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This story is the third part of the trilogy which began in 'Green Fire' and continued in 'Afterglow' (published by B.S.F.R.). It is not necessary to have read those to understand 'Ribbon of Flame', although it is helpful to know that, as a result of Saavik's well-intentioned actions in a cave on the Genesis planet, Spock found himself 'pledged' to her in marriage, to his considerable surprise.

He managed to survive *pon farr* in 'Green Fire' and decided, in 'Afterglow', to try to obtain a severance of the pledge. Those two stories are set after the events of 'Star Trek V'.

'Ribbon of Flame' presumes the events in Original Series Star Trek, the animated episodes and the first six movies. The events in 'Star Trek - Generations' are touched upon, but it is not necessary to have seen the film to understand this story.

Thanks are due to Sue Jones for constructive criticism and editorial advice, from which this story has greatly benefited. The faults which remain are all mine.

JYC

RIBBON of FLAME

by

Jacqueline Y. Comben

PART ONE

Out of the frying pan....

1.

A hundred years ago, the probe had been launched. Its tiny on-board power pack had been exhausted soon after it reported its findings to its owners and it had become space debris, unwanted, moving slowly through the void on a course to nowhere.

After fifty years the probe nearly vanished into a black hole, but, by chance, it evaded capture and was flung aside at nearly the speed of light. It travelled onward, still heading nowhere, meeting nothing, slowing not at all.

Transport Ship 65 dropped into normal space nearly a parsec short of the Qu'orr System because the Warp drive had failed yet again. Hroek, in command, considered whether to risk not reporting the delay, since, if his engineer managed to fix the engine quickly and enabled them to travel at Warp 4, they could still reach Qu'orr 3 on schedule. If he did not report and was late, he would be in real trouble. However, if he reported and was not late, he could call again with good news instead of bad. Since the best Klingons do not become Transport Ship captains, Hroek picked the safe option and ordered his Communications Officer, "Signal..."

At that precise moment, as the Communications Officer moved to obey,

the ancient probe impacted Transport Ship 65 just aft of the bridge. Without Warp power, the shields were minimal, designed only to protect against space dust. The ship, on impulse drive, was doing 0.75 light. The relative velocities exceeded light by an appreciable margin and the resultant flash would be visible from Qu'orr 3 in two years time. By some strange mixture of chance and premonition, the Communication Officer's finger hit the disaster beacon activation switch in the microsecond before its owner joined the air, the rest of the bridge crew and every loose item in a whirling maelstrom which shot out into space through the exploding aft bulkhead.

In the mess, where four off-duty crewmen were eating, they and their meals were instantly vaporised as the remains of the probe ploughed straight through them and disintegrated the hull at the point where the mess bulkhead joined engineering. The engineer, his technicians, their tools and the air they had been breathing joined the puff of vapour which was all that remained of their shipmates.

What was left of Transport Ship 65, impulse engine still firing, changed course by 95°.

The entire incident had taken precisely three seconds.

It was, in Federation terms, Stardate 8719.3.

.....

The third mate of Orion Trader *Ps't'vot* hit the instrument panel, muttered under his breath, hit the panel again and then reported, "I'm definitely receiving a Klingon distress call."

"So?" asked the captain.

"It didn't just flash on and off, it's still signalling."

It was the captain's turn to be surprised.

Klingons did not send continuous distress calls. If in trouble, they transmitted a narrow sub-space beam to their home base and turned it off within seconds, to avoid the shame of possible rescue by some other species. Moreover, *Ps't'vot* was on her way out of Klingon space, heading for Romulan territory, so the distressed ship had to be in a very interesting location.

"Coordinates?" demanded the captain, only to be even more bemused to discover that the damaged vessel seemed to be well inside Klingon space, but apparently beaming its distress call towards Romulus.

"It must be very badly damaged," he deduced, and ordered, "change course to intercept."

"Sir?" queried the first mate, unwilling to tangle with Klingons.

"Who else is out here?" asked his captain. "No one. So nobody else is going to receive that call. Klingon salvage is valuable in certain markets. Raise speed to Warp 5. We'll be there in ten minutes and away again before any Klingon ship knows a thing. Keep sensors on alert to be on the safe side, but I'm not expecting trouble. Klingon Transports don't even have sensors and that's the most likely kind of ship to be in that area."

Of course, he supposed, the instrumentation he was about to salvage would be the outdated junk used by Transports. Any military vessel would surely have self-destructed if really badly damaged. However, even old Klingon equipment was of interest to the Federation and he had contacts who could put him in touch with likely buyers. He mentally added up the potential profit. This was his lucky day!

This buoyant feeling lasted all of nine and a half minutes. It was dispelled immediately they came within visual range of the distress beacon.

"What did *that*?" exclaimed the first mate.

Transport Ship 65 resembled a distorted stew-pot.

The engine nacelle, attached by one bent pylon to the cargo hold, formed the handle, and, somehow, was still propelling the wreck at about 0.8 light. The hold itself appeared largely undamaged. All that remained of the superstructure was a skewed corner of the bridge, forming the lip of the pan. Somewhere, a cable must be carrying power to this, since the distress call was still being sent.

"Target that beacon," the captain ordered, not wanting it to attract anyone else.

Orion Traders are excellently armed and a narrow phaser beam turned the remains of the bent and battered Klingon bridge into its component atoms.

All visions of serious wealth had dissipated and the Orion captain muttered, "We may find something worth having in the cargo."

He added to the third mate, "You will

beam over with me. We'll suit-up. There probably isn't any air in that hold."

When their flashlights pierced the utter darkness, "Heskof!" the captain swore. "Colony supplies!"

Klingons expected their colonists to have the spirit of adventure and to appreciate the challenge of developing an entire planet with the minimum of equipment. This cargo consisted of exactly that. No single item was worth enough to justify the trouble of finding a buyer, if, indeed, one could be found. Orion traders do not deal in scrap metal.

The third mate, less worldly wise, continued to shine his light in every direction, hoping for better things, and suddenly gave a yelp. "Something moved!"

Both beams centred on the same corner and revealed three narrow metal shelves, on each of which lay two small huddled beings. All six were held in place by restraining belts.

The light glinted on an elegantly pointed ear.

"Romulans!" growled the captain.

Since, clearly, there was air in the hold, he cracked open his helmet and barked, in the Romulan language, "Are any of you of good family?"

They stared at him blankly.

In Klingon, he asked, "What are you?"

In Klingon, the largest replied, "Vulcan. We are Vulcan."

The captain brightened. "We'll beam them over to *Ps't'vot*," he said. "At least the detour will be worth something. Romulans wouldn't pay to get back any

of *their* brats captured by Klingons, unless maybe one was related to the Praetor, but Vulcans will pay. Oh yes, Vulcans will pay!"

2.

Vulcan, Stardate 8801.8

At first she thought her eyes were deceiving her, that no one was walking across the burning desert towards the heights of Gol. At dawn, when she had looked out of her narrow window, she had seen what seemed to be a distant figure shimmering in the rising heat, but in the middle of the day there was nobody, no sign at all, only the glistening rocks and the everlasting dust.

Next morning, however, again there was the shifting, moving, dark form, closer than before. Later, it had vanished. There was nothing. Then her eyes screwed as she stared, seeing something after all.

It was exactly the same red as the dust, but behind it the rocks were paler, so she could just make out the... what was the word?

"Adept, what is that?" she had asked before she remembered that perhaps she should not.

She was addressing her grandfather, but had learned not to refer to him as such. He was an Adept of Gol, one who had attained *Kolinahr*.

He came beside her and looked out, not chiding her for her impetuous question.

She pointed, saying, "It is the same colour as the dust, but I can see it against the rock behind."

"It is the tent of a petitioner," he told her.

"Tent." She committed the word to memory, then asked, "Petitioner?"

"One comes to petition Gol; to ask the High Adept to provide a service. He must walk to Gol to demonstrate firmness of purpose and must not distract our gaze, so must stop during daylight hours and camp in a tent of red cloth. Now, it is time to return to your lessons."

The coming of someone new to Gol was the most interesting happening since her own arrival. Whenever she could she looked out and, on the third day, saw that the tent was set up beside the bottom of the steps which led from Gol to the desert floor. In front of the tent a still figure sat, cross-legged, wearing a robe of the same colour as tent and dust. His head was bare, unprotected. Surely he could not stay there long and survive?

"Adept," she reported to her grandfather, "the... petitioner has come."

"Indeed."

Next morning, the petitioner was still there, ignored by Gol, and the next morning also.

During the third day after the coming, while the child ate her meal, an acolyte came and addressed her grandfather. "Adept, Spock son of Sarek is outside and has waited three days to petition Gol for the severance of a marriage pledge. The Council of Elders has contacted High Adept T'Van, supporting this petition. T'Van will allow his approach so that she may know his thoughts. When you have finished your meal, T'Van requests that you summon Spock son of Sarek to her presence."

"My meal is over," stated the Adept. He stood up and departed.

"Spock?" the child asked the acolyte, daring more with one who had not attained *Kolinahr* and might never do so.

"What is that to you?" he asked, imperiously.

"I think I have heard the name," she whispered.

She did not mention that she had heard it spoken by Klingons, and spoken with evident respect; the name of a formidable enemy.

"Spock is no true Vulcan," the acolyte declared. "Sarek married a Human. Spock joined the Starfleet. He attempted *Kolinahr*, but of course he failed."

Not realising how far from *Kolinahr* this utterance showed him to be, the acolyte swept out, leaving the child to her thoughts.

She ran to the window and peered out, trying to see this Spock clearly.

He had been known to Klingons, respected by Klingons, yet he looked so very small from a viewpoint so high above him. The child could see his pointed ears. He looked Vulcan, but Vulcans did not appreciate him as Klingons did. Did the Klingons know he was half Human? Perhaps, one day... No, she vowed to herself, *certainly* one day a true Vulcan would prove to certain Klingons that it was not necessary to be half Human in order to deserve respect.

.....

Two days before the child first caught sight of him, Spock had carefully explained to his father his need to petition

Gol. He did not expect help or even agreement, but could hardly arrive on Vulcan, walk to Gol and depart without visiting his parents. It did not occur to him that his father was rather sensitive about the subject he was now obliged to mention.

Amanda had made much of the fact that it had transpired that the pledge with T'Pring had not only turned out disastrously, but had been unnecessary in the first place. She had, of course, been aware that they could not know that his Human heritage would save Spock from the worst claims of his Vulcan blood, but that had not stopped her from being wise after the event. She had never liked T'Pring, had not been able to explain why she believed the girl the wrong bride for her son, but was delighted to point out that, if it had been up to her, the pledge would never have been made.

