
reason enough to hold Sarek; Spock is my responsibility."

Hilcron sighed.

The manager's office was quiet now that the security men and their computers were gone. Kirk stood facing Hilcron
across the oval desk while Justice Larkin, seated again at the far end of the oval tapped absently at the recessed computer
input keys before him.
"Yes, Captain," agreed Ilkron. "but Spock was seen fighting with Babel staff members. We can't let him go until we locate the man he assaulted. Such a victim might wish to prefer charges. A full investigation..."

Larkin interrupted the worn repetition. "Captain, we realize that Star Fleet has its own methods of dealing with brawling, but..."

Kirk turned to him, hands out, pleading. "But, Sir, he's my First Officer, and he's a Vulcan. You've heard the testimony. He didn't start the fight. And, legal formalities at a time when Sarek has been virtually convicted..."

"Please, Captain," Larkin held up one finely groomed hand and intoned with impeccable diction, "The Law is nothing but formality, and for a very good reason. The same formality you are objecting to is what has saved many an accused from lynching at the hands of a mob."

"Yes, yes, I understand that," said Kirk, "but justice is not achieved by rote recitation of the letter of the statutes. Occasionally, the intent of the law must be considered. That is, after all, what this convention is all about."

Turning and pacing away from the sleek desk, Kirk warmed to his subject, "You are now applying human standards to a Vulcan. You are assuming that, if Spock were guilty, he might attempt to leave your jurisdiction before the victims could bring charges. You're assuming that if he is guilty of one crime, there is a reasonable chance that leniency would tempt him to commit yet another crime. Such assumptions might be applicable to humans, but they are totally invalid for Vulcans."

Larkin said, "But he is only half-Vulcan."

Kirk held out his hands. "He has worked under me for more than ten years. I know his commitment to the Vulcan way is greater than a priest's commitment to his religion. Threat of eternal damnation couldn't grip a soul more strongly, or control actions more completely."

"That may well be..." said Ilkron.

Kirk interrupted, approaching the manager across the wide expanse of carpet, "It is. Look, why don't you have him brought here where you and I can talk to him..."

"He's already made a formal statement," said Larkin.

Kirk waited while Ilkron chewed his lip. Finally, the manager hit a switch before him. "Mr. Dubrill, bring Mr. Spock up to my office right away."

Kirk threw himself into a chair and essayed a smile, thinking, oh, Spock, don't fail me now.

They passed the few minutes in silence. Finally, the door opened to admit Spock followed by Dubrill, a tall, dark human who moved with the grace of one accustomed to a higher gravity. A suitable guard for a Vulcan prisoner. Larkin said, "Mr. Dubrill, thank you. You may go."

Dubrill measured Spock with a glance, nodded to Larkin and left. Ilkron said, "Mr. Spock, you realize that attacking my staff is a very serious offense."

"It is, indeed," asserted the Vulcan positively.

"Would you do so again?"

"A hypothetical question since I haven't done so a first time."

"You deny that you were involved in a brawl? I have witnesses..."

"I deny nothing. I have not been accused."

"We're trying to find the victims to see if they wish to level any accusations. Meanwhile, we have witnesses..."

"You will find no victims who will level accusations against me in a Federation court."

"Why?" asked Larkin.

"Because, Mr. Justice, the only 'victim' who might have a complaint is not a Federation citizen."

Ilkron spluttered. "Mr. Spock, how can you possibly make such a statement? Everybody here on Babel is a Federation citizen."

Spock's brows climbed in gentle negation, "At least one person, dressed in a staff coverall in NOT a citizen of
this Federation. He is Klingon. And not likely to prefer charges against me in a Federation Court."

Larkin gasped, "Klingon! That's preposterous. How could you know..."

Kirk snapped, "Explain."

Spock clamped his hands behind his back. "When I was attacked, I applied a nerve pinch that should have rendered a human unconscious instantly. However, the assailant called Bart was unaffected, and his mental aura was unmistakable. He is Klingon."

Larkin frowned. "Telepathic evidence only?"

"Regrettably, I have no other to offer."

"Spock is one of the few Vulcans who have had enough close contact with Klingons to be able to recognize their 'mental aura'," said Kirk. "On Organia..."

Larkin shook his head, "I can't swear out a warrant on such flimsy evidence."

"Of course," agreed Spock, "but now you know there is at least one Klingon present who was involved in creating an incident aimed at increasing tensions between Vulcans and humans."

"Now wait a minute," Larkin protested, "I know nothing of the sort."

"Then," said Kirk "you'd better start studying Klingoni. You'll be practicing under Klingon law before long if they get away with this. Spock, do you suppose there was a Klingon in that group that attacked your parents?"

Hilcron looked at Larkin's stricken face then turned to Spock, "Why didn't you mention this before?"

"In front of all the guards and without security clearance? On a record tape that would be placed in public file? Breach of security is a far more serious charge than brawling."

Kirk said, "Spock, have you any idea where this Klingon might be now?"

"No, Captain."

"Do you suppose," Hilcron rocked his chair thoughtfully, "the Klingons could be involved in the murder of Ambassador Cunard?"

"Probability, eighty seven point two five percent," answered Spock.

Larkin pursed his lips. "Then how did Sarek's blood get on that dagger?"

"Have you asked him?" said Spock.

"He claimed," supplied Hilcron, "that he was jostled in a turbo-lift and somebody's dagger nicked him. At the time, he thought it was accidental, so he ignored it."

"The truth of that," said Larkin, "will have to be determined in a Court of Law."

"Yes, of course," said Kirk, "we're all agreed on that. But, Sir, as you now can see, Spock had every reason to chase his attacker. The pity is that he wasn't able to catch him."

"I see nothing of the sort," said Larkin carefully. It was plain he wanted to help but couldn't see any way.

"But," said Hilcron, "if there is a Klingon loose in Babel..."

"Then," finished Larkin, "your security men will catch him."

"Why do you think so," said Kirk, "when they haven't caught him yet? Even if I ordered all my crew to help..."

"If there is such a person," Larkin interrupted, "I don't see that implies he's been here for long..."

"He and his ideas," said Spock, "were accepted by your other presumably genuine employees before I arrived on the scene..."

"Which bespeaks," added Kirk, "an efficient organization behind this lone agent."

"Pure conjecture," said Larkin.
"Sir," Spock said, "Vulcans are not given to conjecture. And I never offer a probability estimate which does not include all reasonable uncertainties."

Hilcron interrupted, "How are we going to find this Klingon?"

Larkin corrected, "Hypothetical Klingon."

"Yes," agreed Hilcron, "hypothetical Klingon. But we've still got to find him. Babel's internal security is not designed to deal with this... preposterous... suspicion. Even with all SP's on emergency duty..." he shook his head.

"If," said Kirk, "Spock says there's a Klingon here on Babel, then there is. No 'hypothetical' about it."

"But," said Larkin, "where's the evidence? How can I authorize the general invasion of privacy that a regulation search would entail? Babel is a Diplomatic Sanctuary with internal laws unlike any other place in the Federation."

Quizzically, Kirk murmured, "Loose a plague of tribbles."

"What was that, Captain?"

Kirk cleared his throat, "Legally, your hands are tied, Justice Larkin. Legally, you can do nothing. But think, have people here been behaving normally? Has there ever been such, yes, bigotry in Federation society?"

"Well," said Larkin, "if you put it..."

"Yes," said Kirk, "I do put it that way. And doesn't it seem wrong to you that your hands are tied by the law in a clear case of a miscarriage of justice?"

"Not so clear..."

"Clear enough. I submit, Sir," said Kirk gesturing vigorously, "that the law is wrong on this point. It is within your power to let Spock go. If you do, perhaps he can find you a Klingon, and clear the Vulcan Ambassador of all suspicion."

"Perhaps he could," said Larkin, "but it is not within my power to let Mr. Spock go, however much I might like to."

"But," said Hilcron, "if you paroled him in the Captain's custody..."

"How can I parole him? He hasn't even been accused of a crime yet, let alone convicted and sentenced."

"Well, then let him go on bail."

"He hasn't been booked. The law says the authorities can hold him another twelve hours without preferring charges..."

"But twelve hours will be too late," said Hilcron, "Sooner than that, the news of the murder will be out. We've got to have the case settled by then."

Larkin pondered that, grey eyes locked on Spock's impassive features. The First Officer's record included the Vulcan Scientific Legion of Honor. As far as Larkin knew, no non-Vulcan had ever achieved that status since it involved more than excellence in science. The Vulcan term was translated 'Legion' because it demanded a level of personal discipline far exceeding that of any military organization. It was a Legion of Honor not because membership was a privilege, but because certain lofty standards of ethics were demanded of designates. It was the only decoration recognized by Star Fleet that was not awarded for some outstanding accomplishment but for an unblemished record. And it was a continuing endorsement that could be withdrawn. Once withdrawn, the fact that it had been held would be stricken from the record and it could never be regained.

Larkin said, "Mr. Spock, would you be willing to take Oath of Honor to guarantee your behavior if I let you go?"

"Without hesitation, Spock answered, "Yes, of course, but Oath Binding is not recognized in Federation Court."

"True. But times are changing. The Jurisprudence Committee favors legalizing the Vulcan Oath of Honor. I believe it would be particularly binding in your case since violation would jeopardize your Legion status."

Kirk gasped. That Legion of Honor endorsement was worth more to Spock than life itself.

"There would be no question of jeopardy since there would be no question of violation of such an Oath," said Spock. "However, there is no need for Oath-Binding. There is nothing that I could gain by deceiving you. A deception which injures the deceiver would be an act of such illogic as, in itself, to cast suspicion on Legion status."

"If there is no question of violation, then whether you take Oath or not is immaterial," said Larkin. "Correct?"
"Negative. The Registration of such an Oath is no simple matter. The construction of the Oath also requires careful deliberation."

"I've been attending the sub-committee hearings on this topic and I think I've gained a practical understanding of it. Registration procedures are well enough outlined in the literature. As to construction..." he reached forward and activated a computer. A screen rose out of the desk and glowed to life. He spoke a few words and a display flitted onto the screen.

Kirk recognized the upper portion as Vulcan script. The lower half of the screen showed three items, presumably a translation of the Vulcan:

1. The Designee will appear at _________ (place) on _________ (Stardate) to surrender himself into custody of the undersigned Authority. If sufficient cause shall exist at that time, the Designee will be remanded to _________ (House of Detention).

2. During the interim _________ (Stardate to Stardate) (location), the Designee will accept _________ (name) as Warder Liege, regarding him as he would one who was sponsoring the Designee's candidacy for a Legion of Honor. The Warder Liege relationship will exist from the instant of conclusion of the Oath-Binding until _________ (Stardate).

3. It is understood that this document together with the voice-recording of the Binding will be forwarded to the archives of the appropriate Legion by the hand of _________.

When everyone had examined the screen, Larkin said, "The subcommittee on Vulcan Problems worked out a series of standard forms. I realize this is quite different from the traditional procedure but I am assured that it is acceptable and it occurs to me that this form might well solve our problem."

"At most, I might be guilty of a misdemeanor. This is enough to release a convicted felon who has announced his intent to repeat the felony."

Hilcron spoke up, "Uh, I'm afraid, Mr. Spock, that on Babel, assault is a felony when committed by one trained in close order combat."

Kirk said, "Gentlemen, this is absurd. We all know that Mr. Spock is the one who was assaulted. If anybody is guilty of anything, those men were guilty of inciting to riot..."

"But," said Larkin, "none of the witnesses will swear to that."

"True," said Spock, "and I will not swear to this," he indicated the screen.

Kirk rose to pace nervously before the oval desk. "For heaven's sake, Spock, give them your word and let's get out of here. Every minute we sit here arguing is a minute lost. Do you realize your father could be convicted of murder if we don't find that Klingon. And the political repercussions of that..."

"Captain, you don't seem to appreciate what is involved here."

With two strides, Kirk confronted his First Officer almost toe to toe, "I appreciate that it's a matter of the stability of the Federation. The Vulcan Ambassador killing a human Ambassador at a time like this, there's no telling where it would end. Spock, let's get out of here."

Larkin offered, "I'll fill in the blanks so that you'll be required to return to this office in twenty-four hours. If nobody has preferred charges against you by then, they've lost the right to do so. We'll assign Captain Kirk as Warder..." he looked up, "JAMES T., isn't it?"

Kirk nodded. Larkin continued, "And I'll post this for Vulcan immediately." As he spoke, he worked the controls before him and the screen display recorded the entries. "There," he added, "is that satisfactory?"

"Negative," said Spock. He riveted Larkin with his eyes, "Do you understand all that the Warder Liege relationship implies?"

"Certainly not," said Larkin, "no human could, but..."

"Mr. Justice," said Spock, raking his eyes over the other two humans, "the Warder Liege relationship is a tool for instilling respect for mature judgment. It is a method that utilizes a highly artificial set of values..."

"Perhaps, these terms are too harsh," said Larkin, "but as you surmised, they were designed to parole an intractable criminal. At the moment, however, this form is the closest to the requirements of this case that has been developed. If it won't hold you to your word, it certainly wouldn't suffice in the more serious instance. I can let you go on these terms and call it an experiment, or I can hold you until morning. The choice is yours."

Hilcron said, "That seems fair enough to me, Mr. Spock. You did say you had no intention of violating the terms. So why refuse to take Oath to that effect?"
Spock looked from one face to the next. Refusal would damage the Vulcan reputation. Hilcron and Larkin weren't willing to listen to any logical argument and Kirk was rapidly losing his patience. The Vulcan rose and leaned over the desk to inspect the viewscreen carefully. "It would appear that I have no choice but to comply. Are you ready to record, Mr. Justice?"

Larkin tapped his keyboard, "I've tied into my office file." He raised his finger from the key and three electronic notes chimed out. "Court is in session for the purpose of recording a Vulcan Oath-Binding, pursuant to the release of suspect number," he consulted a screen set flush with the desktop, "778920."

Larkin read in the complete identification of Hilcron and Kirk as witnesses, had them voiceprint and then he nodded to Spock.

The Vulcan spoke into the pickup grid. It was a long, melodious speech in the most precise Vulcan dialect but came to the others as a flat-toned recitation. After he'd finished reading the text, Spock continued for several minutes while the translators slipped and slid through the rapid-fire Vulcainir failing to produce anything recognizable.

At length, Spock paused and Larkin leaned forward to cut the recorder, but the Vulcan stayed his hand and continued more slowly. "In my judgment, this matter is trivial and Oath-Binding is unnecessary since there exists no logical motive to deceive. Although I shall execute the terms of the Oath with scrupulous dedication, I decline responsibility for any unforeseen consequences. I accept the Oath because refusing it might be taken to imply intent to deceive."

For a moment Spock's eyes met Larkin's in silent challenge. Then the Justice nodded curtly and clicked the recorder off, "Well enough. You may go."

Kirk rose, "Come on, Spock. We've got work to do." In four rapid strides he was at the door waiting.

Chapter Nine

Out in the hall once more, Kirk headed for the nearest turbo-lift. They had been in Hilcron's office all afternoon and most of the evening. It was too late to call Amanda. McCoy had placed her under sedation again and she was, no doubt, sleeping. Kirk hit the lift call plate and turned to Spock, "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. We never did get any lunch. Shall we try the place where I found Sarek, The Grotto?"

When the turbo-lift doors swished open, Kirk put his hand out to hold them, "All right, Spock, out with it. What's eating you?"

Spock considered for a moment, then frowned, "I do not believe you appreciate the seriousness of the situation."

"Which situation?"

"With regard to the... relationship... you and I have assumed."

"Oh, come on, forget that..."

"Sir, I cannot forget it."

"Well, ignore it, then."

"That is possible; provided events allow it."

Kirk stepped into the Lift, "Come on. We'll just have to hope our luck holds out."

Spock followed him and the doors closed, "I do not place great reliance on 'luck'."

"Roof," said Kirk. "Look, Spock, I don't know anything about being, what did you call it? Warden Liege?"

Spock nodded, "That, Captain, is precisely the problem. It is a complex and extremely artificial relationship. Your ignorance could be disastrous. And there isn't time to instruct you in even the rudiments."

"I can well believe it. Isn't it enough that I'm already your superior officer?"

"There are some similarities. But, in Star Fleet, Officers are encouraged to display a certain amount of initiative while a Designate is required to function only within the confines of an unreal system."

"I don't understand the purpose of that."
"It is a powerful tool for training the mind in the logical disciplines."

"If you say so."

Just then the doors parted to reveal the roof terrace, scintillating with multicolored lights that pushed back the darkness. He followed his Captain up the ramp, past Raphael's and on into The Grotto.

Here several tables were occupied, some by humans, some by Andorians, and there was one mixed party of humans and Vulcans.

In the pool, two Ziturians frolicked exuberantly; Kirk remembered the Ziturians he'd served with, and smiled. They were the most unselfconscious people you could imagine, and had the most exotic ideas of good manners. Now that he thought about it, that sign beside the pool made good sense. A Zituriian would do all of those things without thinking twice.

Kirk chose a table for two in the rear of the restaurant and sat down where he could watch the door and the pool at the same time. Spock moved his seat so his back was to the pool and when the waiter came, ordered without consulting the menu.

Kirk toyed with a fork until the waiter went away and then said, "In the Kirton Tsu, I drew an analogy between this current surge of bigotry and the effect that energy creature had on us, pitting us against the Klingons and each other, do you remember?"

"Affirmative."

"You never answered my question. Doesn't the way people have been behaving lately remind you of that?"

"Vaguely. But Father was correct. The point is not who pointed out the flaws but rather what is being done about it."

Kirk spun the fork between two palms, then clutched it as if it were a Klingon neck. "It makes sense, Spock, it really does. That Kang is nobody's fool. He could be engineering this whole thing and laughing at our backs."

"Very possibly," Spock paused, considering the propriety of his question, "Captain, does it bother you that a Klingon might be laughing at you?"

Kirk slammed the fork down on the table making the water glasses jump. "Yes, dammit, it does. Don't you have any ideas where we could look for your Klingon?"

"No, Sir. Klingons think more like humans than like Vulcans. I would expect you would have a better chance to outguess one."

"Well," said Kirk, "We could wait for the next disturbance and then just look at the heart of it. But that could take all night, or even a couple of days."

"And we might not be on the scene. Babel is large."

"Yes, it is...."

The food arrived and Kirk fell to with keen appetite. But all the while his mind chewed at the problem. When he finished, he ordered a bottle of strong, black coffee and loaded it with sugar. Nursing his cup, he watched the swimming Ziturians. Evidently, they'd become so involved in each other, they'd completely forgotten the prohibitions on public behavior. The female had loosened her clothing, or perhaps the male had helped her, and Kirk admired the way her iridescent membranes trailed gracefully in the water like the fins of a prize tropical fish.

But they obviously weren't paying attention to him, so why should he pay attention to them? Kirk shifted his gaze to Spock who sat swirling a goblet of pale golden liquid. It coated the glass with an oily film that emitted a purple vapor which the Vulcan studied much as a human might examine tea leaves.

Kirk's eyes drifted to the table just out of earshot behind Spock. A Vulcan wearing a Newsnet armband was speaking earnestly with two humans from Babel Computer Operations. Watching them, Kirk took a sip of his coffee and suddenly he had an idea.

"Spock, the M-IV levels, they've been closed off for weeks. Could that be sabotage?" But his First Officer seemed not to hear him.

"Spock...Spock!" Kirk reached across the table and waved a hand before the Vulcan's eyes. No response. He took the glittering salt shaker and flashed light across his face. "Spock..."
"Yes, Captain?" But he spoke to the swirling purple vapors.

"Whew. Thought you were gone for the night. What's so interesting?"

"More than interesting, Captain. Fascinating. Did you see the group at the table just behind me?"

Kirk glanced toward the Vulcan newswoman but he was gone and the humans were watching the Ziturian swimmers.

"Yes. But," Kirk glanced toward the door where he could see the Vulcan just leaving, "it seems to have broken up."

"Indeed. Did you hear what they were saying?"

"No. These ceilings seem to have an unusually effective acoustical damping field."

"Hmmm. It was a very professional job of, I believe the correct term is 'hate mongering'."

"What?"

"Captain. That reporter is Romulan."

"Rom..." Kirk swallowed and started to rise, "Let's follow him."

"Sir..."

Kirk sat down. "What?"

"Not too closely."

"Yes, of course." Now that he'd taken a moment to think, Kirk said, "We should inform Hícron immediately."

"Inform him of what, Sir?"

"That... uh... how do you know he's Romulan?"

"Captain, the universal translator is a quasi-telepathic device, but it is possible to blank out the projection and actually hear the original utterance."

"You did that?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Why?"

