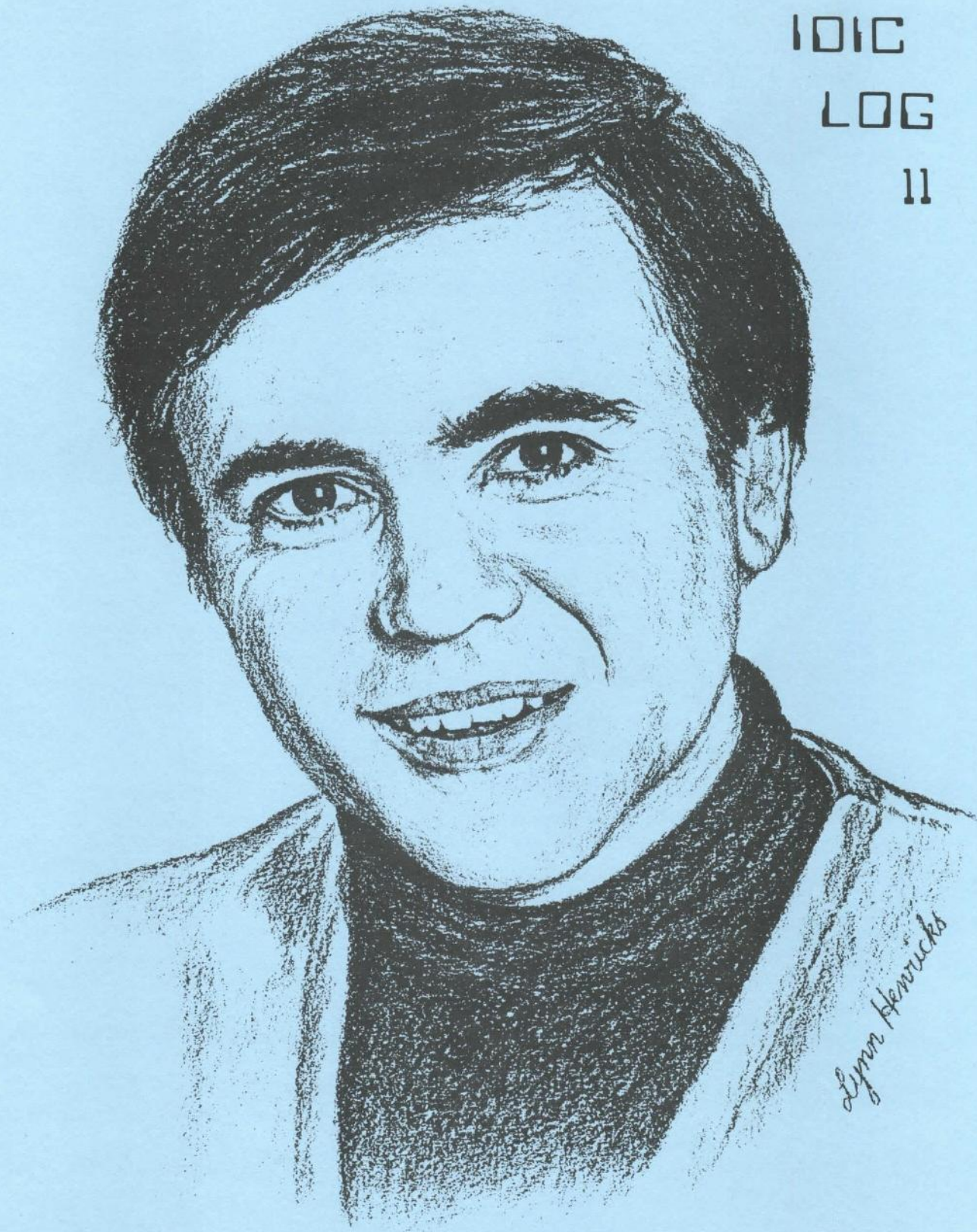


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LOG

11



a star trek
fanzine

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An IDIC publication

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Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton
Printing - Urban Print, 57 Perth Road, Dundee.
Distracting - Shona & Cindy

IDIC Log 11 is put out by IDIC and is available from -

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

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STAR TREK

by

Diane Terry

The recreation room on board the starship USS Enterprise was abuzz with excitement.

Ensign Diya had just beaten Mr. Spock at three-dimensional chess - an all-time first, for an ensign anyway. Nobody was more surprised than Diya.

"It was all so weird," she said to Lt. Uhura as they left the recreation room together to resume their working posts. "I just got it into my head that I could beat Mr. Spock at the game. I mean, I know absolutely nothing about ordinary chess, let alone three-dimensional chess. But I had this clear picture in my mind and I knew *exactly* what to do. Weird!" she said again, shaking her head. "Really weird."

Behind them walked Jimjim Hiljick, a slight smile playing on his face.

Mr. Spock approached him. "It was rather a remarkable coincidence that Ensign Diya should win three-dimensional chess when you were in the room at the same time... I wonder what the result would have been if you had *not* been in the room?" On the accentuated NOT Spock raised one slanted eyebrow at Jimjim Hiljick.

"She would probably have not even entertained the thought of playing the game at all, Mr. Spock."

"Quite!" said Spock. "I should be careful of using that rare gift of yours, Ensign Hiljick - it might lead to trouble one day - for you... and the person whose mind you enter."

"Mr. Spock to bridge... Mr. Spock to bridge."

"Nevertheless, I shall have a game of chess with you another time. It always proves to be most... interesting." Turning on his heels, Spock returned to his station on the bridge.

"I hear you were beaten at chess, Mr. Spock?" enquired Captain James T. Kirk as his First Officer joined him on the bridge.

"A question of mind over matter," said Spock, somewhat huffily.

Kirk frowned. "You mean Jimjim... I mean, Ensign Hiljick, was using his infamous talents again?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Spock.

"I shall have to have a talk with that young man," Kirk mused as he surveyed the planet that had come on the viewing screen. "But meantime let Ensign Diya assume she did it. She doesn't suspect her mind was used?"

"Not yet, sir," Spock affirmed.

"Of all the 430 people on board the Enterprise it *would* have to be Ensign Diya to fall susceptible to young Hiljick. We must keep an eye on those two."

"That would be most logical, Captain," Spock agreed. He returned to his console.

Just then the door swished open and Ensign Diya herself walked in carrying a report which she gave to Captain Kirk. "Dr. McCoy asked me to give this to you to sign, sir."

"Thank you," Kirk said and he smiled at her. "Congratulations on beating Mr. Spock," he whispered out of the corner of his mouth so his First Officer wouldn't hear him, and he gave Diya a wink. Diya smiled.

Then she looked at the planet on the viewing screen. "Oh Captain Kirk. Isn't that a *beautiful* planet?" She gazed at it wistfully.

"It's planet Xoth," Kirk said, watching her. He remembered it had been a long time since Diya had had shore leave. She was a good hard working crew member. *It wouldn't hurt her to be out of Spock's way for a bit either*, Kirk reflected, amused. "Would you like to be in the landing party, Diya? I believe there are some rare species of animals down there you might be interested in, for the lab and for your own personal collection."

"Oh, *thank* you, sir," Ensign Diya said, her face lighting up with pleasure. "I should like that very much indeed."

"Okay. Off you go and get your receptacles, microscopes and butterfly nets and what other equipment you need," he grinned.

Ensign Diya skipped off and a while later, she and Ensigns Smith, Dudley and Cranberry were beamed down to the planet's surface.

The bridge doors swished open and Ensign Jimjim Hiljick rushed in.

"Captain Kirk... don't send down the landing party, sir. It would be disastrous. I know it, sir."

Kirk frowned. On the few occasions Jimjim had used his clairvoyant powers, he had been proved right.

"Kirk to Scotty - delay land. Kirk to Scotty - delay landing."

Scott relayed a message back. "They've already been transported down, Captain."

Kirk looked at Jimjim, whose face was full of concern, and he did not think Ensign Hiljick was pulling one of his practical jokes.

"Mr. Spock?" queried Captain Kirk, swivelling his chair to face his First Officer.

"There is only one life reading, sir," affirmed Mr. Spock. "Three of our people have obviously not made it."

Captain Kirk looked at Jimjim. "Is it safe for another party to land and investigate?"

Jimjim nodded. "I only had bad feelings for the one landing party, Captain."

"Okay, let's you and me, Dr. McCoy and Chekov, go and find out what's happened to our people," said Kirk, leaping from his chair.

It was a volcanic atmosphere that greeted them as they landed, completely different from the reading given on the Enterprise's computer.

"I thought it was supposed to be like our Earth," coughed Chekov.

"Phew! It's hot," gasped Dr. McCoy, who was standing near a bubbling hot mud-hole.

"I can't understand it," Kirk said, gazing around.

The ground shook and a mini volcano near them erupted, shooting red hot ash into the air, showering mostly over Chekov. "Ouch!" he said jumping out of the way.

"To business, gentlemen," Kirk said grimly. "I don't understand all this and frankly I don't like it. It feels like a trap to me. Let's look for our crew members and get out of here."

"Captain Kirk, over here," Jimjim called. He was crouching down surveying the ground. "I've found one of our crew, Captain, and he's dead."

They ran over and Dr. McCoy examined him. They found the other bodies nearby, all except Ensign Diya. There was no sign of her at all.

"Look Captain, a button... and it's come off a Klingon uniform," said Chekov, pointing to a button near Ensign Smith.

"Then it *must* be a trap," Kirk said grimly.

There was a beep on Kirk's communicator. Captain Kirk drew it from his belt and flicked it open. "Kirk to Enterprise... What is it, Mr. Spock?"

"Sir," came Mr. Spock's voice, "I urge you to return immediately. We've just discovered the planet was used as a lure by the Klingons."

"We've just discovered that fact, Mr. Spock," Kirk said drily, surveying with distaste the bodies of his dead crewmen.

"Furthermore there is a whole battalion of Klingon ships about to surround us, and they mean business."

Kirk frowned. "We've found all our crew members except Ensign Diya. The others, I regret to report, are dead."

"Sir," volunteered Jimjim Hiljick, "I could stay behind. I'm sure with my special powers I could rescue Ensign Diya out of any predicament. You could beam us both up when you've sorted the Klingons out."

Kirk nodded. "Yes. If anyone can save Ensign Diya you can. You also have the ability to stand up to heat longer than Humans can."

He flicked his communicator open again. "Transporter room. Scotty, three to beam up and three bodies. Hiljick is to remain behind and look for Ensign Diya." He turned to Hiljick. "Good luck," he said.

Jimjim Hiljick stayed long enough for Kirk's party to energise and disappear, then he went to look for Ensign Diya. He was sure she was still alive, but in danger, and he knew if he was to find her alive he'd have to find her soon.

He eventually located her inside one of the big volcanoes which had been blocked up.

It needed immense concentration on Jimjim's part to probe the thickness of the walls of the volcano and into Diya's mind. Then he could feel darkness, despair and fear, and he could feel that Ensign Diya was working her way around the inside of the volcano, desperately seeking, by means of groping the inside rock walls, for an exit out of her frightening prison.

There was a surge of alarm as Ensign Diya looked down into the cavernous depths of the volcano, cavernous no longer but holding a living, breathing, pulsating, monster which was nothing but a gaping, sucking mouth trying to suck her into its depths so it could eat her. Ensign Diya's fear filled Jimjim, who gave her a dose of his confidence so she wouldn't be scared. She then perceived someone was helping her and she brightened. She had been so alone before.

Then Jimjim decided to try his dissolving ability, a dangerous method that - here - absolutely drained him of all power and left him weak as a kitten. At home he used his dissolving and scrambling method all the time. Everybody did on his planet and it caused no harm, though people did have special non-materialising rooms so nobody could assemble in front of them. Some folks liked their privacy. But it was highly dangerous to use this special talent elsewhere. It could even kill him.

Shrugging this thought aside, and with intense concentration, he finally dissolved and re-assembled himself inside on a narrow ledge close to Ensign Diya.

Diya screamed when she saw him, she was so startled. "Jimjim! How did you get here?" She was shaking with fright and exertion.

Jimjim held her hand. "Never mind that now - it's one of my special powers. C'mon, let's walk around for a bit. I assume that monster down there has no sight, just smell and appetite. Let's walk around. There's bound to be an aperture somewhere where we can squeeze through to the outside."

Diya shook her head. "No, Jimjim. I've been all around twice - and higher up too. There's no way out. Those Klingons grabbed me and threw me in and caused the top to cave in so I couldn't climb out and escape." She gave a gasp. "The Enterprise!" she cried. "Do they know of the Klingons?"

"Yes, Diya. There's a full scale battle going on above us."

Jimjim thought about using his dissolving method again. It would probably kill him using it twice in a row, but he could see no other way out and air was running out for them. Nor did he know how it could effect Diya. He had one pill for her to dissolve herself. Nevertheless he decided to risk it. He explained the pill to her.

"It might kill you," he warned her.

"I'm as good as dead in here, anyway," Diya said. She screamed as something touched her foot. She looked down in terror to see a massive curling lip of mud about to engulf her leg. She hurriedly pulled it out of range. "Anything is better than this," she said, terrified, clinging to Jimjim for protection.

Jimjim fired his phaser down into the monster's maw and for a while the thing was cowed.

Jimjim hastily gave her instructions and the tablet and they both dissolved and re-assembled on the outside of the volcano.

Hours later, Ensign Diya regained consciousness. She arose, her back aching from the rocks that had been sticking into it from the hot, stony, uncomfortable ground. Jimjim was lying next to her.

Fearfully Diya went and felt his pulse. There was none. Jimjim was dead.

Diya was heartbroken. He had died saving her life. She thought about the fun times he had given them, from bending all the cutlery in the canteen to making the Starship run backwards, to Kirk's astonishment and Scotty's consternation.

Jimjim had also given her a present of a tiny live unicorn which she kept in her cabin. The unicorn was a fragile little thing and Diya looked after it tenderly. Jimjim had also added to her menagerie a beautiful sea horse which swam contentedly in a big aquarium she also kept in her room.

"Oh Jimjim," Diya sobbed. She bent over, crying, and kissed his lips. Then pulling herself together, she took his communicator from him and flicked it open.

"Ensign Diya to Captain Kirk," she said.

"Ensign Diya," came the welcome sound of Kirk's friendly voice. "Delighted you're still with us. We thought we'd lost you. You'll be pleased to know we've staved off an attack by the Klingons and can live to fight them another day. Are you all right Diya?" he asked concerned, for a sob had escaped from Diya's throat as she lightly touched Jimjim's face.

"Jimjim's dead, sir. He died saving my life," she said brokenly.

"We'll beam you aboard," Captain Kirk said. "Stand by for energising."

The hostile planet that had been her nightmare world for so long disappeared, and soon she was in the Enterprise's transporter room, amongst dear, familiar faces.

Lt. Uhura was on hand to comfort Diya and take her to McCoy's sickbay. "I'm sorry, Diya," Lt. Uhura said sincerely. "I know how much Jimjim meant to you. You two had a lot of fun together."

Nurse Christine Chapel put some ointment on Diya's sore and badly scratched hands, which were torn and bleeding after she had tried scrabbling her way out of the volcano. Then Dr. McCoy gave her a shot to make her sleep, after she had given her report to Captain Kirk, and Captain Kirk had given her a few fatherly words of comfort, but she did feel a little better after their talk and was only too ready for McCoy's shot and some much needed sleep.

Diya slept around the clock and was still in her bed in sickbay when Nurse Chapel bought her some food, but Diya wasn't hungry. Jimjim's body had been put into cold storage, awaiting a burial service, and Diya was still much too upset to eat. She kept remembering Jimjim.

Diya was toying with her meal when the salt flew up in the air and scattered over her food. She just gasped in astonishment.

Nurse Chapel came into the room. "Did you enjoy your meal?" she asked.

Red-eyed, Diya just looked at her meal, covered in salt. "I didn't get a chance to eat it," she admitted. "The salt upturned itself and ruined it."

"Oh, nonsense. You're probably-over tired and spilt it over the food yourself," said Nurse Chapel. She had had a trying day listening to Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy arguing about Klingon warfare and medical treatment.

"Look!" exclaimed Diya in wonder, as surgical equipment flew all over the room.

"We're being haunted," exclaimed Nurse Chapel in horror. "We've got poltergeists!"

"No we're not, and we haven't!" cried Diya in glee, light beginning to dawn. "It's Jimjim letting us know he's all right!"

Nurse Chapel and Ensign Diya rushed to the ship's morgue and as the door swished open Nurse Chapel shivered, but Diya went into the room and there, sitting up with a grin on his face, was Jimjim Hiljick... looking very much alive.

"What took you so long?" he enquired.

"Jimjim!" Diya flew to him, delighted to see him alive. She hugged him. "I'm so glad to see you," she said and burst into tears.

Nurse Chapel said to Jimjim, "Are you able to walk to sickbay?"

"Certainly, if Diya will give me some space," Jimjim laughed. "I'll be glad to get out of this place. It gives me the creeps!"

"I don't understand," sobbed Diya. "We all thought you were dead."

"So I was, but fortunately it only lasted 48 hours. Lucky you realised it was me fooling about with your food or I'd have been shot into hyperspace tomorrow."

Diya held his hand. "Don't say that."

Jimjim brushed the tears off her cheek. "I won't, so long as you stop crying."

"It's a deal," smiled Diya through her tears.

"I'll tell Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy to come," said Nurse Chapel, smiling at them. She went over to the intercom. "Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy please report to sickbay. You're not going to believe this!" She smiled at Jimjim and Diya. "They're on their way. I can't wait to see their faces."

The door to sickbay swished open. Captain Kirk was gravely talking to Dr. McCoy. "I'll have to inform Jimjim Hiljick's parents," he was saying, "and we'll hold the funeral service tomorrow morning."

Diya gave a sob, and Jimjim held her close and tickled her until her sob turned into a giggle.

Captain Kirk looked up... and saw the newly resurrected Jimjim Hiljick, a laughing Ensign Diya and a bemused but smiling Christine Chapel.

James T. Kirk blinked. *It must have been that hard-fought battle against the Klingons that's made me tired and started me hallucinating things.*

"Bones, do you see what I see?" But McCoy had already whipped out a tricorder and was examining Jimjim's body's pulses, shaking his head in amazement.

"I don't believe it. It's not possible," he kept saying dazedly.

"Yes it is," Jimjim said. "You see, under those circumstances my body does 'die' for 48 hours. Fortunately I was able to recuperate in time before my funeral service. When I was 'dead' my body functions healed and started themselves up again in the 48th hour. They'll be normal again by the 52nd hour."

"You Xianteth people are totally - to coin a phrase from Mr. Spock - fascinating..." James T. Kirk shook his head but he was smiling. He had been dreading the funeral service, a task he always abhorred. It was one of the pitfalls of being Captain of the ship. He held out his hand and shook hands with Jimjim. "Glad to have you back," he said sincerely.

"Hear! hear!" grinned Dr. McCoy and he did a little waltz with Nurse Christine Chapel.

"Oh, Jimjim." Ensign Diya gave a little throat clearing cough. "There's a little problem I have," she said shyly.

"Yes?" said Jimjim suspiciously. "What's that?"

"Mr. Spock has asked me for a return match with three dimensional chess with him. He thinks it was a fluke I won last

time. Since you got me into this mess, I think you should help me out of it."

"Yes! But let's get out of sickbay first... "

And laughing, everyone went back to work, except Diya and Jimjim, who went to work on their three dimensional chess.



Around a blue-green planet
A starship floats in orbit.
Her name is known to all,
Whether they be friend or foe.
Her numbers proclaim: one-seven-oh-one,
But everyone knows that Enterprise is her name.

She's home now, at last, from another long voyage,
Her crew decks are quiet, the bridge crew are gone.
No Klingons or Romulans her defences could breach;
This silver-white lady with the famous old name,
Brought her crew safely to their home port again.

This silver-white lady, like a charger of old,
Brings forth her brave knights and maidens so bold.
Led by their Captain, James T. Kirk,
They go wherever danger may lurk.
To protect those in need from all kinds of foe,
Is where she, and they, will always go.

Through space with such grace flies the Enterprise;
She travels many times faster than light,
To another danger, or perhaps a pleasant surprise;
For her gallant Captain there's no better sight,
Than to look upon her, all graceful and silver-white.

Benjamin T Jones



PHANTASM

by

Leonie Flynn

My tears stain these pages, bitter burning tears that I don't even know mean anguish or self-pity. All I do know is that they are torn from my soul.

My hand shakes but I will be strong, for I must set it all down. Here, on this last night in my cell, on stolen paper, I will recount it all, so that when morning comes I will have either exorcised his ghost from my mind, or I will have burnt his memory so deep within me that nothing in this universe can ever remove it.

My life, such as it has been, seems now to have been made up of two separate halves. For that to be understood I must return to the beginning.

I was only a child when they came to Earth, destroying all in their path. The glorious Imperial Army of Vulcan, feared across the known worlds, made short work of our peaceful world. With savage discipline they reived their way across our continents, their fearsome starships blasting our small fleet from the skies, laying waste to whole cities in a vast global bloodbath that gave no quarter, and accepted only total prostration as surrender.

My family they murdered, their slavers took me.

Oh, I tried to resist them, for I burned with hatred of them, but to no avail. I was just ten years old and their casual brutality broke many men, let alone a child. By the time we reached the slave markets of Orion I was beaten and cowed; ready to be a slave in my mind as well as my body.

Yet for all that, a small spark of pride did survive in me; enough to ensure that I earned my reputation as an awkward slave, so that over the years I was bought and sold many times by unsatisfied masters. I endured the appalling degradation of slave markets on many worlds, before finally I ended up here, at this vast prison for the criminal and the insane, at Shikahr.

I shall not tell of the things that as an orderly in the criminal cells I witnessed. For, not having seen them, no-one would believe them to be true. But here, amidst the pitiful remnants of political dissidents and heretics, I became hardened almost beyond hope by what I saw, and by what I was made to do. Yet here also, on this searing wasteland of a planet, I found the only true man in the universe, let him touch my soul to life, and then watched him die.

I heard of him many months before I ever saw him. To us, the slaves and inmates of Shikahr, he was almost a legend. We all knew the stories of his life, both rumour and fact; how, born a Prince of the Blood Royal, gifted and brilliant, feted and pandered to beyond belief, he had nonetheless raged against the barbarism of the

Empire. He saw corruption where others of his race saw only mastery and, weeping for the hordes of alien dead laid at his people's feet, had broken away to lead the rebellion that almost destroyed the Empire. Almost. It was said that his army of outcasts and criminals were on their way to victory, until treachery broke the rebellion; a million people destroyed by the blind ambition of one woman, his wife.

After it was all over, somehow they had taken him alive, and now, many months later, without even the outward show of a trial, he was being sent here. After months of who knew what treatment, after interrogation and inquisition, they had decided to keep him alive as an example and a warning to others. Anyway, it was not their way to kill swiftly when they could inflict a lifetime of torment instead.

It was a searingly hot day in midsummer when the prison ship and its Imperial escort arrived. I was posted as orderly to the new prisoner, and was glad, for my curiosity about him would be satisfied. They transported him down under tight security, and the prisoner, drugged and virtually comatose, obviously disappointed the governor for he was sent straight to his cell, where I waited for him.

I said that I had been hardened to the pain and suffering of others, but even so I was shocked by what I saw.

I was there when they threw him into the cell, roughly removing the flexiplas straps that bound him. They didn't care that they re-opened deep wounds on his wrists and ankles. They dumped him unceremoniously onto the floor, laughing as they slammed the door behind them.

As they left I hurriedly left my hiding place and lifted his transparently thin body onto the mattress. He was in such a state that I was at a loss to know what to do first. Gathering my wits I drew fresh water, and gently as I could washed him of months of grime. As I continued I could see the pattern of his interrogation etched onto his body, and though I had seen many people of many races tortured, I had seen none who had suffered like this, and survived.

I tended him as best I could; salved the wounds, old and new, that covered him; I pared his nails and tried to comb his hair, though in the end I had to cut it, for its silky strands were matted beyond recovery. Lastly and hesitantly I cleansed his face, trying not to inflict more pain as I wiped fresh green blood from a cut over one starkly canted eyebrow. As I did so I caught my breath, for dark eyes watched me, deep eyes full of pain, confusion and disbelief. My touch must have wakened him, my compassion reaching even beyond the drugs they had bound him with. Amazement at any care for him was in his eyes, and blinking back my tears I touched his hand and gently pressed his long emaciated fingers in reassurance. His intense gaze wavered, and closing his eyes he slept.

I knelt back to watch him, sensing his strangeness, confused by his reactions and my own. There was something in his anguished gaze that disturbed me, that woke my long forgotten self which I thought was dead, buried long ago beneath my parents' grave on Earth. Reaching out I touched his cheek and knew in a moment of crystalline clarity that we were in some way bound, that our suffering had brought us here to be together. How I knew I didn't know, but the feeling gave me strength, and, standing, I continued with my work.

As the days went by the sedatives used on the journey wore off, and he tossed and turned in a fever of delirium. Time after time he raved in the grip of appalling nightmares, from which he woke screaming. I found myself holding him as he fought their grip, stroking his hair to quieten him, staying with him, awed beyond belief by his endurance. Yet despite all that he had gone through, he at last began to heal, and my presence seemed to help him, for he talked to me.

Through the long nights when I held him, sick and shivering from the phantoms that haunted his sleep, his voice hoarse and painful, he whispered of his dreams. For the nightmares that left him almost mindless were always preceded by other dreams and sometimes as I held him, he would haltingly remember them; beautiful fragments of another world, where there was love and friendship, not betrayal and pain.

As time went on he remembered more and more, and welcomed the remembrance, for he lived more in this other world than mine. He even recalled how as a child he had had similar dreams and told them innocently to others, only to be taken to the Master of Gol to have the offending thoughts taken from his mind. Even now he wasn't really sure why that control had broken, except perhaps that when his mind had fled from the torment of the mind-sifter it had found those memories buried deep, and in his dire distress had clung to the calm serenity promised there. At the cessation of the pain his mind had returned to its normal levels, bringing the source of the dreams to consciousness.

The months went by and our lives became bound together in the foulness of the prison and attained a sort of normalcy. He started eating again, his body at last losing the emaciation that had been so shocking. He never spoke of *them* at all, as if his cell was a private universe and the things they did to him just nightmares contained therein. For they did still come for him, showing him off as if he was some prize exhibit in a zoo. Before them, he held himself with icy pride, never speaking a word no matter how much they tormented him for their own sadistic pleasures. He broke down only after the cell door was slammed shut behind him; then he would weep in my arms.