Sarek knew that, with the information available at the time, it had been logical to try to safeguard his son's life by pledging him at seven, rather than hoping he would find a female willing to marry a half-Human later on. T'Pring's parents had been delighted with the alliance. He did not believe that Amanda had somehow known that the girl would issue the *Kal'ifee*. He had not chosen to dwell upon the sorry affair. Now, he was faced with Spock pledged in error to a half-Romulan member of Starfleet.

He did not relish Saavik as a mate for his son, but knew that Gol would see no logical objection to the union. If his son had chosen to follow his own career as an Ambassador, the benefit...

Any Human, at this stage in his thoughts, would have grinned broadly. Sarek, of course, did not, but said, in his usual calm tones, "I cannot presume to predict the decision of the High Adept of Gol, but it is usual for her to accept a

petition backed by the Council of Elders. There are some planets whose culture renders assignment of a female Ambassador undesirable. Often these are the very planets on which some risk accompanies the assignment and it would be a clear advantage to have available a male Ambassador who was not obliged to take a wife with him into such danger. Your Human friends will be retiring from Starfleet in due course. If you agree, after this, to make a career move and if you spend the intervening years following suitable courses during your spare time, I am sure the Council of Elders will support your petition to Gol."

The word 'blackmail' popped into Spock's mind, to be instantly repressed. He recognised, rather ruefully, the unwanted influence of the one-time holder of his *katra*. This was not blackmail. It was totally logical. Incompatibility of career choice was the only reason he knew for the rare severance of pledges entered into by children. He had not considered it for himself simply because he had presumed that he would be expected to change his career immediately. However, if all he had to do was study some data chips...

"Agreed," he said; then added, "It will take me four days to walk to Gol. I am due back on the *Enterprise* in ten. Can you arrange for the Council to contact Gol while I am journeying there?"

"I will raise the matter tomorrow," Sarek told him. "You cannot extend your leave?"

"Negative. This is not precisely a scheduled visit to Vulcan. We shall be obliged to use top Warp on the next leg of our mission as it is."

So Kirk had manoeuvred his way around his orders to give Spock a chance to petition Gol. Sarek understood

perfectly. However, the Adepts of Gol had been known to keep petitioners waiting for five days at their gate. Sarek rather hoped they would not, as in that case his son would assuredly beam up to his ship from the grounds of Gol, if not from the very presence of T'Van herself. Sarek would prefer Spock's exit to be somewhat more circumspect.

"You need a ceremonial tent," he said.

"I have one. It was replicated by Scott, but is identical in appearance to that prescribed," Spock told him. He did not mention that it was much lighter to carry and more insulating from heat and cold, or that his Starfleet issue survival blanket would provide considerably better protection from stony ground than the plain cloth version obtainable on Vulcan. He saw no logic in enduring more pain that was absolutely necessary.

"You will eat here this evening?" his father half asked, half stated. "Your mother..."

"If I do not eat here, she will be considerably displeased," Spock interjected, "so of course I will do so. Where is Mother?"

"At Seleya. She is assisting T'Mel." Sarek paused, almost imperceptibly. "T'Mel is the successor to T'Lar. There are five children at Seleya who were retrieved from a Klingon Transport Ship. T'Mel is supervising their re-education. She believes that your mother can be of use in showing them a non-Vulcan view of Vulcan."

"Indeed?" Spock asked, surprised on two counts.

"Your mother will tell you every possible detail," Sarek informed him, "including her objections to the presence of a sixth child at Gol. I had much

difficulty persuading her that, even had I wished, I could not abstract that child from her own grandfather who is a *Kolinahr'a*."

Spock was fascinated.

PART TWO

...into the Nexus

1.

Earth, Stardate 9751.8

Dr. Leonard McCoy groaned and stared at the inactivated communications console. He must force himself to make this call. He had put it off too long as it was, but his current physical state didn't help one bit.

"Physician heal thyself," he muttered.

No anti-hangover treatment really worked perfectly, so he guessed he shouldn't be surprised that he felt like hell. Then it occurred to him that the problem might be that he was not so much hung over as still slightly drunk. How much Saurian brandy had he sunk last night? In a way it had worked, because he now felt cut off from everything, insulated; his grief a dull ache in the background rather than a stabbing, bleeding wound. He could not have made this call yesterday, he was certain of that. To make this call, he needed a measure of self-control which, yesterday, had been impossible.

He couldn't sit in front of this console much longer trying to work up the courage to activate it, but how did you tell one of your best friends that your other best friend, his friend... closer than that, more brother than friend, was dead? When he had first gone into medicine,

breaking bad news was part of the job, but lately, in Starfleet, it was the Captain who reported to families... 'We regret to have to inform you...'. He, the doctor, was out of practice, and this wasn't just any death. The person he had to inform wasn't just any person.

He owed it to Spock not to break down, not to make it more difficult for the Vulcan by an emotional display. O.K., so he was all Human, all too Human, Spock might say, but to one raised on Vulcan to respect the Vulcan way, blatant emotion was shocking and he was about to deal out enough of a shock without adding to it by loss of control.

Moreover, Spock would blame himself. It didn't matter that it wasn't logical, that it wasn't his fault that Vulcan had called in his debt or that neither of them had thought Jim in any possible danger. Spock would still blame himself. He always did.

McCoy thought back to the time after Rura Penthe, after Khitomer, when Spock had blamed himself. He remembered the conversation as if it were yesterday, better, in fact, than he remembered most of yesterday.

They had gathered in Jim's quarters.

Spock sat in his usual upright way, as if he could never relax. Jim paced around as if he could never sit still. McCoy, himself, lounged with a glass of Saurian brandy, the only one of them who knew what relaxation meant.

"It was my fault," Spock said.

"Don't be..." Jim began.

"What was?" the doctor asked at the same moment.

"Firstly, I should not have volunteered *Enterprise* to rendezvous with Gorkon's ship," Spock stated.

"You should," Kirk told him, stopping in mid-stride and gesturing to the room at large. "It wasn't your fault I was so mixed up over David. Based on all you knew of me, all the years we served together, I should have jumped at the chance of peace. My only question is how you got involved in the negotiations in the first place."

"I agreed to train as an Ambassador with a view to entering that profession at some time in the future, should you decide to retire from Starfleet," Spock said, softly. "By agreeing to this, I gained the support of the Council of Elders for the severance of my pledge with Saavik. When Praxis blew up, my father, as I believe you might say, Doctor, 'called in the debt'. He believed that Klingons would find it easier to trust a Vulcan who served in Starfleet, so I was asked to go to speak to Gorkon."

"Your father blackmailed you to..." McCoy started to splutter.

"Negative, Doctor. It was a logical..."

"Don't talk to me about logic!" McCoy told him.

"Spock, you don't have to carry on as an Ambassador now, do you?" Kirk asked.

"No. It was a purely temporary assignment. If a time comes when you retire, then I shall be obliged to offer my services to Vulcan. That is all," Spock said. "However, when I agreed to train as an Ambassador, I did not expect to be assigned, even briefly, while still your First Officer. I should have made it clear that..." He paused, then said, "Actually, I did wish to try to obtain peace. I did think

that, if I could be instrumental in the peace process, that would be of benefit to all members of the Federation and to the Klingons. However, I should not have involved you."

"Yes you should," Kirk insisted, sitting down opposite his friend. "I tell you, I realise now just how mixed up I was. That wasn't your fault. All you did was for the best of reasons and I'm now damned glad we were involved and actually got peace. I've sorted out my attitudes."

"So stop blaming yourself," McCoy told the Vulcan.

"There's no reason," added Kirk.

"Valeris," said Spock, very softly, ear tips blushing green.

"Oh... you recommended her... Well, you could hardly know..." began the Captain.

"Jim, my mother warned me," Spock admitted. "She..."

"Hang on there!" cut in McCoy, sitting up straight, fast. "Your *mother*? Are you saying she *knew* Valeris was all set to betray the Federation?"

"No, Doctor, she merely said that she did not believe Valeris to have recovered from her childhood among Klingons."

"Her *what*?" Kirk interjected.

McCoy was too startled to do more than gape.

All three regarded each other with mutual misunderstanding.

Spock, of course, recovered first.

"But it is in her record," he said,

realising that they really had not known. "I pointed out to my mother that, should she be correct, since careful psychological tests are given to all Starfleet applicants..."

McCoy jumped up and went to his Captain's terminal saying, "Computer, display the record of ex-Lieutenant Valeris."

The other two joined him.

"It is there," Spock pointed, "but only in Vulcan. I fail to see..."

"I see!" the doctor told him, "They... she...? ...put it in, sure, but only in the fine print. What did Starfleet do? Translated the first part and saw mother: Vulcan, father: Vulcan, grandfather... something to do with Gol! *I'd* think - 'Ohho, no way can we psych test *her*!' The tests don't work for Vulcans. They didn't for you! I mean you tested out so perfect it frightened the designers of the tests. So no way do they bother to test any full Vulcans who apply. They never bothered to get the computer to translate that fine print. It has her schools in the main section. I guess one of those may be Klingon...?"

Wordlessly, Spock pointed.

"Well, I wouldn't have known that," Kirk remarked.

"But Jim, surely her name told you...?" began Spock, his voice as far from calm as McCoy had ever known it.

"Oops," said the doctor.

The Captain sighed, "No, Spock, I'm sorry. Explain."

"No Vulcan female would, in the normal course of events, be given a Klingon name," Spock said patiently, his

calm restored.

"Klingon...?" Kirk mused, walking away from the terminal, "Oh, damn! Valeris, Vixis... and Saavik's name isn't usual because of Hellguard. *She* was properly tested! Starfleet saw 'half-Romulan' and gave her every test in the book!"

"And she passed them virtually as well as Spock did," McCoy said, throwing himself back into a chair. "Which added to Starfleet's certainty that no full Vulcan was worth testing."

Kirk circled the room and muttered, "Spock, it never struck anyone that Valeris should have been called T'something-or-other. On Earth there are so many naming conventions, I doubt if I could count them. We aren't used to Vulcan rules."

"It is not a rule exactly," Spock explained. "In fact, in one province it is quite usual for males to have names beginning 'T'. That is a left-over from an old language in which 'T' implied belonging, I suppose in the sense: 'this name belongs to this one'. Most, however, adhere to the usage implied by high-Vulcan, in which 'S' is a male prefix and 'T' a female one. The 'V' sound signifies nothing. Her original name was TPers. My mother believed that her refusal to change back to that name was evidence for her maladjustment. It seemed quite logical to me for her to retain the name to which she was accustomed."

"Sit down, Spock," McCoy said, since the First Officer was still standing stiffly beside the terminal. "Tell us the whole story. I'm pretty sure you have no reason to blame yourself. It was a mess, but not your fault."