"The 'Vulcan' seemed to be making very little sense. I attributed this to the translator because, with my mixed linguistic background, the machines often slip out of phase."

Kirk cast an anxious glance at the door where the reporter seemed to be lingering to appreciate the view. "Well, go on. What was he saying?"

"According to the translator, he was telling the two humans that they could never excel a Vulcan in computer sciences while at the same time he took great care to display an incredible incompetence in the field."

"And without the translator?"

"The meaning proved to be accurately rendered. However, he was speaking Vulcanur in a rare and heavily accented dialect."

"Is that unusual? I thought it was Vulcan policy to preserve cultural distinctions."

Spock paused to sip his drink, then said very softly, "Captain, it was an assumed accent well chosen to mask his Romulan inflections. It would take an extensive computer analysis to prove it, objectively. And there's no recording to analyze."

Kirk nodded. Now that the shock had worn off, he could easily believe the depth of enemy infiltration of Babel. Since the Organian treaty, he and Spock had been involved in many attempts to combat the new wave of Klingon-Romulan espionage. "Could many Vulcans detect his Romulan accent?"

"No, Captain. In fact, a native speaker of the Turenn dialect would simply assume he had a slight Vennur accent. Very few linguists could distinguish a Turenn/Vennur mix such as he is using from a Romulan accent."
Kirk nodded. In preparing for the mission that had acquired the Romulan cloaking device for the Federation, Spock had made a thorough study of the Romulan languages. "O.K. I'll follow him. You report to Hilcron."

"Sir...? Telepathic evidence is inadmissible. We must bring objective evidence."

"Yes."

"Kirk thought a moment. "Newsnet identification can't be forged. Let's force an identity check."

Spock only raised one skeptical brow.

Kirk looked toward the entryway again. The Romulan was stepping onto the down-ramp. "Come on. Let's not lose him."

Chapter Ten

When Kirk and Spock reached the bottom of the down ramp, the Romulan had disappeared into one of the turbo-lifts. Kirk stopped short, "Damn. Now we'll never know where he went."

"He ordered KXQ-5334-A."

Kirk threw his First Officer an appreciative glance. Vulcan ears! Then he ducked into an adjoining lift.

KXQ-5334-A proved to be the shuttlecraft hangar located in one far flung buttress at the foot of Babel Tower. The turbo-lift let them out just as a robo-truck piled high with spools of heavy cable rumbled by.

When they could see beyond the mountain of equipment, the Romulan was gone. To their left, Babel-uniformed technicians swarmed over two shuttlecraft while on the other side of the cavern, one was being drawn to the parking tower, another was being extracted and a third landed under the direction of a dispatcher.

As it slid to a halt, Kirk saw that the craft was the Enterprise's Galileo VI... no doubt carrying the last of the crew Scotty would send down. A bit ahead of schedule, but then that was Scotty.

"There he is," said Spock pointing to the right.

Kirk followed the Vulcan's gesture. About a hundred yards away, three windows spilled greenish-yellow light onto the floor. One was labeled, "Parts and Maintenance", the second, "Rentals, Tours, Guides," and under the third sign, "Parking and Storage," stood the Romulan... claiming his vehicle.

Kirk glanced out into the cavern. Yes. The vehicle being extracted from the parking tower carried Newsnet identification. It looked authentic, but then so did the Romulan.

"Come on, Spock, we'll claim the Galileo and follow him."

Feeling like an ant in a cathedral, Kirk led the way out onto the floor. As the senior officers approached, the liberty party braced to attention. The Captain nodded amiably, "Mr. Flagman, report."

"Mr. Scott has torn down the transporters, Sir. That's why we brought the shuttle. Decks One to Eleven of the Primary Hull are without life support... flushed with inert gas." He shifted his attention to Spock. "And, Sir, I finished the lubrication of the Deck Seven computer access panels. We won't have any more trouble with them."

One Vulcan eyebrow rose a minute fraction but before Spock could ask how he'd accomplished that without the proper lubricant, the Captain said, "Thank you, Mr. Flagman. I think we will just pay Mr. Scott a little courtesy call."

Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk saw the Romulan climbing into the Newsnet craft. Flagman moved his group toward the turbo-lifts, determined not to get conscripted into the Captain's inspection party.

"O.K., Mr. Spock, climb aboard."

The Vulcan hesitated.

"What's the matter?"

"Sir, does not leaving the planet constitute leaving the jurisdiction of Justice Larkin's Court?"

"Well, technically, I suppose it does, but we'll be right back. Maybe the Romulan isn't going to leave the planet."

"But, if he does?"
"Then we'll follow. After all, how far can he go in a shuttlecraft?"

"Two thousand..."

"Don't answer that. Spock, we have to see this through. Think of your father. Do you imagine he's enjoying sitting in detention?"

"No, Sir. I am certain he is not."

"Look, you only promised to come back, not to stay here. And you are required to do what I say, to follow my judgment, right?"

"Affirmative."

"All right. Let's go."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

Kirk climbed in and took the co-pilot's chair as he activated the three forward viewscreens. The safety shields slid up and the forward, side, and aft views of the hangar appeared on the screens.

The Newsnet craft was sliding cautiously toward the huge hangar doors, preceded by the dispatcher and a gaggle of scurrying technicians. Spock sat down in the shiny black pilot's chair and swiveled to face the communications board where he initiated a rapid-fire exchange with the dispatcher's computer. Within fifty seconds he had obtained clearance for an orbit that would rendezvous with the Enterprise.

The Newsnet ship took off through the parted hangar doors and Spock lifted out right behind him.

"Let's gain some altitude, Mr. Spock. All sensors lock on and track."

"Acknowledged."

The Newsnet craft kept low, skimming along like a tourist out rock hunting until he was half-way around the planetoid. By then, Spock was riding a stratospheric orbit and climbing toward the Enterprise with the caution of an experienced pilot lifting into crowded lanes.

Suddenly, the Newsnet craft disappeared from their plates. Kirk leaned forward. "Where'd he go?"

Frowning into the hooded viewscope, Spock mumbled, "Unknown, Captain... correction... He's climbing at ten g's... more than such a civilian craft should do. Apparently aiming for a solar orbit."

"Follow him."

"Yes, Sir. Respectfully offer the suggestion that he will detect us."

"Oh, cut it out, Spock. This is no time for nonsense. While we're spaceborne, behave like a First Officer, not a cadet fresh up from Academy Graduation."

"Aye, aye, Sir." He bent to the plotting scope. "Hunting cover on a parallel orbit, Sir."

"That's better. Got anything?"

"Possibly. There is a belt of debris, an asteroid zone of considerable density."

"Deflectors on full. Duck into the junk. Kill all unnecessary power. Let's not leave an ion trail."

"Yes, Sir." The lights went to dim and the low hum that was such an unnoticed part of the craft's operation whirred down spectrum to a low growl. Presently, the viewscreens showed hunks of rock bouncing off the deflector shields in every direction and Kirk had all he could do to keep from wincing. Every few minutes, the shields absorbed enough momentum to shake the miniscule craft making Kirk acutely aware of the fragile walls that separated him from the endless void.

The Captain kept his eyes roving from screen to screen, trying to second guess their quarry. Abruptly, the jouncing ceased. Kirk checked the pilot's board and found that Spock had put them within the rock-swarm, but on the same orbit so that now, instead of trying to cross streams of asteroidal traffic, they were riding with the current.

Kirk loosed his grip on the edge of the control desk, surprised at the ache in his fingers. It had been a rough ride.
The shuttle's computer lights were ablaze with the overload demand and Kirk guessed that Spock, himself, had handled a large portion of the computations. As if to confirm this, the First Officer blanked the screens and then threw a schematic diagram onto the center one depicting the Newsnet craft's orbit, the asteroid belt, and their own orbit in the heart of the belt. "Our quarry will intercept the belt here," he tapped the screen, "in approximately eight point seven two minutes."

"Move up within sensor range of the intercept point. I'll bet a year's pay there's a ship there waiting for him."

"Sensor range. Acknowledged." Guiding their craft carefully so as not to leave a trail of perturbed orbits to mark the passage of the Galileo VI, the Vulcan placed them in position and turned to Kirk, "We are within a cleared zone that might be the wake of a Starship... or a Romulan Warbird. I've cut our deflectors to avoid detection. The pilot computer is on auto-evasive."

"Excellent. Sensor readings?"

Spock bent to his copes, shifting the readout selector from electromagnetic to gravito-tronic to tachyonic. He correlated the data mentally as he ordered the computer to display the result on the center screen. "Readings indicate a large, refined metal mass in orbit. Probably a ship since there are pressor beams deflecting the asteroids... not full deflector shielding, which would leave them open to detection from Babel."

"A Romulan Warbird! They have some nerve, less than three A. U. 's from five Federation Starships. We've got to find out what they're doing here, and why they think they can get away with it."

"The Newsnet craft has made rendezvous, Captain."

"Can we get any kind of signal... find out what's going on inside that ship?"

"Negative, Sir. Not from here, with only the shuttlecraft's instruments, and without being detected."

"What about planting a contact-mike on the skin of the bird. A little old fashioned Fourier analysis of the vibrational modes could yield clear speech, couldn't it?"

"Using the full capacity of the Enterprise's main computer... it is theoretically possible."

Kirk chewed his lip. "If they threw any kind of probe signal at that ship, they'd probably be blown out of space on the bounce echo. It would have to be a physical contact. Couldn't a tricorder make such a vibrational mode recording?"

"It could, with certain sensitivity adjustments..."

"Then one of us will have to go over there and get the recording." Kirk opened a wall panel and rummaged within the vacuum suit locker. Extracting one of the tall helmets, he glanced at it distastefully. He could never forget the time he'd been lost in hyperspace and had almost suffocated in one of them.

"Captain," the First Officer joined Kirk at the locker, "respectfully suggest that I should go. The tricorder is not equipped to do the analysis and I doubt if you could estimate quickly enough to tell if you were recording speech or noise."

Kirk nodded. He doubted if he could do any such estimations given all eternity. He had only a vague notion of how it was done and hadn't used any of his math-theory in years.

The Vulcan selected a tricorder from the recess and began plucking at the innards as he walked back to the pilot's seat. In a moment, he had parts spread out neatly on the control desk and was bent over them intently.

Kirk pulled a vacuum suit out of the locker and began the preliminary inspection routine, pulling the adjustments out to fit Spock's measurements.

Suddenly, a loud hissing broke the silence, followed by a crackling sputter. Billowing clouds of dirty smoke poured from the control desk. Coughing, Spock reeled back from the desk, one arm flung across his face. He paused a moment to survey the disaster, then flung himself to the floor where he clawed open one of the panels in sudden desperation.

Eyes streaming, Kirk peered over his shoulder as he yanked loose a bundle of circuit elements.

Instantly, the smoking stopped and within two minutes the air was clear enough to breathe comfortably. Spock gave one last cough and Kirk knuckled away a tear, "Spock, what happened?"

"Unknown, Captain, but that smelled like tetralubisol burning." He examined the smudged control desk, then snapped a few switches and knelt to remove one of the cover panels and inspect the circuitry within.

Kirk frowned. "Tetra lubisol? There shouldn't be any tetra forward of the..."
"Correct, Captain," came Spock's voice from the crawl space. He was on his back, hands lost in the darkness over his head. Then a light came on illuminating his work and giving his face an eerie, green glow. He coughed once more as some of the remaining acrid fumes reached him. "But, Sir, it appears that someone has substituted tetra-lubisol for penta-lubisol, here in the scanner and sensor alignment mechanisms."

He snapped off the light and eased his body out of the confined space. Seated cross legged on the floor, he looked up at Kirk. "Ordinarily, such a substitution would be quite reasonable. However, regulations are quite explicit about the lubrication procedure for shuttlecraft. Tetra-lubisol is acceptable for the alignment mechanisms aboard ship, but the shuttle is designed for compactness, and the computer circuits overlay and surround the working parts. Tetra-lubisol vapor leaches barium ions out of the HoDcolcrystals, reversing the polarity..."

Kirk nodded. "Never mind. I get the picture. Can you fix it?"

Spock took his time about getting to his feet. "I've cut the burned circuits out. I'll reconnect the power and ascertain the extent of the damage to the computer."

Throwing himself into one of the passenger chairs, Kirk swiveled around to watch Spock run the computer through its paces. For several minutes, all three viewscreens lit up with a succession of lissajou patterns and colored gibberish. At length, the Vulcan rendered a verdict. "Ten percent of the computer circuitry is beyond repair. The rest is functional."

"Ten percent? Can we get out of here without full use of our computer?" Kirk threw a significant glance at the center screen which now showed the star-studded blackness with a curtain of dim sparks between them and open space.

"Yes, Captain. I can pilot us through that, but not without difficulty."

"Good, then we won't have to call for help and tip off our friends up there," he glanced in the direction of the Romulan ship he presumed must be there. "We can still get that recording."

"Captain..."

"Yes?"

"I don't believe you could pilot the shuttle out of the debris without the computer's full capacity..."

Kirk nodded. He doubted if he could do it with full capacity. "It's a tricky orbit. One of those big rocks could disable the shuttle and I'd have to call for help."

"Giving the ship ahead a perfect fix on your position. One phaser..."

"And, finished Kirk, "no more shuttlecraft."

"Which would leave me in a very awkward position with the Legion's Examiners..."

"But in that event, you'd be dead anyway."

"Immaterial, Captain. Death does not absolve."

Kirk bounced to his feet and paced the length of the cabin. Driving one fist into the palm of the other hand, he rounded on the Vulcan, "All right. I'll go."

Spock sighed heavily. "That would also produce complications. I cannot allow you to go, and yet I am powerless to prevent it. In addition, I doubt if you could accomplish the mission quite as easily as I could. The logical thing to do would be to retreat. Now."

"And allow Sarek to be framed for murder? And imprisoned for the rest of what might be a very short life?"

He eyed the viewscreens distantly. "There is that."

"Spock, calculate the probability that ship up there would spot us if we head back now."

"Approximately forty-one point two percent. But the risk will be substantially the same, or even higher after we obtain a recording."

"Precisely. But after we obtain the recording, we'll be taking a risk against a large probable gain whereas right now we have practically nothing to gain."

"Yes. I see. There exists a substantial probability that the ship will be gone by the time we could report it."

He went on as if thinking aloud, "Even if we get Captain Sutar to bring the Kongo out here..." he trailed off, still staring deeply into the viewplate.
Kirk sat down to watch his First Officer think. It was plain to the Captain that Spock was deeply troubled by his multiple obligations; to the Legions of Vulcan, to his father, to his Captain, to his Warder Liege, to the Federation. At length, he turned to face Kirk. "At this time, I am not required to render judgment. You will choose and I will follow, as I must, though at this moment, I am at a loss as to how I shall explain my actions."

Snatching the vacuum suit from the chair where he'd dropped it, Kirk erupted into a flurry of motion. "Get dressed while I check out the other suit. You finished adjusting the tricorder?"

"Almost," he replied snapping the components back into place one by one.

"Good. You'll jet over there and get that recording. If you don't make it, I'll try to get a message through to Babel, and to the Kongo."

Three minutes later, they fastened each other's face-plates and ran the triple check of the life-support packs. Satisfied, Kirk activated the pump that would reduce the shuttle's internal pressure and helped fasten the jet-pack units onto Spock's back and chest. By the time they finished the final checklist, they stood in vacuum.

Kirk opened the door eyeing the step that automatically extended, "Watch that first one, Spock. It's a long way down."

"Aye, aye, Captain," the Vulcan answered solemnly and stepped out into the void.

Leaving the shuttle evacuated, ready for Spock's return, Kirk closed the door. Then he threw himself into the pilot's chair and fingered the viewplate controls. Soon, he had a tiny dot moving across the field. At higher magnification, he could see it was Spock. But soon even that was lost.

Then, the Captain sat for two hours with his eyes glued to the screen until they watered. And he systematically hated himself for every man he'd ever lost on a mission, however unavoidably.

But somebody had to go and Spock was the logical choice. They couldn't just send a Starship out to run the intruder off... they had no real idea of the extent of the infiltration... or the extent of the sabotage already committed. No, they needed that recording and scuttle this Warder Liege nonsense. If the Oath caused Spock any trouble, Kirk swore that he, himself, would square it with the Legion, somehow.

As soon as he was clear of the shuttlecraft, Spock let his momentum carry him out of the deflector screen 'shadow'. Then he lined up with a man-sized chunk of rock and collided with it feet first, gathering himself in like a cat to avoid a rebound. Then he paused to examine the tricorder.

The success of the mission depended wholly on his not being noticed. Because of their own fear of detection, the Romulans could not afford to throw out sensor probes indiscriminately. They would depend almost totally on reception sensors and thus be half blind. It was that blindness that he hoped to utilize.

Good, he thought, working the tricorder, the rock he'd chosen was rich in ferrous ores, rich enough to conceal his own unavoidable emanations.

He estimated the center of mass by eye and placed the spare jet pack from his chest in a convenient crevice. Within fifteen minutes, the orbit change was accomplished and he rode behind his shield without so much as peeking around the edge for a visual sighting of his target. A scant ten seconds before the pressors hit his rock, the Vulcan launched himself free.

Only then did he take a moment from his monitoring of the tricorder to glance at his destination. And it was indeed a Romulan Warbird, complete with flamboyant warpaint. But the pressor antennae were all pointed at the rock he'd just vacated, not at him. So far, his strategy had worked. He was safely inside their blind zone.

Slinging the tricorder, he began the intricate maneuver of landing on the Romulan ship, mentally reviewing the interior layout. He chose a location over the main briefing room just off the bridge and landed hands first so the sound of his boots would not attract attention. Then he placed his feet carefully into contact with the hull, pulled out the modified tricorder probes and connected them to the struts that penetrated both hulls and supported the walls of the briefing room.

For the next several minutes, he moved his probes from point to point while carefully monitoring the tricorder screen, but he could get nothing of the right wavelengths.

There was no choice. He'd have to risk it. He crept cautiously to an antenna node that he thought, from his knowledge of Romulan security methods, must connect directly into the briefing room screen, giving the ship's commanding officer an outside transceiver that didn't feed through the bridge. Gingerly, he made the connection and was immediately rewarded with a vibrational mode recording that looked like speech.

While he waited, he bent his mind to plotting his retreat orbit. He couldn't draw their sensors in the direction of the shuttlecraft and yet, he couldn't spare the energy to go too far off line. He needed a diversion.
Gently disengaging his boots from the hull, he moved around toward the sensor antennae that surveyed the side of the ship away from his line of escape. Here he was dangerously close to the hangar deck’s ‘doors but that couldn’t be helped.

The Science Officer squatted down to examine the sensor’s delicate shaft with its complex of nodes copied from an old Federation design. But as he began to pry at the access plate, he felt the rumble of the hangar doors opening. There was no cover. And his vacuum suit stood out against the painted hull like an error in a Berengarian tapestry.

He threw himself flat, watching and waiting. Presently, three Romulans pulled themselves up onto the hull. If one merely glanced his way, he’d be spotted.

But apparently all their attention was on some malfunction in the door sealing mechanism. One of them hauled up a lubricating gun and they bent to work on the seal. Being Romulans, they wouldn’t waste air sightseeing as would a human crew, but all it would take would be a random glance to earn one of them a commendation.

Motionless, Spock waited.

Almost ten minutes passed before the Romulans finished their task and lowered themselves back into the ship. As the last one prepared to follow his companions, he did rake a casual glance across Spock’s position, but he gave no sign that he’d seen anything suspicious.

As soon as the last head disappeared, Spock dashed for the spot where the men had been working. An instant before the door closed, he swiped up a daub of the plastic sealant and snatched his forefinger away just in time to avoid amputation.

Then, while the vibration of the big doors locking into place still masked his steps, he hurried back to the antenna he’d chosen and spackled fresh sealant over the receptor nodes as if a lubricating gun had discharged accidentally. Retracing his steps, he gathered up the tricorder, made a quick estimate and jumped off toward Babel, the one direction completely safe from the Warbird’s sensor pulses and rich in background noise against which he was virtually invisible.

While he drifted, he worked out a careful directional fix on the shuttlecraft, and at the right point in his orbit, applied a single correctional thrust. Then he took time to regret the unearned censure he’d arranged for the Romulan technicians. If the opportunity arose, he’d do his best to vindicate them.
Kirk shook himself out of his reverie. He'd been dreaming up ever more hair-raising disasters until he was sweating enough to make his vacuum suit unbearable. Throwing himself to his feet, he paced the cabin giving each chair he passed a smack that set it spinning. Spock ought to be back by now.

A few moments later, the alarm pinged and Kirk pounced on the viewplate like an expectant father. The tiny speck grew to a blip until he could see it was Spock. The Captain threw himself into the routine and, by the time he had the Vulcan aboard, he was in command of his nerves once more.