Each time they came for him he had to retreat far into himself to survive: yet after each time, as I cared for him, he would again open to me. That is, until the last time, when his father came.

When he heard who was to interrogate him, he stood immobile with shock, then bowed his head as if acknowledging defeat. When they came to take him, he went without a word.

I do not know what occurred between them, father and son, for he never told me. All I know is that when, hours later, he was thrown back into the cell, he was almost broken.

That night, the pain too strong to let him sleep, he lay with his head on my shoulder and spoke of many things. Between long silences he rambled on about his life; of loneliness and despair; of good and evil; of guilt and dreams. Much of what he said was too obscure for me to understand but I listened, content to lie at his side. Finally, with tears glistening in the hollows of his eyes, he spoke of death.

Had I heard (he said) that to the ancients death was the long sleep? He remembered haltingly a Terran text he had read in childhood about death and the terrible consequences of indecision; of a man whose only way out of the turmoil of his life is to kill himself. But he can't do it because his sleep is tormented by phantoms and nightmares, and if to die is but to sleep forever, he would be going to an eternity of torment.

He pondered long on this until eventually, drained and exhausted, he fell into a fitful sleep. Withdrawing my arm from behind his head I pulled the blanket up to keep him warm, and sat watching his sleep-gentled face. Could I have saved him then? Should I have wakened him and demanded that he tell me what he was thinking about? Would it have helped, would my friendship have mattered?

I will never know, for just then I was called away to other duties and I had to leave him, my mind clouded by uncertainty.

In the end I was kept away for the best part of the day, and it was evening before I managed to return.

As the door closed behind me I stood for a moment in stunned disbelief. Then, crying out my despair, I collapsed at his side, kneeling in his life's blood that soaked the grey stones around him. Trembling, I drew his cold body into my embrace, as if my warmth could rekindle his life. As I lifted him, the knife he had so carefully hidden from me fell to the floor from his uncurled hand. Closing my eyes, I wept.

With my face buried in his fine black hair I was startled as a gentle touch brushed against my arm. Looking up I saw his eyes open, their black depths full of pain. For a second I let myself feel joy, but my hope was short lived. His skin was bone white with loss of blood, and I knew that his hold on life was tenuous. His lips moved and I bent forward to hear his words, his voice a faint whisper against my ear.

"Why weep, my friend, do you not understand?"

I couldn't trust my voice, so I shook my head. How could I understand when his death took his friendship away from me.

"Do not weep. I seek that which is in my dreams Perhaps..... no.... *indeed*... I... go... home..... "

With his life's last strength he raised one hand and gently touched my mind, his shining vision filling my soul, his love overwhelming me as he died.

When the sun rises, I too will die. Executed for the crime of allowing his death. When they come for me I will go willingly, for my one last hope in this world is that he was right, and that to die is but to dream eternally; and I, having at the last shared his vision, will dream with him of a silver starship, and a golden friendship forged among the stars. Forever.



WHEN THE DREAMS STOP

by

Gail Christison

from an idea by Gail Christison and Jenny Sumpter

"Jim, if you get caught we can't come in after you. I've read the reports on Kaden. It's barbaric! These transponders aren't enough. You just can't go waltzing into a primitive society, no weapons, no security, no communications - "

"Bones, we have our orders. For better or worse we have to find out what happened to that aerial survey team."

"Well, I still don't like it," grumbled Leonard McCoy. "The odds are that the scout crashed. You could be risking your lives for nothing!"

"Possibly, Doctor." The Enterprise's First Officer spoke for the first time. "But if it had crashed we would have detected its presence on sensors. This culture will not be capable of producing such alloys for several centuries."

"S'right," McCoy said roughly, "it's practically the dark ages down there. They'll probably want to burn you at the stake! Especially you!" He jabbed a finger toward Spock, who raised an eyebrow.

"Hardly, Doctor. It is quite possible though - " the Vulcan paused thoughtfully - "that if we are captured we could be subjected to a variety of torture techniques remarkably similar to those from your dark ages."

Captain James T. Kirk sighed and gave his Science Officer a 'You're a big help' look. "This is exactly why I didn't call a conference about this mission. There's nothing to talk about. All the department heads have submitted their reports and recommendations and they have been duly noted. End of discussion."

McCoy spread his hands helplessly as the two officers, dressed in indigenous costume, boots, drill pants and bell-sleeved shirts that crossed over at the front and tied at the back with dangling tapes, stepped onto the transporter platform. He watched them disappear, a terrible urge to leap onto the platform and follow them manifesting itself in his adrenal gland.

It was all he could do to turn away and go back to sickbay.

Spock pushed back the carved leather headband that covered his eyebrows and ear tips, and shook the mud off his boots.

Rain drizzled endlessly on the colourless little village nestled at the base of high, rocky cliffs.

"This is the only settlement within a hundred mile radius of their last known position?" Kirk screwed up his face at the foul-smelling runoff from the main street - or, rather, track.

"Unfortunately, yes," the Vulcan replied, not concealing his own repugnance as he looked up at the feudalistic stone castle on its almost impregnable site above the impoverished settlement. It was black and foreboding and bore little resemblance to its Terran analog. Reading the scoutship's transmitted reports about the Sharman control of Kaden's people made it no less difficult to witness.

In the meantime, they were getting drenched. He turned and met the Captain's eyes. Kirk had been watching him. Spock cocked his head enquiringly. "It'll keep," Kirk said cryptically. "For now, let's see if we can find an inn."

In the tavern beneath their lodgings, James Kirk ordered a mug of ale and a pot of water for Spock, who surreptitiously dropped a purifying tablet into it. Many Kadis sat drinking the aromatic ale or engrossed in the numerous crude table games scattered around the room.

A few, probably traders, were dressed as the Enterprise men were, but most were ragged and unkempt, their shaggy, uncut hair encompassing almost all Human variation. Two traders by the fire had short, neatly cropped hair, more like Spock's than Kirk's, and were having a heated discussion.

Gradually, Kirk and Spock made their way to the invitingly warm hearth. They sat down at the same heavy wooden table as the two protagonists. The argument was about money, or the division of it. The Captain concentrated on his drink. He'd had enough of being charming and witty, striking up conversations only to have them punctuated by rancid belches, spitting and other less savory body functions. No one had seen or heard anything to indicate that the S'Hylikar or its Vulcan crew had been anywhere near Sharman Tozan's province.

Suddenly, the larger Kadi at the table leaped up, accusing his companion of theft. The other rose angrily then swung around to face Spock.

"You!" he said. Kirk tensed, ready to fight. "Seer, tell this idiot that I am an honest man. If money is missing, tell him to go search his woman!"

"Now we know what those symbols on the band mean," Kirk said in aside.

"Indeed," replied the Vulcan. To Kirk's amazement Spock rose and walked around the bench to the two men. "I have journeyed far," he said, "but I will assist you, if you consent to the touch of my fingers upon your face."

Kirk's eyes widened further as the man agreed and Spock spread his hand on the side of his face. A few moments later the Vulcan turned to the larger man.

"This man has not stolen your money. You both agreed to the purchase of a wagon and a pair of xona some weeks ago. Azon paid

the purchase price at that time. You were both supposed to collect them from the Sharman's stable fifteen days ago."

Both Kadis stared open mouthed at Spock. Kadi Seers usually made arbitrary decisions about any dispute, and their word had to be abided by, even when it was incorrect, thereby promulgating the idea that they were infallible. But no-one had ever heard a Seer recount accurately an event that they could not possibly have known about.

"Thank you, Seer. You are correct," said the smaller man. "But your skin burns. You must be ill. How can we help?"

"I have had too much ale," Spock evaded, "I am well, Azon, thank you."

When Azon turned to his friend to begin a lengthy 'I told you so' Kirk again spoke in aside to Spock.

"Let's get some sleep," he said.

"Well, we learned plenty about farming, commerce and the weather, not to mention Kadi manners, but nothing about the S'hylikar," said Kirk wearily, chewing on some hard bread. The rented room was small, two carved wooden beds and a battered wooden table with a lamp on it the only contents.

"Perhaps not, Captain." Spock leaned on his hands on the table. "Azon has vivid memories of a 'fire star' - a meteorite in the noon sky at the time S'hylikar went missing. I believe that may be why sensors can find no trace of the ship."

"Burn up? I'm sorry, Spock. What a waste."

The Vulcan stared silently at the flame dancing inside the crude glass of the lamp.

Spock? Kirk's mind reached out tentatively.

Here. The thought was reluctant.

Nothing. Kirk recoiled from the implied rebuff.

"Jim, it is most unwise. Those who are bonded do not normally have such a strong conscious link. Were it not for our workload I would have taken the time to instruct you in the techniques for shielding. As Captain, you - "

"Forget it, Spock," Kirk said quietly, almost forlornly. The special bond formed between them as they lay dying in the snows of the ironically named planet Dantes just eight weeks earlier, had been deliberately and relentlessly blocked by Spock since their rescue. He had forged the bond to keep Kirk alive, knowing that the Human would otherwise perish long before he himself would. He was well aware of the need Kirk could not articulate. It was not a mating bond, but the sheer loneliness of being psionically isolated after sharing such a link, no matter for how short a time, would be intolerable for a lesser Human.

Slowly, the Vulcan straightened and came around the table to Kirk.

"Jim." Both his voice and his mind called the Human. Spock raised a hand, fingers not paired, as in mating, but split, as in a Vulcan salute, only more relaxed.

Guided by Spock's thoughts, Kirk slowly fitted his own hand against the Vulcan's. For the first time since the snow, he felt Spock's mind open up, drawing his into it, binding them together. His thoughts soared and intertwined with Spock's, joined with them and fired them, as the link engulfed them both, flinging the last, lingering remnants of the terrible loneliness of their lives to the winds.

Hot milk pudding about the consistency of tapioca was the only breakfast served in the tavern. Spock passed, but watched his hungry Captain demolish a large bowl of it.

"It's very good, Spock. You should have had some," Kirk told him.

"Vulcans do not consume animal products."

"Uh. You mean the milk?"

"No."

"Oh." Kirk peered at the residue in the bowl, shrugged, and pushed back his chair. "We have twelve more days before the Enterprise picks us up from that ridge," he said as they stepped out into the early morning sunshine. "How do you suggest we utilise that time, Mr. Spock?"

"There is a great deal still to be learned about this culture, Captain. There is very little known, for example, about the Sharmans. Perhaps, if we were to find a way to get into - "

They were suddenly surrounded by large, brutish men, probably soldiers, judging by the leather armour they wore. All had lethal looking swords drawn. The one with the most ornate armour stepped forward.

"You are under arrest, by order of Sharman Tozan."

"On what charge?" Kirk demanded, and was struck on the back with a sword hilt.

"The charges are treason, sedition and sorcery," said the spokesman. Rough hands wrenched their arms behind their backs and bound them with harsh rope that cut into their wrists. Kirk's soon began to bleed.

"Damn!" he muttered as they were shoved into motion.

Indeed, Spock agreed darkly.

"What d'ye mean there's nothing there?!" bellowed Montgomery Scott.

Sulu looked him straight in the eye. "There's no one at the rendezvous point and since the transponders are no longer

transmitting I can't track them. Mr. Spock's was still sending a signal from the fortress until three days ago."

"But where are they now?" growled the Chief Engineer to himself. "Then ye'll just keep scanning for their individual life signs until ye find them," he ordered, looking across at Uhura.

Ambassador Sarek was being transferred within the hour from the Vulcan research vessel T'vor, on its way back to Vulcan for refurbishing. He was supposed to be conducting the landing party's debriefing. The Scot slapped the arm of the chair in annoyance. It would all be so simple, if not for the Prime Directive.

Once aboard, Ambassador Sarek accepted Scott's invitation, made out of expediency, to visit the bridge.

The turbolift doors opened and Mr. Scott rose to greet him, but before either could speak, Sulu began to shout.

"Mr. Scott! I think I've found them! There's local electrical interference. I can't get a good fix on them. There's a storm."

"Where are they, laddie?"

"In the hills, heading toward the rendezvous point."

Scott leaned over the panel. "Aye, 'tis them all right, but they're in trouble." He indicated another signature on the grid. "A lot of them by the look of it. Sulu, ye have the Con. Get Dr. McCoy to the transporter room and give Kyle the closest safe co-ordinates ye can."

"Commander." A gentle voice held him at the open lift. Sarek stepped in with the Engineer. "I would accompany you to the surface."

"'Tis not standard procedure, sir. Are ye sure ye would'na rather wait here?"

Sarek shook his head slowly. "In this case, I must insist."

Scott did not argue further, but he had a sneaking suspicion that the Ambassador's decision wasn't based entirely on logic.

Thunder rolled across the sky and the wind howled through the hills as Spock pressed into the stinging, driving rain, struggling hard to focus his confused mind. His single, overriding purpose was to reach the beam down point with the unconscious Human in his arms.

In the midst of his headlong flight a foot caught in a tree root. In his exhausted, devastated state he could not protect Kirk from the fall, and heard his half-conscious cry of pain as they hit the ground.

Spock's head hit something hard, but the cry brought him immediately to his knees. He dragged a hand across his own rain soaked face and was surprised to see blood on it. He'd reopened the head wound.

He looked at his trembling hands and Kirk's crumpled body, and knew they had to rest. There was a fresh gash on the Captain's

cheek but there seemed to be no other new injuries. Gently, he gathered Kirk into his arms and staggered toward the only visible shelter.

It was tight but dry beneath the rocky overhang. Spock shivered as he forced the limp body back into the crevice, unable to withstand the pressure of his own injuries or the overwhelming exhaustion any longer.

He moulded his body to Kirk's back in the narrow space, a warm barrier against the night for the vulnerable Human, and passed out.

Less than an hour later the Vulcan was torn awake by some black nightmare fury. Kirk's body burned against him, moving restlessly in its delirium. The terror in the Human's mind had found his through the unshielded bond.

Spock's battered arms pinned Kirk's flailing arms against his chest. Through the link, Spock called to him, speaking soothing Vulcan words until Kirk gradually relaxed, somehow safe in the harbour of the Vulcan's mind.

His fever worsened. Spock's fear grew, and flowered into anger and despair. Through the haze of his own severe concussion, he knew Jim Kirk was close to death.

He no longer fought his emotions, raging as he pulled the Captain clear of their temporary sanctuary. Wind whipped his hair as he lifted Kirk, desperate to reach the life giving rendezvous point. Only yards from the little cave Spock's battered legs crumpled.

"No!" he cried, anguished. The Vulcan tightened his arms around the Human and fought to remain conscious as he sank to his knees.

He'd failed. Anger drained away, leaving only pain. "No!" he said again, his voice thick with grief. The hell within his body became nothing in the face of losing Kirk.

Long fingers spread themselves on a pale cheek as Spock opened up his being, preparing to follow Kirk beyond his last breath. Green blood trickled down Kirk's cheek, mixed with the endless rain. As he sank deeper, Spock was unaware of footsteps approaching.

Suddenly he was being drawn away. Someone powerful was breaking the death link. The Vulcan was lifted into strong, determined arms as he recognized the resonance. It was sharp and familiar in the midst of his agony.

Sarek.

The Ambassador looked down, his features carved from stone. James Kirk stirred beneath McCoy's hands, and colour flowed back into the deathly pale face. Sarek turned his eyes to his son, smashed and broken and suddenly peaceful. Kirk would not die now.

"Enterprise, beam us up," a wavering Scottish voice commanded.

Leonard McCoy stood brooding over Kirk's unconscious form in

the intensive care unit off the sickbay.

How many times does it have to end like this? Nightmarish memories of Lal and Thann flooded back as his shaky finger traced a small flesh wound on Kirk's cheek. It would leave no scar - but the others... He closed his eyes against the memory of that first examination.

The blue eyes slid momentarily across to where the Vulcan lay a few feet away. It had been hell for M'Benga and Sarek but Spock would live too.

He turned to go, eyes bright with unshed tears. Sarek's fathomless brown ones met his. McCoy had no idea when the Vulcan had come in, or how long he'd been witness to his emotional display.

"Doctor?"

McCoy took a deep breath to steady himself. "They'll make it, Ambassador, no thanks to Starfleet. But they're going to need a lot of time." His voice trailed off for a moment. He cleared his throat. "I've... been there," he said darkly, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "And it's worse than hell."

A flicker of acknowledgement crossed the Vulcan's features. It was enough.

McCoy sighed a jagged sigh and watched, bemused, as the Ambassador pushed a chair across to his son's bedside and settled there, lifting a dangling hand to replace it on the bed, then pausing, content to maintain the contact.

Wearily the Doctor withdrew, and took himself back to his desk and the reports he dreaded writing.

When McCoy returned to intensive care a few hours later, Sarek was still there.

The doctor stared at the sight of the Ambassador, now seated alongside the Captain, holding a torn hand. Kirk had stirred, moaning softly as his head turned from side to side. Sarek's rich baritone spoke soft Vulcan syllables to the Human, who gradually slipped back into a peaceful sleep. McCoy scanned the monitors. The readings were terrible, but no worse than when he left.

"If I ever find out whose idea it was to send them down there like that...!" he muttered under his breath.

Sarek heard. He turned to the Doctor. When McCoy saw his eyes he knew who had recommended them. Anger flared and quickly died. Sarek still held Kirk's hand.

"No-o-o!"

Sarek's head snapped around. The Captain's voice had startled them both. "No-o! Don't! I take it back... Please... Leave him. I beg!"

Vulcan and Human listened, appalled at the shocking fear, pain and humiliation in Kirk's voice, and the implications of his words.

McCoy moved to get the hypo, but Sarek stayed his hand. Elegant fingers moved into a simple meld at the same time as Kirk's face began to crumple in horror of something unseen. His monitors became erratic. McCoy took a step forward, then saw them begin to steady. Kirk's body gradually relaxed.

The doctor looked at Sarek and panicked. The colour had completely drained from the Ambassador's face. A moment later Sarek's hand dropped to his side.

Apparently with some difficulty, he rose and faced the Doctor. The dark eyes held no expression, but they were very, very full.

"Worse than hell," he quoted hoarsely, and was gone.

Less than five hours later it began all over again. Kirk's monitors were going berserk as McCoy raced in, his medical log left running in the wake of the IC alarm.

Kirk's thrashing was rapidly exhausting him and posing a grave risk to the healing internal injuries.

Still in the light healing trance initiated by Sarek following surgery, Spock lay peacefully a few feet away. McCoy weighed the risks and gave the Captain a sedative. He was vaguely aware of Sarek's arrival, but made no effort to speak as Kirk stabilised. The Ambassador remained silent.

When McCoy had gone Sarek stood studying the two for a long time. Generations had not seen such a warrior bond on Vulcan. It was not logical. Or... He permitted himself a small sigh and then resumed his position in the chair at Spock's bedside.

Pain. Pain was forcing its way into his safe haven. He tried to call out. There were voices. Something cold was pressed against his arm.

Oh God, don't let me have to face Azar again already!

Suddenly the pain was gone. Memories crowded into his unready mind. He struggled. Fingers touched his face.

Jim. The soft call pierced his distress.

"Spock!" he cried, and heard the sound of his own voice.

"I am here." And the sound of *his*.

The hazel eyes flew open. A brutalised hand clutched the Vulcan's arm and met dark, emotion-clouded eyes. "Spock." His lips parted in a smile of relief. "Where?"

"Aboard the Enterprise," Spock told him, his own relief suffusing warm colour from his neck to his ear tips.

"My leg?"

"Secured in a regeneration unit," Spock replied honestly.

Kirk began to drift again. Through their link, Spock felt his orientation shift, endured the assault of brutal memories that engulfed the Human again, refusing to leave him alone.

McCoy arrived in response to the agitated monitors but stopped in the doorway, willing Spock to move away so that he could tend Kirk.

He was astounded to see the terrible emotion in the Vulcan's eyes as both men relived the nightmare of Kaden.

Kirk's cries grew louder; distraught, raging cries that sent chills down the Doctor's spine.

Swiftly, Spock trapped the tortured body, holding the Human's shoulders as he spoke those same gentle Vulcan syllables.

Silently, McCoy withdrew.

"But Jim Kirk is a Human. Sending him to Vulcan is no answer!"

"Nevertheless, Doctor, Spock must go to Vulcan to be attended by a healer. I cannot do more than I have already done. Dr. M'Benga can deal with the body, but... The Vulcan Science Academy has the facilities to accommodate Captain Kirk also. The orthopaedic reconstruction and rehabilitation of his leg alone will take months - and resources which a Starship in full service can ill afford to provide or maintain."

"But the psychological effects of - "

"Yes, Doctor, but far more important are the effects of twelve days of barbaric torture and deprivation. If both are to resume their careers, their recovery must be complete."

"Now wait just a damn minute! Who says there's any question about their careers?" McCoy snorted.

"Do you intend to falsify their medical records?" asked Sarek quietly.

"Hell no, but... " McCoy could not meet the unfaltering Vulcan gaze.

"James will not be alone," Sarek told him softly.

McCoy looked up in surprise, but the Vulcan was as inscrutable as ever. "He will be well cared for. They will not be separated."

Separated. Memories of the Minaran ordeal flooded back. McCoy shuddered. Hell couldn't be that bad. He nodded slowly. "But I'm going with them!" he added vehemently.

"That will be in Starfleet's hands, Doctor."

"I'm going!"

Sarek watched him storm off to intensive care, fascinated as always by the tenacity of the Human spirit.

Starfleet's reply was concise and to the point. Three months detachment to Vulcan, to be reviewed at the end of that period, for both Kirk and Spock. Scott was to assume command of the Enterprise for the same period, pending the outcome of the review. Dr. Leonard McCoy's request was denied.

"Superfluous?" McCoy growled disbelievingly. He screwed up his hard copy of the orders and dropped it forlornly on his desk. It wasn't hard to read between the lines. Starfleet had all but written them off. Well, it was going to have one hell of a fight on its hands!

He punched up his current leave status on the desk monitor.

The Healer Synd straightened over his new charge. Satisfied with Commander Spock's progress in the deep healing trance, he left him in the peaceful silence of the Science Academy's little used hospital wing.

Separate, but close by, was the Human's room. Extensively refitted as a fully operational Human intensive care unit, the room was far removed from the warm closeness and familiarity of McCoy's sickbay.

Synd studied the alien's pale features. Kirk had been unconscious for three days, only his nightmares punctuating the stillness. The Healer ignored an urge to ponder again the wisdom of their unique bond - or even the morality of enacting such a warrior rite outside Vulcan society. In the time before Surak's teachings Vulcan warriors of like mind would bond before a battle, each guardian of the other's life and katra. Usually they were comrades of long standing, and would remain so bonded until one or the other died.

Sarek was due to arrive shortly, his duties completed for the day, to resume the vigil over his kinsmen. Scans completed, the tall, hawklike Vulcan withdrew from the room and its unlikely patient.

Azar's eyes glittered. The primitive metallic restraints cut into Kirk's arms. Flat on his back, he was terrifyingly vulnerable. The agonising pain of his left thigh made it difficult to think.

The previous day had seen the Kadi so infuriated by Kirk's steadfast resistance that he'd lost his temper and smashed the Human's leg with a heavy iron bar.

Silently, Kirk waited for his torturer to reveal what lay ahead.

Azar's immaculate white shirt never seemed to get soiled. Kirk stared relentlessly at it as the Kadi leaned over him.

"So, James, we must talk again," Azar said silkily, hefting the same iron bar.

"Will you tell me today where you are from and what that 'thing' pretending to be a Seer really is?"

Kirk gave his only reply in three days of relentless pain. "Go to hell!"

Azar's face coloured with rage. He swung around to the other table.

"Spock! No-o-o!" Kirk screamed as the bar fell, striking the Vulcan a vicious blow, a death blow.

"James!" The room went out of focus. Pain, pain in every quarter of his body. He couldn't see Spock.

"No-o!" he cried again.

"James?" the familiar voice called again.

He blinked, tried to sit up. Vice-like hands clamped onto his arms. Sarek looked down at him as he lay trembling in the hospital bed.

"Bones. Where's Bones?"

"Please lie down, Captain. Relax. It will come to you." Sarek's hands guided his shoulders down onto the crisp blue sheet.

"Spock?"

"Still healing. He will remain in the healing trance for another two point three seven days. The damage - "

"Two days..." Kirk repeated, almost to himself, wide awake now. "And he'll be completely healed?"

"No," Sarek replied heavily. "Clinically the damage will have been repaired, but there will be weakness, a lack of tone in the new tissue, muscles, ligament, tendons." Sarek chose not to continue.

Kirk's leg was a mosaic of fractures above the knee, which itself had required massive reconstruction. The rehabilitation would be arduous. His internal injuries were healing well, thanks to McCoy's surgical skill and early intervention with intravenous tissue regenerators. And Synd was progressively restoring the full use and appearance of the devastated hands and wrists.

Sarek's eyes moved to the burn on Kirk's chest. Covered by transparent, surgical burn tape, the jagged slash of raw flesh stood out horribly among the other remnants of the Human's ordeal.

Kirk would need his indomitable spirit over the next weeks and months.

"Then he'll be here for a while?" The wide, hazel eyes, always so engaging, were now dulled and flat.

"Of course," Sarek replied evenly. "Your detachments are of equal duration."

"Detachment?" Kirk suddenly seemed very vulnerable and uncertain.

"Three months."

"My ship?"

"Is in the hands of Mr. Scott until the medical review board makes its assessment at the end of those three months."

"Prognosis?" Kirk's voice was now thick with fatigue.

"I am not qualified to - " Sarek paused. Kirk was asleep. For a moment the granite features softened, then the dark eyes flicked to the monitors. The elegant jaw clenched uncharacteristically and the Vulcan swallowed, before leaving to find the Healer.

Spock regained consciousness slowly, forcing his way through a haze of pain and confusion. Cramp seized him as he tried to sit up. The cold, hard floor of the cell had told heavily upon his battered body. Nearby, a crumpled, half naked Human moaned and stirred.

"Jim!" Spock moved to Kirk's side. The Captain was bleeding profusely from the mouth, bloodying his face, chest and shoulder. Gently, he rolled him onto his back, drawing a sharp breath at the discovery of the wide, horrifying burn across the normally smooth chest. It was already contaminated with filth off the cell floor.

He shook as he fought to control his emotions. As he had on Platonius, Spock began to hate. The hate grew as he tried to make Kirk comfortable; as he was forced to relieve himself humiliatingly again in an open corner of the cell; and more, as Kirk stirred and woke.

The Human's eyes bulged with the onslaught of raw pain.