"Yes, tell us." agreed Kirk, sitting down and gesturing Spock to a chair. "I'm

fascinated," he added with a grin.

.....

The story, Bones thought, hadn't been so much fascinating as tragic.

Spock told them that a Vulcan trader, on his way to deliver stores to a research team on a planet near the Klingon border, had been hailed by an Orion claiming to have rescued six Vulcan children from a damaged Klingon transport.

The Vulcan had the sense to be suspicious. He'd insisted on having the children genemapped by one of the scientists on the planet. All six turned out to be full, *bone fide* Vulcans. Five of them were positively ID'd. They had been reported lost between seven and eight years earlier when they were five or six years old. Each had been travelling with his or her parents. The parents had been traders. The sixth child was, it appeared, the offspring of parents themselves captured as children, a generation earlier.

James T. Kirk paced his cabin when he heard this. "Starfleet has warned Vulcan often enough!" he declared, angry that the warnings had fallen on deaf ears and frustrated that there was nothing the 'fleet could do about the situation. "Klingons like Vulcan slaves! They value their telepathic talent. All our intelligence reports tell us that. They know no adult will cooperate. They know they can't force an adult to invade another's mind, so they kill them on sight and only bother with children. They raise the kids their way, to see their telepathy as an asset, to be used to further their Klingon master's concerns. They make sure the kids know what an ordinary slave's life is like, so they have an incentive to better themselves by using their telepathy. Spock, *you* know that! How come Vulcan takes no notice?"

"Jim, before this, no Vulcan had actually seen any of their own people who had lived as slaves of the Klingons," McCoy pointed out. "Maybe, now, Vulcan traders will stop taking their children on their ships, but when *pon farr* is getting close, a guy needs his wife and if they have a kid... Well, I can see how come they end up taking Junior along and hoping for the best."

Kirk sighed and resumed his seat as Spock told them that the child born from a previous generation of captives had turned out to be related to T'Mel, the newly appointed High Adept of Mount Seleya. She had undertaken his re-education.

Faced with about the most un-Vulcan grandchildren possible, McCoy had understood why the grandparents of four of the others had sent them to Seleya to be sorted out along with their buddy.

Kirk had distributed coffee as Spock continued the story.

Valeris had not gone to Mount Seleya. Instead, she had been sent to Gol.

Two of her grandparents lived next door to the third, who ran some kind of store in a trading district of Shi'kar. They hadn't known what to do with their grandchild, whose behaviour shocked and confused them. However, her other grandfather had succeeded, at Gol, in casting off all emotion, attaining *Kolinahr*. He had divorced his wife as a result, but he was still Valeris' grandfather.

Spock said that the teachers of logic and mind control in all Vulcan schools were trained at Gol, so of course it seemed the ideal place to send a disturbed, disruptive child; especially as she would be with her own grandfather.

It was clear to McCoy that Amanda

had been sure that Gol was about the worst place for one of those children, but she couldn't explain this to her menfolk and, even if she'd managed it, there had been nothing they could have done.

.....

McCoy groaned, remembering. He had understood.

Those kids had been raised for seven or eight of their most formative years by Klingons. They hated the Klingons for killing their parents, but they respected Klingon ideals, because they had been taught to do just that. Klingons saw Vulcans as snivelling cowards with no honour, because they wouldn't even fight to defend themselves or their children. So these Vulcan children despised Vulcans.

Amanda had been called to Seleya to show the children that a Human believed Vulcans to be fine people and certainly not cowards. McCoy guessed that she'd been a bit careful what she said to her husband about this, because she didn't expect him to understand how deeply the poor kids had taken in their Klingon attitudes, or even really appreciate what the Klingon view of Vulcans was.

McCoy believed that, pretty early on, Sarek had made it clear that he couldn't get Valeris away from Gol, so Amanda had given up on that issue. There was no logic in pursuing it and Sarek would have said so!

It was clear to McCoy that, at Gol, they hadn't tried to teach Valeris to explore her feelings and sort them out. Of course they hadn't; they didn't value emotions at all. The whole purpose of everyone at Gol was to eliminate their own feelings.

McCoy believed that Valeris'

grandfather had taught the child to put up a real strong shield so that the neighbours weren't annoyed by getting telepathic hate washed over them. So little Valeris had walled off her hate for Klingons and her feelings about being stuck with cowardly Vulcans. She'd never learned to see Vulcans any other way because, at Gol, she was told that *Kolinahr* was the Vulcan ideal and, to her, that had surely seemed like ultimate cowardice; crushing emotion to avoid dealing with its consequences.

Why had she been so keen to join Starfleet? It seemed to McCoy that she'd made up her mind to show the Klingons that at least one Vulcan had guts. She kept her name so they'd know her when they met her at the business end of a phaser, some time in the future. Starfleet was how she'd get the phaser and, meanwhile, all she had to do was act dead pan and learn her lessons. She was a real bright kid. She'd fooled everyone into thinking she'd become an ideal little Vulcan, cool as could be. When her granddad died, because Sarek was some kind of uncle, she'd gone to him and asked about joining the fleet. She'd told him she wanted to spread the way of Surak more widely.

Only Amanda hadn't been fooled. She had been sure that, between those pointed ears, the girl was pure unreformed Klingon. McCoy wasn't sure how she'd known: female intuition maybe? Nothing she could explain to Vulcans. She'd been right, but of course her son hadn't seen it.

Spock thought any full Vulcan better than himself; was sure Valeris had learned perfect emotional control, not just how to build a wall in her head! To cap it all, the poor sap trusted Starfleet to check the girl out with all the tests they had given him and didn't realise they wouldn't think it worth while for a full

Vulcan. It was possible that she'd have passed anyway, because she *was* a bright kid and knew the sort of answers a Vulcan would be expected to give!

McCoy realised that it had been sheer bad luck that Valeris was around to be assigned just after Praxis blew up. Cartwright would have asked the computer for any officer with an axe to grind with the Klingons. Sure Jim Kirk had one, but he was under Spock's influence, so Cartwright aimed to have him watched, but to enlist his own man or woman to actually kill Gorkon. The computer translated all the Vulcan in Valeris' record.

The doctor could imagine just how her interview had gone.

She'd been asked, "Would you like a chance to show the Klingons that the Federation is no pushover?"

Of course she'd jumped at it. She'd been given the names of two crewmen to recruit, told to watch Jim Kirk, and sent off on her mission of sabotage. She'd analyzed Jim as just like a Vulcan - Klingons had killed his son, but all he did was yell about it, he wouldn't fight them!

She'd known the Romulans were involved, and saw that as sheer logic. The Romulans certainly didn't see turning to the Federation as honourable Klingon behaviour and it wasn't in their interests to have the Klingon Empire and the Federation allied.

The more people who were willing to kill Klingons the merrier, as far as Valeris was concerned, so she'd been glad the Romulan-Klingon alliance had bitten the dust. She could live with the Klingon involvement too. Sure, a 'good' Klingon would want to go down fighting! She sympathised.

McCoy guessed she'd seen him and Jim as 'unfortunate casualties of a just war', expendable. The girl thought like a Klingon, and he didn't claim to be an expert on what made them tick. It had sure shocked Spock, though.

McCoy still remembered his own shock when Spock forced a mind-meld on the girl. It had been a while before he understood that, having been trained at Gol, Spock had not just a right but a duty to know the thoughts of one who had dishonoured Vulcan. Oh, he'd been blistering angry, more so than the doctor could have imagined possible, but he'd shielded that and gone about the mind meld with cold surgical precision. He had found out what none of the logicians of Gol had suspected.

McCoy remembered the slightly bemused look in Spock's eyes when he had told them, that day in Jim's quarters, "She was angry in a very cold way. Yet not really with the Klingons, but with Vulcan."

Poor Spock. Hatred was alien to him and hatred for Vulcans, whom he so admired, totally incomprehensible.

McCoy had understood, but had never really been able to explain it to Spock; probably never would. He was sure Jim Kirk understood well enough.

Valeris had wanted to prove herself as good as any Klingon. She had learned nothing at Gol except how to fool Vulcans. It had even been no surprise that, after that meld, she had viewed Spock differently - with bemused respect, almost certainly because he was the first Vulcan who had ever dominated her; acted, in her eyes, like a Klingon.

The whole thing had been a tragic mess, not least the waste of a young life, because when, at a preliminary hearing,

Valeris was told, "Since you were ordered by a superior officer, yours is clearly a lesser offence," the kid had declared that she was a volunteer and had killed herself in true Klingon style rather than face a dishonourable verdict - one that didn't involve death.

Spock had blamed himself for that death, for Rura Penthe, for Gorkon's death. Spock still blamed himself to this day. Now Jim was dead and Spock had to be told, and would blame himself for it, for not being there, as if that would have made any difference!

2.

McCoy tensed.

He'd been sitting here thinking, putting off the inevitable for far too long. One bonus was the fact that his head had cleared a lot, but the ache of his grief, the immediacy of the loss of his friend, was getting sharper all the time; so was the pain of knowing what he was about to do to Spock.

"Dammit!" he muttered.

He gritted his teeth and activated the console.

A rather bored-looking female Lieutenant answered and he asked to be connected, if possible, to the Vulcan Diplomatic Courier *T'Lal*.

Just when he would not have minded waiting, with amazing - or perhaps Vulcan - efficiency, he found himself gazing at a black-clad young female with pointed ears.

"Er... Ambassador Spock?" he asked, the pause being due to his sudden

recollection of his friend's unfamiliar title.

"Wait," said the young Vulcan. It seemed they didn't teach the niceties of politeness even to those on ships carrying diplomats.

"Spock here."

It was too quick, too sudden. Spock looked too calmly normal, eyebrow slightly raised.

The doctor was struck totally dumb. What could he say?

It occurred to him, suddenly, that privacy was essential for this call. Such as he could see behind Spock did not appear to be a bridge.

"Are you in your quarters?" he asked.

"Doctor?" The eyebrow rose high.

It struck the harassed Human that being called out of the blue and asked *that* was.... well it would have been funny if it hadn't been quite otherwise.

"Are you alone?" he pursued, not sure how he had managed to sound reasonably calm. He knew he was close to hysteria.

"Affirmative," said Spock, with a slight air of humouring the mentally deranged.

The doctor opened his mouth and nothing emerged. He swallowed. Finally he choked out, "I don't know how to say this."

"May I suggest that you begin at the beginning?" Spock was very definitely humouring him now.

"It's... it's Jim," was all Bones managed.

A strangely 'flat' expression came into Spock's eyes for an instant, almost as if he were looking into himself. This was followed by an almost imperceptible frown.

"Jim is ill?" he asked.

"It's... it's worse than that."

"Jim is seriously injured?"

"Oh God, Spock, I..." McCoy swallowed, feeling tears rising, "He's... he's *dead!*"

The tears had arrived.