"Mission accomplished, Captain. It is a Romulan Warbird, but one of their smaller and newer ships. I recorded what I believe to be a conversation that took place in their main briefing room, just off the bridge."

"That sounds promising."

"Indeed."

"Did you have any trouble?" Kirk eyed the red stain on Spock's glove.

"Negative, Captain."

Kirk shrugged. No doubt the whole harrowing tale would be in Spock's formal report, sounding as dull as a midnight watch.

As they stowed the suits in the once again pressurized cabin, Kirk said, "Now, to withdraw. Any ideas how to improve the odds?" The only thing he hadn't considered in the last few hours was the possibility that Spock would complete the mission flawlessly.

"I do have one idea, Sir."

"Let's have it."

"The reporter's cover identity is so valuable, I doubt if it will be abandoned. It therefore follows that the Newsnet craft should be leaving the Warbird soon. If we slip away in the opposite direction while their attention is on the Newsnet craft, we increase the probabilities in our favor..."

"Right. Go to it."

They took their places at the controls and Spock began to ease the shuttle back the way they'd come, finger hovering over the deflector switch as they ghosted between careening chunks of erstwhile planet. When they'd put a screen of debris between them and the Romulan ship, they waited for the blip of the Newsnet craft to reappear.

They didn't have long to wait. Suddenly, it was streaking across their starboard viewplate as if slung into space by a giant catapult. Instantly, Spock sent the Galileo away in a long loop that would bring them back to Babel about half an hour after the Newsnet craft.

"If only we knew what name that Romulan agent is using," said Kirk. "maybe we could find him when we get back."

"Suhav is the name he was using in the Grotto. It seems to be a well-established identity and I expect he chose the name with some care."

"Why?"

"Romulan humor. 'Suhav' was a historical figure well known as a spy."

Kirk chuckled. It felt good so he laughed heartily, washing away the grim tensions of the last hours. Finally, he said, "We'll drop you off at the Enterprise so you can put the tape through the computer and get Scotty onto this tetrabiotic business. Meanwhile, I'll take another shuttlecraft and go down to see if I can find this... Suhav. When you finish, bring the results down and we'll turn them over to Hikaron."

For a long moment, Spock looked at his Warder Liege, a slight frown playing around the corners of his eyes. Obviously, he didn't like the idea of parting from Kirk. "Aye, aye, Captain. But let me adjust your communicator to emit a square wave pulse on the Enterprise frequency so I can find you without the tricorder."

"An excellent suggestion, Mr. Spock. You do that." Kirk handed Spock the palm-sized communicator from his belt. "Now. I'm going to take a nap. Wake me when we match with the Enterprise."
Chapter Eleven

It was very early morning on Babel when Kirk arrived at the Newsmen’s Lounge. The first stirrings of the breakfast cooks could be heard from the kitchens but the only ones abroad to appreciate the stray aromas were the retiring nightshift and the earliest maintenance crew. Among these were a few representatives of species who couldn’t adapt their sleeping rhythms to Babel’s day.

The lounge itself was typical of Babel. Spacious, plush and quiet. At wide intervals, chairs, perches, and resting racks dotted the blue carpet. There was even a network of silvery strips to accommodate the unipedal, slug-like M-III Swamp-dwellers.

Sooner or later, everybody who worked for a news service would pass through this room. It was located at the central hub of a spherical cluster of editorial offices, transmission-reception rooms, and computer facilities assigned to the various news agencies that were covering the convention.

Around the perimeter of the lounge, bars and restaurants nestled behind latticeworked partitions and at intervals, labeled archways led to the newsrooms.

Kirk located the Newsnet Interstellar sign, a large triangle with curving sides as if inscribed on a spherical surface. Then he settled down to order his favorite breakfast, Korffidian Toast and Terran Coffee, while waiting for Suhav to appear.

When Kirk had checked the Galileo V into the parking tower, the clerk had told him that Newsnet Interstellar had called Suhav to their office. Kirk figured that either that was a code message from some other infiltrator or Spock had been right and the “Suhav” identity was well established.

In any event, he had no other lead. So he sat, munched, sipped and watched. People were coming and going constantly and Kirk noted that here at least, there appeared to be no preponderance of humans. It was a profession where Andorians walked shoulder to shoulder with Tellarites, Vulcans or humans. Zitarians, Schillians, Cordians, and even a Medusan riding in his opaque pram, painted with the Newsnet Interstellar symbol, and escorted by two Vulcans, a Schillian and a K-II class sentient in his spherical life-support chamber moved through the lounge as ignored as if they were part of the furniture.

Kirk finished his coffee and ordered a refill, but before it arrived, Suhav emerged from the Newsnet offices and headed for the main exit, striding purposefully.

The captain tossed a one-credit piece on the counter and took off after the retreating pseudo-Vulcan.

By the time Kirk reached the main corridor, Suhav had mounted the moving strip and was walking along adding to his speed. There were so few people about that Kirk hesitated to follow too closely, but he couldn’t afford to lose the Romulan now.

He stepped onto the strip trying to seem like a casual wanderer with time to kill before some meeting. Eventually, the corridor crossed another at a wide intersection. In the middle of the intersection were two ramps, one leading up, the other down. Suhav took the down ramp so quickly that Kirk was whisked past and had to double back.

On the next level down, there were more people and Kirk almost missed the pointed ears and smooth black hair that bobbed above other heads. He jumped off the down ramp, sidled between two Andorians with a muttered apology and took off after what he hoped was his Romulan.

At the next intersection, he caught a glimpse of the familiar profile disappearing down another descending ramp. Suhav seemed to know where he was going, but Kirk was thoroughly lost. He drew out his communicator and flipped it open, but after the comforting twitter, there came a steady elf tone... Scotty was into the communications board already.

Kirk stowed his communicator in his belt and swung off the ramp, hurrying along another corridor. He’d almost lost sight of his quarry among the growing crowd. Babel’s day was about to begin and in a few hours, all these people would learn of Cunard’s murder. It would probably bring the convention’s work to a complete standstill.

When he reached the next intersection, Kirk looked around for Suhav, but the Romulan was nowhere in sight. Peering over the railing at the down ramp, Kirk spotted several heads that might have belonged to the spy. He played a hunch and went down.

On the next level, there was an arrow over the down ramp labeled, "To M-IV levels only"... and a smaller sign hinged under the arrow, "Restricted to Authorized Personnel".

Kirk knew that the air in much of the M-IV section was still unbreathable by anyone’s standards, but he also could see that Suhav was nowhere in sight on this level... and the Romulan had been heading steadily downward.

Decisively, Kirk plunged downward, authorizing himself to enter the M-IV level and all the while wondering what he’d say if he bumped into Suhav... or started to suffocate.
But neither event came to pass. Instead, he passed through the force-field pressure barrier and found himself in another long, spacious, Babel corridor. But this one curved lazily into the distance in both directions. There was an acrid mist hazing the air and the lighting was a dim blue...Vulcan emergency lights. At intervals along the floor and walls, the decorative murals, mostly Vulcan as far as Kirk could see, were broken where access panels had been removed and hardware strewn out onto the canvas-covered carpet. But, oddly enough, there were no workmen in sight.

Mentally flipping a coin, the Captain moved right. A hundred yards on, he rounded a curve and found himself up against an air-tight bulkhead.

Coughing on the sharp fumes, Kirk jogged back to the ramp he'd come down on and continued along the corridor in the other direction. His throat still felt raw from breathing letra-lubisol smoke and the fumes here made his lungs burn.

Before long, he came to another bulkhead but there was a down ramp on his side of the barrier.

Without breaking stride, Kirk went down, breasting the force field pressure barrier like an Olympic runner breaking the tape. But the air was little better on this new level. The smoke was thinner, but there was a cloying sweet odor alarmingly like phosgene.

Blinking away tears, Kirk surveyed the corridor. It seemed just like the last one, except here there were no Vulcan decorations. Kirk wasn't familiar enough with the other 'M-IV races to be sure, but he thought this corridor might be for natives of Rigel V. He crept along the wall to his left, tried a few doors but found them all locked, and finally came to another down ramp.

He had no idea where he was going, or if he was on the right trail at all, but he was committed now. He took the ramp down and found that it led to a section whose gravity was markedly stronger...strong enough to make his knees buckle. The air was still bad and much abandoned repair work was scattered about. Apparently, the crews had searched vainly for the malfunction and moved on.

The Captain chose to go left again and was unsurprised to find yet another down ramp, but this one had an arrow labeled, "M-III levels only." and an additional warning dangling from the arrow, "Authorized Personnel Only."

Unhesitatingly, Kirk went down and crossed the force field barrier into clean but hot and oppressively steamy air. But at least it was breathable, even if somewhat rank with the effluvium of mudflats. The gravity, too, eased off, leaving his stomach full of butterflies.

There was nobody in sight here, either, and come to think of it, Kirk couldn't recall seeing many M-III's around Babel. The Regulus system was a Federation Member, but they rarely participated in politics.

Cautiously, Kirk made his way left along the corridor. He came to the expected down ramp before he realized that this area must be maintained in M-III condition for somebody. At that thought, he strode rapidly down the ramp, certain he wouldn't find what he sought on an inhabited level.

At the bottom of the ramp, he found himself in a cooler darkness, probably an M-II level but not in service. The sweeping curve of the dim corridor ended in a gaping doorway opening on a cavernous room sparsely lighted by an occasional green glow panel.

Suddenly, he crouched low, hugging the wall and wishing he could melt into the shadows...voices were coming from the big room ahead.

Eyes darting in every direction, Kirk inched his way along the wall until he could peer around the door jam. It was an enormous room with a high ceiling hidden by festoons of cables, the typical M-II's idea of a jungle-gym.

That gave Kirk the clue to identify the otherwise featureless room. When in use, the plank floor would be picked up opening a deep swimming pool, probably honeycombed with grottos and caves equipped with underwater versions of Hilton luxuries.

Kirk could just make out where the planking ended, leaving a wide deck around the edge of the room where guests could lounge or stroll or climb into the overhead net for exercise or diving practice. Here, he was certain, he'd find no signs imposing 'unreasonable' restrictions.

He searched the wall beside him, trailing his fingers over the rough surface until he found a plaque. Using his fingers, he read, GQX-1983-II.

A movement caught his eye and he turned his attention back to the big room as five shadows moved into the light cast by a glow panel. With one raking glance, Kirk identified Suhav and saw that he was talking to four other Vulcans...no, Kirk corrected himself...they must be Romulans. A woman and three men.

"Yes, of course I brought it!" said Suhav. "Here's the key to the locker," he held his hand out to one of the men. "go get the package. I couldn't bring it here because I had to file a story before coming. I'm supposed to be a legitimate newsman, remember?"
The Romulan took the key and disappeared into the shadows on the opposite side of the room, his feet raising echoes from the planking. It sounded to Kirk as if the pool must be filled with water.

"You did well, Suhav," said one of the other men, "the probability of your being caught..."

The woman interrupted, "Enough of your probabilities, S'Dak." She faced Suhav and Kirk admired her severe but very feminine profile. "Well, did you bring our instructions, too?"

"Yes, of course, I did. Do you think I'm totally incompetent, Djuel?" Her name sounded almost French to Kirk.

Looking Suhav up and down, she paced a little circle around the men. "All right, then, tell us. How long do we have before pull out?"

"The computer estimated another four days in order to..." S'Dak interrupted, "At least five days will be required..."

"Quiet, Vulcan," Djuel hissed, "I've had enough of your logic for one day." She turned back to question Suhav more closely.

The import of what she'd said hit him. Vulcan! Could it be? What logical advantage could there be for a Vulcan in supporting a Klingon-Romulan hate mongering operation? Bewildered, he turned his attention back to the conversation.

"Nevertheless, our orders are clear," said Suhav. "We must determine the optimum dosage for Vulcans and then introduce it at the key points on our list. Our failure with Sarek can still be redeemed if he is convicted of the Cunard murder. Which may happen thanks to S'Dak. That dagger business was a stroke of pure genius."

S'Dak moved into the light and Kirk saw he was a tall, thin man with an ascetic face that gave the pointed ears a very natural look. "It was merely a logical extension..."

"And I suppose," Djuel interjected, "your logic should be credited for the rape, too?"

"Negative. It was your assignment to foment an incident... and it was pure accident that involved Sarek."

Suhav interrupted. "As long as we're passing out commendations, don't forget Kort's brilliant improvisation in Raphael's yesterday. That eliminated the half-breed quite elegantly."

"I must admit," said S'Dak, "I would not have considered the risk factor acceptable."

"I know," crooned Djuel, "Vulcan cowardice is no secret."

The third man in the group spoke, "Djuel, on whom are we going to test the drug for dosage? All it did to Sarek was send him off into solitary contemplation. We aren't even sure he knows he was drugged."

Djuel turned and walked away from the group, head down as in inspecting the planking for Vulcan made defects. Then she turned back to them, "The dosage we slipped into Sarek's liktyeu would have turned any Romulan into a berserker. The effect on Vulcans must be the same, but Vulcan disciplines nullified it. We must determine what it takes to overcome the Vulcan disciplines. It will be tricky because thresholds will differ between individuals, and an overdose would simply produce obvious insanity."

"Then," said S'Dak, "we need an experimental subject. Someone fairly close to the norm..."

Spellbound by this exchange, Kirk didn't hear the footsteps behind him until the hair on the back of his neck vibrated to the warmth of a foreign body. He spun around, ducking under the blow he'd only sensed descending. But it was too late.

The rigid hand chopped into his shoulder like a ram paralysing his right arm and sending numbing shock through his neck. He went down on one knee, grabbing for the Romulan's legs and knocked the man off balance. The Romulan fell with a thud, clutching Kirk's head, but Kirk rolled forward, driving his skull deep into the other's abdomen.

The Romulan exhaled past Kirk's ear and the package he'd been clutching flew across the corridor where it landed with a muted thud. Kirk dived toward the package, knowing it must be the drug supply they'd sent the messenger for. If he could get free with it, the drug would be evidence enough of what had happened to Sarek...

But as he landed, the sizzling crackle of a stunning beam sent him pitching forward unconscious.
Chapter Twelve

Auxiliary Control was the one habitable place aboard the Enterprise which gave access to the main computers, so Spock volunteered to stand watch for the next three hours freeing Scotty to start work on the main communicator board and on the Galileo VI. Once alone, the Vulcan fed the tricorder's tape into the computer, set up the analysis program and sat back to wait. Since he was on duty, he couldn't sleep, but he could rest effectively enough.

Three hours and ten minutes later, the computer signaled end-of-run and produced a cleaned tape. Beneath the sputtering and squawking, he was just able to make out a conversation.

What he heard set a deep frown between his eyes as he transferred the filtered, reconstructed and translated recording back into his tricorder along with the original recording. Then he set the library's circuits to wipe themselves clean while simultaneously transferring the complete data set to the top security memory bank under a voice print and code phrase lock.

He was almost out the door by the time the computer signaled that the top security memory bank was inaccessible.

He took a deep breath and returned to the control desk. Scotty's overhaul was becoming a nuisance. There was only one thing to do, take the only copy of the data with him. If he left a copy lying around in the open, he'd be liable to court martial for negligence and breach of security.

As he set the library to wipe the recording, his relief man came in, muttering apologies for being late. Spock scarcely heard as he went through the formalities of turning over the deck. Then he was speeding toward the Engineering Hull's cargo transporter where he could signal the Babel Transporter Chief to beam him down into Babel's early morning crowds.

As soon as his vision cleared, the First Officer stepped briskly off the pad, thanked the technician for his nice work, and headed for the nearest intercom unit, thumbing his tricorder to home on the square wave signal from Kirk's communicator. The directional reading he got caused him to halt in mid-stride, checking the tricorder for malfunction.

When he was satisfied his instrument gave a true reading he consulted a wall map. His memory was correct. The Captain was in the M-II levels.

He zeroed his tricorder against the map's coordinates and estimated the Captain's position. GQX-1983-P or Q. According to the map, that would be the aquatic gymnasium which was now closed. The Captain had no business there, unless he'd found Suhav.

And, thought Spock, he himself was bound by Oath to behave as if Kirk were his Warder Liege.

With a wry glance at the intercom unit, he passed on, heading for the turbo lift. With the first big intersection, he took the down ramp and continued down in a zig-zag pattern parallel to that which Kirk had followed and eventually stood at the head of the ramp marked, "M-IV levels only" and "Restricted to Authorized Personnel."

Without considering authorization, he advanced downward holding the tricorder before him like a mine-sweeper. He read the atmosphere on the other side of the metal screen, decided it wasn't lethal and went through. Following the tricorder's directional fix, he turned left, went down, turned left, went down again and again until he found himself in the lower M-II corridor.

And right ahead of him the tricorder reported six humanoids...five Vulcans...or possibly Romulans...and one human who was probably Kirk.

Spock advanced through the shadows planting each foot on the canvas covered carpet with great care. When he was about fifty yards from the dim, green opening, he set his tricorder down in a tiny recess designed for hanging art works. He couldn't risk exposing that recording to danger. It might be the one piece of concrete evidence that what the "invaders" were doing here was more than ordinary intelligence gathering.

When he'd made his way to the door, he stationed himself so he could not be seen from within and risked a glance around the doorpost.

To his left, along the curving wall, he could see Kirk, unconscious. His hands had been chained together behind his back and the chain looped around a standpipe that protruded from the wall about three feet from the floor and extended upwards another six feet, way above the Captain's head. Kirk's limp body hung down between twisted shoulders and his head sagged forward onto his chest.
The five Romulans stood before the human as if expecting him to wake at any moment. Spock could just make out the conversation as the woman was saying, "Never mind how he got here. He's here. And now we have to dispose of him, preferably before our esteemed allies arrive, making brave Klingon noises. Any brilliant suggestions, S'Dak?"

"Logically, we should attempt to make it seem as if a Vulcan had killed him, but I can't think of any reason... ."

"Logic!" Her voice rose as she vented her frustration on S'Dak. "Reason!" If I hear that once more today, I'll...

"Djuel, he's coming to."

Spock recognized Suhav's accent although his face was lost in green shadow as he bent over the Captain. The First Officer wished he had a phaser, but within Babel, only SP's carried weapons. And, weapon or no, he could not allow the situation to develop any further. The proper course would be to retreat and bring reinforcements, but he was Oath-Bound and the choice was not his to make.

Anxiously, he surveyed the room. And then he had it. If he could creep around the wall to his right and release each of the lines that held the exercise net, the net would fall on the four Romulans.

Probably, the cables were fibre wound on a metallic core, heavy but not heavy enough to run more than a 60% chance of fatal injury to a Romulan, and that would be an acceptable risk under the circumstances.

While the Romulans were watching Kirk revive, Spock edged around the doorpost and slipped silently into the deep shadows. Hugging the wall, scarcely daring to breathe, he slithered toward the first of the lines. When he reached it, he seized the cable with both hands and put all his weight into pulling down enough slack to unhitch the cable. Then, cautiously, he released his grip letting the other anchor points take up the strain.

High over his head, the net bulged downward, then held its position. He moved on toward the next anchor point. A Vulcan engineer would have balanced the net so that any single one of the eight anchor lines would hold it aloft but, Spock reflected, it had probably been engineered by a human.

When he released the next anchor line, he watched the overhead bulge downward with some misgivings. The net held its place and his confidence index began to climb as he moved on.

Now he was at the line diametrically opposite the group of Romulans. As he released it, he could see they were questioning Kirk but that the Captain was recalcitrant enough to draw the violent attention of his captors. Ordinary drugs wouldn't work against Star Fleet conditioning and violence never worked against the Captain. It would be a convenient diversion were it not for the Oath that forbade him to allow Kirk to suffer discomfort. He made hastily for the next anchor point, released it and trotted toward the fifth.

As he released that one, he could see that the net was forming a canopy around the central support, but peers as he might, the shadows would not reveal whether that last support was controlled by the eighth anchor point alone. On that line hung the Captain's life and he had no choice but to take the risk.

The sixth and seventh anchors were the hardest to release, requiring all his weight and strength to counterbalance their loads. Then he was close enough to the Romulans to hear the conversation.

Suhav was still closest to Kirk who was standing now, though unsteadily. The reporter's open hand slapped Kirk's face with a crack that reverberated in the empty chamber. "Now, Captain, let's have that again. How did you find us?"

"Would you like it any better if I said I followed you?"

"Nobody followed me. Let's have the truth."

"All right," said Kirk with an air of genuine defeat, "It was S'Dak. He told me everything."