"Jim. Jim!" But Kirk was beyond all hearing. Spock's eyes glittered with rage as the door opened. They took him again, heedless of his agonised cries as he was wrenched from the ground.

Spock dragged himself up and charged at them. Only the weapon swiftly laid against Kirk's throat kept the Vulcan from tearing them to pieces.

The great wooden door slammed shut. Blindly Spock pounded on it, overwhelmed by pain, desperation, rage.

"Jim-m-m!"

"Spock!" Sarek leaped up from his chair as his son's body jerked uncontrollably. Before he could wake him, the thrashing stopped.

Tears squeezed beneath the black lashes and trickled down the angular face.

"No!" The word was wrenched from the unconscious Vulcan's throat.

Sarek shook him lightly, then harder. The brown eyes opened suddenly.

"Enough," Spock barely whispered. "Father... " It was a plea.

Sarek turned to the Healer, who had just arrived.

"Synd, I would speak with my son alone."

The Healer nodded and withdrew. Sarek waited silently as Spock slowly regained control and pulled himself up into a sitting position.

"I ask forgiveness," he said softly.

"For what?" Sarek responded evenly.

The dark eyes looked up, their surprise barely concealed.

"You may wish to visit James. He is under sedation. Your disturbance communicated itself to him through the bond. I had thought you were again at rest. It seems that the dream continued."

Spock's eyes closed. When they opened again he slid off the bed to stand tentatively on his own for the first time since Sarek had roused him from the healing trance five hours earlier. He tried to move forward, stumbled and almost fell.

Strong hands grasped his arms, taking his weight easily. Gently, Sarek seated him on the chair beside the bed. He sought and held his son's eyes.

"You are my son." Sarek's gaze did not waver. Spock nodded, almost imperceptibly. Sarek straightened. "I must leave now. I shall return this evening," he said.

Numbly, Spock watched him go. For long moments he sat staring at the door then pulled himself to his feet again. He waited for the weakness to pass, then moved slowly out into the corridor.

James T. Kirk stared at the plate of food before him. The same colour, the same shape, the same taste as every lunch since Synd had allowed solid foods a little over a week ago. He pushed it away and resisted an urge to scratch his bad leg, now sealed in a plasticast splint and pinned to a support bolted to the side of the bed. Bored, he studied the pale blue room. He already knew every crack in it, had worked out every conceivable way to escape from it and identified every piece of equipment in it.

The room was atmosphere controlled, a comfortable temperature for a Human allowed to wear only a pair of dark blue trunks because of his wounds. He shifted gingerly, resigned to the pain that had been his constant companion since he'd regained consciousness. He hadn't asked for extra pain killers. Synd knew well enough what he was going through. He did, however, make a mental note to ask McCoy about Vulcan rehabilitation methods.

Bones. Enterprise. He'd heard nothing about their activities and no-one but Sarek had the authority to find out. He leaned back resignedly and stared at the sunlight filtering through the sealed window.

Synd let himself in silently as he always did. Kirk did not acknowledge the old Vulcan's presence. The Healer made his daily examination.

"In three days," he said, "we will remove the bolt. In fourteen days you may begin physiotherapy with T'Rian. You have

made remarkable progress Captain - " Kirk looked at him dispassionately, "considering your antipathy toward your situation, and your food," added Synd, acknowledging the untouched plate.

The hazel eyes locked with his but Kirk did not rise to the bait. Unperturbed the Healer took his leave, passing Spock on the way out.

"Have a good time with T'Rian today?"

Spock frowned at the Captain's tone. "I think not," he said. "The Enterprise is currently laying bench marks in the uncharted Mutara sector. Mr. Scott would like to know when he can go back to Engineering. Dr. McCoy's comments do not bear repeating."

The tension eased out of Kirk's frame, but his fist remained clenched, the too-pink new flesh of the fingers blanching from the mistreatment.

"Thanks," he whispered.

My pleasure. Spock watched as amusement spread across the Human's face, and felt the quicksilver response. *You're welcome,* he added, well satisfied.

Once the support was removed from Kirk's leg an antigrav chair began arriving at the same time each day. The orderly, Saval, would lift him expertly and almost painlessly into it and guide the Human to T'Rian's physiotherapy session with Spock. Each day Kirk would watch the Vulcan go through the routine stretching exercises, then begin the graceful routine Kirk had seen him perform a hundred times in the Enterprise gym - and each time Spock had faltered, or lost balance, and had to begin again, or retire. No one told Kirk why he was there, or whose idea it was, and he never asked.

A week after the removal of the brace, Kirk waited impatiently to be taken to Spock's session. The room that had seemed so large and impersonal now seemed small and cloying. Saval arrived punctually and Kirk submitted to the now routine indignity of being lifted, teeth gritted against the pain, mind set against the humiliation of being manhandled.

Spock had completed his warm up and was poised in one of the delicate balancing routines when they arrived. Kirk sat silently through the perfect routine. Instead of waiting for Spock to change and take him out into the courtyard, though, he motioned Saval to take him back to his room.

It seemed to take forever, moving as always down endless stretches of dull grey walls. As they approached the door of his room Kirk was gripped by an unreasoning dread of being left alone in the blue jail.

"I don't feel like resting, Saval. Let's go to the recreation area. The students are all in classes."

"It is against the rules, and the Healer has instructed that you are not to exert yourself unnecessarily, Captain," Saval said sedately.

The Vulcan could not see the bleak despair in the Human's face

as the door slid open.

"I will accompany the Captain from here," a familiar voice said behind them. Saval shot an undignified look at Kirk and then at Spock, who raised a guileless eyebrow. The orderly nodded and left.

"Jim, you must learn to restrain yourself. I believe you have quite upset Saval," he gently told Kirk's back, but did not raise his shields against Kirk's surge of good spirits.

"Spock, I want to go back to the ship. Bones can look after me."

"Jim?"

"Take me home, Spock."

Defeat does not become you, Captain. It never did, Spock thought harshly, and clearly felt Kirk recoil. "I will take you to the off world gymnasium," he said coolly and added, "it is not in use today," in an infuriatingly normal voice, and turned the chair away from the room.

"Spock." Kirk's voice was ill tempered.

"Yes, Captain?" Spock braced himself.

"Go **** yourself!"

"That, Captain, is anatomically impossible, unless of course one is an Altrayan, in which case - "

Kirk's answering ripple of humour interrupted the dissertation and a moment later his laughter filled the hallway.

The gymnasium for the Academy's offworld students contained a variety of apparatus for beings ranging from feline quadrupeds and bipedal hominids to macropods and even Spock's bisexual Altrayans, whose indeterminate shape could be changed whenever the being pleased and appendages manifested whenever necessary. It also contained a thermally adjustable pool for the Academy's dozen or so amphibian or aquatic races and those humanoid races who revelled in bathing.

Spock stopped the chair in the rest area near the pool, and sat on a bench near the Captain. "Jim, you have progressed remarkably well over the last three weeks. Rehabilitation takes time. If McCoy hadn't acted as quickly as he did you would still be in bed."

Kirk's affection washed over him. "I know it, Spock. It's just... It's been so damned long. They could take my ship..." Spock nodded and looked down forlornly at the smashed leg, unconsciously touching his forehead, remembering.

Kirk paled. "I thought you were dead," he said softly. "If you hadn't pulled your head away at the last second - "

Memories, fears, pain intertwined and held them both silent for a long time.

"Spock, help me get into the water. The plasticast will take

care of the leg, and this is sealed." He flicked at the burn on his chest which was so severe it was still being rehabilitated by the specialist.

"I do not believe Synd would approve," Spock replied, rising and moving to the change cubicles. He returned in a short sleeved lycra wet suit.

"Well, if it's that cold," teased Kirk, but the smile did not reach his eyes.

"Only for a Vulcan. The pool is currently set for humanoids, Velris, Cephalids, and several other races whose tolerances fall within those levels."

He lifted Kirk easily and set him on the pool edge, then slipped into the water. Kirk smiled at his involuntary gasp and put his hands on the Vulcan's shoulders, allowing himself to be pulled into the cool water as Spock gently moved backwards. For a moment they were face to face, then Spock had turned him, a strong arm around the Human's waist.

Kirk revelled in the fluid freedom of the water as Spock back-pedalled lazily around the pool, arm locked firmly around the Human. He allowed the plasticast-covered leg to float free and trailed his hands noisily through the water, feeling the warmth of the Vulcan against his back and the steady rise and fall of his chest.

As the time stretched his pain was dulled by the chill of the water and the tranquillity of the moment. Kirk reached out to the Vulcan's thoughts and was surprised to find his shields in place.

"Something wrong?" he said casually as Spock pushed off the bottom again, sending them gliding through the crystal waters.

"No."

"Spock?"

"I am... happy," the Vulcan admitted reluctantly.

"Is that what you're hiding? Or shame in your friendship with me?" Kirk asked out loud.

"Both," Spock replied quizzically. "You remembered that?"

A class bell rang out somewhere. Kirk instinctively looked up at the wall chrono and smiled. "We'd better get going, or Sarek will think we've run away from home."

"More effort!" ordered T'Rian. Kirk slowly raised the leg until it hovered about three inches above the covers. Pain had prevented him from trying anything more adventurous. He had discovered the 'logical reason' why Synd had withheld any more than the barest minimum of pain killers. When he had completed the exercise a dozen more times to her satisfaction, T'Rian gave Kirk leave to go. She watched as the orderly lifted the Captain into the chair.

For a week now she had watched him struggle with the minimum exercise routines, and while the middle-aged physiotherapist

understood little about Humans, she did understand humiliation. Kirk would simply have to endure. The painstakingly reconstructed knee and mended ligaments, tendons and muscles were simply not willing to accommodate his pride.

Back in his room, Kirk discovered that a computer terminal had finally been installed for him. Experimentally he punched in the codes for Starfleet access, and was surprised at his success. It took a long time to work through the entire Kaden report, log entries and medical records.

When Synd came to do his daily examination, he noticed that the Human was unusually quiet. Readings revealed tension and stress. Spock had been given temporary leave to visit his mother in ShiKahr but Synd's eyes flicked to the terminal before nodding to the Human and departing. When he was gone Kirk slid down and curled up miserably in the bed covers.

The cell door swung open. Kirk felt the fear return. His bile rose as Azar's men marched in. He could not feel the Vulcan. Spock had refused to lower his mental barriers since the beginning of the torture. They dragged both Starfleet officers out of their filthy prison. Kirk struggled with terror and near frantic worry for Spock. Every visit to Azar's little room could be the Vulcan's death sentence. It was he, Kirk, that they wanted information from, that they needed alive. They did not consider Spock to be a person.

Unconsciousness almost claimed him twice as the guards jolted his broken ribs and smashed leg, but he kept his silence even as they were put on the tables.

Fear and rage blurred together. Kirk pulled and pushed and twisted, sending waves of dizzying pain through his body and bloodying his wrists. Unknowingly, he had smashed his transponder.

Suddenly one of the guards, irritated, turned and hit him, closed fist, in the mouth.

Jim!

All right, Spock, Kirk's mind responded, the metallic taste of blood filling his throbbing mouth. His tongue was cut, both lips split and his teeth had cut deeply into the inside of his cheek.

"Welcome again, James." The voice sent daggers of ice down Kirk's spine. "Are you going to talk to us today?" Azar inquired obsequiously.

In reply, Kirk spat blood and turned his face away.

"Very well." Azar nodded and two of the guards immediately tipped Spock's table onto its vertical stand. Fists, boots and knees battered the slim form.

"No!" Kirk shouted as skin tore and green blood spilled.

"You have something to say?" asked the Kadi.

"No." Kirk's command training held, but part of him ached to find a way to stop Spock's agony. Finally he saw Spock close his eyes, not suddenly, but slowly, purposefully. The Vulcan was taking

the pressure off him. The backs of his eyes burned with emotion that Azar would never see.

"Such callous disregard for a companion," the Kadi taunted.

A strong smell of burning assailed Kirk's nostrils. Primal terror electrified his nerve endings, froze his thoughts. Then he saw it. A guard approached holding the sword in a large glove, its broad blade glowing fiery orange and gold, at the end.

"What is your business in this province? Where did you come from? Tell us about the sorcerer!" demanded his tormentor.

Kirk spat blood again but his eyes did not move from the blade held over his body. His heart drummed in his ears and his insides knotted but he kept his silence.

Suddenly Azar signalled and the blade swung over to the Vulcan who lay horizontal again.

"No!" The word was wrenched from Kirk as it came down. "You bastard, leave him alone!" Kirk's fury surged with his adrenalin. Immediately Azar moved to signal the guard again and Kirk realised what he'd done. "No-o-o! Don't! I take it back... Please!" he cried, as the guard moved the blade over the Vulcan. "Leave him... I... beg! Leave him alone..!"

Azar's finger obligingly moved in a mesmerizing arc through the air, back to James Kirk.

Kirk's screams echoed in the corridor and a lone figure broke from its purposeful stride into a dead run, to reach the room and activate the door.

Inside, a body lay sprawled on the floor, shoulders shaking and fists hard clenched. The golden head was buried deep in the circled arms, all the more poignant in the silence.

Shocked, the slender figure knelt beside his Captain and drew head and shoulders against his chest. "Jim," he said softly. It was all there was to say. The rigid form crumpled and clung to him, waves of unresolved grief pouring out.

Leonard McCoy blinked hard and tightened his grip until Kirk's own hands finally grasped his arms, and gently pushed him away. McCoy watched sadly as Kirk staggered to his feet, hobbled to the wash basin and threw up violently. Wiping his eyes, he followed and put his hands on the hunched shoulders.

"You'll be fine, Jim boy, just fine. C'mon, I want you off that leg," he said over the noise of the disposal unit.

Before McCoy could get Kirk back to bed another figure appeared. He had never seen Spock in Vulcan dress before. The figure was imposing.

"Dr. McCoy?"

"I thought Sarek said Jim wouldn't be left alone?!" McCoy allowed his annoyance to show, pleased though he was with Spock's obvious progress.

"The Captain has been making extremely good progress," Spock

said carefully, looking at Kirk. "Synd cleared my temporary absence yesterday."

"That's right," Kirk added hoarsely.

"I should not have gone," Spock admitted.

"Crap," Kirk growled and pulled himself onto the bed. "It was just another nightmare," he added, his eyes moving from one to the other, bright in the ravaged face. "It is good to see you, Bones. Spock, your mother is going to be disappointed if you don't finish your visit." He forced a smile.

"On the contrary, Captain," Spock told him. "Actually, she would very much like to see you, but the Healer will not yet permit visitors." He looked pointedly at McCoy.

"This is business, not pleasure!" McCoy replied. "Even if I am officially on leave."

No-one spoke. The Captain's eyes had locked with Spock's. "Well, if you two don't mind, I'd better go talk to Synd and catch up on your cases," McCoy said with studied lightness.

"Great, Bones," Kirk said belatedly, but the Doctor had already gone.

Spock's eyes burned. "You should not have stopped them, Jim. I am a Vulcan, I could have - " The words trembled. "You never told me."

"I did what I had to do," Kirk said softly. The branding had been nothing but a hazy memory of Azar's voice until now.

Silently, the Vulcan reached out and brushed the seal on the burn, his back rigid with control.

"You would have done the same for me," Kirk told him. "It's not important any more."

Spock withdrew the hand. He had utterly failed to protect Kirk. The innate frailty of the human who sat painfully on the edge of the bed was almost more than the Vulcan could bear.

Kirk closed his eyes, swayed. Spock steadied him, his hands on the pale arms. The shock had caught up. Kirk trembled with reaction, and Spock's grip tightened.

"It's really over?" he said, his voice haunted.

"Yes." Spock's voice was very full. "It's really over."

Leonard McCoy watched Jim Kirk work his way through the exercise routines, pleased with the growing flexibility of the reconstructed knee and leg.

"It's lookin' great Jim," he said amiably as a sweaty, half-naked Kirk flopped in the chair next to his. "So good, in fact, that you can go up to the pool, starting tomorrow. Just start slow, no more than two or three laps," he paused. "OK, what?" he said, bemused by Kirk's lopsided grin.

"Nothing important," Kirk evaded, stretching his broad shoulders. The bruises were gone and the pink marks where Synd had gradually removed his many scars had faded to a faint rosiness. There was still a shiny smoothness across his chest where McCoy had finally removed the large burn scar, only a few days before, and his leg was even whiter than the rest of the indoor bound body. "Bones, you never did tell me how you really got here," Kirk rerouted the conversation.

"Yes, I did. I'm on leave. Just because Scotty happened to drop me at Starbase 49 to arrange supplies on the way to the Borrian cloud... and just because he happened to take my leave application with him..."

"The Borrian cloud. That's five weeks away by subspace," Kirk calculated. A slow grin appeared.

"S'right," McCoy went on. "Including the time it took Enterprise to get there at warp two, I've got eleven days left before Starfleet Personnel has a catfit - and Sarek has already offered to throw water on them for me," he smiled back.

The Captain chuckled at the colourful metaphors and stood up. "Bones - " his tone was suddenly serious. "When can we go home?"

McCoy's blue eyes fixed on his. "When the dreams stop," he said cryptically.

Epsilon Eridani burned down on the Vulcan city of ShiKahr and two of its sons who were paused in conversation next to a stationary skimmer.

"...the link can be tuned down. Kirk can be taught to shield," Spock argued.

"Of course. The difficulty lies elsewhere."

"Bonded Vulcans work throughout Starfleet."

"They are not bonded to a Human - a Human in a Command position. What has Kirk already been willing to suffer for you? What will happen the next time you are used against him?"

"James Kirk did not break," Spock interjected.

"Or he against you?" Sarek continued, unperturbed.

"Command training - " Spock began.

"And if one of you should die?"

"It is not a mating bond."

"No," agreed Sarek. "It is more."

For a long time Spock stared at his parent.

"I must get back to the Academy," the older Vulcan said at the last. Sarek's gaze did not waver.

Spock nodded. "Of course."

The only sounds James T. Kirk could hear were those of the instruments on the bridge of the U.S.S. Enterprise. He leaned forward, revelling again in the challenge of command.

"Don't lose her, Mr. Sulu!"

The helmsman nodded. He had been tracking a ship for over an hour. Its configuration was unknown, its origin unknown, and its only response to Uhura's friendship messages was a declaration of intent to destroy the Enterprise.

The instant the alien ship turned toward them and made a run, Kirk was ready. It swept past on the starboard side, laying down massive attacking fire, reducing the shield capacity to less than a third in one volley.

"Auxiliary control to the bridge!" The intercom crackled to life as they watched the alien ship receding on the stern monitor.

"What is it, DeSalle?"

"Aux helm computer down, sir."

"On my way, Captain." Spock swept into the turbolift before Kirk could even articulate the order.

"Enemy vessel making a second approach!" reported Sulu.

Kirk called evasives and watched. Sulu's work was immaculate, but the other's anticipation was uncanny. Suddenly it was next to them again; enemy phasers lanced out even as Uhura repeated the message of peace. They took several direct hits. The intercom went crazy. Damage control and emergency medical were being called to the engine room and the shuttle deck, and minor injuries were being reported all over the ship.

Kirk's eyes remained fixed on the viewscreen as Sulu took them out of danger again.

"Uhura?" he said.

"Nothing on any frequency Captain," she replied with genuine regret.

"Mr. Sulu, arm photon torpedoes, full spread. Mr. Chekov, ready on phasers," Kirk said with deadly calm. Then it was back on the screen. "On my mark, gentlemen."

"Bridge, we have a fire in aux control! Fire control to auxiliary control room, emergency!" DeSalle's voice filtered through.

"Coming into phaser range... locked on!" reported Chekov.

"Oh my God, Robbins is still in there!" DeSalle had left the intercom on. "No, you can't, Mr. Spock! It's too late! Nobody could survive in that!"

Kirk went rigid. Searing pain ripped into his mind through the

link. He fixed his eyes on the screen.

"Ready, Mr. Chekov. FIRE!"

The Enterprise's phasers danced across the silver hull of the enemy ship. Kirk's hands gripped his chair, his vision blurred with moisture.

"Mr. Sulu, ready all photon torpedoes!" he cried, as the stranger continued toward them. "FIRE!"

Sulu watched elatedly as it bloomed into a great fireball, then shielded his eyes from the white flash as its engines imploded.

Kirk ran for the turbolift.

He seemed to be running forever. Suddenly brilliant lights were blinding him. He blinked.

"Spock!"

"He's here," said a familiar voice. "Wake up, Jim, it's finished."

Kirk focused on the scowling face of Leonard McCoy.

"The fire?"

"It was just a test. There's no fire," McCoy said gently.

Tentatively Kirk reached for the Vulcan's thoughts, and found them.

"Congratulations, Captain," Spock said aloud. "You have completed the entire battery of tests inside two days."

"I let you die."

"No, Jim." Spock came into his line of sight. "I believe you may have just saved us both."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," said Leonard McCoy, watching Kirk drip puddles of water on the gymnasium floor. "Tampering with the Human mind, even for psychiatric assessment, is a risky business."

"It was so *real*," Kirk added, towelling his hair.

"It was supposed to be," McCoy said darkly, "and with Vulcans programming the computer that ran the auto suggestion on you, it was never going to be easy."

"No." Kirk shivered, remembering. "Bones, the truth. There was more to it than just the psych test? Other things during this rehabilitation - "

"The truth?" McCoy said thoughtfully. "Well, I couldn't get a straight answer from Synd about the low level of treatment for pain, and there were other strange things. Like those damn synthocubes. I didn't have any trouble getting a decent meal. And installing that computer terminal in your room. That was completely out of

order." He met Kirk's angry eyes. "But the bottom line - the truth - is that I just don't know. If not for Sarek's intervention I wouldn't have even got into the building.

The Captain nodded and seemed to relax a little, somehow. He smiled. "You came. That's all that matters."

"I, too am glad you came." Spock joined them.

"What did you find out?" Kirk asked a little too enthusiastically.

"You mean you've been snooping, Spock?" McCoy grinned.

"I am understandably curious about our futures," Spock deadpanned, "but I have been able to ascertain only that the Enterprise will receive our orders, whatever they are, tomorrow morning at 0950 local time."

"Tomorrow," Kirk said softly. "I'd better get dressed," he added unexpectedly, but without enthusiasm.

The hint of a frown creased Spock's brow, but he said nothing before departing silently.

McCoy watched Kirk walk across to the change cubicles. The Captain paused to pick up the grey gym shirt McCoy had acquired for him. The broad back and powerful arms rippled again with hard muscle. No scar remained to remind Kirk of the ordeal he'd endured. Even the leg had responded miraculously to treatment.

If only medical science could do for the mind what it can for the body. Gem's lovely face swam in the doctor's thoughts. Then maybe everybody's nightmares would stop.

Vulcan's red sun rose spectacularly, spilling its golden light through his window, but Spock's thoughts were elsewhere as he fastened the Vulcan robes. Somewhere in the back of his mind he felt the effervescence that was Kirk, and wondered how he was handling the wait.

Jim Kirk turned as the door of his room slid open, ready to rag McCoy about rising so early.

"Ambassador," he said, surprised.

"You look well, Captain." Sarek had not been to visit them for several weeks.

"Yes, thank you," Kirk agreed soberly. "I haven't had a chance to thank you for... everything."

"Unnecessary, Captain," Sarek replied, a hint of softening in the angular features.

"But I..." Kirk's eyes locked with the Vulcan's and words suddenly seemed superfluous.

"Well, Jim-boy, today's the big day!" McCoy's face dropped as the door slide open. "Sorry. Didn't know you were busy."

"On the contrary, Doctor," Sarek replied, turning his gaze to McCoy, "I must speak with my son. If you will excuse me, gentlemen?"

Kirk nodded, and watched him go.

"So how do you feel, Jim?" McCoy's blue eyes searched the sombre face.

"The truth?" said Kirk, echoing their earlier conversation. "Afraid. My whole life is up there, in orbit. Take it away and there's nothing left. No point... "

"Jim, you're jumpin' the gun a little bit. Besides, there's any number of things you could do," McCoy chided gently.

"You think it's a foregone conclusion?"

"I didn't say that. I've seen your progress reports. And Spock's. My gut tells me it's going to be all right, but hell, I'm just as scared as you!"

Kirk squeezed his shoulder affectionately. "I'm going out into the courtyard. I need to feel the sun on my face," he said quietly.

"I'll meet you out there. I still have to talk to Synd about physiotherapy for you after you leave this place."

The Captain nodded and followed him silently out into the corridor.

Alone in the sunshine, Jim Kirk squinted up at the Vulcan sky. He knew his white, unprotected skin had begun to burn, but he didn't care. A slight, swirling zephyr and the clean, sweet air caressed his senses. He was amazed at how aware he suddenly was of such small things. Somewhere in the cobbled quadrangle an insect trilled, happily oblivious of the heat, and in the distance somewhere was the sound of construction work.

McCoy hadn't returned. Kirk looked at his chrono. Almost time.

He felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he found a bench and sat down heavily on it. Two students, an Andorian and a Saurian, crossed the courtyard with barely a glance at the Human and disappeared through the big doors. Nobody stayed out of doors during the Vulcan summer.

McCoy crossed the courtyard to where the Captain was sitting, his gym clothes soaked with sweat, beads of it trickling down his sunburned face. The hazel eyes were glassy and distant.

"Bones? Any word?" his voice crackled.

The Doctor shook his head. "And I thought it was hot at Spock's wedding," he grumbled. "Jim, you can't stay out here. You're already startin' to dehydrate."

Kirk stood up slowly and waited silently for McCoy to turn,

then followed him back into the building.

"Where's Spock?" he asked, his mind reaching for the Vulcan's presence.

"With Sarek, last I heard.

Spock?

Here. The acknowledgement was as unnecessary as the call but Spock had recognized Kirk's fear and understood it.

The two Humans entered the Captain's room to find Synd waiting for them. Kirk's stomach knotted and adrenalin made his scalp crawl as the tall Healer faced them.

"Captain. Doctor," Synd acknowledged with a slight inclination of the head, his sombre expression unwavering. "Captain Kirk, you have been discharged from treatment at this facility, as has Commander Spock. You are required aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise to await further orders," he added succinctly, nodded again and departed.

The Enterprise pair looked at one another. "It's time," Kirk said ominously.

Jim Kirk looked up at the sound of his door chime.

"Come," he said.

Spock stepped into the room. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Spock," he said drily.

The dark eyes that met his were troubled. "Do you wish me to remove the bond, Captain?" Spock asked without preamble. "It was forged in a different situation, a different reality. We are alive. It can be removed."