"No, Doctor, he is not."

It was a second before it impinged upon the distraught Human that Spock had not broken, was not in denial. He had declared a statement of certain fact in the voice he always used for statements of fact. McCoy simply sat there, mouth open, not daring to hope.

"Doctor, I have mind melded with Jim many times," Spock said, almost kindly. "I have a type of mental link with him. I still have that link. I am aware of him. He is, therefore, not dead."

Again that 'inward' look crossed the Vulcan's face. He said, "It is as if he is very far away, certainly further than you are."

"You can sense... feel... *me?*" asked McCoy, unsure if he was outraged or not, simply knowing that his tears had gone, that hope was growing every second.

"You hosted my *katra*," Spock reminded him, simply.

The doctor guessed that answered that. He started to think about what Spock had told him. The Vulcan was sure

Jim was alive, but he seemed a long way off. What facts had Scotty given? Did they fit?

"Jim..." he said, "was involved in a rescue. *Enterprise-B* had to answer a distress call. This was... what did Scotty say? About three light years from Earth."

"My mind sense is not that accurate, Doctor. I presume you to be on Earth. If Jim was three light years from you, I would not be able to differentiate the distance. Tell me more details. What was the cause of the distress call?"

"Some ship was caught in some sort of energy field. *Enterprise-B* tried to get it out with a tractor beam and got caught in the edge of the field. Jim did something so they could get away. I'm not sure what. Then a bit... a part of this energy field hit the ship. There was a damn great hole where Jim had been."

"So Jim is inside some kind of energy field?" Spock mused.

"If he's alive, I guess he must be. But he wasn't in a suit, Spock. They weren't due 'til Tuesday!" To his own ears, McCoy sounded close to hysteria again.

"Doctor, I assure you, he is alive," Spock said, very calmly.

It occurred to the doctor that this damned Vulcan was a pretty good psychologist. Considerably less fraught, he thought for a moment, then said, "They rescued some refugees. They transported them from the trapped ship just before it was shaken to bits. I can get tapes of the interviews, but Pavel Chekov did say they were weird. The refugees didn't seem pleased to be rescued, seemed to think they'd been someplace real nice... maybe even in the past, back where they'd come from."

Spock frowned slightly and steepled his fingers. Clearly he was thinking all this out. Finally he said, "I would estimate that either the field is a gateway to other parts of the universe or other times, or both, or Jim is trapped within the field itself, under the impression he is in another time and place." He paused, then added, "Since it was possible to remove people by transporter, I tend to think that the most likely situation is that Jim is still within the field, that it is not a gateway. The energy envelope must be shielding him from me, giving the impression of a vast distance."

It was McCoy's turn to frown. He said, "I *think* I see what you mean."

"If obliged to relive the past, surely Jim will become bored very rapidly..." Spock began.

"Well, er..." the doctor suspected he was blushing, "I guess that depends which bit of the past..."

"Are you suggesting that he would prefer to remain there?" asked Spock, rather sharply.

"No, of course not," McCoy declared, even while wondering if he was really so sure.

"I will need," said Spock, "accurate information as to the last known position of this field and its course and speed. I will endeavour to reclaim the Captain as soon as possible. The field is within three light years of Earth? I find it difficult to understand how it could have gone unnoticed for so long."

"I don't know how fast it's moving," Bones pointed out. "V'ger popped up pretty quickly."

"V'ger was travelling at Warp speed. If this energy field is so doing, it is not a

natural phenomenon. Perhaps it is a type of ship?"

"A damned odd one!" McCoy protested.

"Speculation without data is of no value, Doctor. Kindly send me all the information you can possibly obtain...."

"Send?" cut in McCoy. "I'm coming! I'll bring..."

"Firstly," Spock interjected, "I shall need full data in order to rendezvous with the field, so can hardly wait for you to find your way to my present location. Secondly, it will take this ship approximately seven days to reach the likely position of the field. I am unwilling to delay the rescue..."

"Dammit, Jim may be hurt!" McCoy raged. "You need me! What medical staff do you have on that ship of yours?"

"At this time, only a Vulcan healer, but..."

"Then I *have* to come! Can't you come here first and fetch me?" McCoy demanded. "I'm on Earth. It'll be no detour at all..."

"I might then be obliged to report to the Vulcan ambassador and Federation Council on my recent mission," Spock stated. "There is no reason to believe that the Captain is physically hurt. However, if you insist upon coming, please find out all the relevant information and send it. I will then give you the coordinates for rendezvous at the field. You may join me there."

"I'm a doctor not a... a..." McCoy complained. "I don't know how to find out which ships are going where... how to get to any coordinates!"

"Ask someone in Scheduling," came the calm reply. "Spock out."

Bones felt rushed, put-upon and totally confused.

The ache had gone; all aches had gone. He believed that Jim was alive, but he had a strong wish to throttle a certain Vulcan!

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At first, McCoy thought the main problem would be getting the information about the course and speed of the energy field, but then he realised that the helmsman of *Enterprise-B* would know. The helmsman of *Enterprise-B* called him 'Uncle Bones' and still regarded him as a guaranteed supplier of free treats. It wasn't difficult to give her the impression that he still hadn't told Spock about Jim's 'death' and to mutter that the Vulcan would want every possible detail. In between mouthfuls of her favourite chocolate ice cream, Demora Sulu kindly wrote the required information on a table napkin.

McCoy toyed with asking her about the mysteries of ship movements and decided that would not be fair.

Getting copies of all interviews with the rescued refugees was easy. Although on leave from detached research work, McCoy was still a Starfleet doctor with very high clearance rating. He simply asked the Surgeon General's Section computer. He then returned to Communications Central and made another call to the Vulcan Diplomatic Courier *T'Lal*.

"Will you come and fetch me?" were his first words to Spock.

"Negative, Doctor. It would waste valuable time," the Vulcan said, flatly.

"You have the necessary information?"

"I've got the stuff about the field's course and speed written down here," McCoy told him. "Er..."

He read out the information from the table napkin, none of which he understood.

"It is not a natural phenomenon," remarked the Vulcan, before reeling off coordinates which the harassed doctor had to get him to repeat twice, in order to be sure he had them down correctly.

"The testimony of those rescued from the field?" asked Spock.

McCoy waved the data chips at him and was promptly given a crash course in the method of sending the information directly to *T'Lal's* computer. While he was following these instructions, he asked, "What medical equipment are you carrying? Vulcan standard, I bet."

"Rather more than that, Doctor," Spock informed him. "This vessel may be called upon to assist in certain emergencies. Sickbay is fitted as per Starfleet."

McCoy doubted that. It was no doubt fitted as Vulcan thought necessary and Vulcans tended to see Medikits as a waste of time, because their patients could usually diagnose themselves and, if they couldn't, the telepathic sense of the Healers meant that they didn't need as much instrumentation as he did. Before he set out on this crazy trip - which shouldn't have been necessary, because Spock should have come to fetch him - he would need to pick up as much equipment as he could.

"Information received," Spock reported, cutting across the doctor's thoughts. "Spock out."

"Damn you!" McCoy yelled at the blank screen.

He had no idea why the pointy-eared son of a bitch was being so awkward, but he now had the problem of getting himself to the coordinates Spock had given him. Before he even thought about that, he set out to Surgeon General's to pick up the equipment he needed. He might have to treat Jim inside some energy field, with no call on any facilities from Spock's ship, and he wanted to be as ready for any eventuality as he could be.

McCoy tried to recall whether he had ever met anyone who claimed any knowledge of scheduling. He doubted it. It sounded like something computer experts did; Spock's friends, not his. This last thought brought to mind the fact that he had once met one of Spock's computing friends at a conference on medical diagnosis beds. He remembered this vividly because she was a ravishing beauty and he had thought at the time that it was bad enough that all Jim Kirk's friends looked like her, without Spock getting in on the act.

Probably Joss Hammond from Science Officer General's Headquarters knew no more about scheduling than he did, but it wouldn't hurt to call her.

She was still a ravishing beauty. Whether the streak of white in her curly auburn hair was evidence of aging or a fashion highlight, he didn't know, but it did no harm to her appearance.

"I doubt you remember me," he said. "Leonard McCoy, Medical Branch. We met at..."

"Sure I remember, Doc!" she grinned. "How can I help you?"

"I'm not sure you can. I'm trying to find someone who knows something about scheduling." He saw her blank look and added, "Ship scheduling... which ones are going where, when."

"I'm sorry..." she began, then said, "Wait a minute... I think one of Hip's mouse buddies does something like that. I asked him once what idiots waste their time with mice and he started to tell me. I didn't really want to know, but it just shows that no information is ever really useless!"

She saw McCoy's look of total confusion and explained kindly, "Mice are very small robots which have to be made with the most arcane circuitry. Hip says that's the whole challenge, but it seems crazy to me! I'll call him."

The picture on the doctor's screen split in half, Joss on one side and a lot of equipment on the other. A voice, very deep bass, asked, "Yo?"

"Look at me, Hip! I object to talking to thin air," said Joss.

Into view came an amazing man who at first gave the impression of being upside down. He had the most luxuriant beard McCoy had ever seen, while the top of his head was totally bald.

"Sorry Joss," he said, then, to the doctor, "Hi, who are you?"

"He's a buddy of Spock's. I met him at a Conference. He's a Medic and needs to talk to someone who's into scheduling. Didn't you say one of your mouse freaks is a scheduler?"

"Chuck Jones," said Hip. "I'll call him."

The screen picture split again and, between Joss and Hip appeared a round-faced harassed looking man.

"Hi, Chuck," said Hip. "We need your help."

Five minutes later McCoy, greatly impressed by the usefulness of having friends in computing, if still bemused by the mice, had been booked on the *Proxima Queen* out of Earth Commercial Space Port. The fact that he was willing to pay to travel on a non-Fleet vessel had worried Chuck Jones, who had clearly begun to have doubts as to the legitimacy of the whole affair, but Hip had uttered veiled threats, totally incomprehensible to the doctor, about people who used banned chips in competition mice.

McCoy had been horrified by the cost of passage on *Proxima Queen*, a cruise liner, saying he wanted to travel on the ship, not buy it, but, with no fleet vessels going anywhere inside ten days, he had absolutely no choice.

As it was, he had to go straight to the Space Port, with no time to collect any luggage and was relying on a transfer to an Ellian freighter which he would have to fix up from *Proxima Queen*. If the freighter refused him passage, he'd have to go to Ellian and try to charter a ship and risk missing his final transfer to *USS Excelsior*. The knowledge that Sulu's ship was heading for the same coordinates as Spock's was the one bright spot on a clouded horizon.

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3.