Spock took advantage of the momentary uproar that announcement caused and moved in close to the eighth anchor point. By the time the Romulans had decided that this was another of Kirk's facetious improvisations, Spock was in position and setting his weight against the last, taut cable. For a split second, the Vulcan glanced toward Kirk just ten yards from him in a pool of dim, green light while he himself stood in deep shadow.

With that uncanny intuition that had come to characterise the Captain in the last few years, Kirk chose that moment to glance toward Spock's position. The Vulcan was certain he was well enough concealed so that Kirk could not possibly recognize him, but Kirk nodded ever so slightly and turned back to his captors, "All right, all right," he declaimed loudly, "I'll show you how I did it."

When he had their attention, he continued, "If you'll all just step out into the middle of the room, you'll see what I mean."
As the Romulans moved dubiously out onto the planks that covered the pool, S'Dak walked suspiciously toward Kirk, alternately eyeing the group of conspirators and the captive human.

Straining with all his might, Spock pulled down on the one remaining anchor, heedless of the possibility of dislocating a shoulder. He called forth the last bit of strength that flesh could yield and finally, as S'Dak frowned at Kirk and the otherRomulans eyed each other curiously, the cable came loose and whipped upward carrying him fifteen feet off the floor before he could let go.

Plummeting downward, Spock saw Kirk's boot connect with S'Dak's chin sending S'Dak flying backward to land amidst fallen cables and Romulan bodies.

Spock rolled to his feet and dashed to Kirk's side where he attached the chains. "Captain, are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Spock. The girl has the key to these," he indicated the chain's lock. "We better leave before those Klingons get back."

Spock waded into the net where the four Romulans lay and searched the woman's clothing. "Their allies are Klingons?"

"Right. It's a coordinated operation."

Spock came back carrying a key, "This looks promising, Captain."

Kirk moved so that his First Officer could get at the chain and a few seconds later the fetters fell away, leaving Kirk rubbing tender wrists and shoulders. "That one, ' he jerked a toe at S'Dak, "is a Vulcan, not a Romulan. What do you make of that?"

Spock eyed the unconscious form with raised brows, "Fascinating. Many Vulcans do believe the galaxy would be improved by dissolving the Federation, but there are very few who would aid a regime that is even more militaristic than the Federation."

"Did you get a good analysis of that recording?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then that's our objective evidence. Let's go."

Spock hesitated, looking down at S'Dak thoughtfully, "I'd like to argue with this one, Captain. Perhaps we could take him with us? He probably knows more about this operation than we do and if he can be convinced..."

"Spock," reproached Kirk, "we'll never make it carrying dead weight. Let's move."

"Yes, Sir. I left the recording over this way..." he started for the archway where he'd entered, but before they'd covered half the distance, a group of men boiled from the entrance, weapons ready, braced for action. Then one world rang out across the planking, "Hold!"

Arrayed in battle formation, the men advanced until Kirk could count. Only four of them but in their skillful spread, it would be suicide to jump them. These were no doubt the Klingon allies Djuel was expecting.

Spock said mildly, "Good morning, Mr. Bart."

One of the Klingons stepped forward and Kirk could see he was carrying a tricorder, a Federation model tricorder. Bart thought Kirk, that was the name of the Klingon Spock had tangled with in Raphael's.

Dangling the tricorder negligently, 'Bart' said, 'Lose something, Mr. Spock?'

"Apparently, Mr. Bart."

"Not 'Bart' ... Kort. My name is Kort. Bart to the sheep. Kort to a worthy enemy."

"Thank you, Kort. I am deeply honored to be your enemy."

Kort examined the tricorder. "Let us just see what it controls, feigning ignorance to prolong the prisoner's ordeal.

Kirk seethed with barely suppressed fury. It was a hopeless situation. The Klingons all carried disruptors, and Kirk knew that Klingons wouldn't bother to point a disruptor at someone unless it was set to kill.

Finally, Kort found the interesting recording and miniature voices carried on a tiny conversation amidst enough background noise to drown out a Drill Instructor. Kirk listened tightly. It was Suhav receiving the package of drugs and a briefing concerning the remainder of the operation on Babel.
"Yes," Kort said, "I see. I'd certainly like to know where you got this. But," he made a negligent gesture with the tricorder, "it really doesn't matter. We'll just eliminate this small complication by erasing the tape." With a savagely expert gesture, he wiped the tape and hurled the tricorder into the darkness where it landed with a clatter that raised echoes that faded slowly away to silence.

"Of course," said Kirk levelly, "you understand there is another copy."

"Of course," said Kort genially, "And we'll get to that in due time."

Spock remained silent.

Chapter Thirteen

It had all happened so quickly, Kirk found himself not quite sure how it had been done. One moment he'd been a prisoner under interrogation. Then Spock had rescued him leaving the Romulans sprawled under several layers of fallen rigging. And then, suddenly, he was a prisoner again. Only this time, Spock was lashed to the standpipe with him as they watched the Romulans come to, one by one, and start to push back some of the cables to make a clear space around the standpipe.

Suddenly, another Klingon appeared out of the shadows.

The instant Kirk saw his face, he recognized Kang, the Klingon Captain who had been transported aboard the Enterprise by the energy being who fed on emotions. The Klingon's bushy eyebrows and beard were gone and his wife, Mara, was not at his side, but the overbearing manner remained unaltered as he sauntered up to his captives ignoring the disgraced Romulans. "Captain Kirk. What an unexpected pleasure."

Kirk wanted to spit in his face but pulled himself together and answered, "I'm sorry I can't say the same. The sight of you is neither unexpected nor a pleasure." It was a retort that would have done credit to Spock at his best, and that delighted Kirk.

But Kang failed to appreciate it. He stepped in front of Kirk and looked him up and down as if inspecting a shoddy piece of merchandise. "And you're still only a Starship Captain?" He turned to Djuel, "You let him get away. That was very careless of you, Sub-commander. If we hadn't happened along in time, you'd be up for execution right now."

"You can't allow...?" Djuel all but spluttered. Then she collected herself and went on with cold indignation. "Just who do you think you are to allow or not allow anything with regard to me or my command? We informed you of Kirk's capture as a courtesy to an ally, not as a report to a superior. If we chose to release him, that's our business."

"Yes, of course, Sub-Commander."

"But it was plain Kang didn't buy that bluff. "Just remember that I am in charge of this operation. I conceived it and organized it. I've staked my career on its success. Your cooperation is convenient, nothing more. Any further blunders and I will see that your superiors take appropriate action."

Barely controlling himself, Kang turned to Spock. "Well, Vulcan," he started acidly, "how tell me where are the other copies of that recording?"

For a moment, Spock held Kang's eyes steadily. Then he shifted his gaze over Kang's shoulder, locking eyes with S'Dak as if desiring to say something, yet somehow inhibited.

Twisting to catch a glimpse of Kang, Kirk thought the Klingon was on the verge of apoplexy. He'd been dismissed by his prisoner as unimportant.

But then, the Klingon broke into one of those unexpected laughs, little more than a feral bark. "All right, Vulcan, I've been told you've had some experience with our mind sifter. We have a new improved model we'd like to test and you'll be the perfect field subject."

Without looking away from S'Dak, Spock said casually, "That will be unnecessary. There was only the one copy."

Djuel laughed, "Vulcan cowardice."

Spock's gaze drifted back to S'Dak but he addressed Djuel, "Do you then doubt...everything...that S'Dak has told you?"

"And what do you know of what S'Dak has told me?" She snapped with such intensity that Kirk felt spurred to
comment, "Oh, you'd be surprised."

Unmoved, S'Dak said, "Very clever, Spock, but it won't work. I have never given them reason to distrust me, whereas you have never given them reason to trust you."

"But," argued Spock, "Klingons and Romulans accord as little weight to reason as do humans."

"Your views are held by many. But very few of these would attack the Federation by destroying Vulcan's reputation."

"Destroying Vulcan's reputation in the eyes of... humans... is far better than allowing them to destroy Vulcan."

Djuel stepped between the verbal combatants and spat, "No. Let us not be distracted by Vulcan argument."

Eyes still riveted on S'Dak, Spock asked, "Are you afraid I might convince S'Dak that he is acting on fallacious assumptions? On Vulcan, the coward is one who refuses to expose his rationale to logical argument."

S'Dak answered, "I stand ready to defend my actions before the Legions if necessary. However, I doubt if you will live long enough to bring the matter to that stage."

"In that case," said Spock, "yours will be the greater loss, S'Dak."

Kang roared, "Enough!"

The echoes of the bellow cascaded into silence and all eyes turned to the Klingon. But before he could take advantage of the attention, Kirk interposed. "You must feel very safe here to risk such a great amount of noise."

"S'Dak, observe," murmured Spock aside, "the people you have allied with." He chinned toward Kang, "He cannot claim the attention of his underlings by the quality of his words and is reduced to screaming like a starving primate..."

Kang's gloved hand whipped across Spock's mouth, snapping the Vulcan's head onto his left shoulder. Kirk felt the blow vibrate the standpipe and twisting around, he caught a glimpse of Spock's face, a trickle of green blood forming at the corner of his mouth and the green lighting from the glow panels lending a phantasm hue to the Vulcan's complexion.

"Now," said Kang, "S'Dak, I want you to make the rounds of the guards. Make certain they stay alert. I don't want to be disturbed."

Unmoving, S'Dak looked at Djuel, his immediate superior. But she dismissed him with a wave of her hand, obviously very glad to get rid of the Vulcan, even on command of a Klingon.

Kang turned to her, "As I see it, our problem is how to make it seem that these two have killed each other in hand to hand combat. You may yet salvage something of your prestige if you can devise a method that will convince the Vulcans that humans can't be trusted... while, at the same time, convincing the humans that Vulcans are too dangerously unpredictable to make good allies."

Thoughtfully, she approached Spock, picking her way through the network of fallen cables while searching his face. When she reached him, she placed a hand on his cheek, forefinger caressing his temple. He didn't flinch from her touch, but met her eyes steadily, his expression chillingly remote.

"Yes," she whispered, "I understand what the Commander saw in you. Do you find all Romulan women attractive?"

His eyes remained focused on her.

"Attractive?" the Sub-commander pounded on that eagerly. "Attractive enough to induce you to join us? In the last few years, many of your compatriots have come to us as Vulcan's only hope. We are of one blood, you and I. Should not our race be reunited under one banner? With your name as a rallying cry, the ancient grandeur of All Vulcan could be reestablished in Top-of-World. You would have your choice of women, Romulan or Vulcan. None could deny you."

For one fleeting moment, Kirk thought he saw temptation flicker in Spock's eyes, but then the Vulcan said, "Grandeur, Djuel? There was nothing grand in my family's history until we took the banner of Surak and obliterated all but the memory of Top-of-World. Now only gubmendik graze the slopes and the pillars of Surak rise from the ruins at Crest of World. I and my family are Guardians of a new tradition."

She removed her hand from his face, "And is that new tradition in complete accord with all your inner needs, Spock?"

"Yes, Djuel, it is."

She sighed turning to Kang, "He's unreachable."
"Perhaps," said Kang, "but you give me an idea, woman. Come," he gathered the group with a gesture, "we will discuss this."

The five Klingons and three Romulans picked their way over the cables and out onto the planking that covered the pool. They piled up heaps of cables and seated themselves in a circle while Kirk stretched his neck, trying to relieve the cramps, "She's a tempting little package. Spock, you're harder to please than I thought."

"Humans place a strange emphasis on the value of pleasure, especially false pleasure."

"Do I detect a note of regret?"

"Regret, Captain? Certainly not. Thoughtfulness, perhaps."

"About what?"

"S'Dak."

"Their weakest link? Yes. What do you suppose they bribed him with?"

"He was not bribed."

"Then, why...?"

"He genuinely believes the Federation to be a menace to our way of life."

Kirk tried to change the subject. "I overheard Djuel say that S'Dak helped engineer the murder-frame they put on your father."

"Oh? Interesting."

"Is that all you have to say? Not even the slightest impulse toward revenge?"

"R revenge, Captain, is illogical. Respectfully suggest employing our energies in more fruitful ways."

"Fine. Any ideas?"

"Do you still have your communicator?"

"No. They pried up one of the planks and dumped it in the water."

"Then we are reduced to our bare hands and our wits, which may prove inadequate for the task. Our only other asset is a certain square-wave which should survive for several hours yet."

"In fact," finished Kirk, "it will probably outlive us. Not that it matters. There's nobody to read the message."

"So it would seem."

They fell into a glum silence which was presently broken by Kang's bellowed laughter. Then the five Klingons and three Romulans rose and came toward their prisoners. Kang, brimming with hearty spirits, put an arm around Suhav's shoulder saying, "It will be the biggest story you ever filed. Might even get you a promotion. Can you use their tricorder to make the tape?"

With evident distaste, Suhav pulled away from the Klingon, "Of course. I was trained for this mission in a Romulan espionage school.

Kang halted his group facing his prisoners and looked around. "Where's S'Dak? You," he pointed to one of the Romulans, "go get S'Dak. I want to know if a Vulcan reporter would tape such a fight without attempting to stop it."

"I told you," Suhav repeated as if for the tenth time, "it would be perfectly in character. Haven't I been a Vulcan for the last three years?"

"But your Romulan judgment may yet be faulty in this one area. We pay S'Dak to point out errors before we make them."

"This time," said Djuel, "I would use S'Dak for the experimental subject."

"Oh, we will. Sub-commander. But we wouldn't want to damage him permanently. He might yet be useful. This one, however," he eyed Spock, "is a liability. We will find out how much it takes to create...obvious insanity... in him first." He turned to his men, "Kort, bring the light projector to the lab."
Djuel stepped between Kang and the Klingons. "And after he kills the human, what will you do with him? The effect will pass..."

"Oh, no. We won't let it pass. We'll determine the lethal dosage." He inspected the Vulcan critically. "The autopsy will show that he died of natural causes and Suhav's tape will support that conclusion. The drug leaves no trace other than a perfectly natural chemical imbalance..."

She spoke to Kang's back, "The other Vulcans he's spoken with in the last few days will know it wasn't natural."

"Ah, but he's half-human. And the evidence will be incontrovertible...with the aid of Suhav's tape." He chuckled, turning toward her, "Now go and prepare for your rendezvous with your 'Captain'. Meanwhile, Mara will have her opportunity to test her new mind-sifter on a notoriously resistant mind."

Kang looked at his prisoners and roared with laughter that cascaded off the vaulted ceiling and drenched all of them in chill echoes.

Chapter Fourteen

Now that Spock had gone, the lone Watch Officer, Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott, Senior in Command of the majestic starship, Enterprise, paced nervously back and forth from the main Engineering Deck controls across the hall to Auxiliary Control, checking one chronometer against the other and mentally converting from Stardate to hours and back again.

Finally, his patience deserted him, and he stalked into Auxiliary Control and threw himself into the command chair activating the intercom, "Doberman!"

"Bridge. Doberman here."

"Why haven't you tracked down that malfunction yet?"

"Sir. It appears that there is no malfunction. We really are receiving a square-wave beep at ten second intervals."

"No, not that malfunction. The computers, lad. the computers!"

"McClintok is working on that one, Sir, but I don't think we can lick it without Mr. Spock. McClintok says there's some sort of recording caught in an infinite read-loop between unit K on deck seven and the PT module on deck eight. Nobody up here has any idea what could possibly cause it. None of us have used that section..."

"Well, you better find out..."

"Sir, you know how Mr. Spock is about his computers. I wouldn't dare authorize anyone, even McClintok, to open up the PT banks or probe into those units without Mr. Spock's explicit instructions. However, if you'd care to issue an order, maybe McClintok could get away with it since he's on such good terms with..."

"No," the Chief Engineer interrupted, "never mind. I'll call Mr. Spock...in the morning. You may as well knock off and get some sleep. With Mr. Spock and McClintok tearing into the computers tomorrow, it's going to be a busy day."

"Aye, Sir. Bridge out."

Scotty leaned back in the swivel chair and rocked from side to side thoughtfully. Square-wave beep? And he couldn't even call down to see if Babel Control was putting it out. But if they weren't, where was it coming from, and why?"

All this trouble had started just after Mr. Spock had come aboard, thought Scotty morosely. If it was all caused by something that Vulcan had done, a question would clear it up, but how to get in touch with the Science Officer?

Someone would have to go down in a shuttle, and admit to the Vulcan's face that something was wrong with his beloved computer system.

That set the Engineer's heart to racing. Never was there a task which he faced with greater reluctance. It wasn't that the Vulcan would be angry, oh, no, not Spock. But Scotty would rather face a rampaging human than a Vulcan's unrelenting logic.

But it would have to be done. He'd take McClintok down with him. The lad had a natural aptitude for computers that Spock respected. And, McClintok, the newest addition to the Enterprise's crew, was the only one aboard, next to
the Captain, who could consistently beat Spock at tournament chess. Maybe the lad could also out-maneuver the First Officer in a verbal confrontation if he could ever be induced to say anything at all that wasn't related to chess.

When Lieutenant Fisher came to relieve him, Scotty hit the sack for three hours of well-earned sleep. But he woke to find the situation unchanged and could delay no longer.

Briefly, he considered calling Babel Control on a different frequency but discarded the notion. The Enterprise was now in populated space and the Federation's laws on spectrum-slot assignments were explicit. This was no emergency.

Five minutes after he decided he had no choice, he paraded his crew of clean-cut, eager young men and women on the Engineering Deck. Hands behind his back, he paced up and down in front of the line, "Doberman, Cooper, McClintok. You three know the most about the problem. You come with me. Fisher, you're in Corrunand. I'll expect you to button-up Fire Control Alpha and complete the work on deck eleven by the time I get back. But don't touch any of the Communication/Computation circuitry. Clear?"

Fifteen male voices joined by nine female ones chorused, "Aye, Sir."

Scotty nodded brusquely and marched off, followed by Doberman, a lanky blond with a prominent nose. Cooper followed, running stubby-fingers through his short black hair and wishing Uhura were here to take his place. She seemed to have a better sense of humor where Spack was concerned. Last in line, came the downy-faced chess champion of the Enterprise whose watery blue eyes made people feel that, when he focused his attention on someone, he was swimming up from the ocean bottom to peer out like a sailor using a pair of badly focused binoculars.

The trip down to Babel in the shuttlecraft was passed in a queer silence. Each was certain that none of his own actions had caused the breakdowns, but each knew that, with one glance, the Vulcan First Officer could transform any human imperfection into a major character flaw.

Doberman and Cooper counted themselves lucky that their Vulcan was half human. Some of the harrowing tales told by the humans from the Kongo were enough to make anyone contemplate resigning from Star Fleet at the mere suggestion of transfer to a Vulcan command.

To McClintok, on the other hand, Spack was only an unimpressive chess amateur. He spent the ride mentally playing rapid transit against himself to check his memory of the latest analysis of the Tallman Improvisation that had won against the Vulcan Grand Master, Simnor, at the Finger Lakes Congress on Centaurus IV. He didn't even see Scotty sign the shuttle into the Babel parking tower nor was he particularly aware of Scotty's methodical efforts to locate the Vulcan through Babel's paging service. But he did hear Scotty sigh, "Well, lads, I'd rather not bother the Captain just yet. Let's go find a bite to eat and then tackle Babel Central's Communications Chief. By then, perhaps Mr. Spock will turn up."

Scotty left a message for the First Officer and took his men upstairs looking for a suitable restaurant. After much rubbernecking on the excuse of searching for the missing Vulcan, they settled on a Rigilian cafe just off the Concourse of Planets.

It was a small place but lacked the cozy feel of the crowded cafes Scotty frequented when on Rigel II. It was noon here, but the Hearings had not yet recessed for lunch so there were only five occupied tables and a handful of Star Fleet uniforms in evidence.

Standing in the entrance, hands on hips, Scotty surveyed the place. He felt he could lose half the Enterprise crew in here and still hear echoes if he dropped a depolarizing spanner. But the steaming food smelled good and so did the hot Rigilian burgamead that was almost as good as real scotch.

Perhaps it would be more logical to eat someplace where Spock would be likely to turn up, but Scotty's stomach wasn't in a logical mood. His overhaul was well ahead of schedule and he saw no reason to hurry in finding the Science Officer, so he led his group on through the aisles of tables until he spotted one for six in a back corner.

It wasn't until he was almost on top of it that Scotty noticed there was already a steaming lunch set out for one person, and that the lone occupant was just returning from the restrooms.

"Scotty!" cried the erstwhile occupant.

"Dr. McCoy! I didn't expect..."

"Well, neither did I. Sit down, all of you. Plenty of room. Funny, I was just thinking of you. Doesn't this place remind you of a certain dancing girl...?"

"That's not why we came down, Doctor. We've been wanting to talk with Mr. Spock. Have you seen him about?"

"Well, no, not for a couple of days. I was just talking with Amanda..."
"Would she be knowing where to find him?"