Kirk stood very still, his eyes fixed on a point over his First Officer's left shoulder.

Is that what you want? Silence. Spock?

No.

Kirk's eyes moved from the bulkhead to the expressionless face of his friend. "It's time to find out what our future holds," he said softly.

For a moment Spock was unmoved, then slowly he turned and waited for Kirk to fall in beside him.

The bridge was ominously silent when the pair stepped out of the turbolift. Uhura turned, her face slowly lighting up, and smiled. Sulu looked up from the problem he was checking for Scott, his gentle eyes moving from one to the other, nodded to them and went back to the job at hand.

Scott vacated the centre seat, but Kirk held up a perfectly healed hand. "Not yet, my friend," he said softly as Spock moved to the vacant science station. He moved to Uhura's station and laid a

hand on her shoulder. A few moments later the console lit up with remarkable punctuality. After a beat Uhura handed the Captain her ear piece. The bridge seemed to hold its collective breath as he listened, poker faced, to the whole message.

When it finished he handed back the instrument and smiled tiredly at her, patted her shoulder and turned, looked across the bridge at his friend. The light in Spock's eyes matched the one slowly growing in his.

Scott watched him approach.

"Mr. Scott," James T. Kirk said slowly and smiled at his Engineering officer. "You're sitting in my chair."



MY LONELY SPACE

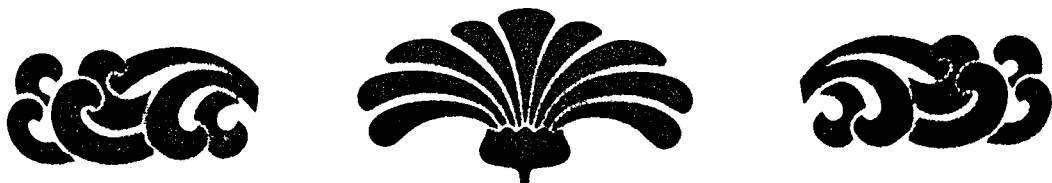
I come from a planet,
So very far away,
But a light year in time,
To me is just a day.

I've travelled so far,
And for so very long,
But the call of my homeworld,
To me, will always be strong.

My heart is the engine,
That powers this ship;
In search of a home berth,
Into which it can slip.

Though time travels slowly,
And light years may pass,
The days grow no longer,
And the nights quickly go,
I'll still travel onward,
But to where, who will know?

Benjamin T Jones



THE CANDIDATE

by

Gloria Fry

Captain Christopher Pike sat in the briefing room studying the dossier on the screen before him. His First Officer sat opposite him, her eyes also intent on the data.

"He sounds too good to be true," Pike commented, looking over at her.

"A genius, even by Vulcan standards," the woman said, a smile lighting up her beautiful features. "Amazing!"

"But he's so *young*," Pike said, uncertainty in his tone. "Vulcan or not, most men his age are still junior officers."

"Captain, he's been through the Starfleet course in record time. Passed his exams with the highest marks ever; he is the only student ever to have gained every prize at the Academy. I heard he gave most of his lecturers an inferiority complex. Shook them up when *he* started to teach *them* new theories." She laughed. "As you know, my brother teaches advanced computer studies there, and Mr. Spock left him way... way... behind."

Pike laughed. "I don't know about your brother, but remembering *my* Academy days, I'd say that some of those old fossils needed to be shaken up." He leaned back and sighed. "The same goes on this ship, especially in the Science Department." His eyes clouded over with anger as he recalled how the lack of discipline and knowledge of the previous Science Officer had almost cost the destruction of the Enterprise on her test run. Murphy had been too casual, too old and too set in his ways. Pike had transferred him and asked Starfleet for suitable candidates to replace him - insisting on interviewing them himself.

"When do you wish to interview Lt. Spock?" the First Officer asked.

"As soon as Lt. Strann is here. I'd like the opinion of another Vulcan."

The First Officer was startled. "But Captain, Strann is Chief of Astrophysics. If Lt. Spock becomes Science Officer he will head all science departments, outranking Lt. Strann - a person more than twice his age. Won't Strann resent him? How can he give you unbiased advice?"

"He's a Vulcan - he can't be biased. He will give me his honest appraisal," Pike said. "I doubt that I would trust a Human in his position, though."

The doors hissed open and a tall, aquiline Vulcan officer in Science Section blue entered. "Lt. Strann reporting as ordered, sir," he said, stopping before the Captain.

"Please be seated," Pike said.

Strann was an excellent officer, a brilliant astrophysicist, but reserved as all Vulcans were. Pike could never have any more than a professional relationship with him or any of the Vulcans serving on the Enterprise. No Human could. All accepted it, though, knowing of the strict privacy that Vulcans required. Yet - Pike found it disconcerting at times when faced with the reality of their aloofness from all Human sociability.

"I would like you to read this dossier, Lt. Strann," he said. "It's one of the applicants for Science Officer. I wish your opinion."

Strann surveyed the file in moments, then raised an eyebrow in a gesture that seemed common amongst Vulcans, but Pike had not yet fathomed out what it meant.

"Well, Lt. Strann?"

"May I see his countenance?" Strann asked.

"Go ahead."

Strann touched the console, and a moment later the picture of a young dark-haired Vulcan appeared on the screen. The Astrophysicist's eyebrow climbed almost into his hair. Pike wondered if he had just seen Vulcan surprise.

"I know he is very young," the Captain said, "but his qualifications are outstanding."

"Indeed, sir - most impressive," Strann said. "I know of Lt. Spock. It is said of him that he has the finest scientific mind of his generation. He is half-Human - the first of his kind - yet he has surpassed full Vulcans in everything he has studied."

Pike exchanged a glance with his First Officer. Vulcans were not generous with their praise, yet Strann had just praised Lt. Spock - or had he? Perhaps he was just relating the facts. Pike was a little confused but he brushed that away; this was not the time to try to understand Vulcans. He touched the audio control. "Lt. Spock to the briefing room," he said. He wanted to meet this half-Human/half-Vulcan officer; something about him interested a Captain who was looking for the very best crew for his ship.

The Enterprise was orbiting Starbase Ten, one of the two Starships there at this time. Five highly qualified candidates were now back on the base awaiting the result of their interview; Lt. Spock was the last one to be seen by Captain Pike.

As the Enterprise officers sat awaiting Lt. Spock, the Captain prepared himself. He hoped that the young Vulcan would be suitable. Vulcans were the galaxy's greatest scientists. To have one as Science Officer was an asset to any ship, but a Vulcan/Human hybrid who surpassed even full Vulcans - what a unique being to have aboard the Enterprise.

Number One had absently noticed from the photograph that Lt. Spock was handsome, but it did not prepare her for the power of his presence as he entered the room and stood with military poise before them. All Humans found the reticent, quiet Vulcans attractive, but Lt. Spock was exceptional, even for this beautiful, serene species of such wisdom with their centuries of peace and harmony behind them. She watched with interest as the Captain interviewed him.

"Please sit down, Lt. Spock," Pike said, indicating a seat.

When Spock had done so, Pike introduced him to the others. Spock bowed his head to both of them with graceful and courteous respect.

"Your recommendation from your previous Captain is impressive, Lt. Spock. He says that your action during the Klingon encounter saved the ship. He believes you would be an asset to any ship, and felt that your talents were wasted on a survey vessel such as his."

"I am honoured by Captain Meyer's opinion, sir," Spock said tonelessly.

"Why do you wish to serve on the Enterprise, Mr. Spock?" Pike asked, taking in the stiff, austere mien of the young Vulcan - more expressionless than Strann. He was intrigued. This boy before him was half-Human and no-one would have guessed it in a million years. He was the most 'Vulcan' Vulcan Pike had ever met.

"On a Starship, the opportunity for acquiring knowledge is greater than on any other class of vessel, sir."

"The pursuit of knowledge is a fine thing, Mr. Spock, but as Science Officer you would run the largest and most varied section on the ship. I know your expertise in all scientific fields is outstanding, but how would you command beings older and more experienced than yourself?"

The young Vulcan stared straight ahead. Pike watched him carefully, fascinated by his total lack of Humanness. Half-Human - who would have believed it?

"Sir, the Science Officer must rely on the skills and knowledge of the specialists under his command. But he must be able to sift through their reports and make the final judgements himself. He must have the ability to do anything - in an emergency - which his staff can. He must be able to understand their work. He is the one responsible to the Captain and must ensure that all available data is prepared and ready for him."

Pike listened, highly interested in the words and the manner in which they were delivered. If Lt. Spock was able to do all that he said, then he would be the finest Science Officer in the fleet. He noted that Number One was staring at the Vulcan with approval, and he knew that for Mr. Spock to meet her exacting standards meant the young Lieutenant was a very strong candidate indeed. He relied on his First Officer's judgement; she had an unerring sense of intuition about people.

"As for my age," Spock continued, "it would be of no importance to the other Vulcans aboard, sir. My people respect ability - age, gender or species are not important."

Pike smile a little. Vulcans were... Vulcans. But Humans made up the largest group on his ship. How would *they* react to such a young and serious Science Officer?

"Lt. Strann, do you wish to ask Mr. Spock anything?"

The older Vulcan bowed his head slightly and faced the candidate. "Lt. Spock, you have had a limited experience of working with Humans. They are often illogical, even unreasonable. How

would you relate to Humans?"

Spock looked at Strann, his dark, piercing eyes intent on the older Vulcan. "My mother is a Human, Lt. Strann. I have had more experience of relating to Humans than any other Vulcan in Starfleet."

Pike and his First Officer exchanged a grin at his reply.

"Indeed," Strann said, and fell silent.

"Lt. Spock," Number One said, "what are your interests?"

Spock turned to her, but did not look directly at her. "Scientific study and research, Commander."

She nodded. "And you have no other interests outside your work?"

"My research occupies most of my off-duty time."

"And that is all?" she asked curiously.

"I am a scientist, Commander," he replied calmly.

"How do you relax, Lt. Spock?" the First Officer persisted. "Do you read? Do you participate in sports? Do you have a hobby which you enjoy?"

The young Lieutenant hesitated for only a moment before he replied, "I read, Commander. I do not participate in sports, but I practise certain Vulcan martial arts. Also, I play chess."

Number One had watched the ship's Vulcan complement working on Humanly impossible exercises and fighting techniques on occasion, and had been very impressed. She wondered what level of skill the candidate possessed. He was so slim, almost slightly built compared to some of the others. How would he fare against the powerfully built Lt. Sival of Engineering? She knew, though, his appearance was deceptive - he would easily be able to take on any Human aboard, and any of the other species also.

Pike stood up and immediately the others also rose to their feet. "Would you like to see the bridge, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

"I would be honoured, sir," came the polite reply.

The Captain led the way to the turbolift, and once there he surreptitiously watched the candidate for any reaction to the sights of the giant ship. He knew that Spock had never been aboard a Starship before, and most newcomers were overawed. However, the Vulcan stood silently, his eyes focused in front of him, his hands clasped behind his back, calm radiating from him. Pike nodded approvingly.

The bridge crew acknowledged their Captain. He returned their greetings, introduced Spock to them, then said, "Please feel free to check the science station."

Spock frowned, almost imperceptibly, but bowed slightly to the Captain in acceptance and made his way over to the console. He sat down, his hands immediately finding the complex sequences required for a class one check of the library computer. The others looked on

with admiration and a certain touch of awe as the data on the screen flashed by faster than the Human eye could follow.

Number One turned to her Captain, awaiting his signal. Finally tearing his eyes away from the science station, Pike turned to face her and nodded. She depressed a key on the helm console.

The alarm sounded moments later. "Captain," she said. "Unidentified object approaching at high warp speed."

Pike sat down on his chair. "On screen, magnification ten."

The object which appeared on the viewer swirled and changed before them, the colours brilliant and sparkling, plunging the Enterprise into a kaleidoscope of shifting, changing patterns.

"Mr. Spock, what is that?" Pike asked, watching the Vulcan with keen interest.

Spock stood, staring into his hooded sensor-scan. "Sir, sensors indicate a solid body at the heart of an energy field of..." He stiffened slightly. "Captain, it is emitting Zimmerman radiation - deadly to Humans."

Pike expressed surprise. "Oh, come now, Mr. Spock. Zimmerman radiation has only been observed three times in one hundred years."

"One hundred point six five years, sir. First discovered by Dianne Zimmerman, Astronomer Royal, Earth... Sir, it is illogical."

Pike tried to keep his face straight. "It *is* illogical, Mr. Spock. How can you possibly recognise the pattern of Zimmerman radiation? It is so rare."

Spock turned around to face the Captain. "My memory is excellent, sir. But if you wish I shall compare it to the records in the library computer. Sir, I have been monitoring all communication channels from the other orbiting vessels and Starbase Ten. There are no emergency procedures in operation. As their sensors would detect any approaching menace, I can only conclude that you have set me a test."

He half turned and placed long fingers against the console. "I now present to you the computer comparisons proving my observations, and the method by which we could destroy the object if this was a real emergency."

The Communications Officer, who had been ready to play his part by introducing a false message from the Starbase, grimaced, then chuckled as the Captain ordered the test cancelled. Pike returned his attention to the young Vulcan. "That will not be necessary, Mr. Spock," he said.

Captain Pike regarded the calm countenance of the candidate. Mr. Spock had been the only one of the six he had seen to discover it had been a test, and quickly too - within seconds. He had been cool and highly efficient, determining the details and evaluating it all with remarkable speed. He had not panicked, but had logically proceeded with fast, painstaking Vulcan thoroughness - even monitoring the base - as he recognised the Zimmerman phenomenon and its deadliness to lifeforms; as he even searched for, and found, the defence against it.

A Science Officer of such skill would mean the difference between life and death in a situation which required quickness of thought, and recall of any knowledge which might add to the safety of the ship. The young officer had all the makings of a brilliant Science Officer. He was cold, remote - yet no-one expected a Vulcan to be the life and soul of the party. Pike wanted his crew to be safe; he was determined to have the most efficient crew in Starfleet. Lt. Spock was barely more than a boy, but he exuded competence, dependability, assurance - along with a maturity which seemed incongruous in one so young.

"Thank you, Lt. Spock," he said finally. "Please wait in the Officers Lounge."

He watched as the Vulcan courteously acknowledged his words and left the bridge before bursting into loud laughter. The other Humans joined him. They had been through this test six times today; if any of the first five candidates had been Science Officer in a real crisis instead of the simulation, the Starbase, two Starships and assorted smaller vessels orbiting it would have lost thousands of personnel. Lt. Strann watched the Humans with curiosity, not understanding the reason for their humour.

"Well," Pike said, after he had recovered his composure. "I think I'll take my chances with such a perceptive and exceptional officer. Opinion, Number One?"

"I agree, Captain," she replied. "I've never seen anyone work so fast."

"Lt. Strann?"

Strann moved forward to stand by the Captain's chair. "He is remarkable, but is modest and respectful. An honourable Vulcan. He would make an excellent Science Officer, sir."

"No qualms about working under him?"

"None, sir."

"Do you foresee any problems with others in the Science Department?"

Strann was silent for a long moment as he considered the most diplomatic way of phrasing his answer. "Captain, there will be problems. Mr. Spock was correct in his observation that amongst Vulcans there will be none. But Humans are not like Vulcans. They feel that merit *and* age should be respected. They do not like taking orders from one who is their junior."

Pike sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I know." He studied the calm Vulcan officer, trying to penetrate the lack of expression, attempting to judge the small tell-tale signs he could so easily read in a Human, as to their real feelings. As usual, he was unsuccessful. "Well, I'm not going to pass up the chance of gaining a Science Officer of that calibre because a few Humans will think he is only a boy." He leaned over. "Number One, please contact the others for me and thank them for applying. Lt. Strann, accompany me to the Officers Lounge."

Spock immediately stood as the Captain and Astrophysicist entered. He gave no indication of the joy he felt when informed that he had been accepted for the post. He bowed his head

respectfully before the man who was now his commanding officer.

Christopher Pike's reputation was one of a fine, upstanding person with excellent command skills and a calm, efficient personality. Spock knew that he would be able to work with such a Human, for even Vulcans respected Captain Pike. Very few Human-dominated ships had so many Vulcans aboard. There were twenty-four on the Enterprise. No - twenty-five now.

Spock thought of his parents. His mother would be thrilled at his achievement, but, he wondered, would it make any difference to his father's opinion of him, and the Starfleet career he had chosen?

"Pre-launch briefing is in six hours, Mr. Spock," the Captain said. "I will see you then."

"Affirmative, Captain," Spock replied.

Pike smiled a little. "Look after him, Lt. Strann," he said, and left the two Vulcans together.

Spock raised his eyebrow, wondering what the Captain had meant. He looked at Strann, waiting for the older Vulcan to speak, as a younger person respectfully did with their elder. Strann returned the gaze for many long seconds before he spoke in the soft welcome sounds of the Vulcan language.

"Your courtesy does you credit, Lt. Spock. I and the other Vulcans aboard will be honoured to serve under your command. It will be difficult for one as young as you, but you will have our assistance in all matters. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you need advice."

Spock kept his telepathic shields tightly shut, aware of the power of this Vulcan mind as it tentatively reached out a little. "You honour me, Lt. Strann," Spock replied formally, his face and tone devoid of any expression.

Strann immediately withdrew. "Forgive me, Lt. Spock, but you are alone. We of your people aboard have bond-mates, bond-brothers or sisters. I as senior aboard must tell you that your position is most unusual."

"I have always been alone, Lt. Strann. It is of no matter," Spock said as bitter memories of his childhood on Vulcan resurfaced. *Half-breed... Uncontrolled Human... Less than a Vulcan...* Because of those taunts from his school mates he had set out to prove that he could be better than any of them - outclassing them in every field - but most of all, becoming a true emotionless Vulcan, showing no sign of the despised Humanness. In doing so he had gained his father's grudging approval, until the day Spock had decided to go into Starfleet.

Strann's voice broke into his thoughts. "Lt. Spock, it is known that you have suffered because of your Human heritage, and all are aware of your honoured father's disapproval of his son's entry into Starfleet."

Spock's features grew very hard and cold at Strann's words.

"I beg your pardon if I have offended you," Strann quickly continued, "I only wish to tell you that you will have the support of your people. I bid you welcome to our small community."

"Thank you, Lt. Strann," Spock said, deeply pleased by the other's words. He had not worked with any Vulcans on his last ship, and the prospect of being amongst like-minded Vulcan scientists was a pleasant one. "If you will excuse me, I will return to the Starbase for a short time."

Strann bowed. "If you will permit it, on your return I will introduce you to your staff."

"I will permit it," Spock replied.

He left the Officers' Lounge, trying to restrain his excitement. No-one guessed! No-one sensed that beneath his serene countenance his delight at becoming Science Officer of a Starship threatened his composure.

Pike called the Admiralty with his decision, and the method by which he had arrived at it. His old friend, Admiral Ben-Levi, laughed knowingly. "You always were inventive, Chris," he said.

Pike grinned embarrassedly. Simon knew him too well. In the four years that he had been Ben-Levi's First Officer they had become firm friends.

"A brave decision, though," Ben-Levi continued. "Lt. Spock is regarded as the Academy's best ever student. Quite a loner though - even amongst Vulcans. A brilliant scientific mind - it makes you wonder what he'll be like when he matures. Chris, maybe you can be the one to mould him. We need young people of such calibre in Starfleet. If his interest is kept, he will go to the very top. Encourage him to make his future in Starfleet - befriend him, if he will accept it. Vulcans are very difficult to understand, but maybe you'll be able to do it. After all, you have more Vulcans on your ship than any other Captain."

Pike nodded. "I know, Simon. I like the boy - something about him - don't know what it is. Strann likes him too, or at least approves of him."

"Good luck, Chris," Ben-Levi said. "Take care."

Pike thanked him, broke contact and settled back in his chair thinking about Lt. Spock; the lightening speed and efficiency he displayed at the science station, as though he were almost a part of the computer system. His thoughts were interrupted by his Communications Officer calling him from the bridge.

"Captain Garrovick from the Farragut wishes to speak to you, sir."

Pike sighed with pleasure at the thought of Garrovick's reaction to the news that the Enterprise had a Vulcan Science Officer. The Farragut had only arrived at the Starbase a few hours ago, and Pike - in the middle of his interviews - had not yet had the chance to talk with his friend from Academy days.

"Put him on," he said. He was going to enjoy this.

Lt. Spock, newly appointed Science Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise, walked along the main concourse of the Starbase on his way to the Transporter Section. In his hand he carried a black

carry-all in which were his precious lyre, a small assortment of informal Vulcan clothing and some personal items. He would not need much aboard the Starship for the ship's fabricators would supply all his needs.

The pathway was crowded with personnel on shore-leave. Spock walked alone in the crowd, unaware of the impression he made as he serenely moved among them. Through the grapevine, everyone knew of his appointment and of his unique passing of Captain Pike's test.

A group of young men and women from the U.S.S. Farragut came towards him from the opposite direction, a laughing crowd of junior lieutenants on their first deep-space mission wrapped up in one another's company, flirting, joking, having fun.

Spock ignored the noisy Humans, his mind on the message he had sent to Vulcan, wondering how his father would receive it, when one of the Humans suddenly knocked against him with enough force to send the carry-all flying from his hands across the path. He stood still - rigid with tension - recoiling from the momentary touch when he received a turbulent mass of emotions which had penetrated right through his telepathic shields.

The young Human found his balance, stared up at Spock, and flushed deeply when he realised what he had done.

"C'mon, Jim," one of the others said, but the man named Jim swallowed hard, his handsome face contrite. Quickly, he retrieved the case and held it out to Spock.

"Please excuse me, Lieutenant," he said, "I'm very sorry."

Spock turned to face him and for a moment stared into bright hazel eyes which did not flinch from him. He quickly reduced the power in his gaze, for it was almost impossible for Humans to take; they always feared the almost hypnotic projection of his telepathy. He had learned not to stare openly into Human eyes, as all Vulcans did, yet this Human did not seem to be the least bothered and gazed up at him with an interest which changed to recognition.

"You are Lt. Spock," he stated, "the new Science Officer on the Enterprise."

"Affirmative," Spock replied, closing his shields more tightly around him as he felt the barrage of the Human's enthusiasm and curiosity.

"Lt. James Kirk of the Farragut. Congratulations on your appointment."

"Thank you, Lt. Kirk," Spock said, wondering why this Human was so interested, and so polite. Most Humans he had met knew little of even basic courtesy. He accepted the carry-all and was about to move away when Kirk spoke again.

"I wish you every success on your voyage, Lt. Spock. Good luck."

A strange warm feeling enveloped the Vulcan - he frowned in puzzlement, wondering what had happened - but immediately he forced it away. "I do not believe in luck, Lt. Kirk. It is illogical. However, I thank you and wish you a successful mission on the Farragut."

A wide smile covered the face of the Human Lieutenant. "I am honoured to have met you, Lt. Spock. Perhaps we will meet again some day."

Spock raised an eyebrow. He had to get away from this peculiar young Human. Something about him was disconcerting.

"If you will excuse me, Lt. Kirk. Captain Pike is expecting me."

"Oh - certainly," Kirk said, standing aside. "Goodbye, Mr. Spock."

Spock bowed to him slightly and walked on, an unusual conviction deep within him that he *would* meet this man again. He wondered why the prospect of that seemed so interesting. Dismissing his feelings as totally illogical, he continued on his journey to the transporter room.

The memory of Lt. Kirk persisted, though, as a sudden premonition of standing by the Human's shoulder - of a strength and courage and will which matched his own - filled his mind. It seemed so real and so right. Using strict Vulcan control, he negated the unwelcome image. He was a Vulcan. He was Science Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise.

Lt. James T. Kirk stared after the figure of the Vulcan he had accidentally knocked against. He chastised himself. Vulcans did not like to be touched and *he* had crashed right into one. What had Lt. Spock thought of him?

Not much, he surmised. He sighed with regret at being made to look such a fool in the eyes of such an officer. Science Officer of the Enterprise. What an achievement in one so young!

"What is it, Jim?" his friend, Gary, asked him. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Kirk shook his head. "I'm all right."

Yet he did feel a little shaky. Why did he have the very real conviction that he *would* meet that Vulcan again? It was a gut instinct. He had learned to trust such instincts. He had stared into the eyes of a Vulcan, something space legend said was impossible to bear. It had caused him to feel a strange jolt deep within him as if that alien gaze had penetrated into the recesses of his mind. He shivered a little and returned to his friends. If it was fated, he would meet Lt. Spock in the future, but right now the Farragut awaited him. On that ship he would begin his real training for his goal in life: Starship command.

In his mind's eye he caught a glimmer of himself wearing Captain's stripes, and a Vulcan - that very Vulcan - at his side. He laughed at himself - he was only a junior lieutenant. If he was to reach the rank of Captain it would be years - many years - in the future. He dismissed his daydreaming and set himself to enjoy his shore-leave. But ten hours later, from the observation deck of the Farragut, he watched as the Enterprise left Starbase Ten. His eyes watched her with a longing he did not quite understand. He did not know that one day she would be his...



FROM THE DIARY OF SARAH KIRK

by

Helen Cakebread

The old man sitting in the wheelchair gazed at the garden. He could not make out the flowers as his eyesight was poor now, even with glasses; but he could see it was a mass of colour, and he felt good sitting there in the warm sunshine.

He let his mind wander, as it often did, and remembered the days when he was young and active - not like this, crippled and unable to walk very far; when he used to sit in the command chair on his lovely lady, the Enterprise, giving orders...

Yes, those were the days when he could lift his head with pride as Captain James T. Kirk.

There were so many tales he could tell about his friends - Scotty, Sulu, Chekov, the lovely Uhura... and his two closest friends, McCoy, nicknamed Bones, and his Vulcan friend Spock. They made a good team.

So many adventures... Times when he thought he'd lost Spock - but somehow they would pull through.

Then came the day when he had to leave his ship and take a desk job. Then it all changed. Spock went back to Vulcan to help his father - because of Sarek's bad heart, Spock would do all the travelling for him.

It was on one of those trips that during a freak storm his shuttlecraft crashed and everyone was killed. Kirk remembered that day too clearly, because he had been expecting a visit from Spock. The loss hit him hardest when he knew he would never see those raised eyebrows again.

His other friends now had jobs or ships; he never saw them again - they had their own lives to live.

Only Bones came to visit him when his great grandson could bring him.

He had married three times, and lost count of the children - not that he wanted them to see him like this, an old man waiting to die. He knew his days were numbered, but he was ready.