McCoy had used Space Port Earth before, during his brief time out of Starfleet. His recollection was of rows of check-in desks and then rows of doors, called 'gates', which led to shuttle bays. He supposed the separate Proxima Cruise Line facility had always been there, but he hadn't noticed it. Now, however, it

was brightly lit and 'Proxima Queen Departures' was prominently displayed. He followed the sign and found himself in a huge lounge equipped with comfortable looking white upholstered chairs grouped around small tables. On the walls were glowing advertisements for various Proxima Cruises. He saw just enough to realise that the trip to Chetsin via Ellian was about the shortest and, therefore, presumably cheapest. Given the price of his ticket, he dreaded to think what people paid for some of those other tours.

At this point in his thoughts his attention was claimed by the sole occupant of the lounge, a glamorous blonde in a white silk outfit which displayed her excellent figure to advantage. This was topped by a tiny white hat, perched precariously on her luxuriant curls.

"Doctor McCoy?" she asked.

"How did you...?" he began.

"You are our last passenger, Sir," she told him, "I am Abigail, your Ground Steward." She looked at his small shoulder bag and asked, "Where is your baggage?"

"I didn't have time to collect any," he muttered, sure he seemed a very dubious character. "The... er... guy who booked my ticket said..."

"Oh, you can buy everything you need on board," she assured him with a glowing smile. "Proxima pride ourselves on our Purchasing Malls. If you will follow me, please, Sir, our transporter facility is just over here."

"Transporter?" asked McCoy, shocked.

"Proxima provides every modern convenience, Sir," she gushed; then,

seeing his expression and eyeing his uniform, she said, "I assure you, our transporters are regularly maintained and inspected by Starfleet personnel."

"It's just that I hate transporters," he explained. "One of the few good things about travelling on commercial ships is that they don't use 'em."

"Oh dear." She looked hassled. "We do make arrangements for any passengers who really object to being transported, but we are already late..."

He took pity on her. It wasn't her fault, after all.

"It's O.K.," he said, "I don't hate them that much. Lead on."

It was only when he saw the circle of pads and the white-clad man in charge that it occurred to him that Abigail hadn't actually said these were Starfleet *run* transporters. He wondered how regularly they were inspected, but, carried by his original impetus, was already on a platform before he could ask or make any protest.

A moment later he materialised, in one piece, on one side of a lounge as large as the one he had left. He stepped smartly off the platform and then noticed that, at this end, there was a row of about six sets of pads. He guessed civilians weren't easy to hurry, so they sent each succeeding group to a different landing point up here.

"Doctor McCoy! Welcome to *Proxima Queen!*"

The cheerful voice belonged to a girl who was almost identical to Abigail, save for her raven hair and dark eyes. It crossed the doctor's mind that their work would be ideal for Harry Mudd's androids.

"I'm Suzette," announced the young lady. "I'll show you to your stateroom, Doctor. If you..."

"My what?" asked McCoy.

"Your..." she eyed his uniform, smiled even more kindly and said, "Your cabin, perhaps you call it in Starfleet? We refer to passengers' cabins as staterooms, as they are rather large to be described as cabins. Yours is E15."

"My quarters!" exclaimed the doctor, catching on.

"The crew have quarters, Sir. The passengers have staterooms. Your baggage will be delivered there directly."

"I don't have any," he said. "I'll need to buy a few things. I didn't have time to pick up a bag."

"Would you like to go straight to the Purchasing Mall?" Suzette asked. "It will be very quiet now, because most passengers are in the Observation Lounges watching us leave Earth and pass Luna."

"We're moving?" McCoy was amazed. There were none of the almost-subliminal sounds he associated with a starship in flight.

"Oh yes," his guide assured him. "Would you like to make your purchases now?"

"I guess so," he nodded. "Oh, and I'll need to see your Captain sometime soon. I'm not aiming to go to Ellian if I can help it. I want to try to fix transfer to an Ellian freighter."

"Sir?" Suzette's smile was wiped out by an expression of total shock. "A freighter?"

"I'm trying to rendezvous with U.S.S. *Excelsior*," he told her. "You just happen to be the only ship going my way."

"You are on a mission?" she exclaimed. "How exciting!"

McCoy was naturally honest, but explaining the full story to her was a daunting prospect. Moreover, she would get him to see the Captain faster if she thought he was on duty. He said, "This is confidential," because he didn't want rumours all over the ship.

Suzette, with visions of undercover operations of the kind featured in the more lurid entertainment programmes, was thrilled. She said, "Suppose I take you to the Mall, and while you're marketing, I can be arranging for you to see the Captain."

"Lead on!" he grinned.

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One look at the collection of marketing outlets showed the doctor that there was nothing sold here that lacked a designer label. He had a rooted objection to paying for a logo decorating some otherwise standard item. The thought of having to purchase designer jockey shorts and socks made him feel quite ill, but he guessed he was stuck with the situation. Suzette was talking earnestly into an intercom in a corner behind a collection of potted plants, so he went to find the cheapest underclothes available.

McCoy was not to know, but Suzette was obliged to pass his request through the First Class Senior Steward to the Chief Stateroom Steward, who passed it to the Chief Steward. One of the functions of this officer was to prevent passengers from demanding access to the Captain. However, Surgeon Captain McCoy, in

uniform, was not your ordinary passenger, so the Chief Steward called the Third Officer, her liaison to the bridge. This worthy, who had failed Starfleet Academy entrance, but still took interest in the service, did not for one moment believe that anyone on an urgent mission would travel on a Cruise Liner which took three days just to get out of the solar system. He hunted out as much information as possible before reporting to the Master of *Proxima Queen*.

"Sir," he said, "it appears that the booking was made by some section of Starfleet HQ, but it was paid for from McCoy's credit account. McCoy himself was Captain Kirk's Chief Medical Officer and that whole crew is famous for disobeying orders and..."

"Saving Earth and the Federation a good few times," observed the Master.

"Well, er, yes, Sir, but this whole thing seems very fishy to me."

"Mister, *Proxima* passengers are supposed to be given every possible consideration. On that ground alone, I must see the Surgeon Captain." He glanced at the data his subordinate had gathered. "I see he was promoted to that rank about the time he left the *Enterprise*. I doubt Starfleet promotes people who routinely disobey orders for no good reason. Captain Kirk is dead, so whatever McCoy is doing, it has nothing to do with him. Tell the Chief Steward to conduct the Surgeon Captain to my office as soon as is convenient for him. I don't want him waiting around and I don't want him hustled."

McCoy, at that moment, while not hustled in the least, was considerably hassled. He was not poor, but the amount he was being charged for a few essential items of clothing was, in his opinion, totally ridiculous. This was on top of

what this trip was costing. He had a good mind to make Spock pay up, since if only the stubborn Vulcan had come to collect him, none of this would have been necessary. He had caught on to the fact that Spock was diverting to rescue Jim, when he was supposed to rush straight back to report on his recent negotiations with the Klingons, but surely he could report by sub-space?

The doctor was certain that Spock's fertile mind could have dreamed up a scheme to get to Earth and away without being forced to report to anyone. Spock was just being deliberately provoking by refusing to even consider the possibility. Or was that damned Vulcan practising amateur psychology and trying to make sure that he, McCoy, had too much on his mind to worry about Jim? Well, it wouldn't work and why *shouldn't* he worry if he wanted to? He had a rooted objection to being babied!

"These will be delivered to your stateroom immediately, Sir," said the sales assistant.

"I don't remember the number. I haven't been there yet." McCoy objected.

"Oh, we can check it out, Sir, no problem. Have a nice day."

This obviously meant that nobody carried packages out of the damned store and annoyed the doctor, who was certain that part of the inflated price was paying for a delivery he didn't want. Given the age of the few passengers he had seen, he could see the sense of a delivery service for large or heavy purchases, but to extend this to a small collection of vests, underpants and socks was crazy.

He was not in the best of moods when he emerged to look for Suzette. He found her in the company of a slightly older, but equally glamorous woman, whose white

silk outfit was decorated, on the shoulders, with a great deal of silver braid.

He opened his mouth to ask if this was the captain, but Suzette forestalled him, saying, "Sir, this is our Chief Steward."

"Marie," elaborated the woman herself. "I'll be pleased to show you the way to Captain Leroy's office when it is convenient for you, Sir."

This mollified the doctor, who grinned and said, "I guess now is as good a time as any, if that's O.K. with the Captain."

"Of course, Sir, right this way. You can go, Suzette."

Suzette opened her mouth on a 'but', which she had no chance to utter as her Chief, smiling at their passenger, led him away.

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The turbolift opened to reveal a small foyer, empty but for a potted plant. Three doors, unmarked, led off in the directions not occupied by the lift itself. McCoy guessed that any passenger who arrived here by mistake would get no further. This notion was augmented when his guide led him to the left hand door and touched an almost invisible button on its centre, which looked more like a spyhole than anything else.

"Yes?" asked a disembodied voice.

"Sir, Doctor McCoy to see you," announced Marie.

The door opened and the cheerful voice, a resonant baritone, called, from inside, "Come in, Surgeon Captain."

McCoy entered, saying, "Don't call me that! It's a crazy rank, as I told the

Surgeon General, but he just said he's a Fleet Admiral with no Fleet, so..." He grinned at the tall man of about fifty, who was approaching from around a vast desk, and shook the proffered hand. "Hi, there, Captain. Thanks for seeing me so quickly."

"Officially, I'm the Master of *Proxima Queen*, but I'm addressed as 'Captain', so I guess I see what you mean about rank. Name's Leroy, Grant Leroy."

"Leonard McCoy."

"A drink, Doctor? Do sit down." He gestured to a comfortable-looking chair in the ubiquitous white.

This was the most human person he'd met since entering the *Proxima* Departure Lounge. McCoy gratefully relaxed in the chair and asked, "Do you have Saurian brandy?"

"I do." The Master poured two glasses, handed one to the doctor, and sat down opposite him in a similar chair before saying, "How may I help you? You want to transfer to a freighter?"

"From what I've heard of freighters, I'm not sure 'want' is quite true," grinned McCoy, sipping excellent brandy, "but I have to, if I'm going to make my rendezvous. I've got the coordinates at which we should meet the freighter..." he consulted his notes, "the *Lisa-May James*."

It did not seem to Leroy that it was his place to ask why. The coordinates were clearly on his course and would require no diversion. However, some delay would ensue. He said, "Look, Doctor, I have a load of passengers who don't like changes in schedule. If this freighter isn't where she's supposed to be..."

"You can't hang around waiting," McCoy nodded. "I understand that and I

wouldn't have a clue whether she was late or had already gone, so I wouldn't ask you to wait. If she isn't there, I go on to Ellian and try to charter something to get me to Sulu's ship." He remembered another point. "In fact, I don't know if the freighter will take me. We couldn't find any way to ask. I'll have to ask you to call 'em up when we get in range and if the Captain... Master... says 'no', that'll be that!"