"Uh, no. I don't think so. What's the big rush?"

They sat down and Scotty told him.

McClintok settled himself and positioned his tricorder unobtrusively. Within thirty seconds, he was totally absorbed in a match that had been played on Regulus II less than a year ago. It involved the Eel Bind Variation of the Vegan Defense against the White Queen's Gambit and McClintok wanted to play the variation against Spock who had certainly not heard of it since he rarely followed the competitions.

When Scotty finished talking, McCoy hid an incipient grin behind a cough. "I'd like to hear you explain all this to our First Officer."

"There's nothing funny about it, Mon."

"There's nothing funny about what's been going on down here, either," snapped McCoy. "Your problems would provide the comic relief we all need."

"I haven't had time to follow all the news..."

"Then," said McCoy, "Let me fill you in." The Doctor talked until the waiter came to take their order, and then continued confidentially, "So, I'm going to bend security regs a little and tell you that the Captain found Sarek and now the Ambassador's in the brig charged with murder. Spock's in the brig, too, for brawling. That's top security, too. Leak it and we'll all be court martialed."

"Brawling!" Scotty's eyes twinkled in a way that declared the Vulcan would never live this one down.

"We're keeping it from Amanda, for the present," continued the Doctor gravely. "She's had enough shocks for the time being. All she knows is that Sarek has been found and is well."

"In that case," said Scotty, "I guess we canna talk to Mr. Spock."

When they finished the meal, Scotty sent Doberman and Cooper to check with Babel Central and they returned to report a complete negative.

Scotty set his mug down with a splash, "Give me that tricorder." Doberman handed it over and the Engineer worked the instrument as if he'd wagered a bottle of hundred year old Scotch on his skill. After several minutes he exclaimed. "That beep originates from a point source... right down there." He pointed to the floor beneath their feet. "Let's go." He was in no mood to wait for the spectrum monitors to catch the intruder.

Holding the tricorder at arm's length, Scotty followed it out of the restaurant until he had a precise directional fix. His men gathered around him, forming an eddy in the traffic flowing through the corridor.

"How far down?" asked McCoy.

"A wee shade more than," Scotty eyed the ceiling and then the floor estimating the distance. "twenty levels."

McCoy led the way to the nearest wall map, tracing a route with his finger. "We're here. Twenty levels down... would be here. But that's closed," he said tapping the glowing red warning lines, "There's no way to get down there."

"We'll find a way," promised the Scott.

"And if we do, we're likely to be asphyxiated," said McCoy, "or thoroughly lost. This is a big..."

Scotty frowned. "If my memory serves me right, you told me a week ago that you'd been an Explorer Scout..."

"I did? Well, I was, but this..."

"So come along." Suddenly, streams of delegates poured onto the Concourse from the Hall of All Planets and Scotty ploughed his way toward the first down ramp. After a moment, McCoy hurried to catch up with the group. Wherever they were going, they might need a doctor.
In the green shadowed darkness, deep in the bowels of the Tower of Babel, Kirk shook himself awake at the sound of feet stumbling through the tangled cables that still lay on the planking. He'd fallen asleep still chained to the standpipe. Now, he climbed to his feet, his shoulders aflame with the effort of forcing his benumbed hands down behind his back.

Before he could focus his eyes, a limp body fell on him and slid to the floor at his feet. Blinking away his sleep, he saw it was Spock at his feet and Mara who had delivered him.

She motioned and one of the guards held Spock up while the other secured him to the standpipe. Then, wordlessly, the Klingons marched away leaving the prisoners alone among the sinister shadows.

Kirk twisted around to look at his First Officer. The Vulcan’s eyes were closed, a sure sign he wasn’t well. And his head lolled forward on his chest as if he were dead.

It seemed like hours but could only have been minutes later when Spock stirred, proving at least that he still lived. Now Kirk had only to worry about the Vulcan’s sanity. From their experience on Organia, the Klingon mindsifter was perfectly capable of ripping even a Vulcan trained mind to shreds.

"Spock. Wake up. It’s all over. They’ve gone. You can come out of it now. Spock."

One of the Vulcan’s eyes opened. Then the other. He appeared to assemble the components of his personality until he could say, "Captain..."

"Spock... are you all right?"

Painfully, the Vulcan climbed to his feet. "Functional, Captain."

"They didn't penetrate your mind?"

"I believe not, though they believe they did."

"Let’s keep it that way. How did you manage to resist the machine?"

"I did not resist. I told the truth. That they destroyed the only copy of the tape... except the one in my mind."

"Which may as well not exist as far as the law is concerned," said Kirk gloomily.

"Precisely."

"But even so, I’d expect they would have ransacked your mind, digging for anything that might be useful to them."

"Indeed. They did try. However, I’ve, matured, somewhat since Organia."

At that moment, a party of seven men marched through the archway, arguing among themselves heatedly. As they neared, Kirk identified Kang, Kort, S’Dak, Djuel, Suhav and two of the Klingon guards. S’Dak was moving back and forth between Djuel and Kang, saying, "But you can’t just kill him. He's a youngest son of a youngest son. Necessity or not, you can’t kill them both on the same day."

"Quiet, Vulcan," said Kang. "We didn’t ask your opinion on his ultimate fate, only whether Suhav’s part is being staged correctly. Suhav’s story must be perfect. We don’t want him to lose his cover when we withdraw."

"Yes, yes. I explained that. It will work if you report it as I said, but it would be better at least to allow..."

"No," said Djuel, "and that is final. He will die and they will find his body. That is the way it must be. Surely your logic shows you that."

"It does not. If he must die, then Sarek must survive as was originally planned."

By this time, the party had reached the captives and S’Dak turned to Spock, hands outstretched beseechingly, "Surely, you agree."

"Your logic is flawless," said Spock, "However, your premises are unsound, hence your conclusions are fallacious. Nothing Vulcan can survive if the Romuland prevail."
S'Dak turned to Kang. "You said you deep probed his mind, that your machine reached the levels of cultural conditioning and implanted..." 

"Quiet, S'Dak," the Klingon growled and then addressed Spock. "You did not resist. The mind-sifter took you apart synapse by synapse. Yet you say this?"

"Perhaps I put myself back together again."

"Enough of this," roared the Klingon leader. "Kort, inject him."

As Kort adjusted an air hypo and approached Spock, Djuel confronted Kirk, a thin smile stretching her lips. She was dressed in a softly feminine drape of material that revealed enough to set any man's blood afire. He'd seen the style on Vulcan, but it was usually worn over a modest undergarment.

"Thus ends the legend of Captain Kirk," she said. "It may make quite a ballad one day."

With a flourish that wafted the hem of her fragrant sleeve under Kirk's nose, she circled around to face Spock, inserting herself between the Vulcan and Kort who was just finishing the injection. She looked into brooding Vulcan eyes. "In a few moments, Spock, you will begin to become agitated. Your mind will open to any suggestion we make. And we will suggest that you desire... for your own. Does that seem unlikely?"

"It does indeed. You might have had greater success had you dressed properly for the occasion."

"Does my costume disturb you?"

"Disturb? Negative. Repel, perhaps."

"Why?"

"The garment is never worn thus in public."

"But the Captain doesn't know that and it is for him I dressed. The drug will guide you through your part. And those who see the tape will believe I dressed for a private meeting." She mocked him. "Would you have me meet my lover robed to serve KirTohn?"

Spock's eyes narrowed, "It was you who drugged Sarek."

Kirk twisted around to catch a glimpse of the scene being played behind him. Djuel's hands covered her mouth and her eyes darted to the watching Kang. But Kang dismissed her blunder with a wave of his hand; plainly, he thought Spock wouldn't live to use that information.

Straining his neck, Kirk could just see Spock's face set in a ferocious grimace. The drug, whatever it was, was working.

Djuel moved in closer to Spock. The top of her head was on a level with his nose so that his lips were buried in her loosened hair. After a heartstopping pause, the Vulcan averted his face and sucked in a ragged breath. Kirk could feel the standpipe between them vibrating with Spock's trembling.

Suddenly, Djuel flung her head back and placed both her hands on his cheeks, turning his head toward her. "Look at me, Spock. You desire me. Your mind is locked to mine, for all eternity. Our destinies are twined; our souls mingled. It is to me that you MUST come..."

"No! It...is...NOT!"

"It was to me that you were linked..."

"No!"

Kang broke in, "Kort, double the dose."

As the Klingon moved to obey, S'Dak said, "Need I remain? I have duties..."

Spock turned on him, suddenly livid with a suppressed fury that halted Kort in motion, hypo scant inches from Spock's shoulders. "Duties? Your duty is here. It is written. 'Suffer the death of thy enemy and the anguish of thy liege. The hand of the accuser shall boil in the blood of the accused and his oaths shall drape the necks of the living unto and beyond the wards of death.' He chinned toward the Klingons, "They know not the measure of honor, but thee call thyself Vulcan. Are thee Vulcan or are thee..." he spat the word at S'Dak's feet, "gubmendik?"

Kirk had never heard his First Officer so impassioned. It lent the cryptic speech the air of a challenge on the field of honor and indeed, S'Dak recoiled as if slapped by a feudal gauntlet. But, after facing his challenger for a few
"Then your duty is to stay and convince me..."

"It is too late. Action has been taken by the leaders of our common cause. A life must be sacrificed, but that is no reason to allow other affairs to languish."

"There is death and there is Death. Would that your allies grant you the Death of Surak."

"The legend of Surak and the thousand bells has no relevance, it is pure fabrication."

"As Guardian of the tradition handed down to me through all my father's father's generations, I assert that the thousand bells has every relevance, though it may indeed be pure fabrication." He eyed S'Dak speculatively, "However, I do not expect you to see the connection immediately. That would require a certain skill in the logical disciplines."

Kang stepped between the two Vulcans, "Enough!" he bellowed pouring all his frustration into decibels. "Kort, give him one and a half units more."

S'Dak seemed to wake from a daydream, shook himself, and departed hastily. As the Vulcan's footsteps echoed and died, Kang reared back and loosened waves of mocking laughter. Presently, the Klingon leader sobered and leveled his gaze at Spock. "Vulcans have no stomachs."

But the insult had no effect. The First Officer stood, head lowered, eyes squeezed tightly shut, jaw muscles bunching under the sallow skin. Kirk could feel the trembling in the tense body and he twisted around to watch Djuel move close to Spock's chest, suggesting, taunting until finally, he lunged at her.

Kirk stumbled backwards, off balance as the standpipe was wrenched a good five degrees off vertical. The Captain held his breath prayerfully as a rending protest deep inside the wall cut through the eerie silence. If something broke, it would activate an alarm, that would bring help.

But the screech died away without apparent effect.

Kirk shifted his weight and eyed Spock. The chains had held and Spock's shoulders had been wrenched back cruelly by his lunge. The pain had sobered him once more, and now he stood quietly surveying the Klingons through slitted eyes.

Djuel stood far back as if confronted by an enraged Denevian lythma. "I believe he would have killed me."

"Your mistake," said Kang, "was telling him about your role in the Kirton."

"I didn't tell..."

"You told enough." He ordered, "Kort, bring that light. Suhav, set up your tricorder to filter the light out... we don't want it to show on the final tape." He motioned his men forward, "Untie the earther and put him over there," he gestured toward the area they'd cleared of fallen cable, "but watch him. He's the hero type earther who knows how worthless his life is."

By the time the guards had Kirk unchained, Kort had returned with a compact hand projector no bigger than a man's forearm. Taking the projector, Kang ordered two more units dosage for Spock then turned to Djuel. "Over there beside Kirk now. Give it a good forty seconds for the tape. And, Captain, my men have Klingon disruptors, instantly lethal when desired, but a wound in the thigh or shoulder is slower than disembowelment, and more painful."

Kang motioned the guards away from Kirk to give Suhav an unobstructed view that showed only Kirk and Djuel alone in the dark. With a skill that surprised Kirk, she presented herself to be kissed, maneuvering with her back to Suhav so that Kirk was clearly identified while she remained anonymous except for her bared ears.

After a few seconds, Kirk found himself responding automatically and had to fight not to lose himself. He'd never been so adroitly seduced before and he found himself wondering how Spock had resisted her.

Finally, she broke the kiss and clung to him to whisper in his ear, as if she'd been reading his mind, "I was trained to handle human males, Captain. Would you congratulate my instructors?"

"Wholeheartedly."

Abruptly, she broke away from his arms and leaped back, crying out in what seemed genuine surprise. An instant later, Kirk was knocked over by a hundred sixty five pounds of Vulcan fury and then he was fighting for his life.
Dry fingers closed on Kirk's neck and his eyes bulged before he could get his knee up far enough to boost the Vulcan over his head. Then, momentarily, Spock's entire weight descended on Kirk's throat and he thought he was dead.

But, then the pressure vanished and Kirk rolled to his feet, crouching to face his crazed opponent. His only hope against that strength was his agility, if the drug would rob Spock of coordination as well as reason.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk saw Suhav dancing around trying to get a close shot of Spock's face. He was probably recording body-functions, too. Behind Suhav, Kang was pointing his light projector at Kirk, but there was no visible effect.

Suddenly, Spock was on him again. ignoring the threat of Kirk's fists and closing to envelop the human in a spine-snapping bear hug. Kirk could hear the joints cracking, bones grinding against one another, and a sudden pain lanced down his legs. He gouged savagely at the Vulcan's eyes, pushing his head back until he thought he would break Spock's neck.

But the relentless pressure on Kirk's back increased steadily. The drug had left Spock no interest in self-defense. The sacrifice of vision or life itself was trivial to him compared to success in this battle. Berserk was the only word Kirk could think of. Clearly, it was kill or be killed.

The Captain's back gave another searing protest and his unarmed combat instructor from the Academy whispered in his ear, and Kirk knew it was his only hope.

It would have to be a hard-driven knee to the groin, a blow that might be lethal. Kirk's whole being shrank from the savage tactic. He'd have to put his whole strength into it. He'd certainly get no second chance.

Laboriously, he shifted his weight onto his left leg, which was growing numb from the pressure on his back. In one last, desperate hope, Kirk drove his fingers into Spock's eyes. But it did no good. The crushing of his ribs had emptied his lungs and he was blacking out. "Spock," thought Kirk silently, "don't make me do this. I don't want to do this." He put all the anguish of his human emotions behind that plea while he concentrated all his strength into his right leg. It was a technique Spock had taught him while trying to teach him the nervepinch.

Suddenly, Kirk felt his left leg buckling. Now or never. He drove his knee up in a brutal attack. But instantly, he regretted it. Eye screwed tightly shut against the grinding agony in his back, Kirk waited for his knee to connect with soft tissue and crunch into hard bone.

But, then, the pressure on his back was gone and his left leg crumpled under him. His right knee met... thin air! Momentum carried him back and his skull cracked against the planks. He skidded into a pile of cables like a discarded rag doll.

Dazed, he peered into the darkness. Spock had thrown himself backwards to avoid the blow. His motion had been so abrupt that Suhav had been caught off guard. In what seemed to Kirk like surrealistic slow motion, the Vulcan ploughed into the reporter and the two figures tumbled in a graceless heap.

Kirk rubbed circulation back into his leg and the whole scene snapped back to normal tempo. In a flash, the Klingon guards were disentangling Suhav from Spock and setting the Vulcan back on his feet while the reporter retreated to a safe distance.

But, the kill crazed Vulcan lunged at the reporter, grabbing a handful of his tunic and nearly strangling him.

Swiftly, Kort moved in with his light projector and aimed it at the floor just within Spock's field of vision. Like an automaton, the Vulcan turned, led by the puddle of light, until it settled on Kirk again.

Then he heard the booming tattoo of running feet and abruptly he was smothered under Spock's weight again. They rolled and Kirk came up on top. He scrambled free and ran back into the cleared arena, searching the shadows for the onlookers.

The reporter was maneuvering for an angle that would include Djuel and the Captain. Kirk measured angles, estimated momentum and braced himself.

Spock leapt over the cables and charged the Captain. Kirk moved his right leg back to brace himself better, and took the impact with his arms against Spock's chest. He grabbed a double handful of blue velour and swung his whole body around in a shot-put wind-up that sent the Vulcan hurtling toward the line of spectators.
Spock crashed into Djuel carrying them both into Suhav. The reporter stumbled into Kort and the light projector sailed high into the vaulted shadows landing somewhere out of sight with a hollow clang.

Kang’s voice bellowed, “Kort, get him!”

But Kort wasn’t fast enough. Spock picked himself up, shook his head dazedly and dove at Kang who was obliged to dance back into the shadows while the other guards swarmed onto Spock.

Then Kirk joined the melee, elbows and knees flailing with telling accuracy. It felt more natural fighting with Spock instead of against him.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Captain saw Kort trying to aim a disruptor at Spock who was busy throttling Kang. Hastily, Kirk finished off another guard and waded toward Spock.

But before he'd taken two steps, a man in Star Fleet red came sailing out of the shadows landing squarely on Kort’s back.

A second red uniform followed, then another and a final one topped with shining blond hair. With a shrug, Kirk narrowed down his concentration to deal with the nearest Klingon. But for all his size, the guard was quick. He dodged the blow and launched a drop-kick that sent Kirk down among shuffling feet clad in steel toed black boots from which a forest of muscular legs writhed. Someone stepped on the Captain’s shoulder, grinding a boot heel into the aching joint and then stumbled away. Testily, Kirk fended off a Star Fleet boot that was descending towards his abdomen. The owner of the boot fell heavily to the planking beside Kirk and a white face turned toward him in the shadows. "Captain!"

Kirk gripped a Romulan leg and shoved it away, "Scotty! What took you so long?"

A limp Klingon body dropped out of nowhere and landed across the two Star Fleet officers, knocking the air out of both of them. A gangling, red shirted youth landed on top of the Klingon. Two blue clad arms reached down to pluck him off the pile and Kirk heard Spock’s voice, "A brilliant application of basic chess principles, Mr. McGlinitok."

As the feather weight youth was lifted, Kirk heard him say, "Chess, huh?"

"Klingons and Romulans versus the Federation. Chess is basically a war game."

"Oh. Oh, you mean... no, it wasn't my idea... it was S'Dak's..."

"He calculated the voltage?"

"Yes. I only rigged the pool controls to flood."

Kirk's back was damp. He pushed the Klingon body off his chest. "Scotty. S'Dak is a Romulan agent!"

"Not any more," said the Engineer. "He's going to..."

Abruptly, shock slammed through Kirk's body, stiffening every muscle, exploding in his head as his eyes bulged, a disruptor beam split the darkness, someone far away screamed, and the last thing Kirk knew before the darkness claimed him was the forest of stiffened bodies toppling on him, burying him.

Chapter Sixteen

Kirk sank deep into the chair, rocking gently to ease his strained back and admitted to himself that he was getting a bit old for sudden acrobatics. As he sipped the bright flavored Vulcan drink Amanda had provided, he felt he should be annoyed at McCoy for hovering behind his chair like a fussy mother Horta. But it was impossible to sustain jangling emotions while immersed in a Vulcan family reunion.

Even the argument Sarek and Spock were having around the viewscreen in the corner of the suite's main room was intense without being tense. It was a Vulcan argument; emphatic but devoid of any personal conflict. To a Vulcan, losing an argument was no disgrace but an occasion for rejoicing.

It was odd, reflected Kirk, the way such nuances only became apparent in total relaxation. His euphoria, he knew, was partly due to the analgesic Bones had given him and partly due to some subtle effect of the non-alcoholic but potent Vulcan drink.

The Captain's eye came to rest on Spock and Sarek, still bent head to head over the screen, apparently oblivious to the chairs Amanda had placed behind their knees. They'd been at it ever since he and Bones had arrived. For once, the humans had been punctual and the Vulcans unprepared for their dinner engagement. And the KirTohn Tsu' wouldn't wait. Still, the murmuring exchange continued like a chanted duet.
Amanda had cautioned them not to interrupt. Sarek was trying to determine whether Spock's behavior under the influence of the drug had been a violation of his Oath-Binding. As a Senior of the Vulcan Scientific Legion of Honor, Sarek was empowered to make an on the spot decision that would be respected. And it was, Amanda had assured them, a very difficult evaluation in spite of the fact that Spock had appeared before Larkin at the specified time.

The argument had ranged through the last thousand years of Vulcan Literature and now centered on challenging the interpretations of several well-established scholars.

From Kirk's viewpoint, Spock's behavior had been irreproachable. The Captain couldn't imagine the basis of the disagreement between father and son and he resolved that, as soon as his head floated back down from orbit, he'd go and tell them to forget the whole thing. Meanwhile, he would enjoy the languorous mood.