Kirk lost all sense of time as he dozed. When he opened his eyes it was dark; a few stars had come out. This was the time he liked best. He knew he should not be out this late, but with luck *they* would turn a blind eye and leave him a little longer. His eyes seemed very heavy; they closed again.

Jim.

Kirk opened his eyes and stared in surprise. Spock was standing in front of him.

Spock? What are you doing here?

Jim, it is time. Come with me! I have been waiting so that we would be together again.

Now Kirk saw that Spock was young again; he wore his blue tunic top and his hair shone black. Kirk rose from his chair, surprised to do so with no difficulty. He raised his hand to brush his hair back and noticed that he was wearing his gold uniform. He did not understand; he began to turn back, but Spock caught hold of his arm.

No, Jim, do not look back. There is nothing to see. Look, Captain, the stars are waiting.

The Human looked at the Vulcan and smiled, and together they faded into the night.

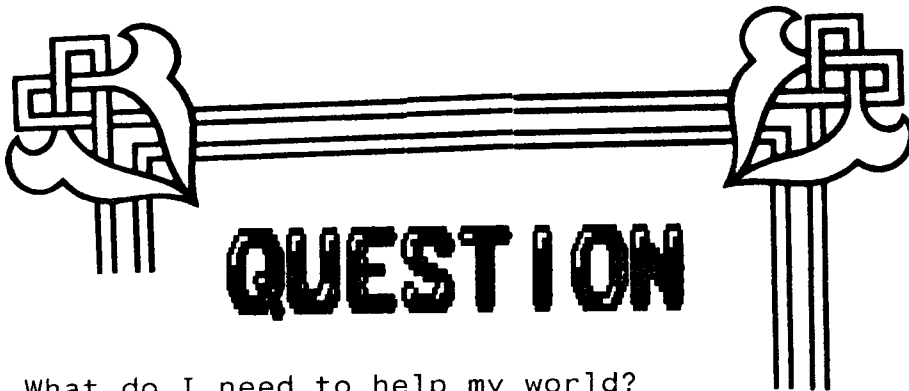
The young nurse came down the ramp. She had forgotten Mr. Kirk, but knew he would not mind - he loved sitting out here as it got dark. It was time, though, to get him settled, give him his supper and perhaps get a story from him. She loved the way he told his stories - they seemed so real.

She bent and touched him. He was cold; she looked closer and saw what she would never forget - a smile of sheer happiness on his lips.

She turned and looked up at the stars, somehow knowing he would be there; then she noticed that two of the stars looked bigger and brighter than the rest.

Nurse Sarah Kirk looked up at them and without knowing why, whispered,

"Live long, and prosper... "



Youth - What do I need to help my world?

First - It's Love that keeps our world together.

Second - I say Openness and understanding is better.

Third - No, it's Guts and courage that's required.

Fourth - It takes Intelligence and wisdom to make us all inspired.

Fifth - One needs Courtesy and politeness.

Elder - Use all of these but temper them with what they make.

Youth - What's that?

Elder - Look and you will see.

Helen Connor



CONFLICT ON ALPHERATZ

by

Bonnie Holmyard

In his opinion it was a senseless act, but he had carried out his orders and knew the High Priestess was awaiting his report. He could procrastinate no longer. His stride was one of military precision as he marched through the marble halls of her temple. His thoughts, however were chaotic.

The sentries at the entrance to the Throne Room snapped to attention at his approach. He was oblivious of the action; he was trying desperately to blank his mind. He had to have complete control over not only his thoughts but especially his feelings to be able to face the High Priestess. With that deliberation at the forefront of his consciousness, the Sergeant-at-Arms marched up to her throne, knelt on his left knee, bowed his head and placed his right arm over his heart in tribute.

"Has the message been sent?" she asked and immediately he felt shudders of passion ripple through his being.

He rose, stood at attention in front of her and purposely denied himself the pleasure of looking upon her splendour. *One step at a time*, he silently cautioned himself, and said, "It has, High Priestess." Her power over the males of any species was not something to be scoffed at. He knew it for the tangible thing that it was and had to fight constantly to withstand its force. And fight it he did. Taking a deep breath, he met her eyes, somehow fought the hypnotic essence of her gaze, and said, "Still, I fear it will not help us."

Her head tilted slightly, the green of her eyes seeming to darken. "Why do you say that?" she questioned. "It is my understanding the the United Federation of Planets pride themselves in helping planets in need of assistance. I am sure they will answer our summons."

There was no denying the conviction of her tone, nor the excruciating ecstasy just the sound of her voice brought to his loins. Add to that melody the invincibility of her gaze and most men lost themselves. He, however, could not allow himself that luxury. It was his duty to voice his opinions. He, as her Sergeant-at-Arms, was her only true counselor. He swallowed hard, tried desperately to think of something else - anything - and spoke again.

"That may be, High Priestess, but I fear the Federation will not want to chance the galactic war responding to our message could incite." He paused, almost lost himself, swallowed again and continued. "I further point out that we have nothing to offer them for interceding in our problems."

She pouted and he felt his resistance crumble. "That is not so," she countered. "It is our very position that is to our favour. I am sure the Federation would welcome our planet's entry, and it is

my understanding they do not ask or demand payment for their aid."

All he could do was nod. He could find the strength to debate the issue no longer.

"Then we will cease this discussion as it is pointless to speak of matters beyond our control," she said. "All we can do now is hope the Federation will answer our summons."

He nodded again and she smiled, a radiant and resplendent smile, a smile that all but melted his heart. He had to get out of here.

"You may go, Sergeant," she said, as if sensing his discomfort, and he just barely controlled himself enough to bow before turning abruptly and leaving her to her delusions.

"Priority one message coming in from Starfleet Command, Captain," Lieutenant Uhura reported from the communication station on the bridge of the USS Enterprise.

"On screen, Uhura."

Captain James T. Kirk swung his chair round to face the screen just as it changed from its view of the moving stars to the image of Admiral Rose. Instantly Kirk was alert. Rose was Commander Strategic Space Command.

"Admiral Rose," he said, opening communications, "how may I help you?"

"Captain Kirk," the Admiral said, nodding slightly, "we have received a message from the High Priestess of the planet Alpheratz requesting her planet's entry into the Federation."

Kirk's suspicious nature was now wide awake. Why a priority one communication for such a routine diplomatic mission? Why Admiral Rose? "What's the catch?" he asked.

"Excuse me, Admiral, Captain," the Vulcan First Officer spoke as he moved into the bounds of the communication screen's parameters, "but isn't the planet Alpheratz located within Klingon territory?"

"Inside Klingon territory!" Kirk exclaimed, his head swinging from his First Officer back to the screen. "And Starfleet is seriously considering sending a starship, *my* starship, into Klingon space to answer the High Priestess's summons!"

"Those are your orders, Captain," came the cool reply.

"That's quite a catch, Admiral," Kirk retorted. "Need I point out the Klingons will consider our entering their space an act of war?"

"You need not," Rose replied. "We are well aware you may be heading into a trap purposely set to draw the Federation into Klingon space and a galactic war, but Alpheratz offers Starfleet an excellent strategic position inside Klingon space, and if it is at all possible, we intend to grasp it."

"It's a suicide mission, Admiral!" Kirk retorted.

"That is not a very optimistic outlook, Captain, and one hardly becoming a man of your reputation."

"I simply point out the obvious," Kirk stated.

"Be that as it may, your orders stand. The Bonaventure and Excalibur have been called in to aid you in this mission. They will rendezvous with you at Sector 8.7 of the Klingon Neutral Zone and will proceed under your direct command to the planet Alpheratz. Details are being transmitted now. Rose out."

Kirk watched the stars replace the image of the Admiral and felt the stirring of an emotion he did not want to face. He turned slowly to his First Officer, noting the raised eyebrow and unspoken question in Spock's eyes.

"You have a comment, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

"It would appear the Federation is determined to have Alpheratz join its ranks," Spock said drily.

"Indeed, but at what cost?"

"Jim!"

He stopped and turned at the sound of McCoy's call and hurried footsteps. The Doctor, he saw, was another man with questions in his eyes, and if Kirk knew Bones, his questions would not remain as silent as Spock's.

"What's this I hear about you questioning command orders?" McCoy immediately asked as he came abreast of his Captain.

"It's not as though I haven't done so in the past," Kirk answered, again continuing on his way to the briefing room.

"But you've never before called an assignment a suicide mission in front of the crew," McCoy stated, keeping pace. "What's got into you?"

"I don't have explain my actions to you, Doctor," came the cold reply.

"Excuse me for being concerned," McCoy answered and fell silent.

Kirk heard the hurt in his friend's voice and was instantly ashamed of his harsh words. It was not Bones' fault that Kirk felt as he did. It was no *one* person's fault. "Sorry, Bones," he murmured. "It's just that when a man faces the shortcomings of those he has sworn to obey, it's a sad day indeed."

"What *are* you talking about?"

Kirk came to an abrupt halt. The briefing room was now two steps away but before he stepped through those doors and faced his command crew, he would satisfy McCoy's curiosity. It might do him good to speak the words that had been screaming inside his head since speaking with Admiral Rose, but he doubted it.

"It's this whole stinking mission, Bones," he said angrily, "and the questions it raises. Questions like: is a strategic position inside Klingon space so important the Federation Council would sanction war? And since when did Starfleet begin to take such manipulative steps? And what of the planet Alpheratz? Are they to exchange Klingon domination for Starfleet exploitation? It makes no sense to me, Bones, and I don't like it one little bit. None of it!"

Thus said, he marched angrily into the briefing room. He dropped into his seat, all but glared at the department heads who surrounded him and literally pounded the intercom button on the table's command centre. "Kirk to Bridge."

"Bridge, Chiltern here, sir," the Communications Officer responded.

"What is our ETA to the Neutral Zone, Chiltern?"

"Estimated arrival time, thirty point seven minutes, sir."

"Have the Excalibur and Bonaventure reported their arrival times?"

"Both report they will be arriving at approximately the same time, Captain, 0700 hours."

"Thank you, Chiltern. Kirk out." His eyes flickered to those around him. "That gives us half an hour to come up with a plan of action," he said. "Spock, background on Alpheratz if you please."

"Alpheratz lies in the outer fringes of Klingon space," Spock began methodically, "bordering Sector 8.7 of the Neutral Zone. It is an agriculturally based civilization and its inhabitants are reported as a passive people. The ruling government consists solely of a High Priestess, she being as much a god in the eyes of her people as a ruler. Since Klingons discovered the planet's existence, 10 Standard years past, they have all but depleted the planet of its harvests. Thus the High Priestess's summons for Federation aid."

"It would appear Starfleet is convinced the High Priestess's message is genuine," McCoy added, "otherwise they wouldn't have called in three starships to respond, although why they would even consider the situation feasible is beyond me."

"You have an uncanny ability, Doctor, of stating the obvious in a manner that implies the facts were not clear on those points from the beginning," Spock stated, sending McCoy into a blustering attempt to find an appropriate response.

"Spock," he mumbled in rage, "only you could -"

"Gentlemen!" Kirk interrupted. There was an abrupt and utter silence. The Captain looked sternly back and forth between the two, but inwardly he smiled. Even on the brink of galactic war McCoy and Spock could argue. He would be wise to follow their example and remove himself from consequences beyond his control. "Now is not the time for your petty arguments," he forced himself to say, and then went on in a definite let's-get-down-to-business tone. "If anyone has any *constructive* comments, now is the time to make them, and I need not remind you, time is running out."

"Ship's engines are operating at top performance," Chief Engineer Scott responded proudly.

"It would be illogical for the High Priestess to have announced to the Klingons that she has requested our aid," Spock cut in. "We should, therefore, have a 97.043 percent chance of encountering no resistance until we reach Alpheratz."

Kirk couldn't help but grin. "97.043 percent, Mr Spock?" he repeated. The Vulcan nodded, straight-faced, and instantly McCoy had his say.

"I strongly disagree," he said, his blue eyes snapping from Spock to Kirk. "I can't quote statistics, but I also can't remember a single time when we've entered the Neutral Zone and not encountered Klingons."

"Three starships make an impressive fighting force, Doctor," Sulu put in.

"Facts, people, facts," Kirk interjected. "We need facts not just supposition, and we will not obtain those facts until we face the reality of this mission. Therefore, we proceed cautiously and defensively. We must first ascertain from the High Priestess the size of the Klingon force on her planet. Uhura, when will we be in communication range of Alpheratz?"

"Not until we enter Sector 8.7, sir, and may I point out that the Federation received the summons via space buoy. Alpheratz may not have space-wide communications."

"Nothing in the report to indicate their communications levels, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, sir."

"More unknowns," Kirk said, and thought that the more he learned about this mission the more it just didn't sound right. "Okay people," he went on, "assuming we can initiate communications with the High Priestess, I want all your input on the validity of the transmission. I still have my doubts as to the legitimacy of the mission. It could be a trap. Therefore, once communication is established, feel free to interrupt with any questions or comments. Understood?"

At everyone's nods of acceptance, he concluded, "Let's get back to our posts and ensure the ship is ready for this encounter."

"Captain, I have a channel open to Alpheratz. The signal is weak but the High Priestess is standing by," Uhura reported.

"Do we have visual?" Kirk asked, sitting a little taller in his command chair and straightening his uniform.

"Aye, sir, on main screen at your command," she confirmed.

"One moment, Uhura," the Captain said as he looked around at the bridge crew. "Okay, everyone," he said, "let's give the lady our undivided attention. Open communications, Lieutenant."

At his final words the image of the High Priestess filled the

screen and Kirk literally lost his breath. She was by far the most beautiful creature it had ever been his pleasure to look upon. Petite, vulnerable and cloaked in an innocence that tore at his heart, he could only stare at her, transfixed. Her eyes - what was it about her eyes? Spaced a little further apart than usual, they were a bright emerald green, shaded by long dark lashes, and seemed to reach inside his soul to stroke his spirit.

"Captain."

Kirk heard the voice - Spock's voice - but was unwilling - unable - to pull his eyes from the beauty that filled the screen. Her essence seemed to reach out to him across the great void of space that separated them, to awaken within him a desire that burned as it caressed. He wanted nothing more than to run his fingers through her lush brown hair, to lose himself in her eyes.

"Captain," Spock repeated and this time a hand fell on Kirk's arm. He literally had to drag his eyes from the screen, felt an inexplicable emptiness grasp at his being, and forced himself to meet and keep the Vulcan's steely gaze. The impulse to look back at *her* was all but overpowering.

"Our mission, Captain," Spock prompted.

"Yes," Kirk heard himself answer. He shook his head, trying to comprehend what was happening and simultaneously noting the dazed faces that surrounded him. He was not the only one affected by the mere sight of the High Priestess. What was this... 'seductive' was the word that immediately came to mind... Yes, seductive... what was this seductive power she controlled? Was it natural or was it, and she, a tool - a Klingon emissary - deployed to entice the Federation into Klingon space and a galactic war? The thought immediately fastened his mind on the mission. His eyes flew back to the screen and this time he fought the temptation of the High Priestess's image. He cleared his throat, which suddenly felt far too dry, and began.

"I am Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation starship Enterprise," he said solemnly. "I am sorry, High Priestess, but I do not know the correct manner in which to address you."

She smiled at his words and Kirk felt a riot of emotions burst through his control. Then she spoke.

"Captain Kirk," she said, her voice hypnotic, mesmerising, spellbinding, "I am the High Priestess of the planet Alpheratz, and that is the only name or title I have ever known." Her smile broadened, although he did not believe it possible, into a brilliant camouflage of intrigue. "I am grateful for your expeditious reply to my request for aid," she said. "When can I expect your ship's arrival?"

Control, he silently commanded, *control*. He glanced at Spock, still standing at the side of the command chair, noted the Vulcan's dispassionate expression, and took strength from it. What was the question? Oh, yes... "Our calculations indicate Alpheratz is approximately seven point two hours travel time from the Neutral Zone," he forced himself to reply, "but there are certain things we must learn before we enter Klingon space."

"I will answer all your questions to the best of my ability, Captain, and what I do not know my Sergeant-at-Arms will endeavour

to answer."

Kirk believed her. "Thank you," he said in what he hoped was his best diplomatic manner and earned himself another of her dazzling smiles. His face and mind went immediately blank. *Captivating*, he thought, *she is absolutely captivating!* Then Spock spoke.

"High Priestess," he said, calm and collected as ever, "it would be logical to speculate that you have not advised the Klingons of your contacting the Federation."

"That is correct."

"A wise move," Kirk intervened, unable to stop the silly - was *it silly?* - smile that stretched across his lips. "And what is the size of the Klingon force on Alpheratz?"

"There are no Klingons on Alpheratz, Captain," the High Priestess replied. "There is, however, one Klingon Bird-of-Prey in orbit around my planet with its weapons directed at my temple. At present Captain Tree Zarth is in command here. Apparently he has upset his superior and his punishment is to guard our planet... a duty he is not pleased to find himself doing." She spoke in a manner that indicated she found humour, however slight, in the Klingon Captain's predicament.

Kirk thought he could detect a laugh coming, which he speculated would be deep and husky, and almost grinned. "Only one Bird-of-Prey?" he heard himself question. A part of him seemed determined to keep his mind on the matter at hand. He allowed that part to take control. "Mr Spock, what are the statistics on a Klingon Bird-of-Prey?"

"A Klingon Bird-of-Prey has a crew of twelve, Captain. Its fire power consists of standard phasers only."

"It seems a small force to control a planet so completely," Kirk voiced his thought.

"My people are a peaceful race, Captain Kirk," the High Priestess explained immediately. "The Klingons' threat of destroying me and my temple, which is the heart of my peoples' culture and way of life, is enough to keep my people doing their bidding." She paused, her eyes seeming to darken in the moment, and again Kirk felt the power of her personality. Had he thought her captivating? She was bewitching! He had to force himself to concentrate on her continued speech.

"We are located within Klingon territory through no fault of our own," the High Priestess was saying, "and are therefore a conquered people. We have no option but to obey. The Klingons are a warrior race and a race that does not give as it takes. Our fields may be prosperous but my people are starving. If you do not intercede on our behalf my people will die. All we want is to be able to live our lives as we did before the Klingons came."

Kirk felt the sincerity and conviction of her words. One glance at Spock convinced him that the Vulcan believed her as well. No matter what provocative powers she commanded, Kirk did not doubt the dilemma her people faced. If there was one thing he knew, it was his enemy, and the Klingons had been his enemy for a long, long time.

"I have one final question," he asked. "Who knows of your contacting the Federation?"

"Only myself and my Sergeant-at-Arms, Captain."

"This is good," Kirk said, and smiled, not simply because it was called for, but because he had finally been able to look past the beguiling persona she projected and feel the plight of the planet. "Please carry on as if nothing unusual were happening," he continued, "but rest assured, the Federation is on its way."

"Alpheratz dead ahead, sir," Sulu reported.

"Scanners indicate the Klingon vessel is presently on its orbital path on the far side of the planet," Spock reported, not raising his eyes from the science station monitors.

The reports came in and the orders went out. Kirk began to reveal his plan of action. "Mr. Sulu, establish standard orbit, keeping the planet between us and that Bird-of-Prey. Uhura, contact the Excalibur and Bonaventure and tell them to maintain their positions just outside sensor range until further orders, but contact them immediately if the Klingon vessel makes a wrong move. Scotty, I want you in the cargo hold ready to operate the transporter there on my order. We will speed up the ship and come up behind the Klingon vessel. You will then lock on to the Klingons aboard that vessel and beam them aboard the Enterprise."

"That could be a wee bit tricky, Captain," Scotty replied.

"I know, that's why I want you to operate the controls personally. Have a security team of equal numbers to the visiting Klingons accompany you to the cargo hold, and take no chances. As soon as the Klingons materialize, stun them and move them to the Brig."

"A wise move, Jim," McCoy said, making his presence known. "They will be in a state of confusion and disorientation at their sudden and unexpected abduction." McCoy was not one to remain in Sickbay when all the excitement was happening on the Bridge, and the excitement was definitely happening on the Bridge. He had heard of the beguiling powers of the High Priestess and was determined to experience them himself - 'for medical purposes', he had said. Kirk almost laughed at the thought.

"That's what I'm counting on, Bones" he said, his eyes flickering back to the Engineering Station. "Okay, Scotty, you have your orders. Advise me when you're ready and we'll close in."

With a nod, Scott headed for the turbolift and Kirk turned once more to Uhura.

"Lieutenant, monitor the Klingons' communications and advise immediately if there is any indication that they are aware of our presence. That will leave us with no option but to call in the Excalibur and the Bonaventure and open fire."

"Aye, sir," she replied, her hands already in motion.

"Mr Chekov, stand by main phasers."

"Standing by, sir."

"Mr Sulu, stand by with tractor beam."

"Standing by, sir."

The tension on the Bridge was rising. Chekov kept flexing his finger over the phaser firing button, while Sulu carefully manoeuvred the great starship closer and closer to the Klingon vessel shown on the main screen. Spock and Uhura sat intently at their stations, while McCoy paced impatiently, but thankfully silently, in front of the turbolift doors. It was one of those times when a Captain could only sit and watch as his orders were carried out.

The silence was suddenly broken. "Transport operations terminated," Spock reported. "Scanners show no life forms remaining on the enemy vessel."

"Sulu, tractor beam," Kirk ordered as he pushed the intercom button on his chair. "Kirk to Scott." The seconds it took for Scotty to respond indicated far better than words the state of confusion in the cargo hold. Finally, "Scott here, sir."

"Report, Mr. Scott."

"Captain, we have the Klingons aboard and they are presently all sleeping like little bairns, but there is one small problem."

"Yes, Scotty, I'm waiting."

"Well, sir, didn't Mr Spock say there would be a crew of twelve?"

"Your point, Mr Scott."

"Yes, sir. We beamed over nine Klingons, sir. There are three missing!"

"They must be on the planet's surface," Spock said, promptly programming the ship's scanners to search the surface of Alpheratz for Klingon life forms.

"Thank you, Scotty," Kirk said, the irritation completely gone from his voice. "Good job. Advise me when the Klingons are safely in the Brig. Kirk out." Rising from the command chair, he moved to the rail in front of the science station. "Anything, Spock?" he questioned.

"One moment, sir," the Vulcan answered passively. "I could have been wrong in my assumption that the ship had a full crew."

"Fine time to think about that!" McCoy muttered as he too joined the huddle at the science station.

"But I was not," Spock continued, ignoring McCoy's outburst. "Sensors show three Klingons in one of the most highly populated areas on the planet. Lieutenant Uhura, do you still have the transmission coordinates from our previous communication with the High Priestess?"

"Yes, sir, relaying that information to your console now."

"It is as I suspected, Captain," Spock said a moment later as he turned to face Kirk and McCoy. "The three Klingons are at this moment in the Throne Room of the High Priestess's temple."

Captain Tree Zarth studied the face of stone that stared down at him as if he were a bug to be squashed under her dainty foot but shrugged off his annoyance. He had the upper hand here. "Our ship's scanners indicated you received an incoming transmission, High Priestess," he stated arrogantly. "I want to know from whom the message came?"

"I know nothing of an incoming transmission, Captain Zarth," she answered. "Your ship's sensors must have malfunctioned. There could be no transmission without my knowledge."

"I am well aware of the control you have over your people, High Priestess," Zarth snarled menacingly. "That is why I am here. It's about time you learned of the control I have over you." He did not want to think about the control she exerted over him. He cleared his throat. "I am sure you would consider it rude of me to call you a liar, so I will give you an option." He motioned one of his officers forward. "I draw your attention to the small box my Executive Officer is holding. It looks quite harmless, doesn't it? But believe me, looks can be deceiving."

The High Priestess's face revealed nothing, and Zarth was inwardly pleased. She was a strong female, as well as beautiful, and he intended to make her his own. There wasn't a member of his crew who had stood in her presence and hadn't felt his lust-blood boil. It was as if she emitted some strong sexual aroma, and he found himself constantly fighting the attraction. *Soon, he silently vowed, soon I will no longer have to do so. Soon she will be mine.* Pushing the seduction of that thought aside, he went on.

"We call it our *tuQDog*, or mindsifter," he said proudly. "Allow me to explain its function." He paused for effect. "It has different degrees of force. Depending on the degree used, it can either sift through a man's mind and extract specific information, or it can rip through a man's mind and record every bit of knowledge it encounters. Of course, when that much force is used the man's mind is permanently emptied." Another pause, then, "I say *man*, but the mindsifter works equally as well on a woman."

Zarth watched the High Priestess intently as he spoke and was pleased by the fleeting expressions that revealed she understood fully the function of the machine, and why he was explaining it to her. Smirking wickedly, he went on. "I am going on a little walking inspection tour of the immediate farmland, which I anticipate should take me about an hour. When I return I expect you to tell me the transmission's origins, or - " and yet again he paused - "or I will order my Executive Officer to obtain the information for me."

Deliberately he slid his eyes from the High Priestess to her Sergeant-at-Arms, knowing she followed his gaze. "It would not do for me to have to use the mindsifter on you, High Priestess," he said as his eyes slithered back to hers. "I would very much hate to see that rebellion wiped from your eyes, along with everything that makes you such a vital person, but believe me, I will not hesitate

to do so if I must. I am sure, however, your trusted Sergeant-at-Arms... " He left the words unsaid for effect.

Giving a mocking bow, he turned to leave but stopped again before reaching the door. Turning slowly, knowing he was the centre of attention, he spoke. "I will leave my Executive Officer here with the mindsifter, as a reminder, and to ensure your Sergeant-at-Arms is not called away on some important business." Laughing loudly, he left the Throne Room and was instantly surrounded by Starfleet Security.

A horde of expressions played across Zarth's face as the emotions raged through his mind. His astonishment quickly turned to fury. Instinctively his hand moved for his weapon, but even before his reflexes could bring his hand to his sidearm, he felt the weight of the weapon disappear. Simultaneously he heard the Throne Room doors reopen and tried to call a warning to his Exec. Without warning a phaser appeared in his face.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, his eyes flashing from one red-garbed Federation dog to the next. Slowly the circle of his captors separated and a man dressed in gold stepped forward.

"The meaning of all this, as you so aptly call it, is that you are now prisoners of the Federation," the Human casually informed him. "Shall we join the High Priestess?" He did not await a reply but deliberately turned his back and started into the Throne Room.

Zarth made as if to follow, but as soon as the phaser was removed from his face, he made to lunge after the man.

"That is not advisable," a stern voice said as a hand landed firmly on his shoulder.