Leroy was very curious, but this Surgeon Captain did not strike him as a deserter, a mutineer, or as anything but a nice guy. He said, "We'll get to calling range of these coordinates in the early hours of the morning of our fourth day. I'm afraid you'll have to get up at 3.00 a.m. to make that call."

"Damn Spock!" McCoy muttered under his breath. Aloud he said, "That's life, I guess. I suppose there's some kind of wake-up alarm in this stateroom I haven't seen yet?"

"You haven't been taken to your room?" asked Leroy, shocked.

"I had some purchases to make. It's O.K. None of your folks were remiss in their duty," McCoy assured him.

"Do you remember which Steward met you on board, Doctor?" asked the Master. "I doubt very much that the Chief is still standing outside. I'll call..."

"Suzette," grinned McCoy, "and I just realised what the poor kid was trying to say to her boss when Marie whisked me away!"

Leroy had heard the doctor's earlier muttered imprecation and was now curious as to what Ambassador Spock had to do with his passenger's trip. He did not think it was a medical matter, although McCoy was carrying what

looked like a medical bag, as a doctor rushing to a patient would surely not mutter 'damn' in quite that way. He was sure that his job as the most senior representative of Proxima Cruise Liners was to do everything in his power to help his passenger and, vicariously, the Ambassador. He just hoped that, one day, he would find out what it was all about. He called and arranged for Suzette to come and collect McCoy. Privately, he was amused by the fact that his Third Officer would think he knew more than he did and would have to nurse his curiosity and suspicions. Third Officer King made no secret of his contempt for Cruise Liners. Leroy had never wanted to serve in Starfleet and rather enjoyed being able to help this 'fleet officer while King had to button his lip on the matter and pretend not to be interested!

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McCoy's stateroom contained, in his opinion, every conceivable luxury. This included his recent purchases, delivered as promised.

After putting them and his medical equipment bag in one of the many drawers, he browsed through the 'Proxima Information Service' and discovered that, as well as 'Standard Class', less well-appointed accommodation, *Proxima Queen* also carried 'Executive First' and 'Proxima Priori' staterooms, with even better facilities than his own. He failed to imagine quite what these might be. He was travelling First Class purely because this had been the only room available when Chuck made the booking. He guessed he should be grateful he had not been forced to pay for 'Proxima Priori'!

There was, moreover, another disadvantage to this mode of travel. He was hungry, having had no time to eat

since his snack with Sulu's daughter. His booking entitled him, he discovered, to three meals per day, served at set times in the First Class Dining Room. He could eat in assorted cafes around the ship, or in his stateroom, at any time at all, but the prices on the sample menus horrified him, not to mention the room service tariff!

Muttering further imprecations on the subject of a certain Vulcan, he indulged in a good long soak in the giant jacuzzi before going to bed.

He found it very hard to sleep. On top of being hungry, he found his mind going round and round the subject of what might be happening to Jim. Could he get hurt inside that field or was he in some kind of suspended animation? How did Spock intend to rescue him? Could that, in itself, be dangerous?

McCoy's tired mind provided no answers and, eventually, he fell asleep. When he woke up, he was certain that he had only just dropped off.

There were hardly any passengers to be seen in the Dining Room. He was directed to a table at which a white-clad stewardess, minus hat, was sitting.

"Good morning, Sir," she smiled. "I'm Sonia. This will be your table throughout the cruise."

"Hi," he responded, not at his best in the morning. He helped himself to juice and toast and asked, "Where is everyone?"

"Oh, very few of our passengers get up for breakfast, Sir," she said. "You'll meet the others at luncheon."

McCoy arrived for that meal having spent an extremely boring morning wandering around the ship. Apart from corridor after corridor of accommodation, it seemed to consist largely of observation lounges with views of space, assorted malls mainly full of cafes and bars, and a small 'health club' containing a diminutive pool. He might have indulged in a swim, but for two factors. One was the likely cost of a pair of swimming trunks, the other was the fact that the pool and its environs were heavily populated by other passengers, all, seemingly, in advanced old age. McCoy had not felt so young in years.

Each of the tables in the Dining Room was again presided over by a Steward. The doctor guessed the Ship's Officers ate with the 'Proxima Priori' class. Those assembled at his table were of similar vintage to the folk by the pool. Three of the group were elderly ladies who seemed intent upon finding husbands. To McCoy, all three appeared determined to audition him for the role. Worse still, his uniform caused immense interest. Everyone wanted to know why he was travelling on a Cruise Liner.

"I've got to get to a rendezvous and this ship happened to be going my way," he said, as repressively as he could. "I guess you are all on vacation? Why did you pick to cruise?"

This was an inspired question as it revealed a need among the others to establish a pecking order based upon the number of cruises previously enjoyed. The winner was a shrill-voiced harridan on her fifth. She assured them that her previous trips had been far longer but, because she had never visited Ellian, she was obliged to make do with this little tour, hardly more than a long weekend.

The doctor did not regard ten days as any sort of weekend but kept his peace as

the others vied to tell of their cruising experiences. He became quite sorry for the lady on her first trip, despite her previous interest in him.

His sympathy evaporated when, as the conversation flagged slightly, the lady concerned said, "In Starfleet, *you* must have been simply everywhere! *Do* tell us some of your experiences!"

"Well, er..." His mind went blank.

The others all joined in, insisting that he must have a whole catalogue of fascinating stories about far off planets.

He managed a couple of descriptions of the most boring places he could think of and was greatly relieved when he had drunk his coffee and was able to escape to E15.

He did not dare walk around the ship again in case one of the crones pounced on him. His peace of mind was not helped by the fact that, while not exactly hungry, he certainly did not feel satisfied. The food had been perfectly palatable, if a bit bland, but the portions were minuscule. He guessed they were designed for the appetites of centenarians and hoped the young stewards got to eat extra some place else, for the good of their health.

He sat in E15, trying not to think about Jim and trying not to clock-watch every minute until the next meal.

Dinner was an unmitigated disaster.

All the other passengers had changed into the sort of clothes that demanded him to be in dress uniform to conform. He said nothing, but felt their looks. To cap this, when the harridan asked him something about Starfleet, he replied, crossly, "I wouldn't know, Ma'am. I'm a doctor, not a..."

He got no further.

"A doctor?" cried every passenger at the table, and, all at once, they began to list symptoms, ailments, problems and cures, and to demand consultations.

How he managed to finish his sparse meal and get out of there in one piece, he was never, afterwards, sure. He could have cursed aloud, because his own sense should have told him he was surrounded by hypochondriacs and folk with genuine health problems. What he knew for sure was that he was stuck, for the rest of the trip, with paying over the odds for room service and hiding in E15. He could cheerfully have throttled Spock!

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4.

While McCoy was heaping imprecations upon his head, Spock was trying, unsuccessfully, to meditate. All he was actually doing, as he was only too well aware, was worrying.

He had been shocked into declaring his certainty that Jim lived. Having said as much, he had felt obliged to give some sort of explanation. In fact, given the distraught doctor's evident distress, he had wanted to do all in his power to reassure him. He had not exactly lied. It was true that he had melded with Jim, but did he have a mental link? The doctor had, of course, presumed this to be some sort of Vulcan phenomenon. By likening it to the aftereffect of McCoy hosting his *katra*, he had encouraged that belief. However, he must be honest with himself.

When he had experienced similar 'feelings' before, he had said nothing. On the first occasion, when his Captain was abducted to Triskelion, he had ordered a

360° sensor sweep and then another at longer range. Only when presented with physical data had he acted, ordering the ship to follow the transporter trace and, even with that data, his order had been questioned, not least by McCoy himself. He had not then considered reporting his 'feeling'. In fact, even now, the very idea made him shiver slightly as he imagined the doctor's reaction. In those days he had tried so hard to be a credit to Vulcan, to ignore his Human ancestry. The word 'feeling' was not one he would have used with respect to himself, yet a feeling was what it had been. It was not, in all honesty, a link. At that time he had never touched minds with his Captain, certainly they had not melded. There had been no explanation for his 'feeling'.

If that transporter trace had led in a totally different direction, would he have followed it? The question was academic. It had, in fact, pointed where his 'feeling' had told him Jim was and they had found him, together with Uhura and Chekov. Was that mere chance? Had he imagined his awareness of Jim?

After that he had been obliged to initiate a deep mind fusion in order to retrieve his Captain's memory on Miramanee's planet. Later, to deal with the illusions projected by the Melkots, he had melded, not just with Jim, but also with McCoy and Scott. When Jim was lost in Tholian space he might have thought his 'feeling' to have arisen from the fusion, augmented by that meld, but he could not presume any such thing, for it had been exactly like the first time, the time before any meld, any fusion. He had not mentioned his certainty that his Captain was alive. Instead, he watched his last orders and took command of *Enterprise*. Only when others actually saw Jim did he make clear that he was doing all he could to rescue him.

No matter how many times he had

touched Jim's mind... to help him to forget the android, Rayna, to prove that Janice Lester had switched bodies... nothing altered the fact that he had first had this 'feeling' before any Vulcan mind contact occurred between them.

Jim had called him across parsecs and he had heard. V'ger had amplified the call, but there had to be something to amplify. His Human Captain, classified as having a very low psi factor, nevertheless was capable of sending a telepathic call. Did this explain his 'feeling'? There were documented cases of one identical Human twin knowing when the other died, knowing that the other was not dead, even of having contractions when the other went into the labour of childbirth. Was this empathy rather than telepathy? Could he have some kind of empathic Human link with his Human Captain?

Was there really any link of any kind?

That was the real problem. He had declared Jim alive. He still believed it, or thought he did. Certainly, he was determined to act on it, just as he had before. Yet how could he allow McCoy to risk his life on the strength of something that might just be wishful thinking?

It was true that the testimony of the refugees implied that life continued within the energy ribbon, but they had been snatched out before their ship exploded. He had no reason to believe they would have survived had they not been transported to *Enterprise-B*. It was true that he hoped to avoid the explosion of the vessel known as the Ambassador's yacht, but he could not be certain the shields would hold. If this 'feeling' of his turned out to be a foolish Human notion, with no reality, he could easily be leading McCoy to his death. Jim had been alive on Triskelion. Jim had been alive in Tholian space. That did not prove that Jim was

alive now.

It would be so much easier if the doctor failed to make the rendezvous. In fact, to worry now was really extremely illogical, since it was most likely that McCoy would fail to arrive. The very fact that *Enterprise-B* had been the only ship available to try to help those refugees made it clear that no 'fleet vessel' would be leaving Earth orbit in this direction, since only *Enterprise-B* was there. It was true that many commercial ships plied the Earth-Ellian route but, even if the doctor managed to get to Ellian, his chances of getting any further in the direction of the energy ribbon were satisfyingly low.