On the whole, the affair had turned out very well indeed. Ensign McClintok's propensity for chess had distracted him from catching the substitution of tetra-lubisol for penta-lubisol in the Deck Seven computer access panels as well as aboard the Shuttlecraft. The tetra-lubisol had caused the library computer to retain the recording Spock had analyzed and ordered erased.

Spock's square-wave broadcast from Kirk's communicator had been amplified by the seepage of pool water into the circuitry... thus attracting Scotty's attention.

Then, Spock's recording, together with the captured spies and their supply of drugs had cleared Sarek and alerted the authorities to the fomenting techniques of the infiltrators. Also, with Mara's gang of agile saboteurs out of the way, the M-IV levels would be habitable again in less than two days thus removing one more source of irritation.

The intricacies of cause and effect bemused Kirk's drugged mind. He could visualize the future scene in which Spock would chastise McClintok, over a chess board, naturally, for his failure to prevent the lubrication errors. The Vulcan was the only man aboard who could hold McClintok's attention long enough to drive a censure home. Kirk chuckled at the absorbing passions of youth. Then he grimaced at the shooting pains that lanced outward from his back and took another sip of his drink.

At length, McCoy accepted a drink from Amanda and settled down in a chair beside Kirk. Kirk sighed. That was a welcome relief. He could almost hear the repetitious liturgy in the doctor's head, "Back injuries can be serious. Jim isn't as young as he used to be. This is the third time he's injured his spine in three years. That numbness in the left leg bothers me..." over and over.

At long last, Spock straightened. "Yes, you've found it, Father. Grandfather told me about it, but I'd never seen it done before."

Deactivating the viewscreen, Sarek nodded, "I'd never have thought to search the original text. Brilliantly done, Spock."

"Thank you, Father. But the clarification would not be definitive were it not for your application of Surak's Fiftieth Lemma which revealed the composite nature..."

Amanda interrupted the post mortem, "Would My Husband care to reveal to me the Honor Status of our son?"

Sarek looked around as if suddenly aware there were others in the room. He blinked twice, then came toward the humans, hands behind his back as if about to face an audience. "My wife, it has been obvious for the last three hours that Spock retains his Legion Status. The problem has been to establish the fact with the maximum elegance."

"I see."

"Well, now," beamed McCoy, "I think that calls for a celebration."

The remark fell into the silence like a sour note at an Altairian concert.

Hands behind his back in unconscious imitation of his father, Spock looked down at Kirk and sniffed curiously. Abruptly, he took the glass from Kirk's hand, smelled it and then handed it to Sarek while accusing his mother with an unwavering gaze.

Sarek examined the contents of the glass and then handed it to Amanda, "You should not have..."

She took the glass, "But..."

Spock said, "Captain, I believe you've had enough tsurlitsh for one day. It is not something I would recommend for you." He turned to Amanda, "Perhaps the Captain would care for some purnvifh?"

Amanda looked from husband to son, but met only stern disapproval. "I don't understand, I thought..."

"You thought incorrectly. " Sarek assured her.
"If my judgment has been faulty, I must apologize. I'll bring the purnvifh." She retreated to the bar to dial
for the antidote to the mild stimulant of telepathic awareness.

"Tell me once again, Spock," said McCoy, "what you said to S'Dak that turned him inside-out like that. I don't
believe I've ever seen a man in such a state as he was when he ran into us..."

"Of course, you haven't seen a 'man' in such a state," said Spock, the lines of his face softening in a way that
bespoke a polite amount of amusement. "S'Dak is Vulcan. His previous actions were based on logical conclusions
drawn from a model of the situation as he saw it. When I pointed out the flaws in his model, he amended his position,
logically."

"But what was it exactly that you said?"

Spock recited the conversation verbatim, then added, "He understood there was an Oath-Binding on me that was
about to be violated. I might have phrased it differently had I been in full control of myself, but apparently, the phrasing
was effective."

McCoy shook his head appreciatively, "Amazingly effective. Do you think the Federation authorities will press
charges against him?"

Sarek said, "I doubt it. Ssarsam tells me that the Jurisprudence Committee indicates they are going to adopt the
'Telepathic Evidence Clause' and that most members are favorably disposed toward the 'Cultural Values Amendment'.
I believe the literal enforcement of the current laws will be suspended for the interim. S'Dak's only serious problem
will be with the Cunard murder."

Kirk said, "It would be unprecedented. even unconstitutional. to allow ex-post-facto..."

"Indeed it would," agreed Spock: "but then it is the Constitution which is under reform because it is as riddled
with injustice as are Star Fleet Regulations."

"I'm beginning to see that," said Kirk. "but should we believe everything the Klingons and Romulans tell us?"

Sarek settled himself in a chair across from Kirk, "We should be grateful to our enemies for pointing out our
weaknesses. What is the function of an adversary if not to search out inadequacies?"

McCoy chuckled and waved his glass at Spock, "Now I know where you get it. At least you come by it naturally."

Pulling a veil of angelic purity over his face, Spock seated himself opposite McCoy.

When Amanda returned with Kirk's new drink, Sarek handed it to him,"I would advise you to drink it down
quickly, Captain. The flavor may not please you, but I assure you it will do you no harm."

McCoy intercepted the blue crystal goblet and sniffed. "If you don't mind, Mr. Ambassador, I'd like to reserve
the right to prescribe for my patients." Wrinkling his nose at the smell, McCoy held the glass at arm's length, "What
is it?"

Spock answered, "Purnvifh. Doctor, is certified for human consumption by the Federation Medical Association
whereas tsurlitsh is not, mainly because of certain side effects." He gestured toward the viewscreen. "You may check
that if you wish."

Reluctantly, McCoy handed the glass to Kirk who tossed down the pale blue liquid holding his breath against the
pungent fumes. Being a Vulcan concoction, it could hardly contain slimy sea creatures and rotting skunk. It was just
his brain associating strange odors with familiar ones.

"Spock," said McCoy, "do you have any idea why that light beam caused you to attack Jim?"

"I don't remember anything after they untied the Captain and led him away..."

McCoy hopped on that, "Isn't that rather unusual? Hysterical amnesia isn't a Vulcan..."

Sarek said, "Such amnesia is not entirely unknown, Doctor. There have been drugs tested in the laboratory
that suppress the brain's ability to record permanent memories. Such drugs have side effects not unlike those both
Spock and I experienced."

"But," said Amanda, "you didn't seem drugged."

"If I'd known about it, I'd have been able to throw off the effect sooner."

"When," asked McCoy, "did you begin to catch on?"
"Only after the dose I received in KirTohn Tsu'. Before that there was nothing unnatural."

"But the blacklight effect?" McCoy persisted.

"That was an ingenious exercise in misdirection," said Spock. "When they put me under the mind-sifter, ostensibly to determine how many copies of the recording I'd made, they really implanted the conditioning that made me respond to the light. I've expunged the last vestige of that from my mind, but it was no easy task."

"I hope you've been thorough!" said McCoy. "I'll be sure to check that out before I certify you for duty."

Spock turned to Sarek, "Father, the Klingons may have stumbled on something important there. I've a theory that the common Parent Race we share with the Romulans came from a planet of an F-type sun. The salient clue is in the perception sensitivity curve of the Vulcan eye compared to the Romulan, and especially in the inner lid reflex." His words began to tumble over one another until he slipped into Vulcanir.

Listening, Kirk remembered his own father with deep affection. Between them had been an easy-going kind of love that the adult Jim Kirk had learned was very rare. Until recently, he'd been baffled by the closeness of the Vulcan family bonded, somehow, without emotion. But now he could see his First Officer come alive under Sarek's guidance in a way that transformed him from the coldly reserved Science Officer into a small boy eager for a weekend fishing trip with his father.

Slowly, as the purmvifh took effect, Kirk found himself again on the outside looking in and he began to realize how his friendship with his First Officer had transformed the meaning of the word, Vulcan, for him.

If the rest of the Federation was still thinking in the terms he had grown up with, Kirk mused, they were missing nine-tenths of the reality of Vulcan. And if that were true for Vulcans, who were nearly human, it must be even more true for other races. It was a miracle that the Federation had lasted this long.

But there would be great changes made before he retired. There would be fleets of starships named by non-humans, scores of new regulations. He hoped he'd retire before things got too complicated. But, he figured he had another ten years left if his back didn't give out. He could still take the Enterprise out on one more map-and-explore mission...
SSarsun's Argument

Kraith IF

Jacqueline Lichtenberg

PREFACE:

SSARSUN'S ARGUMENT takes place in the Kraith Series between Kraith I, Spock's Affirmation and Kraith II, Spock's Mission. The lead character in this story, SSarsun, was an important subordinate character in Kraith I, where we first met him. He is a Schillian, one of the newer members of the UFP.

The Schillians are trisexual, reptilian-like amphibians who are fully telepathic. Their normal mental state includes a constant telepathic contact with another telepath. Deprived of this sensory input, they suffer hallucinations, and eventually, insanity and death. They are humanoid in appearance, scaley-skinned, thick necked, with webbed fingers (vestigial, really), and 'gill slips' located at the join of neck and shoulder. The underwater breathing apparatus is termed 'gill' only by vague analogy. They retain a small amount of the mildly saline seawater in their lungs to moisten the 'gill' apparatus while living dry. Periodic immersion in good breathing water is a must for health. The Schillians are noted for fiery temper and unbridled emotional display. They are apt to become violently offended by any mention of gender identity, and all three sexes prefer to be called 'he' as a matter of formality.

Kraith I was the story of the consequences of the theft of an important Vulcan artifact, the Kraith. The Kraith Series continues to explore outgoing ripples of those consequences. "SSarsun's Argument" is only the beginning of one line of exploration. With help from the Kraith Creator's, we should have many more stories about SSarsun.
Admiral Pesin spread his fingers flat on the recessed desk-screen before him. The lighted screen turned his hands a translucent red, the red of blood --- the red of --- guilt? He drew a deep breath and fixed his eyes on the transporter plate centered in the floor on the other side of his desk. In the years since he'd moved into this office, he'd never had to face anything quite so distasteful.

It was politics, he told himself, just filthy, dirty politics and nothing to concern a military man. He was in charge of an outlying border region. The infighting among Federation Council Members was none of his business.

They had made the decision, but he would have to implement it. It would be his hands soiled, not theirs.

He would have to face that Schillian.

The warning chime sounded and the image began to build before the desk. In seconds the iridescent splinters coalesced into the stocky, uniformed Schillian. Pesin waved him to a seat. He saw no point in "breaking the news gently" to a telepath. He said, "Ssarsun, your request for transfer from Starfleet Security to Starfleet Command has been denied."

The Schillian didn't even blink. Pesin couldn't read the Schillian face for expression, but he could perceive the disappointment as if it were his own. After a long pause, the lizard-like mouth opened and the crisply cultured voice said in flawless English, "Yes, Sir."

Pesin cleared his throat. "You have, however, been promoted from Lieutenant Commander to Full Commander in the Starfleet Security." He couldn't bring himself to add the traditional congratulations.

"Thank you, Sir."

Pesin paused. He'd expected the man to submit his resignation on the spot. It was an awkward moment that stretched into embarrassment.

Ssarsun broke the silence. "Ordinarily, I would seriously consider resigning. However, I believe the Admiralty will rectify its error given time. I would like an opportunity to demonstrate that I do have the requisite... temperament for command."

Pesin found the oddly stilted, Vulcan phrasing of the Schillian somehow both reassuring and disturbing. Schillians were noted as the most unpredictably emotional species in the Federation. Ssarsun's restraint was somehow unnatural. Pesin said, "You and I both know it's prejudice, Commander. You can't argue against prejudice."

"Begging the Admiral's pardon..."

"Go ahead."

"Sir, I don't think they act out of prejudice, exactly. At least not in the classic sense. There is a great deal of fear involved in this decision. Some of it is legitimate fear, and it is possible to argue that out of existence. I would like to try."

"You'll get that chance, Commander." He flicked his viewer to the next item. "You have been assigned to command the Security Convoy which will accompany the Federation Council's Commission which is investigating the theft of the Kraith. There will be three Council Members on that Commission plus a number of very important people representing various governments and interests. The Vulcans have already assembled an investigating commission of their own under one of their Chief Envoys, Stovam. You must know his reputation?"

"For thoroughness? Yes."

"I wouldn't call it thoroughness, exactly. A human who was that meticulous would be classed as a compulsive neurotic, or worse."

"It's considered a normal and admirable trait in a Vulcan. That's why some Vulcans consider most humans... hmmm, scatterbrained, like a computer with randomized gates."

Pesin harumphed in the time honored tradition of the discomfited bureaucrat and returned to his subject. "Yes, well, the furor among the nonhumans over the theft of the Kraith is enough to make the internal security of the Federation's Investigatory Commission a nightmare by any species' standards. And, as if that weren't enough, the Commissioners are planning to travel out toward the Neutral Zone to go over the territory step by step themselves!"

Pesin paused. Ssarsun would have nodded had his thick, reptillian neck allowed the gesture. Instead he blinked all his eyelids in succession. For the instant that both the Schillian's eyes were closed, Pesin allowed himself a grimace. They both knew that the officer responsible for security on such an expedition was more likely to be court martialed or at least cashiered by the time the dust settled. Something violent was bound to happen. Ssarsun would take the blame.

The Admiral shoved a stack of tapes toward the Schillian. "It's all here. Good luck, Commander."
Sarsun rose, collected the tapes, and moved to the transporter pad. "Thank you, Sir."

"Dismissed," said Pesin.

Sarsun shook out a communicator. A moment and he was gone as quietly as he had come. Pesin stared at the empty space.

* * *

Commander Sarsun, Starfleet Security marched the length of the pearl gray corridor of the specially built Federation Council Cruiser, Oritz. The last of the Commissioners had beamed aboard and now the ship's Captain was preparing to break orbit. Sarsun was well satisfied with the ship itself. The Cruiser had been constructed to house and transport important personages. She was fast, roomy, and armed to the nacelles with enough defensive top secrets to outlast a siege. The special accommodations for Internal Security were the most streamlined, modern facilities he'd ever worked with. There was only one thing left that bothered his thorough-going mind. And he would have the Captain correct that in a few minutes.

He rounded a corner and swung into Briefing Room Three where he would meet with the Captain. The door whizzed open. Sarsun stopped short on the threshold. A human would have gaped in surprise.

The two Schillians rose from the chairs turning to face him. Slowly, as if melting out of a fear-stance, Sarsun advanced into the room so the door could shut behind him. "Your pardon. I did not realize the room was occupied."

The nearer of the two groped for a telepathic link. Sarsun shied back for a moment, then allowed a surface contact. (( I am Zimr. We work for Councilor Valdai. //

//Known.// answered Sarsun guardedly.

The other one, identifying himself as Itn, probed Sarsun's guard. //With whom are you now linked? You were to form with us, no so?//

Zimr said, //He's isolate; I feel it.//

//True.// admitted Sarsun. //I am Vulcan trained and can tolerate isolation for short periods.//

The two Schillians exchanged amazed glances, then Sarsun felt their minds join, holding open a place in their meld-net for him. He felt the trembling compassion in that offer. The two were shaken to their very core beings. Their emotions resonated, reinforcing one another until together they were imploring him to come into their meld, to share their perceptions.

Their intensity instantly repelled Sarsun. In a flash, he perceived that these two were lovers. Together, they would form a triad, and that was the last thing Sarsun wanted with these two strangers. Deeply shaken, he barricaded his mind against them, saying aloud, "A moment, please."

His rejection threw the pair into confusion, their offer disintegrating until it was a mere shadow. Itn moved to stand beside Zimr as if seeking security in the other's strength. Zimr said, //He hallucinates. We shall have to take him.//

The two moved as One toward Sarsun who stood paralyzed in the middle of the floor. As their arms reached out to embrace him, Sarsun managed to speak. "That... won't... be necessary."

They paused and he continued, "The Vulcan's disciplines I use to retain sanity during isolation require a period of adjustment before entering a meld. I am ready now." He knew he had to do it. He could not live without the telepathic contact. He cursed Starfleet and himself for the circumstance that had brought him into dependence on these two. He had no business in trying to complete a love-meld. He'd left too much of his soul on Vulcan.

More cautiously this time, the invitation was extended again. He allowed their surface contact to grow and deepen while he showed them carefully through his conscious mind. With a mechanical precision that startled the pair, Sarsun opened the channel to his perceptual centers and began to draw upon their perceptions of reality to balance his own. He had no business in trying to complete a love-meld. He'd left too much of his soul on Vulcan.

More cautiously this time, the invitation was extended again. He allowed their surface contact to grow and deepen while he showed them carefully through his conscious mind. With a mechanical precision that startled the pair, Sarsun opened the channel to his perceptual centers and began to draw upon their perceptions of reality to balance his own. He had to admit it was a relief. He'd been isolate only a matter of minutes. He wasn't drunk enough to stand it very much longer. In fact, the encounter with the others' raw emotions had sobered him unpleasantly.

He let them understand his feelings in the matter, and then systematically closed them out of his conscious mind. He knew he was hurting them. Their disappointment was almost tangible. "Please try to understand. I was raised outside the large meld nets of Schillia. I can't tolerate an open-meld."

//We grieve for you.// The sadness that overlay that simple statement overwhelmed Sarsun like a palpable wave. Sudden dizziness overtook him, but before his knees could collapse, Zimr's arms were about him.
In spun a chair around and Zimr carried Ssarsun to it. The Starfleet Commander had to admit, privately to himself, that Zimr's strength felt good. That goodness was amplified into something frighteningly intense by In's gentle fingers stroking his gill slips. Suddenly, he ached to swim with these two.

At that moment, the door flew open admitting Captain Rifflard and Federation Council Member Keith Valdai of the Conreid Stars. The two humans had their heads together, Rifflard in patient attendance and Valdai arguing earnestly. "So you see, Captain, we must provide swimming facilities for him, even if he is the only Ziturian aboard. And I'm sure the Schillians would be only too glad to breathe water for a change."

"Councillor, you shouldn't have brought a Ziturian clerk. Certainly, you could have found a human to..."

At that moment, they spotted the trio near the table. The two humans stopped dead in the doorway. There was no mistaking the nature of the scene before them, and Schillians were notoriously sensitive about such things. The Captain was outraged, petrified, and embarrassed all at once. Valdai recovered first, moving into the room to let the door close. "I hope we are not intruding, gentlemen. Zimr, I don't believe I've met the Commander."

Zimr and In rose. "Councillor, this is Ssarsun, Chief of Security."

Valdai gave a formal bow, "My pleasure, Sir."

In said, addressing the Captain as well as Valdai, "The Commander suffered a brief attack of vertigo due to our clumsiness in establishing a meld with him."

Ssarsun rose, stepping away from the pair. "I'm quite all right, now. Captain, I'd like a word with you, please."

"Certainly." He looked expectantly at Valdai. The Councillor said, "Zimr, I'd like you and In to inform Frei that the swimming facility will be rigged down in the Engineering gym as soon as the Chief Engineer gets around to it. Tell him it won't be long. And maybe you'd better stay with him a while. He's feeling rather bad. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, Sir," said Zimr, and the two Schillians departed.

The Captain cleared his throat meaningfully, but Valdai said, "As ranking member of the Council present, and head of this investigation, I think I should hear your Security Chief's report."

Rifflard moved to the head of the table, obviously reluctant to admit a civilian to his privvy council. Stubbornly, the Councillor took a seat at the side of the table apparently prepared to stay a while. Ssarsun decided he liked this man.

"Captain, if you don't mind, I think Councillor Valdai should hear this."

Rifflard suppressed a squirm by sitting ramrod straight in his chair. He was a short, wiry dark-skinned man with a fringe of white hair around his shiny pate. He knew he either had to reject his Senior Officer's advice and throw the Councillor out, or take the advice and allow the man to stay. He couldn't argue in front of an outsider.

"Very well. Commander, proceed."

"Captain, Councillor. My report is very short. The ship is functioning perfectly. The crew has been screened and double checked and rated reliable. The passengers are, at least for the moment, refraining from killing each other..."

That last brought an appreciative chuckle from the Councillor.

"...and that brings us to the one item which I would like to see amended, the course."

"The course?"

"Yes, sir. As it stands, we will be passing through a region of space which I cannot rate as secure." He touched controls and the triangular screen on the table lit up with a schematic of their course, arrowing straight for the Neutral Zone and the last known location of the Kraith, before it had been recovered by the Enterprise. He touched another control and a portion of the course line was encircled in a red glow. "This area...I don't trust it. During the last fifty years, three ships have mysteriously disappeared between here," an 'X' appeared, and then another 'X', "and here."

"Certainly," said the Captain. "The Romulans have been known to raid that deeply into our territory. No mystery. They haven't done it lately though. The last ship to disappear in there was five years ago."