Zarth noticed the Federation Captain had not even turned to acknowledge the disturbance as his gaze shifted to look into the stony face of a Vulcan.

"One centimetre to the left," the Vulcan said pointedly as his hand tightened on Zarth's shoulder, "and you will no longer be conscious." The voice went suddenly low. "It would not do for a commander such as yourself to appear so defenceless in front of your men, Captain. Do I have your word as a warrior that you will behave?"

Zarth's eye's flashed. The Vulcan remained unmoved, his dark eyes locked on the Klingon's. Still the sincerity and respect of the Vulcan's whispered warning cut through Zarth's anger. "Why the courtesy, *Vulqangan*?" he demanded.

"I simply offer you a chance to live to fight another day," came the cool reply. "A warrior must know when to fall back, as well as when to charge." His grip tightened painfully and Zarth saw stars.

"I give you my word," he managed to say. Instantly the Vulcan's hand fell from his shoulder, but he remained close at Zarth's side as together they marched into the Throne Room.

"High Priestess," the Federation Captain was saying as he bowed respectfully, "I trust you have not been harmed."

"Thank you for your concern, Captain Kirk," the High Priestess

answered, and the High Priestess's seductive power over Zarth vanished. His fury flared.

"Kirk?" he shouted. *This* little runt of a Human was the notorious Federation Captain Kirk? He could not believe it! Still, Zarth saw the strength and bravery in his enemy's eyes as the man turned to face him.

"Captain Zarth, isn't it?" Kirk said, his tone and stance one of self-serving insolence. "If you have something to say, Captain, I suggest you speak in a more civil tone."

Zarth snarled. "What do you hope to achieve by entering Klingon space in this manner, Kirk, and holding three Imperial Officers in such a way?" He all but spat the words.

"Your calculations are a little off, Zarth," came the smug reply. "There are presently twelve Imperial Officers and one Bird-of-Prey at the mercy of the Federation. I think it is safe to say that at the moment I have control of the situation here."

Zarth found himself totally astounded for the second time this day. His eyes flew back and forth between the High Priestess and the Federation Captain. Somehow he fought the chaos of emotions. "You may have control of this planet at the moment, Kirk," he shouted, "but once the Empire hears of this, that situation will abruptly change."

"And who's going to tell them?" Kirk shot back. "You? How would you explain your losing control? And who says you will get the chance to report?" There was no mistaking the threat in Kirk's voice.

Zarth bristled and growled. "Captain Kirk," he said righteously, pulling himself up to his full imposing height, "your presence in Klingon space constitutes an act of war," he went on, unable to keep the glee from his tone, "and we Klingons would like nothing more than to show the Federation how to fight!"

"A prospect I see you would immensely enjoy, Captain," Kirk answered calmly. "Too bad I have other plans for you." Turning to one of the red clad inferiors, he issued his orders. "Ensign, escort Captain Zarth and his officers to the Enterprise and put them in the Brig with the rest of the crew."

Zarth's eyes slid to his Exec and saw the man still held the mindsifter. Too late he saw Kirk's eyes had followed his.

"Hold up there, Ensign," Kirk called out and the security team came to an abrupt halt. Zarth silently cursed his stupidity in drawing the man's attention to the weapon as he watched his enemy saunter over to his Exec and hold out his hand.

"What do we have here?" Kirk asked almost playfully, but his eyes were icy cold when they latched on Zarth's.

Zarth said nothing.

"Come, come," Kirk taunted. "You've been asked a direct question, Captain. I want an answer."

Zarth remained silent.

"Captain." The High Priestess spoke, and both Kirk and Zarth turned to acknowledge her. "Captain Zarth called it a mindsifter and was about to demonstrate its powers before your timely arrival."

Kirk's eyes, Zarth noted, flashed dangerously. "I am glad we spared you *that* little demonstration," Kirk said calmly, in direct contrast to the anger in his glare. "As my First Officer can attest," he indicated the Vulcan, "it is not a pleasant experience."

Zarth immediately took a second look at the Vulcan who had allegedly survived the use of the mindsifter. *A brave and worthy enemy, that one*, he thought, his eyes lingering on the alien as he and his men were finally led away.

"Captain," Spock began, as soon as Kirk entered the interrogation room, "as we will have to re-educate the Klingons one at a time, I have ordered Security to open another section of the Brig to hold those re-educated from those whose turn is yet to come. It would not do to have them consort."

"Very well," Kirk nodded and took a seat. "Now, without getting too technical, explain how this modified mindsifter will work."

"Basically, Captain, I will use the mindsifter to locate all knowledge of our presence in the Klingons' minds and erase it. Secondly, I will plant the suggestion that Alpheratz has lost its usefulness to the Empire as its fields are no longer productive, and for a report to be sent recommending it would be best to leave the now depleted planet to its inhabitants."

"That will, of course, not guarantee the Empire will believe the report," Kirk surmised.

"I have anticipated that, Captain. At this moment a science team is on board the Klingon vessel reprogramming the computers to substantiate those facts."

"Excellent, Spock," Kirk said, beaming. "You do anticipate every contingency. One final question. Will the mindsifter erase all memory of us even though the Klingons are still aboard the Enterprise?"

"Affirmative. Their minds will be in a suspended state, which will wear off in approximately six point one hours. They will by then be back aboard their own vessel and we will have departed. Their new memories and their ship's computer should do the rest."

"Thank you, Spock. Your efficiency has paid off again." Kirk rose and moved to the door. "Shall we begin?"

Captain Zarth's face fell when he entered the interrogation room and saw the mindsifter set out before him.

"Open a channel to the High Priestess, Uhura," Kirk ordered as he stepped out of the turbolift and walked toward his command chair. In seconds the screen changed to reveal the High Priestess.

"High Priestess," Kirk began, "we have finished re-educating

the Klingons as I previously explained to you. If all goes according to plan, the Klingons should be departing shortly and you shouldn't be bothered by them again. Lt Uhura has assured me that she has set up a priority one communication system for your use. Please do not hesitate to call on the Federation again if you should ever need our help."

To say Kirk was pleased that this mission was coming to an end, and a successful end at that, could in no way express his feelings. He had fallen helplessly under the High Priestess's control, had fought the seduction of her existence only by concentrating on the Klingons and had helped rid her planet of Klingon domination, all despite his reservations toward the Federation for sending his ship into this chaos to start off with. To say he could not wait for the Enterprise to leave Alpheratz could again in no way express his emotions - emotions he knew he would not be able to comprehend until he was light years away from *her*.

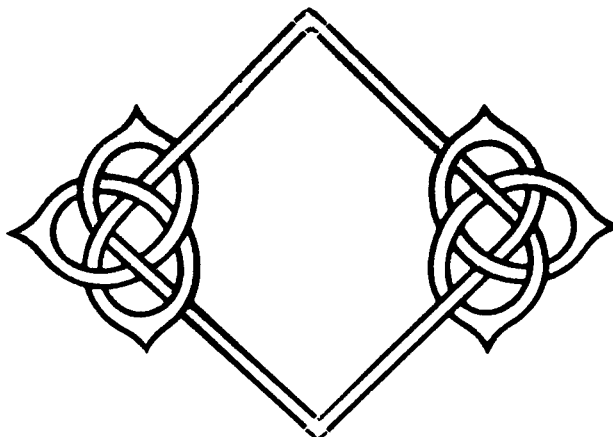
"Thank you, Captain," she said, flashing a dazzling smile. "I should have contacted the Federation long before this seeing how efficiently you handled our problems in such a short period of time. Again I thank you on behalf of myself and all the people of Alpheratz."

Kirk smiled. "You are quite welcome, High Priestess, but your thanks are not necessary. The Federation is always willing to help those who request our assistance." He could not help but feel deceitful in making the statement, but he had performed his duty as ordered, and knew he had best put a lot of distance between himself and the beauty that filled the screen.

"A Federation ambassador will be assigned to your planet, and I surmise she - " Kirk was determined to ensure said ambassador would be female - "will be arriving shortly to help establish Alpheratz as a member of the United Federation of Planets. We, however, must be on our way. We cannot be within sensor range when the Klingons come to their senses, but rest assured, we shall not leave this sector until we see them depart."

"James," the High Priestess said, catching him completely off guard. His eyes opened wide as she went on. "Please come and visit me again... when you are off duty."

The riot of emotions that he had fought so successfully burst to the forefront of his mind, and he grinned, as silly as it might appear. "I shall indeed, High Priestess," he somehow managed to say. "I shall indeed."



INSIDE PROGRAMME

by

Sherry Golding

Stardate: 4392.8. Captain's Log. Starfleet has urgently requested that I go to an uninhabited planet, Ridal Fourteen, which has an atmosphere that is breathable but contains some harmful gases, making it unsafe to remain on the planet for more than two hours. We are to find a rare plant which can be used to cure a deadly disease which has attacked the inhabitants of Ridal Four; a million people have already died. We must return with the plant to Ridal Four within four days of collecting it. This is imperative as, once dug up and taken into an artificial environment, this plant will die within ninety-six hours; it needs sunshine to survive, and although we can produce artificial sunshine, it is not enough. Two million people on Ridal Four depend on us. Two million!

First Officer Spock looked up from his station.

"Captain, we shall be reaching Ridal Fourteen within two point two minutes."

Captain Kirk looked at the viewscreen. There it was, a planet twice the size of Earth, and uninhabited. He stood up.

"Very well Spock; come with me, please. Chekov, you too," he said, looking at his senior navigation officer.

"Uhura, have Dr McCoy meet us in the transporter room," he ordered.

The three officers stepped into the turbolift. "Transporter deck," said Kirk to the lift's computer.

The turbolift took them away, increasing speed as it descended. It came to an abrupt stop. The doors opened and the men stepped out.

As they entered the transporter room, Dr McCoy stepped forward. He shot Kirk a dirty look.

"Bones, are you ready?" asked Kirk, stepping on the transporter platform.

McCoy looked at him. "Of course I'm not. Of all the stupidest questions I've come across, you just had to go and pick another one," he grumbled, stepping on the platform.

"Mr Scott, beam us down," said Kirk.

"Aye, Captain," replied Scott, pushing up the transporter lever.

A blue light rendered the men invisible. They materialised a few seconds later on Ridal Fourteen, as if they had never been where they had stood before. Kirk stepped forward, listening to the gentle buzzing sounds of Spock's tricorder. Beautiful! Blue sky, yellow sun - the planet was beautiful! Like Earth of the past, perhaps the fourth or fifth century. Nothing unusual but for its plants, trees and flowers. The plants were crystal layered, the trees miniature in size, with honey-like liquid constantly pouring from their branches, and the rock-like flowers were colourful. In the distance, a waterfall thundered.

Spock knelt down. "Captain, we must find a blue plant which has silver lines."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "You don't say," he mumbled with mild sarcasm.

Spock continued. "The blue and silver plant, Captain, is the plant capable of saving those on Ridal Four. Should we get the blue and red one they will die, as its substance is like rat poison, extremely harmful to mankind."

Kirk looked around him. "Strange," he said.

Spock lifted his eyebrow. "Strange, Captain?" he asked.

"Yes, Spock, strange. There are no life forms."

"Yes, Captain, but for the plants there is no life which I can record. It is indeed strange," agreed Spock.

"Keptin, look at this flower," said Chekov with excitement. "Its so beautiful, like the flowers in Russia."

You had flowers like that in Russia?" asked Kirk, pulling a face.

"I think it was in Leningrad. I met this girl, I gave her a flower, just like this one, only it was real," Chekov said in a dream-like voice, picking up the beautiful rock flower. Ouch! What had pricked him? Something... something... He shrugged it off. It was probably just a sharp edge. He looked at his middle finger where he had felt the jab. No, nothing there, no blood, no cut. He put the flower back and approached Kirk and Spock. Kirk was speaking.

"Spock, I'll see you back on the ship. Find that plant as quickly as possible. You have less than an hour."

"Fifty point four minutes, to be exact," Spock corrected him.

Kirk frowned as he opened his communicator. "Scotty, beam me up."

Spock approached Dr McCoy, who was kneeling by a tall yellow flower with green spots. McCoy looked up. "Spock, do you have to stand over me? Here I am, hoping to get away from you and..."

"Doctor, you have fifty point three minutes to find that plant, less than one hour; if - "

"I know, I know," grumbled McCoy, standing up. "Can't help admiring some beauty though, it helps me to forget those ears of

yours."

"Really, Doctor?" asked Spock, with no emotion. McCoy shook his head and stalked off towards a large, green, still river. Silence greeted him. No wind, no bird song. Even the waterfall, now, was strangely silent. McCoy shrugged.

He knelt down to examine a flower just as he heard a shout from one of the biologists who had beamed down a few minutes earlier with two other crew members. He stood up and ran over.

"Sir, I've found it," the biologist said, handing it over to Spock.

McCoy bit his lip. "It isn't the one," he said. "The line is too smooth, too thin. We want a thicker one, and it must be slightly jagged. Try again."

Spock handed back the plant. "Gentlemen, we have less than forty minutes," he reminded them. "You - "

"Give us a break sir, it was just a Human mistake," argued one of the men.

"A mistake we do not have the time to argue about," replied Spock, walking away.

The man shook his head slowly, but said nothing. He walked away and McCoy watched him go, a frown on his face. Where were those plants? The Professor who had discovered their value had told them he had found one here. McCoy frowned again. Unless someone else had taken all of them then there should be no problem finding them. Spock did say there were no life forms. No animals, no people. There was no-one on this planet who could have taken them. What of the Klingons, the Orions? McCoy looked doubtful. No, he didn't think so. So where...?

He looked around him. A rare plant, it wouldn't be in an obvious place - or would it? Hmm. He wondered. The Professor had found one easily enough. But had the plants died since then? How could a crystal flower die? McCoy began to worry. All those lives, all those... He stopped thinking when his eyes came to rest on a bed of flowers. Of course, of... He rushed over, and knelt down. The plant had to be amongst the flowers, surely. If not, then those people... He studied them carefully, each one. No. No, it wasn't there. He stood up again. Damn. But where, where? He looked at the river. His eyes narrowed. Perhaps, perhaps. Twenty minutes left. He walked over quickly and knelt down on a thick bed of grass. Nineteen minutes. He looked through the transparent water, the grass, everywhere but... seventeen minutes. He looked at his watch. No, eleven minutes. Eleven! He stood up. Damn, where was that blasted plant, where the hell was it? He looked around, and walked to every bed of flowers and every rock. Again he looked at his watch. Four minutes! His heart raced, his head pounded, his eyes ached. Damn, damn, damn.

Spock came to his side. "Doctor, I do believe I've found the plant."

McCoy looked at him, his face reddening, angry. Of all the... He had searched everywhere, high and low, and it had to be that damn Vulcan who found the plant. He nodded, and feeling too stubborn to ask Spock where he had found it, he said "Well, don't just stand

there then, let's get back to the ship."

Spock took out his communicator, "Mr Scott. Six to beam up."

The Starship Enterprise raced at warp eight towards Ridal Four, passing the stars at incredible speed. Captain Kirk sat back and relaxed. Within two days they would be there. More than enough time to save those people.

Chekov, seated at navigation, sharply shook his head. Did he just see some white transparent alien life forms, with... with blue, yet humanoid heads and humanoid faces, near a black rectangular table... with funny devices?? He looked up. Only the stars and the black, empty universe stared back at him. Funny! He was sure he had seen - A buzzing sound in his head. He looked sharply downwards, impelled by some kind of force, and stared at the navigation board. Ten seconds, twelve, sixteen! The force let go. Chekov looked up. What? Sweat trickled down his face. Explore! Explore! Explore! Why? Why? Explore what? The ship? He knew the ship, why did he have to explore it? He stood up abruptly, without wanting to. Sulu, the helmsman, looked up curiously.

"Chekov, are you all right?" he asked, with concern.

Chekov wanted to speak, but... but couldn't. He turned sharply, as if he were a robot, his movements unnatural, unco-ordinated. Kirk looked up, slightly confused, as Chekov was forced to walk at top speed to where Spock stood by his station.

Again Chekov looked down, again his eyes became fixed, this time on the science console. Kirk looked up. He approached Spock, who had just raised an eyebrow.

Chekov moved to the next station, then to another and another, while the crew looked on in silence. Again Chekov had a glimpse of those aliens, again a glimpse of that rectangular box.

"Chekov," said Kirk, with confusion, "Chekov, what are you doing? You're away from your post."

Explore, explore! The turbolift doors opened. An engineer stepped onto the Bridge. Chekov stepped inside and was gone before Kirk could reach him. He stared at the closed doors for a moment then turned to look at Spock.

"Fascinating," was all Spock could say.

"Spock, can you explain that? That wasn't at all like Chekov. It was as if some force was controlling him," said Kirk, confused.

"If I were you, Captain, I'd have Chekov placed under restraint. I suggest then the Vulcan mind probe."

Kirk looked at him. "Yes... yes." He approached the arm of his chair and hit a button.

"Security, find Chekov and have him put under restraint. Use phasers on stun if he resists." He looked at Spock again.

"Spock, I want a complete report on that planet."

"Very well, Captain, I'll do it immediately."

Kirk watched him return to his post. Chekov. How strange, how incredibly strange. What was making him do those strange things? Why? For what purpose? Chekov seemed to be studying the Enterprise. Why? Kirk clenched his fists. The Klingons. Could they be behind all this? The devils! He wouldn't put it past them. Were they in some way manipulating Chekov's mind, trying to force him into doing some harm to the Enterprise? Paranoia forced him to hit the communication button again.

"Security, have you found Chekov yet?"

"No, sir."

"Then look in the Engine Room, everywhere. The Klingons may be trying to destroy the Enterprise."

"Yes, sir."

Spock looked up from his station. He approached Kirk.

"Captain, I doubt it has anything to do with the Klingons."

"What, then? We know what those devils are capable of doing. They would do anything to destroy us."

Spock looked at him, saying nothing.

Kirk added, "Have you found anything?"

"Nothing which we have not found already, Captain."

The intercom sounded. Kirk hit the button.

"Sir, O'Neil here, we've found Chekov. Had to stun him. He is confined in Sickbay."

Kirk looked at Spock. "Very well, O'Neil, we'll be there immediately."

The Sickbay doors slid open. Spock and Kirk met McCoy by Chekov's bed.

"Bones, bring him around."

McCoy gave Chekov an injection. The Russian woke slowly.

"Chekov, Spock is going to use the Vulcan mind probe. He must know why you have been acting as you have been."

Spock brought his hands together, bringing them downwards, towards his chest. Silence. Chekov remained unmoved, his body relaxed as Spock's fingers touched both sides of his head. He listened, unmoved, his face expressionless.

Visions, visions reached Spock's mind. White transparent aliens, a rectangular box. A huge computer! Visions! *\Why do I see you? Who are you? Why are you invading Chekov's mind?* Silence - a long eerie silence. Spock felt the cold, the eeriness. He shouldn't feel it; he was a Vulcan, he shouldn't feel it.

Answers came to him. *\We have lived on this planet, under its earth, for two million years without any outside communication.*

Sudden pain, loneliness. Spock groaned at the pain, the loneliness! The answers continued. *\We have longed for the day that someone might come and touch the flower of sight and communication. We have now studied your Starship and your kind. We shall build a Starship like yours and when we are able we shall enter your world and make peace. We desire companionship other than our own. We have the need to study what your people believe. Chekov, as you call him, has a tiny programme inside him which enables us to see and hear everything around him. It enables us to learn and absorb.*

"You must take the programme out of him, now," said Kirk. "You may be harming him."

\He is not harmed Captain, Spock's voice told him as he repeated the alien's words. *\We shall release him after you have finished communicating with us. We seek only peace.*

Kirk softened. "We too seek only peace. Had we known of your problems we would have offered you transport to our world, as we can still do now. There is no need for you to build a ship, we can help you. You will be welcomed and accepted on Earth, and you will be treated as we treat everyone, with friendship and respect."

\No, Captain, you cannot transport us. Our ship will be our life force. We need certain gases in the planet's atmosphere to survive. We can only survive on your Earth for up to six hours, just as you can only survive on our world for two. We will need the ship to sleep and live in when we are not visiting or talking with your kind. We can adapt this ship to our needs. We say goodbye now, Captain, until the day we meet face to face. I shall be looking forward to seeing you.

Kirk smiled. "I too look forward to meeting you. There is much to discuss about our different cultures."

\Yes, Captain, there is. Goodbye, until we meet.

The voice faded, the programme inside Chekov's mind discontinued. Chekov sat up.

"Keptan, was I seeing things or was there a white transparent alien there with - ?"

Kirk touched his shoulder. "No, Chekov, you weren't seeing things. We have just communicated with and seen future friends, a new culture. Creatures that have been lonely for countless years and who have now learned of an opportunity of escaping it by meeting new beings, whom they never knew existed. They have a great deal of studying and learning to do, so I doubt they will feel lonely again."

"Not to forget, Captain, that they have some things to teach us. They seem to be more advanced - "

"With computers, Spock, and wasn't it computers which led to their loneliness? Thank God they've come across some Humans with good old Human emotions. Now they will get every chance to relieve their emotion of loneliness, simply by being with Humans instead of boring, unfeeling computers. I bet you never realised, Spock, how

much more important, how much more value we Humans have, as opposed to logical, unemotional computers," McCoy said as Spock looked at him, his face expressionless.

"Actually, Doctor, I prefer the company of computers, which are not noisy and which do not talk too much. I find Human emotion most illogical, if I might say so. Had these aliens not had Human emotion, they would have realised that the company of computers is far more desirable than that of the blabbering mouth. If you'll excuse me, Doctor, I think I'll go back to the bridge, where my services are more needed."

McCoy gave him a dirty look as Spock turned his back and left the sickbay.

"Sulu, ahead warp factor nine," said Kirk, as he and Spock stepped out the turbolift.

"Aye, Captain, ahead warp factor nine," Sulu repeated from his station, his eyes still fixed on the large viewing screen.

Kirk sat down. Relaxation. He turned to look at Spock, who was by his station. "Spock, how long have we...?"

"Sixteen point six hours until we reach Ridal Four," replied Spock without emotion.

Kirk sat back. Sixteen point... He looked at the stars, the black universe, and frowned. Sixteen point... He sighed, oh never mind. He rubbed his eyes. He felt so... so tired. He stood up. "Spock, take the con, I'll be in my room should you need me."

Spock gave a slight nod of his head and Kirk left the Bridge, quickly and noiselessly.

Time always seemed to go fast, especially in space, thought Kirk, looking at Ridal Four as he stepped onto the Bridge several hours after they had attained orbit. He approached Spock.

"Dr McCoy has reported from the planet. The Professor has started giving the injections and the cure is already taking effect. Within one point - "

Kirk laughed and slapped Spock on the back. Spock looked at him with surprise, his eyebrow lifting. "Never mind, Spock, never mind. Sulu, as soon as Dr McCoy is back aboard the ship, take her out at warp three."

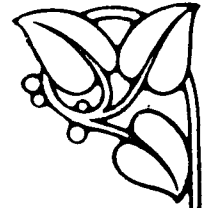
"Aye, sir, which direction?" Sulu asked, looking at him.

Kirk sat back, looking and feeling happy. "Oh, any direction. Just take her out of here."

Kirk sat back and smiled.

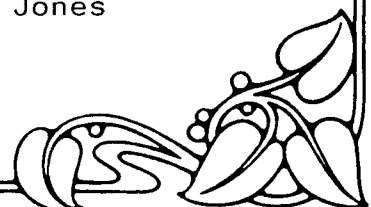
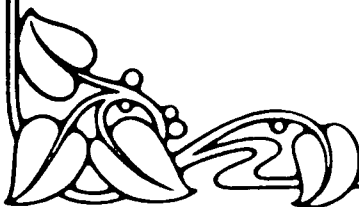


A CRY FROM A LONELY HEART



The pain of losing you;
Of having you die in my arms
And being unable to do anything
To stop you from going,
Will never leave me.
It will be with me to the end of my days.
I often pray that I will
Soon be allowed to join you;
For I feel only half alive
Without you.
You said that my presence
Brought you comfort,
That not even death would separate us -
That you would always be near me;
For we are joined by a bond
That not even death can break.
Your words have brought me some comfort,
Though I have often thought
How much better it would have been,
If we had both been taken together.
For I find that life
No longer holds any joy for me.
For the pain of losing half of myself -
The most important half -
Has taken the joy out of living.
Our friends try to help me,
Knowing of my pain;
But they cannot ease my loneliness or pain,
No matter how hard they try -
And they try so hard.
Their caring and concern move me deeply,
But neither they, nor anyone else,
Can give me the one thing
That I need and want -
You.
For only when we are reunited,
Will this pain and loneliness
Leave me.
I pray that day will come soon,
For I miss you so much, my friend -
Brother of my soul,
And I await the time
When we will be together again -
Forever.

Christine J Jones



COMMITMENT

by

Teresa Abbott

The corridor seemed endless. Peter Kirk walked along it briskly, making sure his face seemed normal and relaxed. There were visual monitoring units at frequent intervals along the passageway, and he knew that any abnormality in his behaviour would be reported to Security.

He had walked this way hundreds of times before. Run along here with his friends in earlier, happier times. He was alarmed to find how menacing the normally bland walls appeared, the angles sharper, and his heart pounded so loudly in his ears that he was surprised that only he could hear it.

The door at the end slid open and he stepped gratefully into the cool evening air. Stage one complete. He strolled across to the guard post at the entrance of the yard and stopped.

"Evening, Peter." The guard seemed surprised to see him, but unalarmed. "Bit late for you to be going out?" There was no suspicion in his voice, only friendly inquiry.

"I've got a special pass. It's my birthday and I'm going out with friends." Peter handed him the pass and held his breath as the guard ran it through the scanners. He didn't realise how nervous he was until the computer beeped the all clear.

"Congratulations. You must be 16 now - am I right?" He smiled as Peter nodded. "Well, have a good time. Don't forget you've got to be back by midnight."

Peter raised a hand in acknowledgment and proceeded along the pathway. *Walk*, he told himself. *Don't run*.

When he was finally confident that he was out of sight he couldn't restrain his jubilation any longer. Letting out a joyful shout he ran to the waiting car.

Peter's unhappiness had been growing for several years, but it had only reached crisis point in the last few months. He knew why only too well. The exam results were all out, and as expected he had excelled in all his subjects. The final application to Starfleet Academy had been sent, and his acceptance was regarded as a foregone conclusion by his teachers. In a couple of months' time he should be starting his training.

Except for one thing. He wouldn't go!