This meant that worrying about McCoy was very foolish indeed. Instead, he should be considering how to convince a logical Vulcan crew to hold his 'Ambassador's yacht' in a tractor beam in the path of an apparently lethal energy field. If he simply stated that Captain Kirk was alive within the phenomenon, would they presume him to have received evidence of this among the signals from McCoy? He could only hope so.

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McCoy himself was positively eager to set his wake-up alarm for the early hours of the morning. The sooner he left this ship, the better. He had been effectively trapped in his stateroom with only the visit of a rather dim-witted lad each day to break the monotony. The youth was in charge of a cleaning robot and seemed to have a very limited command of Standard English. The fact that McCoy had been glad to see him said everything about the voyage.

There had been nothing to take his mind off the subject of Jim. The state-of-the-art entertainment facilities provided

only material geared to the taste, so it seemed to the doctor, of fans of assorted ball games or those suffering advanced senility. Travelling on an Ellian freighter might be uncomfortable, but at least no one aboard was likely to be older than he.

He had some trouble setting the alarm. This was due to the fact that the computer had been programmed not to accept from passengers instructions which were likely to be mistakes and to cause said passengers to complain bitterly, if obeyed. Fortunately for the harassed doctor the Master, setting his own alarm, remembered the programming and hurriedly ordered the computer to accept and obey all commands given by the occupant of stateroom E15.

Why the stupid machine had not responded first time, McCoy never knew, but its sudden compliance mollified him before he got to the stage of calling a steward for help.

It was as well that he packed his few belongings in the bag provided for the ship's laundry service before going to sleep, because he almost slept through the wake-up call. He was not used to an alarm which took the form of softly playing soporific music and a gentle voice apologetically telling him he had asked to be woken.

When he finally roused, more due to his own sub-conscious than to the efforts of the computer, he had time for only the most minimal ablutions before throwing on his clothes and leaving E15 at speed. Marie was patiently waiting outside to take him to the bridge.

This was reached from the same enigmatic lobby as the Master's office and was a surprise.

For a moment, McCoy thought he

must be in some kind of auxiliary control room, until Leroy smiled and said, "Welcome to the bridge, Doctor."

This liner was controlled from a room not much larger than the flight-deck of a shuttlecraft. Instrumentation seemed minimal, only two panels. Apart from the Master's chair, that was it!

"We should be in range of the *Lisa-May James*." Leroy said, "Signal the freighter, Mr. King."

A second later, in a rather surprised voice, the young officer said, "They are responding, Sir."

"Doctor?" The Master gestured to McCoy to join King.

Only then did the doctor realise that there was no viewscreen, just the sort of toughened window usual on a shuttlecraft. He moved to the indicated station and saw a small screen on which appeared a face, the owner of which had not shaved for at least twenty-four hours.

"This is *Lisa-May James*. What can we do for you, *Proxy Queen*?" asked a cheerful voice with a very strong Ellian accent.

"*Proxima*," muttered the officer beside McCoy.

"Er... I'm Leonard McCoy, Dr. Leonard McCoy, Starfleet Medical," he began, somewhat nervously, since he was about to ask a big favour and only now realised the likelihood of rejection. "I..."

"Hello there, Doc! It's a pleasure to meet you," declared the Ellian accent. "Cind... Oh, maybe you don't know who I am? I'm Bill Watson, Cindy's second brother. She's told us all about you - you being a big mate of her Captain. Any friend of his is a friend of ours! What can the *Lisa-May* do for you?"

McCoy was poleaxed. He was delighted at his reception, but could not call to mind anyone called Cindy. Finally, he managed to say, "I'm trying to rendezvous with *U.S.S. Excelsior* at..." he consulted his notes and read out the coordinates, "...I think..."

"We're going your way and you want to hitch a ride? Only too pleased, Doc. I'll beam you aboard as soon as you like!"

It transpired that *Proxima Queen* did not have transporters as such, only something called 'pattern enhancers'. Watson had assured the doctor that his freighter had excellent transporters, which hardly needed pattern enhancement at his end, but it was agreed that he be beamed from an enhancement pad, to be on the safe side. He wasn't sure if he wished he understood all this jargon or not. It was possible that complete understanding would add to his alarm, rather than reducing it. He was certain he would be very glad indeed when he was back 'in the arms', so to speak, of Starfleet!

The turbo-lift trip, in the company of Leroy, at least gave him a chance to try to work out the identity of his soon-to-be host. It finally occurred to him to try to remember girls with Ellian accents and light dawned. She was a tiny little Security Ensign on *Enterprise-A*, one of Spock's class. 'Her Captain', he now realised, meant Spock, not Jim Kirk. The Vulcan's contacts, at least, were coming in handy on this trip, even if Spock himself had been anything but helpful.

Beside him, Leroy had been delighting in the fact that the supercilious King certainly thought he knew more about the doctor's journey than he did. He hoped that one day he would find out more but, for the moment, watching King having to suffer ignorance was really quite satisfying. He saw the expressions

chasing over McCoy's face and grinned.

"Placed Cindy, have you?" he asked.

The doctor nodded ruefully. "Was it that obvious I didn't have a clue?"

"I shouldn't think he realised," Leroy told him kindly, as he led him into the large reception lounge and over to the 'transporter enhancement pads'. "If you would just stand on there, Doctor, we'll make sure you get safely to the freighter."

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The large, white-furnished lounge disappeared, to be replaced by an equally large, if not larger, space which was dimly lit and seemingly full of dangling carcasses. In front of the contents of this outsize butcher's shop stood a huge man. McCoy did a double take. The smiling face was the same as the one he had seen on the screen, but any resemblance to the little Security Ensign was minimal.

Bill Watson saw his surprise, grinned and said, "I take after Mum, Doc. Cind and my brother Bob are both like Dad. Welcome aboard the *Lisa-May*! Put it there." He held out an enormous and rather grubby hand.

McCoy shook it, or rather let his own hand be enveloped by it, thanking him as he did so for the lift.

"It's my pleasure, I told you that. We all know Cind never would have passed out of Academy if it wasn't for her Captain," Watson assured him. "Right this way, Doc. We have the transporters in the hold to save lugging cargo too far, but the chill seems to seep through the force field, whatever we do. Let's go somewhere warmer! Oh..." gesturing back at the cargo as he led the way to a small door, "do you eat meat? Cind says her Captain

doesn't, being Vulcan, but if you do, you'll get the best steak in the galaxy from our galley, bar none!"

"Steak?" asked McCoy, trying not to drool.

"You hungry?"

"Starving."

"Don't they feed you on that floating hotel?" asked Watson, amazed.

"The portions are designed for people who lost their appetite about twenty years ago," McCoy explained.

"Right this way!" grinned Watson. "I haven't had breakfast yet myself."

Ten minutes later, the doctor was sitting on a very functional and none-too-clean chair in a very plain mess room. The expression on his face was one of utter bliss.

"Our own beef," Watson explained. "Our spread is some of the best cattle country on Ellian. That's never been frozen, either. On our way back, when we're eating defrosted meat, it's never as good. Better than most, but not as good as fresh. Have come coffee, Doc."

After sipping this beverage, McCoy was even less able to speak than before. Eventually he managed to say, "The coffee... the *steak*...! Do you grow the coffee too?" He had never, in his life, tasted any to compare with either meat or drink.

"Wrong land for coffee. That's Broombridge's Ellian Blue Mountain, dark roast. Cindy's Captain likes that. We send him some whenever we can get it to him, but she says he's some kind of Ambassador now so... will you be seeing him?"

"Why hasn't that skinflint Vulcan ever given *me* any?" demanded McCoy, outraged.

Bill Watson laughed. "I'd say we never let him have enough to spread around," he said. "You take a sack for you and one to pass on to him if you see him, and some steak." He frowned, "*Excelsior*? Isn't that Captain Sulu's ship? Cind knows him too, doesn't she? Take some coffee for him and steak, if he eats it."

"He eats it, and I'm trying to reach Spock. That's the whole object of this trip. I'll be glad to drop some coffee in front of him and ask how come he's kept it to himself until now!" McCoy assured him.

"Cind described your friendship right down the line," observed Cindy's brother. "Oh, I was sorry to hear about Admiral Kirk. Tell the Captain, we all grieve with him."

McCoy nearly choked on his steak.

Seeing his face, Watson said, hurriedly, "Oh, of course, he was your mate too. I'll bet he went the way he'd have wanted to, though, just like Dad. Cind told us her Captain made her see that, about Dad. Made her a lot happier. Now, I'm going to have to go up to the bridge in a minute. Do you want to come or...?"

At this precise moment, the doctor yawned mightily.

"Looks like you need to sleep," observed his host. "You can doss down in my cabin."

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When McCoy woke up, he lay thinking for an appreciable time.

This freighter might be functional to

the point of bareness, show signs of age and of a crew who regarded cleaning as a chore to be put off until tomorrow, but it was a lot more comfortable, in every way that mattered, than the floating palace he had just left. Bill Watson's bunk was well sprung and cosy, and as for the food....!

Which led his thoughts to a certain Vulcan and his Cadets. It had been known, even in Surgeon General's, that no one in Spock's class ever failed. Now it was clear that this was due to the less-able getting as much extra tuition as they needed to get them to pass out. That they worshipped him had become clear when serving with some of them on *Enterprise-A*. Of course, you only had to see that Vulcan with a tribble to know he was a fraud. He was soft with small animals and children and he saw his Cadets as children, having been raised with Vulcan notions of life expectancy and development. Spock's Cadets, however, never got out of order or presumed on his indulgence. They respected him. They also loved him.

McCoy knew why he had never been given any coffee, though probably Jim had. Spock wouldn't admit to him that one of his ex-Cadets cared enough to get her folks to deliver sacks of coffee half across the Federation just because he'd admitted a liking for the stuff! Well, the secret was out now. It was just his luck that this had happened when Spock had left the fleet and he would hardly ever see him and be able to benefit.

This thought reminded him of all the changes in their lives and of Bill Watson's comment about Jim. That had told him a lot about Spock, about his ability to comfort a heartbroken kid, about why that kid loved him. However, it was true that Jim would want to die in harness. *Proxima Queen* was an object lesson on the evils of living too long. What did life hold for Jim now? Oh, if he was alive and

trapped, they had to get him back, but were they bringing him back to a life not dissimilar to that of the bored pensioners on that Cruise Liner? McCoy shuddered. He hoped he would never be too old to be useful, to do valuable work, to help people. At least, in his job, physical strength wasn't vital. As long as his brain was O.K., he could practice some sort of medicine. But Jim...? Jim was only really happy on the bridge of a ship, and a Starship at that. He would be bored rigid if obliged to Captain something like *Proxima Queen*, since the only explanation for the limitations of her bridge was that everything that could be run by the computer was run by it. It was quite likely that Leroy was only aboard because the passengers felt safer with a real Captain, not because he actually needed to do anything. That life was not for James T. Kirk.