"Nevertheless, I don't like it, sir. It has been so long since one of those disappearances that I suspect another is due any time now. We would do well to skirt the area, so." He put another line on the schematic, looping around the zone.
"That would require another three days travel time. Out of the question." Rifflard was firm.

"Captain," said Valdai, "I think we can afford a few days if it will increase the safety factor." The moment he said it, he realized his mistake. So did Sarsun who shot him a look which the Councillor knew all too well.

As a matter of form, Rifflard pursed his lips and pretended to consider the advice. Then he rose. "Thank you, gentlemen. We will continue on course as selected." Without waiting for comment, Rifflard took himself out the door.

For a moment, the two remaining men looked at one another. Sarsun raised both layers of eyelids and gazed steadily at the Councillor. At length he said, "Entropy is a vector quantity."

Valdai looked surprised. "That's a Vulcan saying. Book of Sources."

"Correction. Book of Fragments. I just hope we don't end up in fragments."

"Not many off-worlders know the Vulcan Books."

"I was raised on Vulcan. You have an excuse?"

"I'm of Dorn extraction. Trained on Vulcan."

//Then you should have known better than to needle the Captain.//

After a pause, Valdai said, "Most people usually have some reaction to that announcement, if only, 'I didn't realize you were a telepath.'"

Sarsun eyed the human carefully. "Ah, I see. You don't receive."

"That's right. Half-deaf telepathically. They taught me not to project and let me go home. Didn't Itz and Zimr tell you?"

"Didn't get around to it."

"They're a nice pair. Think you'll like them when you get to know them. They like you. I can tell."

"You'd better not tell, if you want to keep them on your staff."

"I didn't mean it that way! I wouldn't..."

"Sorry. Just joking."

Valdai chuckled. "Needn't apologize. Aren't any Vulcans aboard."

"Correction. I'm Vulcan. At least I'm more Vulcan than Schillian---sometimes."

"But not all the time!" The glint in Valdai's eye was unmistakable even to a psi-blind. He was the only Federation Council Member whose staff consisted entirely of nonhumans. He was known as something of an eccentric among his peers, but he had gained an intimate knowledge of the habits of all races of the Federation. He'd known Itz and Zimr had been frustrated for lack of a third, a kind of frustration no bisexual race could ever understand. He also could tell the three Schillian sexes apart.

"That is a private matter." Sarsun rose. "Live Long and Prosper, Kieth Valdai."

Valdai rose, "Wait a moment. Please don't take offense."

Sarsun paused. "A Schillian would not be offended, Councillor."

"A Vulcan would. I apologize. You are a most unusual person."

"I choose to regard that as a compliment to my race."

"A very Vulcan attitude, I would say. Tell me," he said moving up beside the Schillian and strolling casually toward the door in open invitation, "why are you in Starfleet?"

"A deceptively simple question, Councillor." Sarsun tacitly accepted the invitation to walk a ways together. "I usually say because I prefer it."

"There aren't many Schillians who would."
"No, indeed, there are not. So I am doubly needed here."

"Security is a natural career for a Schillian, I would suppose, but don't you find it difficult to find a... telepathic contact always available?"

"Occasionally."

"Isn't that a handicap in Starfleet?"

"Not in Security."

"You are a full Commander. As far as I know, no Schillian has ever risen higher, in fact, very few telepaths have."

"I am well aware of that, Sir."

Something in the Schillian's tone prompted Valdai to say, "You've encountered prejudice lately?"

"Of a sort. The Admiralty refused my request for transfer to Starfleet Command."

"You want to be a ship's Captain?"

"There have been very very few nonhumans on Starfleet's Admiralty. I think it will soon be time. They do not agree. There the matter rests."

"Except they've given you this assignment." It was obvious the politician recognized how precarious Ssarsun's position aboard the Ortiz really was.

"And if you'll excuse me, Councillor, I really do have a great deal of work to do."

"Peace and Long Life, Ssarsun."

Routine finally caught up with Ssarsun the next morning as the ship's Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Stimson, called him in for his physical. He entered the overly elaborate sickbay with tired resignation. "Good morning, Doctor."

"I don't know about that. This place is more like the scene of a massive panic than a good morning."

Ssarsun looked around at the facility. The duty personnel were busy processing the passengers' health records. A ship designed to cater to hoards of high-ranking dignitaries of assorted physiologies was necessarily possessed on an oversized, overstaffed sickbay. "Doctor, until you've seen a panic on Vulcan, you haven't seen a panic."

Stimson cocked his head at the Schillian, a quizzical smile playing the corner of his mouth. He was a gray haired, fiftyish man with a well seasoned face to match his well traveled personality. "I rather doubt the Vulcans would treat an off-worlder to such a sight."

"I rather doubt that an off-worlder would have the sense to know what he was seeing, Doctor."

Stimson snorted good naturedly. "Jump up here on the bed and we'll get you started on the exercise machine," he said. Getting Ssarsun winded would be the only way to keep him from a continuing stream of improbable comments on Vulcan life. Every trip that Ssarsun made with the Ortiz gave Stimson a new inventory of 'facts' to wonder about. But at the moment, he was more concerned about Schillians than about Vulcans.

In due course, he had Ssarsun on the BCP analyser with the medical computer hooked in. He said, "Now, can you tell me what I'm going to have for lunch today?"

The tracing etched on the screen shifted as Ssarsun groped for a link with Stimson's mind. The computer identified the overlay of Stimson's BCP elements and then shifted and blurred as Ssarsun attempted to search Stimson's future. The tracings appeared normal to Stimson, but Ssarsun said, "Uncertainty factor too large. Why do you always fix on something so trivial that it can have any number of interchangeable outcomes? I can tell you for sure you will eat lunch, but that's about all."

"Gee, thanks, but you don't have to bite my head off. I just wanted to check the Brain Functions patterns for the record."

"Sorry. I don't intend to have your head for lunch."

The multi-ordinal joke caused the BCP tracing to blur as Ssarsun associated across a number of different cultures. It was laughter reflected on the Doctor's screen. When it cleared, the overlay of Stimson's BCP pattern was gone. Ssarsun had broken the telepathic link without being told. He didn't usually do that. In fact, thought Stimson, Ssarsun didn't usually strain so hard at his humor. "Ssarsun, what's eating you? Why so touchy?"
"Who, me? I'm fine."

"Then, who isn't fine?"

"There are no medical problems that I know of. That's your department, isn't it, Doctor?"

Stimson released the Schillian. "Now, that sounded like a typical Vulcan put down. Translation: 'I wish outsiders would learn to mind their own business,' right?"

Suddenly serious, Ssarsun hitched himself onto a bed and let his feet dangle as he observed the human doctor. "Vulcans aren't the only people who place a high regard on privacy."

"Schillians define privacy a little differently, though, don't they?"

"Yes, but..."

"...but," interrupted Stimson, "either way you define it, a man's got to be honest with his physician. Sometimes painfully honest. Ssarsun," Stimson said, tapping the screen on which the cranial circuitry pattern had been displayed, "there was something here that a Schillian physician would have recognized, but which I missed."

Eyes hooded, Ssarsun was silent.

"Look, we've been friends for quite a while. If I'd been on that Admiralty Board, I'd have voted for your transfer to Command, because I think you'd make a damn good captain. And I'm not usually wrong about people... all different kinds of people. But, Ssarsun, even a captain has to be honest with his physician."

"What makes you so sure I'm not being honest?"

"Hell, you know."

"I don't pry into other people's minds, Doctor. If you want me to know something, you must tell me."

Stimson's deeply lined face went stoney. "All right. I can do arithmetic. I can even add a little. Point One: the three of you could form a triad if you chose. Point Two: anxiety readings sky high on all three to exactly the same value. Point Three: not one of you can predict more than an hour into the future. Point Four: BCP pattern shows a very tenuous connection between you and Zimr-Inn with a very strong connection between Zimr and Inn. You're holding out on them, and it is ruining the pre-cognizant abilities of all of you. Now that might not add up to a medical problem, but it looks like a psychological problem in the offering. I can't certify you fit for duty if there's any chance you'd be hallucinating from sensory deprivation."

"You know that's nonsense. I can get along on far less."

"I've seen you. But what about Zimr and Inn?"

"They have each other."

"So they do, but they evidently require more."

"Doctor, your statements do not follow any logical thread of argument. First you are threatening to remove me from duty because I might be hallucinating, and then you are threatening to remove me from duty because Zimr and Inn might be hallucinating. That just does not make sense."

Stimson threw up his hands. "Vulcans!"

"All right, as long as we're being Vulcan today, let's just state that it is a private matter which your intervention cannot resolve. There is no effect which interferes with the performance of my duties."

"Except as a predictor you're not worth a copper credit."

"Precognition is not an officially recognized duty. True, with a broader meld-net as a base, we could probe farther into the future with greater resolution of detail. However, there are no standards of performance governing precognition, and I know my own margins of error well enough to not call a danger that doesn't exist. You have no choice but to certify me fit for duty."

Stimson sighed. He knew when to quit. But he promised himself he'd keep an eye on the three of them.

For the next several days, Ssarsun managed to avoid Inn and Zimr. His feelings toward the pair were sharply mixed. On the one hand, his sympathy for their longing verged on genuine anguish. On the other, his aversion to the
wide-band rapport they instantly demanded produced an overriding panic in his heart. The average Schillian raised among the huge group-melds on the home planet would thrive on such total telepathic contact. Ssarsun's childhood on Vulcan had never included more than five or six way melds among visiting Schillians, and those were always distantly formal contacts by comparison with what In and Zimr demanded of him.

As a result, whenever he met the pair, Ssarsun made sure he was not left alone with them. He used every bit of the discipline he'd learned on Vulcan to keep their probes out of his inner mind. This, of course, confused and tormented the couple, until inevitably, late one evening, Ssarsun's luck ran out.

The Chief Engineer had rigged a small immersion unit, barely large enough to exercise swimming muscles, but at least filled with nonchlorinated, mildly saline water. It was a tasteless odorless liquid nothing like the warm green seas of Schillia, but at least it was devoid of the pervasive human stench that filled the ship.

Long hours juggling emergencies had left Ssarsun precious little time to himself. By the time he reached the tank, his gills were aflame from the dessicating air. Stripping off the red shirt and black pants of his Starfleet uniform, he emptied his lungs and sank into the water gratefully letting the fluid tease his enflamed gill slits open.

He basked in the current from the oxygenating pump, surprised at the trembling in his body. He hadn't realized how far he'd exceeded the fatigue limits. The world would just have to get along without him for a while. Before he knew it, he was asleep.

The dreams that flowed through his mind like the water through his gills left little trace of their passage save to strengthen and revitalize a mind gone numb and bruised. Gradually, after several hours, the dreams began to focus and collect around a central theme—Vulcan. That hellishly dry planet with the desperately logical people and their peculiar culture, tshaichran... Stone walls of age proven tradition;

Guarding;
Deep valleys of quiet serenity;
Thrusting;
Crystalline towers of thought;
Growing, reaching, yearning, grappling to the stars.

He saw Vulcan's throbbing, ruby sky arched over a gem encrusted, glittering planet where each person was a lonely pylon isolated in a desert. The image was so bleak it suddenly seemed hostile. The glittering, hard, unyielding Vulcans, unknowable in their cherished privacy were transformed before his eyes from trustworthy understandable friend to unpredictable, potential enemy.

The weird, insideout negative vision shocked him to full wakefulness. Above him, the silver surface of the water parted to admit the sleek arrowing form of Zimr. The sight cleared the last webs of sleep from Ssarsun's mind. He identified the delicate probes which the other Schillian had inserted into his mind as he slept turning his dreams to nightmare.

With a shudder of revulsion, he excised those tendrils and triumphantly watched the other falter in his descent as the shock hit him. Instantly, Ssarsun regretted his callous act. He gathered himself and went to the other's assistance, opening his mind to help support his fellow Schillian. Sensory deprivation was a familiar torture to Ssarsun, something he could take in stride when need be. Most Schillians, however, were far more sensitive. //Zimr. I did not mean to hurt you, but only to protect myself.//

//We would not harm you.// Slowly his physical reaction abated, yet Zimr still clung to Ssarsun.

//Nor I, you, intentionally.// Preparing to surface, Ssarsun tried to extricate himself from Zimr's grasp.

//Then, don't go. Put an end to this. Now.//

//I...can't...help...you...//

//You can if you will it.// The older Schillian grasped Ssarsun's hand spreading the fingers to compare the hue of the gossamer webbings. The bluish tinge of sexual maturity was clearly visible in Ssarsun's tissues, though for him it hadn't yet spread to his body scales as it had for Zimr.

The physical evidence forcibly displayed before his eyes, Ssarsun had no defense from the throbbing plea of the other's thoughts. Their eyes met, bare of all protective lids. //Ssarsun, we do not demand any permanent commitment of you. For us, time is short, but you have many years yet. Help us now, and we will find another when we get home. But we will never forget you.//

He did not say it, but the implication lay there, plain for Ssarsun to read. He was Schillian enough to feel that they would be right in that. He could see it in Zimr's scales, now that the other's hand lay on his for comparison. Zimr could hardly have been any bluer and still be scale gray enough to be alive!

//You should not have come. You should have gone home. Valdai would have let you.//
IIt would have been all right if you had not completed our triad and then refused us. //

/I cannot...complete. I never offered to.///

//You did not need to offer. Your beauty offers for you. We look upon you, and we live for the first time. Deny us, and we will never live again.//

//Life continues, even for the neutered,// replied Ssarsun.

Instantly, Zimr clamped down hard on Ssarsun’s hand and his mind simultaneously isolating Itn from Ssarsun’s attempt at logical cheer. //Don’t. Itn fears being left neutered and childless by the passing of the blue. You have years yet to make that choice. Our time is now. Help us before it is too late.//

Ssarsun did not fear the passing of the blue. He had always seen it as his inevitable role. In fact, it would be a relief when he was no longer a potential mate, and he wished it to come to him as soon as possible. Helping them meant delaying that time, and making it harder to accept when it came. Yet he was Schillian. His guts knew the desperate drive to delay that passing as long as possible. His Vulcan outlook made it seem criminal for him to deny others the right of parenthood. His Schillian emotions surged through his body swamping out his mind.

A human would have sobbed in anguish.

Ssarsun broke away from the stronger Schillian, striking for the surface with such speed that he hit air before closing his gill slits properly. He flushed water and drew air with a lung wracking cough that drove him to his knees on the edge of the tank. Delicate hands closed about him, soothing the spasms of his gill slits with their moist webs.

He looked up into the veiled eyes of Itn. Never had he seen such beauty. Moments before, they had been his enemies forcing him to act against his will. Now, suddenly, his will was theirs. He found his hands moving to the join of neck and shoulder, seeking Itn’s gill slits.

They drew together, mouth to gill slits, tongues flicking, exploring delicately in tune with the exquisitely painful dilations. Zimr joined them, first mentally then physically. Though his state of arousal was already well ahead of theirs, he did not hurry them for fear of frightening Ssarsun. At first, he tried to confine the mental rapport to the areas Ssarsun had already revealed. But then, gradually, as the internal and external dilations reached maximum, Zimr began reaching deeper into Ssarsun’s guarded mind. Before long, Zimr had begun forcing Ssarsun into the deeper, sustained meld they had been demanding of him.

But that was a mistake. He hit a memory-area that had been under a privacy block, and it sent an electrifying shock through all three of them. Ssarsun rolled away from them, tried to regain his feet, slipped and fell back into the pool. He sank like a stone, curled into a ball.

It was several minutes before Zimr and Itn, clutching each other for support, could catch their breaths. When the spasms caused by the severed contact had subsided, they brought Ssarsun back to the surface and coaxed him out of his fear. //Come back to us, Ssarsun. I promise I won’t do that again.//

//You couldn’t help it. But I can’t stand it. This is not for me!//

//Ssarsun,// said Itn with the persuasiveness of his gender, //can you find it within your power to leave us now? We will not hurt you again. We will be very careful, because we don’t want that to happen again.// As he went on in that vein, he moved closer to Ssarsun.

Already sensitized, Ssarsun responded strongly. Lulled by their promises to respect his mental privacy, he found his barriers softening as his private orifice began to dilate once more. When the membrane sealing Ssarsun’s orifice had been completely exposed, Zimr quickly parted him from Itn’s grasp and gently lowered him to the deck.

Before the dilation could begin to relax, Zimr had the membrane parted and the throbbing organ released. What could have been a long and painful process in less experienced hands evinced only an inarticulate hiss from Ssarsun, his delirium scarcely disturbed.

Zimr wasted no time relieving Ssarsun of the precious genetic material. Itn parted them, demanding his rights from Zimr and received them in full measure while Ssarsun rolled aside helpless in the long ecstasy of the retraction phase. Zimr’s skill was evidenced again as he brought the three of them to a simultaneous climax that left nothing to be desired. Afterwards, Zimr lay between them, an arm around each. The dilations had been total. It took a long time for the orifices to close to decent invisibility again. Together, their minds rode the lazy surf of the Schillian coast, their thoughts turned naturally to predicting their mutual future.

The shock that hit the three of them then made what Ssarsun had done to them earlier seem like a pleasure. They sat up as one, eyes unveiled in dismay---there was no future!

Ssarsun’s withdrawal from that three-way rapport was a conditioned reflex that was to save his life, and the lives of all aboard the Ortiz. As the other two Schillians reached forward into that blank which was not merely their own
deaths, but the absence of any whisper of the Schillian meld-nets - the almost subliminal presence that pervaded all space no matter how far from Schillian - Ssarsun slammed down his Vulcan trained barriers and extricated his mind from theirs and from that horrid knowledge that lurked just moments away.

His orifice not yet properly closed, the lassitude still gripping him, he forced himself to rise and move swiftly. He squirmed into his uniform, pausing only a moment when the coarse cloth rasped across delicate, exposed tissues. The alarm thrilling his nerves made that sensation painful instead of erotic. He ignored it.

When he burst onto the bridge, everything seemed quietly normal. None of the humans sensed anything amiss. The Captain was in his command chair, Valdai standing beside him talking softly. Even though the bridge was smaller than that of a Starship, the Councillor's voice did not carry to the crew working the boards around the perimeter. The main viewscreen showed star-studded space apparently devoid of any menace.

Ssarsun strode directly to the command chair and confronted the Captain without formality. "Sir, this ship is in grave danger!"

Surprised, the Captain said, "Of what, Mister?"

"I don't know, Sir. But we've seen it. It's bad, and very close."

Valdai said, "Premonition, Ssarsun?"

"Yes, Sir. Captain, get this ship off this course before it's too late!"

Instead, the Captain turned to his Science Officer, "Walton, a sensor scan."

"Just completed, Captain. Negative. There's nothing out there but space and stars."

Rifflard swung his chair around and shrugged at Ssarsun. Then he said, "Helmaman, deflectors on full. Actuate all defensive hardware."

"Deflectors on. Defensive systems... armed!"

Rifflard looked to Ssarsun, "Better?"

"No, Sir. Change course."

"No, Councillor. I'm afraid they are incapacitated for the moment." He turned to the Captain. "Sir, this is bad whatever it is. Zimr and Itn are only civilians. Their fear reaction has them paralyzed. I'm asking you for the last time... change...!"

In mid-sentence, Ssarsun choked off a gasp, all eyelids peeling back in stark terror. He fell to the deck, spinning the command chair around backwards with his weight. Before Rifflard had time to react, time seemed to stop them all dead in their tracks.

The deck bucked under foot as some weird field disrupted the gravity compensators, giving the illusion of a sudden burst of acceleration followed by an even more sudden deceleration. The Captain pitched forward out of the chair, stumbled over Ssarsun's outflung arm and fell against the railing hitting his head sharply against the staunchion.

The bizarre stretching of time seemed to recoil as if a rubber band snapped them back into place. No sooner had the effect subsided and the duty officers picked themselves up than the Navigator called from the Helmaman's board, "Captain, we've being fired...!"

A giant hand shook the ship and all in it. The intercom gave out miniature voices screaming wordless shrieks of surprise and alarm.

"...upon," finished the Navigator lamely.

When the Captain didn't answer, the Navigator turned. The Science Officer was examining the Captain's head. The Communications Officer was calling sickbay. The Helmaman was unconscious on the floor by the turbolift doors. Valdai was helping Ssarsun to his feet.

The Navigator had a problem. Ssarsun, a full Commander outranked Walton, a Lieutenant Commander. Walton, however, was legally allowed to command the ship, Ssarsun was not, because of the law against telepaths in constant rapport with other telepaths commanding UFP ships.
Hardly before the Navigator perceived that he did have a problem, they were hit again. This time, nobody was knocked down, but boards all over the bridge went red. Reflexively, but a little late, the Navigator hit the Red Alert button.