Ever since his uncle had placed him in the school after the incident on Deneva where both Peter's parents had died, he had tried to do as Kirk expected of him. He had been nearly thirteen then, though thin for his age and of slight build. In the three years since then he had shot up as boys often do. He realised now that he

was probably taller than Kirk himself.

To be honest, he knew it wasn't all Kirk's fault that he was unhappy. Peter himself had only gradually come to realise that the life he was leading was not for him.

Over the past few weeks he had tried to contact Kirk several times, but the attempts were half-hearted because he dreaded a confrontation. When the message came back that the Enterprise was on a priority mission and only urgent messages would be received, he didn't press the request for a communication. Instead, he began to blame his uncle for not caring enough to keep in better contact.

One evening, he had poured out all his troubles to Arix, a young trader he had befriended one day in a cafe in town. Peter had noticed Arix's space port documents, and had been envious that someone so young should have the freedom of the galaxy. Arix was in his early twenties, to Peter's 16 years, and that was enough for Peter to admire everything he did. Arix wasn't particularly clever, and crewed on a small trading ship, plying goods from planet to planet. It was in reality a boring life, but to Peter it seemed glamorous and exciting. Over several weeks an unlikely friendship had developed between the pair, and the trader seemed particularly impressed when he learned that the young man's uncle was THE Captain Kirk.

"Why don't you do something about your problems for once?" Arix had goaded him at their last meeting. "You're always going on about how unhappy you are. Come with us when we next leave Earth, and we'll take you to see your uncle. Think of the shock he'll get when he's hailed by a ship with you on board."

The idea had instant appeal. Kirk would be livid, but at least they would be able to talk face to face.

"I'll never get permission. I can't even leave the building without a pass."

Arix had grinned at him. "Don't let little things like that stop you. I can get you a pass."

Peter had held his breath. It was illegal, of course. Then he thought, *To hell with legality!* He had always done the correct thing throughout his life. For once he would do something unpredictable. Of course the school would be alarmed by his disappearance, but by the time they had searched for him and contacted Kirk, Peter would almost be there in person. It seemed an incredibly exciting idea.

So it had been agreed. Now Peter ran to the car where Arix was waiting, and sat overjoyed as his friend drove quickly to the space port. The ship Arix crewed for was called the Valhalla, a small ship but adequate for transporting many essentials. The ship's shuttle was waiting to collect them, and Peter climbed on board without a second thought. Having been surrounded by caring people all of his life, it never occurred to him to doubt the intentions of others.

Enterprise Medical Log Stardate 5067.3 Dr Leonard McCoy reporting. Captain Kirk's condition continues to improve, albeit slowly. I am, however, concerned about recent test

results which indicate the possibility of internal complications. If matters do not improve within the next few hours a further operation may be necessary.

McCoy turned off the recorder and leaned back in his chair with a sigh. To say he was concerned was an understatement. He was extremely worried. He hoped sincerely that another operation would not be necessary, for Kirk was still very weak after the last one. The tragedy was that they would have all been unnecessary if only Kirk had listened to Spock's and the Doctor's advice and stayed on board the ship during their last planetary survey. But when had Kirk ever listened to advice!

It hadn't even been a particularly interesting planet, but it was the last on their list before their planned stopover at Vulcan for repairs and shore leave. The urge to go down and take a look had been too strong, and resulted in the Captain being badly crushed in a freak land slide. Spock had himself sustained heavy bruising in the desperate attempt to reach Kirk in time. The Captain had been badly injured, and McCoy had had to perform extensive surgery to patch up the damage.

Neither Spock nor McCoy had actually said, 'I told you so', but Kirk knew that they thought it. And it was a salutary reminder to them all that death stalked them all the time, and not only on the more glamorous missions.

Now McCoy looked up to find Spock standing quietly in the doorway. The Doctor frowned. "How long have you been standing there, Spock? Lost your tongue?"

The Vulcan didn't respond with the expected rejoinder, and seemed unsure of himself. "Doctor, I need your advice."

His manner belied any frivolous answer. McCoy gestured to the opposite seat. "Come in. What's the problem?"

The Vulcan hesitated. "There has been a private, top priority message for Captain Kirk from Starfleet. I wondered whether it would be ethical to withhold it for a while."

McCoy whistled. "That's dangerous ground, Spock. Although I understand your concern that Jim shouldn't be troubled at the moment with any more hassles..." He would have gone on, but the intercom bleeped.

"Scott here. Is Mr Spock with you?"

The Vulcan reached across McCoy's desk to the switch. "Affirmative."

"There's a shuttle coming in from Vulcan. Commodore Bob Wesley's aboard and he wants to see Captain Kirk right away. Shall I send him along to Sickbay?"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "Thank you, Mr Scott. I'll collect the Commodore myself from the transporter room."

He looked at McCoy. "It seems that matters have been taken out of our hands. I suggest you have the Captain ready."

When Spock and Commodore Wesley entered the Sickbay, Kirk was sitting propped up in bed, and it was obvious even to an outsider that he was far from well. McCoy hovered nearby, threatening with his posture to remove anyone who overstayed their welcome.

"Jim." Wesley held out his hand. "I was sorry to hear about your injury." He didn't waste any more time on pleasantries. "Jim, I'm afraid we've some worrying news about your nephew Peter. He's gone missing from his school. Starfleet sent you a message but Mr Spock tells me he hasn't had the time to show it to you yet."

Kirk looked up and met the Vulcan's eyes across the room, but there was no reproach in his face. He understood Spock's motivation only too well. His concern for Peter, however, was intense, and he cursed the circumstances which had put him out of action.

"What are you doing here, Bob? Or have Starfleet made you their messenger boy?"

Wesley looked embarrassed. "Jim, your nephew's probably just gone off with some friends for an adventure. He's at that rebellious age. However, Starfleet must consider the possibility that he's been kidnapped, and that his abductors mean to get at you through him. They didn't know for sure how serious your injuries were, and thought you might take it into your head to indulge in heroics and go and find him yourself. I've been put in temporary command until he's found, to make sure you stay on the ship and let Federation Security do their job."

"I see." Kirk couldn't deny the logic of Wesley's statement. If he were well, nothing would have stopped him from going after the boy. Federation Security was good, but tended to recover corpses in these cases, instead of living hostages. His mind raced furiously.

"Will my men still be allowed to take their shore leave?"

Wesley relaxed. He had expected more opposition. "Yes, of course. There's no need to alter your plans at the moment."

"Thanks." Kirk turned towards Spock, his heart racing, and gambled everything on the unspoken understanding between himself and his Vulcan friend.

"Mr Spock, I suggest you go down with the first lot as planned. We may need you on board later. Give my regards to your parents."

McCoy froze as he realised what Kirk was up to. Spock had turned rigid and didn't answer. The Doctor marvelled at Kirk's audacity. Surely Wesley would realise that Spock would never take leave while Kirk was still so ill. But Wesley didn't know the pair as well as the crew of the Enterprise, and heard nothing unusual in the statement.

Spock stood undecided for a fraction of a second. He understood that Kirk wanted him to do that which he himself could not, and to go and try to find Peter, and a part of him was honoured by the trust. It still went against all his instincts to leave the ship, however, especially now at such a critical time. However, if that was what Jim was asking him to do...

Kirk watched his friend anxiously. He understood Spock's reluctance to go, and hated the thought of maybe sending the Vulcan

into unknown danger. But there was no other choice...

The Vulcan relaxed, his decision made. "Thank you, Captain. I will pass on your greetings to them." Turning, he left the Sickbay.

McCoy slowly let out his breath. It still seemed unbelievable that Wesley was oblivious of the undercurrents in the conversation. Yet Kirk and Spock had communicated in microseconds, saying volumes in glances that others couldn't see, let alone interpret.

The Doctor ushered Wesley from the room. "The Captain needs to rest now, Commodore. I'll escort you to the Bridge." To Kirk, he muttered, "I hope you realise what you've done."

He instantly regretted the words, because it was obvious from Kirk's face that he did.

Spock filed an official request for leave, in case the authorities should later take the trouble to check, and then had himself beamed down directly to his parents' dwelling on the outskirts of ShiKahr. The interior of the house was cool and silent, with all the controls set to minimum. Spock had known, as indeed had Kirk, that Sarek and his wife Amanda were away on Ambassadorial duties on Earth, and that their dwelling would be empty.

Spock felt no pleasure in returning to the home of his childhood. Without his parents there it was an empty shell. Maybe another time he would have responded differently, but now all his instincts urged him to be back on the Enterprise with Jim.

Quickly, Spock turned up the power and air conditioning controls. He had no need to check the kitchen. He knew his mother always kept it well stocked. He headed instead for his father's computers, probably some of the most advanced in the Federation.

Activating the console, he punched in his Security clearance before leaving a brief message for his parents explaining that he had had need of their facilities for a while. He then turned to his work.

It was what Spock did best, and Kirk had known that. Few in the Federation could manipulate the computer networks as well as Spock. It took several hours, for he was working with top security systems, but at the end of that time Spock had arranged for all incoming messages to the Enterprise to be monitored by his computers. Any referring to Peter Kirk, or addressed to Kirk personally, would be held back and recorded on his machines.

Hopefully, he had succeeded in doing this in such a way that no-one would suspect the interference. There would be an infinitesimal delay in the remaining messages reaching the Enterprise. If Uhura on the Bridge suspected anything, Spock was confident she would remain silent.

When it was done, he set an alarm on the computer to wake him if any such message should be received, and lay down on the bunk in his father's study to rest. He didn't feel like sleep, but felt that logically he should do so, as he did not know what the next few days would bring.

Briefly, he thought back to the last few moments on the Enterprise. McCoy had come with him to the transporter room, and had stood fidgeting in the corner while Spock had set the co-ordinates. Finally, Spock had had to confront him. "Doctor, is there a problem?"

McCoy had shuffled uneasily. "Spock, I know you think what you're doing is right. Before you go, I have to tell you that Jim's more ill than he thinks, and there's a fair chance that I'll have to risk operating again in the next day or so. I thought you should know before you made your final decision."

Spock had turned back to the controls, suppressing the coldness within him. When he looked up again, his face had been devoid of all expression.

"I will do as he asks," he had said briefly, and he had made his way to the transporter pad.

Those words came back to Spock now. Yes, he would do as Jim requested. When Samuel Kirk had died on Deneva, Spock had offered Kirk his regrets, but his words had been brushed aside. At the time their relationship had still been in its formative stages. This time Kirk was trusting him with his nephew's life, and Spock was determined not to let him down.

The alarm beeped in the middle of the Vulcan night. Spock was awake instantly, and reaching over pressed the playback. A gruff voice issued from the speaker.

"If you want to see your nephew alive come alone to (here there were a set of co-ordinates). If we see any other ships we will kill him."

That was all. No ransom demand, nothing.

Spock checked the co-ordinates. As expected, they were in a relatively deserted quadrant of space. A one-man ship could reach there in a matter of hours.

Spock sent an acknowledgment.

"Agreed. Will rendezvous in - " and he set a time some 5 hours distant.

He then set to work at the console again. Five hours. The journey would take two. That gave him three hours to discover what he could about Peter's abductors.

Having checked that a ship would be available, Spock's fingers flew over the computer panels. Soon he had a directional fix on the message. He knew that Peter had originally been on Earth, and he knew the rendezvous co-ordinates. That gave him three points of reference on the flight path. Running a check on all the flight plans logged on Earth by vessels leaving within the last 24 hours, he had soon narrowed it down to an old trading ship called the Valhalla, and even had a list of the last registered crew members. It was obviously a very amateur operation to leave such an easy trail. This made the captors all the more dangerous, as they

probably had unclear objectives, and were more likely to panic and kill the boy if they were alarmed.

Spock entered all the details he had so far on a security tape, as well as projections of the possible flight paths after the rendezvous. He arranged for the computer to transmit the information to Federation Security 2 hours after the rendezvous. This would give him enough time to make contact with Peter and sum up the situation.

Spock knew he might be walking into a trap, although at least if he made contact with the boy, the two of them together stood a better chance of escape. He would go as a negotiator, and since the Enterprise was known to be in orbit around Vulcan, his identity would not be immediately obvious to the crew. Ordinarily Spock might have been more cautious. Yet his overwhelming need was to get back to the Enterprise, bringing Peter with him, and this seemed the quickest way to achieve his objective. He had long ago accepted that where Jim was concerned, emotional considerations overtook his Vulcan logic.

Closing down all the equipment he had used, he changed into civilian clothes and left for the space port.

Aboard the Valhalla, Peter was becoming increasingly disillusioned. The dramatic space flight of his imagination had settled down into dreary routine, unalleviated even by Arix's company. When Peter had come aboard he had been allocated a small room, barely large enough for a bunk and chair on which to put his things, and then been largely ignored. The Captain in charge of the vessel was a large, bulky humanoid of indeterminate ancestry, and the remaining three crew-members were Arix and two Andorians who kept themselves strictly to themselves.

The ship could best be described as OLD. Even that was too polite a term. The walls seemed to creak and groan under the stresses of flight, and Peter wondered if they would ever reach their destination.

It was whenever he got to this point in his thoughts that Peter usually stopped speculating. No-one had told him where their destination was and he didn't like to ask. Correction. He was too afraid to ask. It had taken many hours before he had admitted to himself that at the root of his boredom and disillusionment lay fear. To admit that, he had to admit that he had perhaps misjudged Arix and the people into whose hands he had entrusted himself.

Arix still spoke to him if they should meet in the corridor, and he was free to move about the ship as he liked, but he knew he was carefully watched all the time. And in truth, there was nowhere for him to go. Did that mean he was a prisoner rather than a comrade of these people? And if so, why were they taking him halfway across the galaxy to find his uncle? Whatever his feelings were about Kirk, Peter didn't wish him any harm, and hoped he hadn't set in motion a chain of events which he would later regret.

For the moment, the hours crawled by tediously. He avoided the Bridge because of the undercurrent of hostility he felt there, and stayed most of the time in his room. Every few hours Arix would come and check on him and bring him some food and drink. At those times, Peter would try and question his so-called 'friend', but was

usually told to be patient. He soon came to understand that there was no love lost between the crew members, and that even Arix was unsure of his position.

When the ship finally shuddered to a halt in space, Peter felt a mixture of elation and dread. If they really had arranged a meeting with Kirk, he knew his uncle would be furious. But he also had great faith in Kirk and hoped that somehow the older man would be able to extricate them both from the position into which Peter had put them.

"Out!" The door was slammed violently open and Arix came into the room. No longer friendly, he seemed to have become as savage and threatening as the other crew members. Taking Peter by the upper arm, he propelled him into the corridor and along the passageway leading to the shuttle docking bay, muttering all the time under his breath.

"Time to meet this precious relative of yours. Time to see if all this has been worth the trouble."

They came to a halt just as the docking bay doors hissed open. The Captain was already waiting, and didn't spare Peter a glance. The young man held his breath in anxiety and anticipation as the two Andorians came out into the ship with - Spock?

Peter took a step backwards in disbelief. He'd only seen the Vulcan once, during those turbulent times on board the Enterprise after the incident on Deneva, but hadn't forgotten him. And of course Kirk was forever mentioning Spock in his letters to his nephew. The Vulcan was in civilian gear, and Peter doubted whether the ship's crew would immediately know who he was.

The Captain was furious. "This isn't Kirk. What have you brought him here for?"

The Andorians were cowed and apologetic. "He was waiting at the rendezvous point. He said Kirk couldn't come and had sent him as a negotiator."

Peter's thoughts were bitter. So even though he was in trouble, his uncle hadn't cared enough to come and find him, but had sent his Vulcan instead!

The Captain looked sharply at the youngster's face. "You know this man?"

"Yes." Peter realised a second too late that his answer should have been no. Desperately he tried to cover up. "He's just a crewmember. He doesn't know anything of value."

At his words, the two Andorians and Arix all started arguing with the Captain, asking what they were supposed to do now, and how were they to get their reward. Reward? The chill creeping up Peter's back became even colder.

Amidst the commotion, the Vulcan caught Peter's eye and spoke quietly. "Are you all right?"

Peter nodded, too upset and confused to speak. Spock continued, "It is best they do not know who I am. They could use it as a lever against your uncle."

Peter stepped back in disbelief, refusing to hear what the Vulcan was implying. That Kirk would come for Spock, but not for his nephew? But the Andorians were already taking Spock out of the hold into the corridor, and Peter stood, forgotten.

Frantically, he grabbed the Captain's arm. "Where are you taking him? He's of no use to you. Let him go. What are you going to do?"

The Captain pushed him angrily aside. "We will not negotiate. We'll question him to see if he knows anything of value, and then we may or may not send him back where he came from. The men are angry and they need some entertainment, and he should provide that for a while." He leered at Peter's horrified expression. "Do you want to come and watch, or have you no stomach for it?"

The situation was fast taking on the dimensions of a nightmare over which he had no control. Peter could no longer meet the Vulcan's quiet eyes as they led Spock from the room, and deeply ashamed of himself he fled to his room, with the Andorians' jeering taunts echoing behind him.

An ominous silence descended on the ship. Peter paced the limited floor space of his cabin, feeling a coward but afraid to leave. His heart was pounding, his palms sticky, his mouth dry. He didn't know what he expected to hear. He knew that whatever they did to Spock the Vulcan would never cry out. Belatedly he realised that when they'd finished with Spock they might start on him. It reassured him a little to discover that he was equally determined to tell them nothing.

Growing up was never easy, and now Peter had to face the fact that he alone was responsible for whatever the Vulcan was enduring. It was his immature, self-centred behaviour that had brought about this whole fiasco. He realised now that he should have got in touch with his uncle properly and made him listen to his problems, instead of putting all of their lives at risk with foolish dramatics.

When, finally, the door swung open, Peter forced himself not to take a step backward. Arix placed the tray he was carrying on the chair and turned to go without a word.

"Wait". There must have been some quality in his voice, because the other man stopped and turned.

"What have you done with the prisoner? What are you going to do now?"

Arix's face was cold and hostile. "You lied to us. You said your uncle valued you highly, but he sends us one of his crew who will tell us nothing. We should kill you both."

"No. Wait." Peter thought rapidly. "Let me see him. I may be able to make him see sense. Please, just for a few minutes."

Arix considered, then must have come to the conclusion that he had nothing to lose and maybe something to gain from such a meeting.

"Right, then. You've got 10 minutes and not a second more. He's in the store room at the end of the corridor."

Arix leaned forward until his breath was hot on Peter's face. "Try to persuade him that it's in the best interests of you both if

he co-operates. Now go."

Peter needed no further prompting. He hesitated for only a second, surprised that Arix didn't send for a guard to go with him, but the man guessed his thoughts and laughed. "He won't be going anywhere for a long time, and neither will you. Now go before I change my mind."

Peter grabbed the mug of water from the tray and ran down the corridor. The door of the store room was unlocked and unguarded. He pressed the entry button and it slid open to reveal a small, poorly-lit room, half full of boxes and containers arranged haphazardly in unstable looking piles. Peter stepped in, blinking as the door closed behind him shutting off even more light. Then he froze as he made out the prone figure of the Vulcan on the floor in the corner. He'd obviously been thrown there by his captors, and lay as he had fallen, on his back and with his eyes open. Even to Peter's inexperienced eye it was obvious he was suffering.

"I'm sorry." Peter knelt down, stricken, beside the injured Vulcan, trying not to gag at the sight and smell of the man's many injuries. "I'm truly, truly sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen." He was surprised to find his own voice gruff with unshed tears, but had no time to worry about his own loss of control.

Quickly, he tore a strip of material from his shirt. Dipping it into the cup he moistened the Vulcan's lips before dabbing ineffectually at the many cuts and bruises on Spock's face. To his relief, most of the injuries appeared to be superficial, although Peter realised that had their captors wanted to kill the Vulcan they would have done so. Obviously they still considered it to their advantage to keep him alive.

The Vulcan breathed rapidly and shallowly and looked up at him with unfocused eyes. Peter stopped his useless ministrations. Five minutes had already passed and there was so little time left to help. He bent down low to the injured man's face. This was no time for questions but one had to be asked.

"You're Spock. I remember you from the Enterprise. Why didn't he come for me?" He detected the childish self-pity in the question but had to know the answer.

The Vulcan seemed to make a great effort, but his voice was still almost inaudible. "He is very ill." Then, "Be thankful that he did not come. He would not have withstood this."

The full implication of Spock's words hit home immediately. Would the ship's crew really have done this to Kirk? What was the Vulcan saying? That he was glad to have taken the suffering in Kirk's place?

Putting these thoughts away to analyse later, Peter leaned forward again. "Can't you control the pain? You're a Vulcan. What's wrong?"

This time Spock's answer was only a whisper. "My mind. Unfocused. You cannot help."

Peter hesitated. There were only barely minutes left. Then he took a deep breath and made a decision. All of his life he had kept a difficult secret, but at that moment he grew up and decided he

could not live a lie any longer. Knowing that Vulcans didn't like to be touched, he nevertheless leaned forward and held the Vulcan's face between his hands. "Listen, Spock. I CAN help you. But you must not fight me in this."

He saw the flash of fear and incomprehension in the Vulcan's clouded eyes but had no time to reconsider. He put his hands palm down on Spock's forehead in the way his mother had shown him long ago, and closing his eyes, began the chant she had taught him. Peter knew that had the Vulcan been well he could never have got through the mental shields. But Spock's mind was in disarray, his thoughts unfocused after the mental and physical devices his captors had used on him. The boy shuddered as the full impact of the Vulcan's torment flooded into his mind, but he was winning the battle, and soon he had superimposed some of his own order on the other mind and felt it grow stronger.

After a couple of minutes the Vulcan was asleep, his breathing easier, and his injuries hopefully healing. Peter stood, and leaving the room ran to his quarters before anyone should come and realise what he had done. Then he sat and wept like the child he still was, trembling from reaction.

Of one thing Peter was in no doubt. The Vulcan's welfare was now his responsibility. Even the crewmembers must have realised that Spock could not be questioned any more at the moment, but Peter could hear the increasingly raised voices and arguments from the Bridge, and knew that sooner or later they would decide to try again. He didn't think that Spock would survive another such session. Indeed, his own life was safe only as long as they considered him a valuable hostage. If they were willing to kill Kirk's messenger, they might decide that Peter was no longer of any use to them, and kill him too. Somehow he would have to get Spock off the ship, and he would have to do it soon.

The task seemed impossible. Peter considered all the things he knew which he could use to his advantage.

The ship was old and probably easily destroyed. He had learned enough in his wanderings around the corridors to know where the key control panels were located. The crewmembers were uneasy comrades and could probably be provoked to quarrel. But what could he use to goad them? The answer came at once, but Spock had asked him not to reveal the messenger's true identity. Still, Spock was not well enough to be consulted. Peter would have to act on gut instinct and intuition. *Like my uncle is renowned for doing*, he thought wryly.

There was no time for a more detailed plan. Peter slipped out of his room and went looking for Arix. He found him in what passed for the rec room, sitting at one of the tables gazing dispiritedly into a glass of some strange-coloured beverage.

"I need to talk to you." Peter sat without invitation in the chair opposite.

Arx glowered across at him. "I've nothing to say to you. Go to your room."

"I have a proposition to make". Peter was relieved to note that his voice sounded confident and steady. "You've helped me before and I reckon I owe you a favour."

Arx's interest pricked up. "How can you help me? You've

nothing that I want."

Peter lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I have information. I know who the prisoner really is. I'll tell you, if you promise to keep it to yourself, and include me in any deals you make. I don't want the others to know because we'll have to split the reward too many ways."

"Go on." Arix's interest was definitely aroused. "Who is he then?"

"He's Commander Spock, the Vulcan First Officer of the Enterprise. And he's also son of Sarek, the Vulcan Ambassador. If Kirk doesn't pay for his return, I'm sure his father will."

"THAT is the 'famous' Mr Spock?" Arix was astounded. Then he sniggered. "I'm sure Kirk will pay handsomely for him. I've heard that they're very, very close," and he winked suggestively.

Peter tried not to recoil from the suggestion. "Fine. Let me know when you have a plan worked out. Don't forget we'll have to get rid of the Captain."

Arix looked startled but nodded, and getting up, Peter left him plotting over his drink.

His next stop was the Bridge. The Captain scowled when he saw him. "What do you want?"

Peter faced him confidently. "A word in private which could be to your advantage."

"Hmm". The Captain considered, then came to stand beside him. "Well?"

This time Peter wasted no time on preliminaries. "Your prisoner is Spock, First Officer of the Enterprise, and son of the Vulcan Ambassador. I'm telling you this because Arix has somehow found out and I think that he and the Andorians are plotting to take over the ship and trade the Vulcan for a hefty reward. I thought you should be warned."

The Captain was suspicious. "Why are you telling me this?"

Peter shrugged. "I think you're the best person to run this ship. If the others take over I don't think any of us will survive for long."

This answer seemed to satisfy the man, and as soon as he could do so inconspicuously, Peter returned to his room to await developments.

He didn't have to wait long. The sound of heated voices and a scuffle could be heard minutes later. Immediately Peter entered the corridor, and taking the cover off one of the control panels, wrenched out as many wires as he could.

There was a sharp smell of burning, then the ship lurched violently to one side and the emergency lighting came on. Peter didn't hesitate. He ran to the storeroom and was relieved to find the Vulcan already staggering to his feet.

"The shuttle. Quickly." Peter helped Spock along the corridor

to the docking bay. Although there was no sound of pursuit as yet, it could only be a matter of seconds before the crew guessed what was going on.

The docking bay door was locked. For a moment Peter despaired. But Spock was beginning to come round fully and, realising the problem, seemed only to touch the control panel before the door slid open.

In the shuttle they belted themselves into the seats. Worried, Peter looked at Spock, who still seemed a little dazed. "Are you all right? Can you fly this thing?"

"Affirmative." To Peter's relief the craft responded to Spock's expert handling, and launched successfully. However, Peter's exuberance was soon to be dampened.

"No fuel." Spock's voice was expressionless. "We'll have to land as soon as possible."

Rapidly the Vulcan checked computer readouts of the nearest available systems.

There was only one star with several planets. None of them seemed particularly habitable, but there was nowhere else to go. Spock fed in landing instructions in case the ship should have to crash land, and they prepared themselves for a bumpy journey down.

On board the Enterprise, Commodore Wesley finally cornered McCoy in Sickbay, only to find him preparing for surgery. "Doctor?" He took in the preparations and sighed. "I had hoped to speak with the Captain."

"That won't be possible." McCoy's brusqueness hid his growing anxiety. "Captain Kirk's condition has worsened and I'll have to operate immediately. Now if you'll excuse me."