Simultaneously, Ssarsun gained his feet and spun the command chair around to face front. He sat in it, apparently more because he couldn't quite stand up yet than because he was taking command. Nevertheless, he said, "Red Alert, Mister Hughs." Then he hit the arm-button and spoke into the pickup, "Engineering, Damage Report."

"Impulse power only. Don't know how long we'll have that, though. Get us out of here."

"Who is this?" said Ssarsun.

"Ensign Greymont. Commander Hill seems to be dead. We're waiting for the medics now."

Ssarsun said, "Walton, get down there and take command of the Engine Room. Get our warp engines back on line as soon as possible."

Walton hesitated, looking from Ssarsun to the main viewscreen which still showed nothing but empty space. Ssarsun said, "My training has been in Security, Mister Walton. I can handle the bridge, but I know little about engineering."

Valdai said, "Go on, Walton. My responsibility."

The turbolift doors parted to admit a stretcher and two medics. Walton departed.

Ssarsun said, "Lieutenant, maximum magnification. Navigator, plot us a course to the nearest Starbase; Ten, I should think it would be."

"Right, Sir."

The main viewscreen still showed nothing. Then, suddenly, a white streak swooped across the screen and came to rest in the middle of the view. At once, Ssarsun seemed to relax in the chair. He said, "Hailing frequencies, open, Lieutenant. Helm, strike the deflectors to half-maximum. No sense wasting our impulse banks."

Incredulous at this order, the Navigator turned.

Ssarsun said, "Go to Yellow Alert. You can relax now. That's the Enterprise."

With a trace of his more usual good humor, Ssarsun said, "Of course, it's not our Enterprise... but it will do in a pinch."

At that moment, the viewscreen flickered and zeroed in on the bridge of the USS Enterprise. In the command chair sat the familiar figure of Spock, wearing command gold and captain's stripes. The rest of the bridge crew were unfamiliar to the Ortiz people.

Spock said, "This is the USS Enterprise. Captain Spock commanding. What ship?"

Ssarsun answered, "Ortiz, Federation Council Registry Five-five-one. Why have you fired upon us?"

One classic Vulcan eyebrow raised toward hairline, Spock said, "I might ask why you are parking on the bullseye of a Starfleet target range. Would that answer your question?"

"Yes, I think it would, Captain. I think a full scale conference is in order. If you will do us the honor of beaming over with one or two of your officers..."

"Since we were the ones who inadvertently inflicted damage, may we be the ones to offer hospitality? It is not every day that an experimental weapon transforms an asteroid into a Federation Starship complete with unknown species... even a pocket-sized starship like the Ortiz is quite an accomplishment. The mystery interests me."

"No doubt. But I think you already know the answer."

"Transmitting beaming coordinates, Ortiz. We'll expect you in five minutes. You do use minutes, don't you?"

"Yes, we'll be there." Ssarsun motioned to the Communications Officer and the screen went blank.
As soon as the stars reappeared, he swung out of the chair and headed for the turbo-lift. "Navigator, you have the con. I'll be in sickbay. Lieutenant, keep Damage Control working hard. We must be spaceworthy sooner than possible."

Valdai followed him into the lift. "Where are you going?"

"To get a drink. I need one."

Folding his arms across his chest, Valdai said, "That's an unusual thing for a commanding officer to do in the midst of an emergency."

"Well, Councillor, I would hate to be under the command of an officer who suffers from hallucinations during an emergency. Unless I get some alcohol into me, that's what's going to happen very soon. Deck 3."

The lift whined and dropped, shunted, and dropped again. Valdai said, "You'll have to let Walton take it, Ssarsun."

The Schillian put out a hand to stay the doors. "Sir, I don't think Walton can do the job. Let's find out if the Captain is OK before we fight about it."

He let the doors go and they flew open. Across the narrow hall, the sickbay was a seething mass of humanity. Ssarsun wilted at the sight, but Valdai led the way down the corridor to the Chief Medical Officer's door. They entered to find a quiet office leading into a private ward of three beds. On one lay the Captain, life-signs indicators dancing. On the other, lay a covered body, life-signs indicators lying mute at the bottoms of the scale. Doctor Stimson turned from the corpse, "Commander Ssarsun. Commander Hill is dead. The Captain has a concussion, possibly some slight internal bleeding may develop. I can't give him anything to wake him up. Who's in command?"

"For the time being, I will have to take the responsibility, Doctor," said Ssarsun.

"With whom? Zimr and Itn are..."

"I know how they are. I'd like to be able to save their lives and all the rest of us, too. But I can't do it if I go crazy first."

"I'm surprised you haven't already."

"Chalk it up to clean living, Doctor. Do you happen to have any of it in stock?"

For a moment the Doctor was nonplussed. Then he remembered something Ssarsun had told him during a drinking bout some months ago on shore leave. 'Clean Living' was a loose translation of a pun on the Schillian name for the liquor that Ssarsun favored. He chuckled, "In the lab, storage bay 'D'."

Ssarsun went through the door at the far end of the room. Valdai said, "Doctor Stimson, I've never known a Schillian who could get along without a contact."

"Ssarsun can't any more than the others, but he can last another half hour or so, I'd guess... if he gets drunk enough."

"What good is a drunk commanding officer?"

"Depends what he has to do."

Ssarsun returned with a bottle of Schillian Schlugtamer in one hand. "Nothing requiring coordination, Doctor. It's Spock who will have to do the calculations. After that, I can easily turn command over to Mister Walton. By then, Zimr and Itn should be awake again. Until then, keep them under heavy sedation. Let's go, Councillor."

"Wait a moment," said Stimson. "I think you owe me an explanation, since this is a medical problem."

Ssarsun glanced at a chronometer near the table viewscreen. He took a swig of the liquor, paused, took another, then said, "Doctor, the situation is quite complex. At the moment, we have slipped out of our space time coordinates and into a parallel universe of unknown characteristics. However, there are a few things that we do know. One: in this universe, there are no Schillians."

Valdai said, "No, we know only that the UFP of this universe doesn't know about the Schillians yet."

"Contrary, Councillor. There are no Schillians here. None save Zimr, Itn and I. That is why they have gone catatonic. There isn't even the slightest whisper of an...hmmm...echo from the massive meld-nets of Schillia. There are no Schillians." He took a swig from his bottle. "Two: in this universe, the Enterprise is commanded by Spock, not Captain Kirk. The Spock of this universe is...personality-wise, somewhat different from the Spock with whom I am acquainted. The origins of that personality difference intrigue me. I
must learn why he is different and at the same time convince him to help us get home, quickly."

"Because," said Stimson, "if not quickly, you won't make it at all."

"Right, Doctor. For me, it is only a matter of minutes. Even my own friend, Spock, could not help me in a universe where there are no Schillians."

"Then," said the Doctor watching Saarsun guzzling Schlugtamer, "I'm going over there with you, Commander Saarsun."

"I'm glad you volunteered, Commander Stimson. I'd hate to be in the position of having to order you into danger." He took two last gulps from the bottle and tucked it away on a shelf. Valdai's opinion of the Schillian's ability to command went up a notch or two.

Moments later the three men stood on transporter pads in the relatively large transporter room of the Enterprise. Saarsun stepped forward holding up his hand in the Vulcan salute. "Peace and Long Life, Captain Spock."

Slanted eyebrows rose precipitously toward the receding hairline as the smooth shaven chin dropped slowly as if in dismay. However, the Vulcan aplomb was legendary even in this alternate universe. Spock's answer came smoothly even if a somewhat self-conscious imitation of the Schillian's phrasing, "Peace and Long Life, Commander. If you will follow me to the conference room..."

"Certainly, Captain." They followed out into the corridor where Saarsun drew abreast. "Captain Spock, I would have expected you to offer the Commitment of Surak to my greeting."

"In this way, Commander," said Spock, indicating a door. They all filed through and took places around the long, curving table. The ship and its furnishings were so familiar that the universes just couldn't be greatly divergent, thought Saarsun. He was beginning to hear a ringing in his ears. Sensory deprivation was a creeping reality within his mind. He punched the computer console for some background music to counteract his personal problems. The labia of his private orifice were extremely irritated from his untimely departure. It was that as much as anything that kept him sane. But he needed a drink. He said, "Where I come from, Captain Spock, it is considered polite to offer refreshment to guests. I don't suppose you'd happen to have any Terran whiskey in stock, would you?"

Loath to be caught short on diplomatic protocol, Spock ordered the beverages. It was only moments before they were served. Saarsun drained half his glass, made appropriate comments about Terran distilleries, and said, "Now, Captain, to business."

"Indeed. Who are you?"


"There is no record of a Federation registry, Ortiz, nor of any race fitting your description, Commander Saarsun."

"Yet here we are."

"And in possession of an inordinate amount of information. Surprisingly accurate information in some instances."

"Have you never encountered the alternate universes, Spock?"

"I have read the theory, and some reports, but never have I seen any concrete evidence of such transfers."

Saarsun spread his fingers so that the pearly webs glistened. Only to his eyes was the blue evident. "In my universe, Spock, your father's name is Sarek and his father's, Suvil."

"My father's name is Sarek, but his father's name is Shariel. How is it that you come by this?"

"I know your counterpart rather well. He has encountered parallel universe transferences and succeeded in restoring imbalances by calculating the conditions and moments of reverse transfer. I've been hoping you could do this for us."

"I'll have my Science Officer begin on it immediately."

"No. There is a severe time limitation. In less than an hour, I and two other Schillians will probably die unless we can get back to our own time. There are no Schillians here." He took another pull on his drink.

"What makes you think I could do it faster?"
"Your counterpart could. In fact, your counterpart would have already made most of the relevant calculations. I know you want to stall us here until you can study us and our computerbanks and determine the differences between our universes. But, Spock, to do this would be to violate the Commitment of Surak."

"Surak was a great man, perhaps the greatest of all Vulcans. But I do not know this, 'Commitment of Surak' of which you speak."

"Surak's Construct stands upon five principles: The Philosophy of Name, the Philosophy of the Idic, Domination of Logic, Reverence for Life, and Privacy. To delay us in our return would be to place the Idic above the Domination of Logic and to destroy life. Such behaviour would be illogical."

"The Commitment of Surak, then, is to abide by these five principles?"

"That is correct. One indicates one's commitment to Surak's philosophy by this sign," he said holding up his webbed fingers separated into a "V" with opposing thumb isolated and ticked off the meaning of each digit as it formed the symbol. "Privacy stands alone, Reverence for Life and Domination of Logic are an inseparable pair, and Name-Idic are of equal stature. This sign, together with the words, 'Live Long and Prosper' are a guarantee to adhere to the dictates of Surak's Construct. I am not Vulcan, so the most I can usually offer is the lesser commitment of, 'Peace and Long Life'."

"It is a concept of great beauty. I would like to visit the Vulcans of your universe."

"There is no telling what disruption such cross visits might entail. In our universe," said Ssarsun, "many scientists are engaged in developing the theory of level travel. Perhaps one day it can be made safe, even with profitable trade of knowledge, if not artifacts. Right now, we believe that the less effect that one universe has on another, the less chance for disaster. That is another reason we dare not tarry here a moment longer than necessary."

"You argue like a Vulcan."

"Thank you, I consider that a great compliment, especially from Spock."

"Are you so sure I am anything like your Spock?"

Ssarsun drained his glass, placing it firmly on the table before him. "I'm willing to find out, and at the same time convince you of the urgency of our request." He rose and walked around the table toward Spock.

The Vulcan rose to meet him, wary and alert. Ssarsun was anything but alert. The liquor had begun to take effect. And he hadn't had anything to eat since the previous day. He took the easiest approach he knew, marshalled his mind into strict discipline putting away the pain the coarse uniform cloth caused him every time he moved. At all costs, that pain and its associations must not reach this Spock.

When he reached the Vulcan, Ssarsun raised his hands spread for a skull contact and said, "We will do this the Vulcan way."

Two steely hands lashed out and caught his wrists. "Do what the Vulcan way?"

"A brief, relatively shallow, mindmeld. I assure you I know what I'm doing."

Spock looked at the spread fingers, not at all repelled by the gossamer webbing, but rather distrustful of the pattern the fingers formed. "You may, but I do not. I am only half Vulcan, and I am not trained in the use of the mindmeld."

"Shariel did not train you? You are not a Guardian?"

"Guardian of what?"

"The Tradition. Are you not kataytikh?"

Spock shook his head cautiously. "Either your accent is bad, or that category does not exist here."

In Vulcan, Ssarsun said, "My accent is passable most of the time."

"Fascinating," said Spock.

"Ah, yes, indeed. But I haven't time to be fascinated. You have completed the calculations, haven't you?"

Spock looked at the hands he held. "What is it you wanted to do?"
Only this, Spock, to show you why you must release the calculations now and help us get home. Ssarsun conjured within the Vulcan's mind some of the sights, sounds, smells, and the general feel of several different Vulcan cities. He concentrated his demonstration on details that revealed the extent of the Domination of Logic and Reverence for Life while trying to keep his emotional reactions under control.

Because of this Spock's lack of training in the science of mind, Ssarsun was afraid to give him a glimpse of the Schillian meldnet. Instead, he concentrated on showing this Spock a glimpse of the general precepts of Vulcan behaviour in action. He took the scenes from his own memory, a city here, a family there, a vacation trip somewhere else. He showed this Spock a Vulcan living at peace with itself, creative, intensely competitive, yet deeply respectful to all living things.

Then, in quick succession, he showed him the results of the inroads the Federation culture had made upon the prevailing peace. The nature of disputes reaching the courts gradually changed. The number of Divorces by Challenge took a sharp rise. Industrial espionage made its planetary debut. And the most shocking news headline --- a contract had been signed for the export of Vulcan animals to be slaughtered for meat.

That last brought Captain Spock to sharp attention. His people, too, were vegetarians, opposed to the slaughter of animals for food. His Vulcan, too, had suffered similar changes under the impact of the Federation. Though his people did not seem aware of any threat. His counterpart, Commander Spock, was the leader of a movement slowly gathering followers who were alarmed at the symptoms already visible in the daily Vulcan news.

Almost before Ssarsun knew what was happening, Spock had seized on his knowledge of the other Spock and plumbed the depths of that knowledge. Only his privacy blocks stopped that thirsty mind. Untrained and insensitive though this Spock was, he was a man of supremely tenacious will. Ssarsun severed the contact, saying aloud, "So you see why you must help us return and discover the truth about the theft of the Kraith. The disappearance of the Ortiz could be the first step toward interstellar war."

"That is your Vulcan, not mine. I am not bound by its laws or its fate."

"Don't play with us any more, Spock, your own Vulcan is not so different, is it?"

Spock didn't answer. He still held the Schillian's wrists.

"Schillians are full telepaths, Spock. We don't need physical contact. But we have a dire weakness. We need constant telepathic contact with a telepath in order to maintain sanity. In our universe, any telepathic mind will do. But here, the lack of others of our kind leaves an emptiness that we cannot tolerate. The only reason I'm not catatonic already is my Vulcan upbringing." Spock released the hands.

"I have paid by showing you our Vulcan. Now send us home."

"You have paid richly. The calculations are complete. Tell your Captain to set course one-one-three-mark-seven, warp one for two and one half minutes. We will lay down a barrage ahead of that course, and at the appropriate moment, we will fire directly at the Ortiz. The spatial stresses should be a perfect reverse of what brought you here, and we will have our asteroid back."

Ssarsun shook out a communicator. "Ssarsun to Walton."

"Ortiz. Walton here."

"Can you give us warp one for three minutes, Mister Walton?"

"Yes, Sir. Can do."

"Thank you, Mister Walton. Stand by."

"Standing by. Ortiz, out."

Ssarsun held up his hand. "Live Long and Prosper, Captain Spock. I hope the failure of your mission doesn't cause you too much difficulty." Ssarsun led his small group to the door, Stimson lingered. "Tell me, Captain Spock, have you ever heard of a Captain James T. Kirk?"

"This ship's last commanding officer was Captain Kirk. He died in the line of duty."

"Oh, I see." Stimson rejoined his group at the transporter door. They climbed onto the pads and were whisked back to their own ship.

Ssarsun said, "You shouldn't have asked him that, Doctor."

"I wanted to know. Jim's my friend."
"Yes, but what Spock meant to say was that he wasn't able to save Jim Kirk's life. And even in this universe, those two were friends. Even a Vulcan can know grief."

"I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as you'll be if this Spock decides not to send us home."

"Why should he do that?" They were walking down the Deck Three corridor to sickbay and turned into the Doctor's office before Ssarsun answered. "Because he saw a Vulcan which could have taught him to save Jim Kirk's life many times over. He'll be eager for that knowledge and we're taking it away from him -- possibly at the cost of his career."

"I don't understand."

"This was no mere accident, Doctor. That Spock fetched us here on purpose. It was his mission." Ssarsun extracted his bottle from where he'd cached it and took a long pull. "I'd feel easier if he'd return the Commitment of Surak."

He took another pull on the bottle, stashed it safely and headed for the bridge.

A fresh bridge crew member filled the Helmsman's chair. The others were still on duty. Walton came in behind Ssarsun. "Commander," he said softly, so none would hear but Ssarsun, "are you well?"

"I'll last. Take the sensors and stay alert."

"Yes, Sir."

"Helm, course one-one-three-mark-seven, warp one for two and one-half minutes -- stand by to execute on my countdown."

"Aye, Sir. One-one-three-mark-seven, warp one, two and one half minutes. Standing by."

"Deflectors and defensive systems on full."

"Deflectors and defensive systems on full."

"They're going to be shooting at us. Sound Red Alert, impact warning. We don't want any more injuries."

That earned him some curious stares, but the crew went to work securing ship for a shakeup.

"Hailing frequencies open. Get the Enterprise on the forward screen."

The stars flicked off and the Enterprise bridge replaced them. Spock sat in the command chair, his crew busy around him. "Commander Ssarsun, standby to execute on my countdown."

"Standing by."

Spock raised his hand in the Vulcan salute as he had before, but this time he said, "May You Live Long and Prosper, Ssarsun."

"May You Live Long and Prosper, Spock."

"Ten Second Warning. We will retreat to firing distance. Mark."

The Spock image disappeared. The white streak smeared itself across their screen. Ssarsun chanted, "Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, ... Three, Two, One, Helm, execute."

It was a bumpy, nauseating ride, but suddenly a big fist slammed into their rear sending them through a hole in space-time big enough to shove a ship through.

When it was over, Ssarsun stood up, swaying slightly, and said, "Your ship, Mister Walton. I'm not qualified to command on this side of that barrier."

He staggered off the bridge into Valdai's arms. The lift doors closed on the two of them. Valdai said, "Sickbay."

The lift dropped. "Ssarsun, they're awake!"

"I know, but I'm dead drunk. Wonder if anybody aboard thought to bring along any good, Schillian hangover remedies?"
"How about hair of the dog?"

"Good ol' Schillian tradition, that: Won't work this time, though. Drank too much, too fast."

"I've got another one. How about an appointment to Command Officer's Training School at Starfleet Academy? You've earned at least that much, and if a Councillor can't swing it, he's not worth the paper his credentials are printed on."

They reeled into the hallway, crossed to the Doctor's office and went on in. Sarsun threw himself onto the bed with a groan. "Now that's no hangover remedy, but it makes the sacrifice worthwhile. I accept, Councillor. OHHH," he groaned, as the uniform cloth did violence to his tissues again.

Stimson came in with a pair of surgical scissors. "Lie still, Sarsun. I know what you three have been up to, and what you in particular should not have been up to so soon afterwards. Goodbye, Councillor. See you later. Take another drink Sarsun, this is going to hurt."

Valdai tiptoed out. The door closed on Sarsun's "Don't you dare... ohhhhh!" and Zimr's "Shut up, Sarsun. You have a lesson to learn."

Sarsun groaned once more and was still. Stimson glanced at the life-signs panel. "Unconscious."

"Yes, Doctor." said Zimr from the neighboring bed. "Work well now. There is danger of infection."

It was his first time. "I figured as much. Humans may not be telepaths, but we're not all stupid." He trailed off on a low whistle. "Inflamed already. He was in water?"

"Yes. The Ziturian?"

"It'll be all right. I have a good pan-spectrum anti-biotic stock of Schillian hormones. Need something to create some good strong contractions."

"You take care of the infection -- we'll handle the rest of it."

Stimson looked over his shoulder eyeing first one Schillian and then the other. "It's a deal." He turned back and armed his air-hypo with a flourish. There wouldn't have been any infection if it hadn't been his first time and if he hadn't started dilating under water. Zimr should have known better. But that wasn't the sort of thing a human doctor could reprimand a Schillian for. Stimson knew when to stop.