The Commodore stepped back to let him pass even as he said, "Dr McCoy, I've tried to contact Mr Spock at his parents' home, but I can't raise him. You wouldn't have any idea where he might be?"

McCoy thought, *He ought to be here, now, where he's needed. And he would be if Jim hadn't sent him on a damn fool search for that young nephew of his.* But aloud he said, "Surely what Mr Spock does in his leave time is his own business."

He stopped then, realising that his tone of voice could almost be construed as insubordination. Fortunately, to his relief, Wesley made no comment, and the Doctor hurriedly left the room.

In some deep recess of his mind, Spock knew that if he didn't move within the next few minutes he would die. But Vulcan training and logic were powerless against the unrelenting onslaught of cold which seeped into every nook and cranny of his body and soul, and he was weakened already, his defences at breaking point because of what had been done to him on the ship.

The ship. Peter! Sluggishly his thoughts found some sort of coherence, and fear for the safety of the boy gave him the strength

that he couldn't find for himself. Even so, it seemed an eternity before he forced his eyes open to find himself in near darkness, face down in wet sand, with a howling wind all around him.

He realised the bottom half of his body was still lying in water, the waves sucking hungrily at the last vestiges of warmth within him, and centimetre by painstaking centimetre he dragged himself up the sand and shingle until he was on dry land.

Here, if anything, it was colder. The wind wailed across the deserted beach, dangerously lowering his body temperature even further, and Spock knew he had to reach shelter to survive.

He caught sight of the boy lying barely metres away, a vague shape in the dim light, and from this distance it was impossible to tell if he were alive.

It galvanized Spock into action. On his hands and knees he crawled across the space separating them, hardly able to breathe because of the sand whipped into his face by the storm, and reaching across, felt for a pulse. He allowed himself a sigh of relief on finding it strong and steady. There was no obvious injury. Spock shook the boy firmly, and obtaining no response, hit him firmly on the face. This at least produced a reaction, and relieved, the Vulcan pulled at Peter's arm.

"Get up!" The words came with difficulty through numbed lips, and were carried away on the wind. "We must move and find shelter. Get up!"

Although Peter couldn't hear the exact words, something of the urgency in the Vulcan's voice finally communicated itself to him, and he began to understand the situation they found themselves in. Looking around in dismay, he staggered to his feet, and seeing that Spock was probably in a worse condition than he was, helped the Vulcan to stay upright as they half crawled and half ran up the beach in the darkness.

There were some rocks not far away - vast outcrops of jagged cliffs jutting into the ocean. They found a half hollow at the base, a small semicircular space maybe six metres wide with a narrow opening. Without needing to speak they piled up rocks and stones in the entrance until the wind's howling was reduced to a whine, and only then sank down, exhausted, to rest. The absence of wind was a blessed relief, and although they were both very cold there was a thankfulness in at least being alive. For now.

With the rocks in the entrance the cave was in near darkness, but Peter could hear the Vulcan's rasping breath and spoke first, his voice sounding unexpectedly loud to his ears after the noise of outside.

"What is this place? Do you know where we are?"

"I believe this is Oris 5. It was the only barely habitable world within range of the shuttle when we left the ship. Unfortunately it does not possess a very tolerable environment." Spock's breathing was becoming increasingly difficult, and he had to pause between each statement. "The planet is far from its sun, nearly always in semi-darkness, and cold. You may be able to survive here for up to 48 hours. I, in my present condition, will not."

The matter-of-fact statement, delivered so unemotionally, horrified Peter. "What are you saying? There must be something we can do? What about the shuttle remains? We may be able to salvage something. We need food and water and warmth."

Spock shook his head, though he doubted whether Peter could see him. "I saw no remains of our craft. If it landed in the ocean it will have disappeared by now. This planet has very little drinkable water, little or no vegetation. No life-forms. If we had just a phaser we could at least keep warm. As it is..."

"Then what did we escape for?" Peter was almost shouting now. "We might as well have stayed on the ship. I didn't go through all that just to give up and die!"

Spock coughed, and it was a moment before he could answer. "To go out in the wind now would be suicide. I for one am content. It will be a better death than at their hands. There is every reason to suppose that the Enterprise will locate you in time, as I left details of where I was to rendezvous with your captors. Doubtless Starfleet Security will soon find the Valhalla, and 48 hours should enable them to scan all the habitable planets within range once they learn what has become of us. Their treatment has left me weak, and my injuries are not healing as they should, despite what you tried to do for me before."

The silence stretched between them. It was the first time Spock had made any reference to the enforced meld he had endured on the Valhalla. Peter knew he should explain, and found himself thinking back over the years, wondering how much he could trust the Vulcan.

His chief memory of Spock after the incident on Deneva was of someone who was - kind? But how could a Vulcan be kind? Peter had heard many varied opinions about Vulcans over the years since then, and no-one had ever used that word to describe them. Now that he thought about it, even as a child he had realised that Spock was usually clinically efficient and cold with most people. It was only when the Vulcan had been alone with him that he had seemed more relaxed. And, of course, whenever Kirk was with them.

Was it the Vulcan's attitude to Kirk, visible clearly to a child if not to other adults, that had resulted in the change of his feelings from liking to - jealousy? Because Spock was with Kirk when he, Peter, could not be? The tales of the Enterprise's exploits abounded at the school, and it was always Kirk and Spock, ad nauseum. Even the Vulcan himself had implied that he was the one lever that could be used against his uncle.

Yet on the Valhalla, Spock had risked his own life to save Peter's. It didn't make sense. Still, whatever the truth was, there was one thing that had to be said.

"I owe you an apology, Spock. It was unforgivable to enter your mind without permission."

Spock raised an eyebrow at the formal statement, a gesture lost in the darkness. "Apologies are unnecessary. Given your abilities you did the only logical thing. I will admit, though, to a certain curiosity as to how you came by mental powers."

Peter took a deep breath. It was pointless keeping secrets if they were both going to die, and talking might help to take their

minds off their predicament. "My mother was an Erasian." Peter was grateful for the lack of light, for it helped him to pour out all the things he had kept hidden for so many years. "You've heard about them, of course."

Spock had indeed learned about the Erasians in the course of his studies. They had been an ancient humanoid race, peaceful and non-aggressive. Their culture had concentrated on spiritual development and their mental abilities had increased over the centuries. Limited telepathic ability, greater pain control, but their greatest gift had been the power of healing, the ability to see into a person's body and mind and put right what was wrong. Of course, they had been no match for the many warlike races in their part of the galaxy. Their planet had been destroyed and the survivors scattered to the far corners of space. It wasn't a new story, and had happened to many other similar races with almost monotonous predictability.

Peter swallowed. "My mother's people survived in isolated pockets throughout the galaxy, and generally kept their abilities hidden because of the fear and ignorance of the indigenous populations. Occasionally there would be wild stories about someone with the gift of laying on of hands.

"Although they tried to breed with their own kind in order to preserve these qualities, my mother was in fact only one quarter Erasian when my father met her during the course of his research on the Martian colonies. She never kept her ancestry a secret from either of us. All she herself possessed was a greater control over her own body, although she taught me all the ancient ways. After all, the chances of my ever inheriting any of these abilities was very remote, given the continual dilution of the genes through the generations of Erasian exile."

Peter stopped. The next part was the hardest. But Spock surprised him by speaking, for Peter had forgotten the power of the Vulcan's thinking.

"And your father was a research biologist, and genetically engineered you so that you would possess all the necessary attributes." It was not spoken as censure, just fact.

"Yes." The young man's voice was a whisper. "He wanted only the best for me. The best qualities of both races. He told me early on, when it was obvious I had all the gifts, and made me promise that I would never tell anyone what he had done. I think by then he had realised the enormity of his crime."

Spock was silent. With one part of his mind he catalogued the state of his own body, and longed to close his eyes, to give up and rest. But the boy needed advice, and he was the only one who could give it.

Since the Eugenic Wars, the Federation had an almost exaggerated fear of gene manipulation and selective breeding. What Sam Kirk had done was undoubtedly wrong. Had he still been alive he might have had to stand trial. From Peter's point of view, it was to his advantage that both his parents were dead.

Spock made an effort to speak. "The Federation will not punish you for the crimes of your father. You are a unique individual and will be treated as such. There are places where you can be trained to make full use of your abilities, and fulfil your father's desire

that you be the best of both worlds."

Apparently this was not the boy's chief worry. "But what will my uncle think? He was so close to my father, he'll feel betrayed. I know how he grieved for him after his death. I can't destroy his memories and ruin my father's image in his eyes. He expects me to go to Starfleet Academy and study to be an officer. I want to go to the Vulcan Academy and learn to control these things within me. He'll never understand how the two parts of me are torn apart!"

Spock almost smiled. What twists of irony life sometimes threw up! He forced an answer past the growing numbness of his mind and body. "Jim will understand." In his weakness and lack of control, all the longing and caring for his Captain and his friend were in his voice.

Peter inched across until he was at Spock's side. "You care for him that much? I was never sure how much he really meant to you. The men on the ship made suggestions, implied things..." and he stopped, embarrassed.

"People will always seek to destroy that which they do not understand." To Spock, with death seemingly inevitable, it was suddenly vitally important that this young man should know the truth. "There is a Vulcan word - we are more than brothers. He is my life."

Peter's breath caught in his throat. Somehow, in the time they had spent together, all of his jealousy had gone, to be replaced by acceptance and awe.

"Then how will he live without you? If he is sick, as you say, he may never find us. He might already be dead himself."

"He lives." Spock's voice was so quiet Peter realised that the Vulcan was beginning to lapse into unconsciousness. Yet he had said something of vital importance.

Peter leaned forward and shook the Vulcan, feeling for the first time just how wet and cold his companion was.

"How do you know? Are you trying to tell me that you're telepathically linked?" He felt, rather than saw, the answering nod.

Peter was truly shouting now. "Then why don't you tell him where we are? Send him a message, a picture, a co-ordinate, whatever it is you can do." He pulled back in horror as he realised the reason Spock hadn't done so. "I'm sorry. I forgot your mind was damaged." His thoughts flew on rapidly. "I'll help you. I'll join my mind to yours and we'll try together. I'm almost his flesh and blood. I'm sure our linked minds would be attuned to his. We have to try this."

He felt the Vulcan struggle to pull away, and held him tight. "What are you afraid of, Spock? That I'll see in your mind how much you love him?"

The Vulcan flinched as the word he would never use reverberated round the cave, but forced himself to speak nevertheless. "You don't understand." Peter had to lean forward to hear the words. "He is too ill for such a mental contact. It may harm him irreparably."

The answer astounded Peter and he let go, momentarily taken aback. Even now, so close to death, Spock would not save himself if it meant harming Kirk. Peter thought over what he knew of his uncle and made a decision.

"Spock, if he finds out later that there was a chance and we didn't take it, he'll never forgive us. You must know inside that it's what he would want. If necessary I'll force a meld again. I know you're too ill to stop me. But this time I'm asking you to please, *please* help me in this."

When there was no reply Peter once again felt for the Vulcan's face, and was rewarded a few moments later by Spock's cold fingers on his temple. Only a moment, and they were one.

Oris 5. Dark. Cold. Wind. Star pattern. Last known co-ordinates. Anything and everything they knew they tried to transmit.

Don't let go, Spock. Use my mind to go into trance. I know you can depress your bodily functions to minimal level. I'll watch over you until he comes. Use my strength, Spock.

Peter felt the Vulcan's mind slipping away from his and released the meld. He felt for Spock's pulse, and found none. No respiration either. A touch of the hand to the forehead, and he was reassured that the Vulcan still lived.

When, a short while later, the wind abated, he left the cave and scoured the empty beach for anything useful. The ocean stretched unending in the twilight, dark and unbroken. An exhaustive search produced no drinkable water or food, and nothing to use for protective covering. Finally, Peter returned in despair to the cave, his own need for liquid increasingly urgent. Sitting with his back to the rocks he cradled the Vulcan's thin form in his arms and waited.

McCoy frowned. There was something going on here which he didn't like. The operation on Kirk was complicated, but routine. He hadn't anticipated any problems. Why, then, did he feel uneasy, as though something were very wrong. Concerned, he stopped what he was doing and rechecked the diagnostic indicators above the bed. All appeared normal. Body functions as expected during an operation of this magnitude. Brain wave patterns normal. McCoy blinked in surprise. For a split second it had seemed as though there was some kind of 'interference' on the brain wave scanner's readout. McCoy looked again but all was as it should be. Reassured, he turned back to his work, only to notice the flicker on the scanners again out of the corner of his eye, and this time the accompanying change in heartbeat and respiration.

"What the...!" McCoy didn't know what to make of it. Whatever it was, it was a complication he could well do without. An impossible thought occurred to him.

Spock? Then - Leave him alone, damn you! He's too weak. You'll kill him.

He waited, but there was no further interference, and after a moment all Kirk's bodily functions were back to normal. Feeling rather sheepishly ashamed of himself for thinking that Spock could

somehow have been responsible, McCoy resumed the intricate work he had been engaged in.

When McCoy entered his sickbay office some time later, he found Commodore Wesley seated waiting for him.

"Commodore." McCoy crossed the room and sat wearily at his desk, deciding that his well-earned drink would have to wait. "What can I do for you this time?"

"How's Kirk?" It was obvious the man's concern was genuine.

"As well as can be expected. I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that he should be back in charge of the Enterprise within a week or so." McCoy slightly regretted the hostility in his voice. Wesley was a good man, and it wasn't his fault that he'd been put temporarily in charge at such a critical time. It was just that the ship and her crew were sorely missing both the Captain and the First Officer's presence.

"We think we've found out what happened to young Peter Kirk. Or at least Security have. They've traced him to an old ship called the Valhalla, crewed by four very dubious characters, and they've traced the Valhalla as far as a rendezvous with another ship, type 'unspecified'. After that the trail leads to the far end of this sector, to the Oris system. We're on the way there ourselves."

"Well!" McCoy was greatly relieved. That would be one less burden for Kirk to bear when he came around. "Federation Security have certainly been doing their job."

Wesley scowled. "SOMEONE has been doing their job. Security received a computer readout of the ship's details, her crew, and the last known co-ordinates. Do you have any idea who could have supplied them with such information?"

McCoy looked studiously down at his desk and tried to look innocent.

"Also," continued Wesley, "I've tried to recall Mr Spock from his leave, but have been unable to trace him. We've had to leave without him. Do you know where he might be? Could he, perhaps, be on board a certain 'unspecified' ship?"

McCoy thought back to that brief interference on the operating table. "Perhaps he's unwell and unable to answer. I'm sure he'll turn up," he finished lamely.

"Hmm." The Commodore grunted noncommittally, and stood to leave the room. At the door he paused. "I'm not the fool you take me for, McCoy, just because Jim's my friend and I choose not to notice certain things." Going out, he left McCoy sitting speechlessly behind him.

Twelve hours later, the Enterprise hung in orbit above Oris 2. The bridge crew were silent and unhappy, and Bob Wesley sat in the command chair wondering miserably what he was going to say to Kirk. They had traced the Valhalla, or what was left of her, to the planet below. The ship had apparently gone out of control and careered

into the planet's atmosphere. What was left, and it was very little, was scattered over a wide area. No hope of any survivors. Even if there had been, the sensors registered a dry, hot environment, a very low oxygen content, and no life forms.

Wesley stared dejectedly at the view on the bridge screen. Such a waste! He had never personally met Kirk's nephew, but records showed him to be a highly intelligent, somewhat unique young man, of whom great things had been expected. And if, heaven forbid, Spock HAD been with him, what a loss to the Federation! An even greater loss to Kirk!

The turbo-lift doors hissed open behind him, and turning, Wesley was dismayed to see Kirk himself entering the Bridge, accompanied by an annoyed McCoy.

"Jim!" The Commodore stood up. "You shouldn't be on the Bridge." He looked to the Doctor for support.

McCoy shrugged angrily. "I've told him, and told him, but he wouldn't listen once he heard we'd reached the planet."

Kirk had by now descended into the well of the Bridge, and although Wesley indicated that he should sit in the command chair, he remained standing, leaning against the bridge rail for support. His eyes were fixed on the bleak landscape on the screen.

"I'm sorry, Jim." Wesley moved closer to him in support. "The ship disintegrated in the planetary atmosphere and there were no survivors." He was aware of the dreadful atmosphere on the Bridge, for all of the crew knew what this would do to their Captain.

Kirk was staring in disbelief at the screen. "What is this place? This isn't where they are."

Wesley took a step back in concern. Had the shock so affected Kirk's mind that he couldn't accept the truth?

"It's Oris 2. It's where the Valhalla crashed... "

Kirk pushed him aside and walked unsteadily to the navigation console. "It's Oris 5 we want, not Oris 2." He punched up the schematic of the system on the screen, then swayed on his feet, and Chekov hurriedly got up so that he could sit in his chair. Kirk sat and rested his head in his hands. McCoy crossed the Bridge to be with him, and put a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Jim, they've seen the wreckage. There are no..."

"Bones." Kirk reached out and gripped McCoy's arm. He held the Doctor's eyes, knowing that McCoy was the one person there who might believe him. "They weren't on that ship! I don't know how I know, but I do." He shuddered as the subconscious memory of what seemed like a dream resurfaced. "It was cold, dark, wet. This isn't the place. I *know* it was Oris 5."

The seed of understanding began to grow in McCoy's mind. Wesley, however, was not so patient.

"Doctor, take Captain Kirk to Sickbay. He's obviously distressed."

With an effort, Kirk stood up and turned around.

"Bob, I know how this must seem. Yet I'm sure of what I know. Call it a dream, a premonition, what you will. Stranger things have happened. Oris 5 is only a few minutes away. You must allow me to check." From his stance, it was obvious that if Bob didn't allow it, he would somehow take over and order it so, whatever the cost. The Bridge crew sat silent, but Wesley sensed that their support was with their Captain, however deranged he seemed.

McCoy spoke into the silence to ease the tension. "Commodore, it is a scientific fact that dreams can sometimes contain accurate information". To himself he thought, *It wasn't a dream, it was a telepathic contact. I saw it happen.* Yet it was easier to allow Wesley to believe in a dream than to launch into an explanation of the unique telepathic link between Vulcan and Human.

McCoy tried again. "If there's any chance at all that they've survived, isn't it worth a look? It's not as if it will take much of our time."

The Commodore knew when a battle was lost. He shrugged. "All right. Set course for Oris 5. Since you insist on this, you'd better take the command chair, Jim, and let Chekov resume his station."

It did indeed take only minutes to achieve orbit around the other planet. Preliminary sensor scans showed what Kirk had predicted. A dark, cold place, with little land and virtually no life-forms or vegetation. McCoy hovered behind Kirk's shoulder, wondering how he would pick up the pieces if here, too, there were no survivors. Kirk sat as though turned to stone, the film of perspiration on his face the only outward evidence of his inner struggle to keep going. When the scanners picked up two life forms, one Human and one Vulcan, the Doctor could see the shudder that ran through Kirk's body. His own throat tight with relief, he clasped Kirk's shoulder hard in a gesture of understanding and support.

"It's okay, Jim. We'll bring them home. Now *please* will you come back with me to Sickbay!"

Considering the severity of the ordeal, McCoy found Peter to be in surprisingly good condition. The young man had suffered heavy bruising when the shuttle had crash-landed, but fortunately he had been thrown clear and had avoided any serious injury. He was obviously very cold and suffering from dehydration, and could do with plenty of nourishment. However he was a strong young man, and the Doctor could see no reason why he shouldn't be up and about in less than 24 hours, given a good meal and a long sleep. The mental trauma might take longer to heal.

McCoy could not say the same for Spock. The Vulcan had massive infections in both lungs, as well as in many of his superficial injuries. The Doctor pursed his lips as he examined the damage inflicted on Spock by the crew of the Valhalla, but said nothing. Ironically, it had been to Spock's advantage that the planet had been cold, as it had prevented even more serious infection from spreading. Dehydration was not a problem, as Vulcans were used to going for long periods without water, but Spock's body temperature was definitely too low.

McCoy encased the Vulcan in a thermal field to bring his temperature gradually back to normal and, grunting, declared himself

satisfied that Spock would survive.

"Aren't you going to give him anything?" Kirk, standing unsteadily against the door, looked more in need of medication than Spock did.

McCoy shook his head. "He's in a deep trance, Jim. As far as I can tell he's got his bodily functions well in control. When he comes out of it he may need some drugs, but I'll wait until then." He took a last look at the silent figure. "Be thankful he's alive. If he'd been unable to go into trance, he'd be dead."

Peter, standing next to Kirk in the doorway, said nothing. What had passed between Spock and himself in the cave on the planet had been highly personal although, having been inside the Vulcan's mind, Peter had no doubts that Kirk at least would one day learn most of the details.

The Captain had made no attempt to hide his joy on seeing both Spock and Peter back on board the Enterprise. Or his anger. But McCoy had spoken to Jim earlier, and had asked him not to lay into the youngster straight away. The Doctor was glad to see that so far Kirk had kept his fury in check. They all knew, however, that a later confrontation was inevitable.

Now McCoy, having convinced Kirk that it was pointless hanging around when Spock wasn't going to be aware of anything for many hours to come, steered the Captain to his cabin. Once he was sure that Kirk was resting, he took Peter with him to the rec room for the biggest meal that the young man could eat.

Several hours later, Peter entered Kirk's cabin. He had eaten, slept and cleaned up, but felt no better and had been relieved when finally he got the summons to go to Kirk's quarters.

He found Kirk sitting on the edge of his bed, and was surprised yet again by how - *normal* - Kirk looked. In his mind, he had built his uncle's image up over the years to quite ludicrous proportions. Peter sat in the chair to which Kirk waved him and waited, but he was no longer afraid.

The Captain studied Peter and thought, *Last time I saw him he was a child. Now he's a man and I know nothing about him.* Aloud he said simply, "Why?"

Peter took a deep breath. This wasn't going to be easy. Spock had assured him that Kirk would understand, yet he still had his doubts. He started clumsily.

"I need to talk to you."

Kirk was impatient. "Of course. That's why I called you - "

"No." Peter waved him silent. "I need to talk to you properly, not as uncle and nephew, but as one person to another." When Kirk was quiet, taken aback by the forceful personality before him, Peter finally took a deep breath and began to talk openly, for the first time in many years, about his history and the things that really mattered to him.

Later, McCoy found Kirk in the observation room. The Captain

was leaning back in one of the chairs, his eyes fixed unseeingly on the multitude of stars outside.

The Doctor sat in the adjoining chair. "Mind if I join you?" When after a minute he received no answer, he tried again. "Come on, Jim. It's not the end of the world."

Kirk turned to look at him sharply. "You knew?"

McCoy shook his head. "Not until just now. Peter poured it all out to me over our meal. Spock had apparently assured him that you would understand, but it seemed he wanted a second opinion."

Kirk smiled sadly. "Am I such an ogre, then, that my only nephew is afraid to talk to me about the things that really matter?"

McCoy shrugged philosophically. "Well, Jim, like it or not, you've built yourself up quite a reputation over the past few years. Peter was determined to live up to what he saw as your expectations and not disappoint you."

The Captain closed his eyes. "What hurts is that I never guessed, or even suspected. I'd known Aurelan for years. Admittedly not very well, but I'd met her several times, and Sam was always speaking and writing about her. What's worse is that I never knew my own brother. I thought I understood him completely."

"Jim, how many of us can say that we ever really know what goes on in another person's mind? Although I can't condone what he did, I can understand it. Sam merely tried to do the best he could for his child, as any parent would. If he were alive today, he would be proud of what he'd achieved, not ashamed. And you should be, too. Peter is a unique young individual.

"As for not guessing, I, too, should have known. At the time of the Denevan incident I picked up some unusual readings from Aurelan, but never had time to pursue them. She was the only one, apart from Spock, who could fight those creatures enough to retain her own identity, and tell us what we needed to know. I thought then she had an exceptional tolerance for the sedatives, and better pain control. With hindsight it all seems so obvious."

Kirk grimaced. "Well, I guess I'll have to get used to the fact that my nephew will be going to Vulcan to study. It certainly is a crazy universe."

McCoy stood up. "Speaking of Vulcans, there's one in Sickbay who'll probably want to see you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Kirk rose too suddenly and swayed.

"I'm telling you now." McCoy took hold of Kirk's arm and steered him towards the doorway. "You can have five minutes with him, and no more."

The side room was bathed in soft light, and Spock was only barely conscious.

Kirk stood in the doorway and hesitated, unsure for once of his welcome. If he hadn't asked Spock to search for Peter, the Vulcan wouldn't be suffering now. It had been one of the hardest decisions

he had ever had to make, and Kirk wondered if Spock would ever really understand how difficult it had been.

He himself had been too ill. Spock was the only part of himself he could send, the only person he could trust absolutely to do his best.

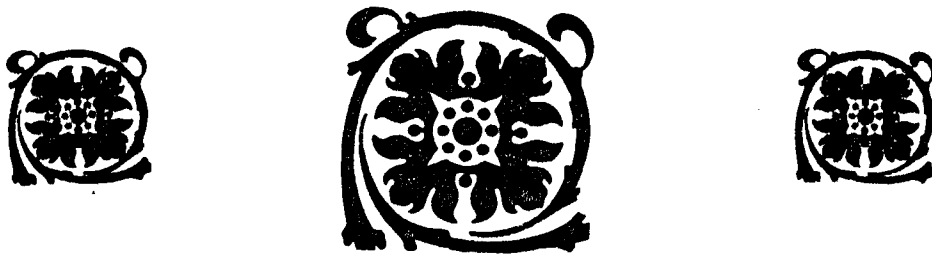
But at what cost? Would the Vulcan ever forgive him?

As if he had sensed Kirk's presence, Spock moved restlessly on the bed, his eyes searching.

"Jim?" There was fear and desolation in that one word, and Kirk realised with dismay that Spock might not even be aware of the fact that the operation on the Captain had been successful.

Cursing himself for being such a fool as to ever doubt their commitment to each other, he crossed hurriedly to the bed. "I'm here, Spock. Everything's all right now."

And indeed it was.



SEARCHING

My mind's the computer,
In search of the one,
Whose arms will enfold me,
When my mission is done.

To me the future
Looks as bleak as the past,
As I still travel on,
Still searching in time
For the one whose heart
Is compatible to mine.

So beam me up, Scotty,
I may as well say:
My love and emotions,
I'll lock far away.
The key I will hide,
Till some moment in time,
When someone might release me,
From this prison of mine.

Benjamin T Jones