McCoy shivered, then told himself there was no point in getting depressed. He would just have to hope that Jim could find some sort of satisfying occupation. However, as he got up and went to have a shower in the small, ill-equipped cubicle, he could not totally cast off the feeling that Jim might be happier dead than retired. It was not a pleasant thought.

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The doctor's depression was lifted to some extent by indulging in another of those steaks and some more of that wonderful coffee. The arrival, while he was eating, of a cheerful young man who introduced himself as the Second Engineer, brightened him a lot. There might be someone, somewhere on Ellian, who was not always cheerful, but he had yet to meet anyone from that planet who was gloomy. His table companion, Mick Van Damm by name, told him about the joys of shore leave on various planets, regaling him with some stories which he

took with a pinch of salt, but thoroughly enjoyed. He responded with his experiences on the Caretaker's planet, beginning with the appearance of a large White Rabbit. Whether Mick believed a word, he wasn't sure, but the story went down well.

They were interrupted by a call from the bridge.

It hadn't impinged upon McCoy just how little time he would have on *Lisa-May James*. Bill was calling to tell him they should rendezvous with Sulu's ship in ten minutes. He hurriedly went back to the Master's cabin to pick up his equipment and bag of underwear, was met there by Bill himself, and led to a very small turbo-lift which took them to the bridge.

The contrast between this and the bridge of *Proxima Queen* was vast. This bridge might be small in comparison with the one on the *Enterprise* and was, not surprisingly, rather dirty and cluttered with items such as mugs and reading matter. However, it had all the stations any bridge should have, all manned and working. It had a viewscreen on which, as they arrived, appeared a small blip.

"Can't you magnify that?" asked Watson.

"It's at extreme range, Bill, but it's *Excelsior* for sure," a cheerful voice announced from what was, presumably, the sensor station.

"They're answering our hail," another officer reported.

"Put it on screen, Hans," Bill ordered.

"This is Captain Sulu of... *Doctor McCoy*?" This last was exclaimed by an anything but inscrutable, totally poleaxed Sulu. "What are you doing on that

freighter?"

"Hitching a ride." McCoy told him, "I'm trying to rendezvous with Spock's ship. You're going my way. Can I transport over? I'll bring the best steak in the known universe *and* the best coffee!"

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5.

"Permission to come aboard, Sir?" asked McCoy with a grin.

"And welcome," responded Sulu cheerfully, from beside his Transporter Chief. He eyed McCoy's luggage, which consisted of a medical department shoulder bag, three sacks, a large cool-bag and a bundle of plastic. A delicious aroma of coffee had arrived along with his unexpected guest. Nothing seemed to make sense, but he had to ask one question before all the others which clamoured in his brain. "Is Spock ill?"

"No, of course not," the doctor answered, rather sharply.

"I thought... you *were* travelling on an Ellian freighter. I thought you must be needed urgently," explained the confused Captain.

"Don't knock Ellian freighters!" McCoy told him. "Never again. They have a lot going for them." He looked down at the cool-bag and added, "I hope you have a galley on this ship, because..."

"Of course we do," Sulu responded. "We have hydroponics and everyone likes fresh food when we can get it. The replicators are all very well, but the real thing will always be better."

"Then get someone to take this to your cook." Bones gestured at the cool-bag. "It's

full of the best steak in the Universe. Until you've eaten this, you don't know what steak is!"

"How much have you got?" asked Sulu. "My crew is four hundred and..."

"Not enough for all of them," McCoy said, hastily. "I guess you have some and I do. The rest can cast lots."

"Mr. Shaw, get the bag taken down to the galley, please," Sulu ordered the Transporter Chief.

"And guard it with your life!" added McCoy.

"Do I get a piece of steak, Sir?" asked Shaw.

"I guess so." Sulu gave in to the inevitable. He bent to pick up one of the sacks and asked, "Is this *coffee*?"

"That's as good as the steak. One sack is for you. Don't send that to the galley. You'll want to keep it in your quarters for special occasions," McCoy told him. "I mean it. You'll regret it if you give any away."

Sulu gave him a questioning look and lifted two of the sacks, then asked, "Where's the rest of your luggage?"

"I haven't any. I didn't have time to pack. The steak and coffee are presents from the Captain... Master of the Ellian freighter. I had to buy a few necessities on *Proxima Queen* and I'm relying on your ship to let me have what else I need... a clean uniform, to start with."

"*Proxima Queen*?" Sulu stopped in the act of leading the doctor to the quarters they had allocated to him. "Isn't that a Cruise Liner? Very up-market!"

"Handsome is as handsome does,"

McCoy said with feeling. "Give me the *Lisa-May James* every time!"

"What were you doing on either one?" Sulu asked. "Oh, come to *my* quarters. You can tell me there."

He led the way out into the corridor and along to the turbo-lift as the doctor said, "I have to rendezvous with Spock. He's coming from some other direction and wasn't willing to put himself out in the least to pick me up. We're going to rescue Jim. He's trapped in some sort of energy field."

Sulu was glad they'd made it to the turbo-lift before the doctor made this announcement because he suspected he looked like a goldfish; certainly he was bereft of words. Finally, he managed to say, "My orders are to investigate the ribbon of energy that's moving at Warp speed in this direction and which was responsible for the *death* of Captain Kirk and a ship-load of refugees."

"You're actually going to the thing?" the doctor exclaimed. "That's the best news I've had in days."

"Look... come along here." Sulu gestured McCoy into his quarters. "Sit down, Doctor. Tell me... Captain Kirk's *alive*?" He began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" demanded McCoy.

"First Mr. Spock is reported dead and brought back alive and now the Captain! No one will believe, in future, that any of the bridge crew from old *Enterprise* is dead unless there has been a post-mortem witnessed by the Surgeon General, and in Spock's case, probably not even then! Now give me the details!"

"Make some of that coffee," the doctor advised. "I'll tell you while we drink it."

He knew Sulu would laugh when told of his experiences with the elderly hypochondriacs on *Proxima Queen*. He couldn't avoid telling him, but wanted, at least, to be enjoying the coffee while he squirmed.

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After a meal of excellent steak, the quality of which had ensured his welcome by everyone of *Excelsior's* crew who had been lucky enough to taste it, a night in the familiar surroundings of Starship quarters, and a breakfast including Ellian coffee, attired in a clean, fresh uniform, Dr. Leonard McCoy felt like a new man as he stood behind the Captain's chair on the bridge of *Excelsior*.

"We should be in sensor range of the energy field soon," Sulu told him.

"Captain, I'm detecting something now, at long range," reported the Science Officer, on cue. "It's giving phenomenal readings... I never saw anything like it."

"Do we have visual?" asked Sulu. "As soon as you can, put it on screen, full magnification."

A moment later, McCoy stared, dumbstruck, as the viewscreen picture changed from peaceful stars to an illustration from Hell. It looked like a ribbon of flame searing across their path. He knew it was actually at far sensor range and he knew it could not really be fire, since flames need air and space is empty. The illusion, however, persisted. The notion that Jim was trapped some place in that maelstrom was horrifying.

Sulu whistled.

"Captain," reported the Science Officer, "there is a ship approaching on an intercept course. The signature checks

out as the newly commissioned Diplomatic Courier Vessel, *T'Lal*, Vulcan Registry."

"That's Spock's ship," McCoy said.

"Hail her, Rand," Sulu ordered. "Ask to speak to Ambassador Spock."

Janice Rand, already enjoying the old-homes feeling of McCoy's presence, was delighted to oblige.

"I have an answer," she reported.

"On screen, quarter view," ordered Sulu.

The familiar face did not displace the flaming ribbon, but was inset in the lower left side of the screen beside it.

"Spock here," he said. "Captain Sulu?" His eyebrow rose. "You are here to investigate the phenomenon?"

"That's right," Sulu agreed. "I was able to give Dr. McCoy a lift. He tells me Captain Kirk is alive in there somewhere!"

"Indeed," said Spock, flatly.

"Do you need any help?" asked Sulu.

"Perhaps I may beam over to discuss the problem?" Spock asked.

"You'll be very welcome," Sulu assured him. "I'll alert the transporter room."

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McCoy diverted to his quarters to collect his medical equipment, two sacks of coffee and his few belongings, since he presumed he would be leaving when Spock did. Spock himself, welcomed aboard by *Excelsior's* Captain and led to a

Briefing Room, was now facing the problem he had hoped to avoid. One aspect of his dilemma had been solved. Sulu's announcement had given the impression to *T'Lal's* crew that Jim was known, by Starfleet, to be alive.

McCoy had aimed to greet Spock with a grand gesture, throwing a sack of coffee at his feet and demanding to know why he had never had any of Spock's. Instead, he stared at the Vulcan open-mouthed.

He had always thought of Sarek as a snappy dresser. It had not occurred to him that Spock's father merely wore the clothes thought suitable for an Ambassador. All he had seen of Spock himself on various viewscreens had been head and dark-clad neck. Now he found himself staring at an outfit in black velvet encrusted with gold and silver embroidery and embellished with what looked like diamonds.

Spock, diverted, raised an eyebrow and asked, "Why are you surprised to see me, Doctor? I assure you, the Transporter Operators of both *T'Lal* and *Excelsior* are efficient."

"You... your... all that decoration!" exclaimed McCoy.

"You could hardly have expected me to wear a uniform to which I am no longer entitled," Spock said. He sniffed. He looked around and located the source of the aroma. "Are you entering the coffee trade, Doctor?"

"Aha!" McCoy exclaimed. "I brought one of these for you. With best wishes from Bill Watson, Cindy's brother. He told me they've been sending you this stuff for years. How come you never shared it with your friends?"

"You always seemed to relish the strange fluid which purported to be

coffee and which was provided on the *Enterprise*, Doctor. I did not realise you would enjoy the real thing."

McCoy glared at him.

"Can I break in on this to ask how you aim to get Captain Kirk back?" put in Sulu.

"The information I received implies that a well-shielded vessel should be able to endure the stress at the edge of the energy field, if the field, so to speak, is allowed to catch up with the ship," Spock said. "I will not risk flying directly into it. My plan is to board a craft provided for my use and referred to as the Ambassador's yacht. I will launch and ask *T'Lal* to hold the 'yacht' in a tractor beam in the path of the field. Once in the field, judging from the evidence of the refugees rescued by *Enterprise-B*, I should have no difficulty locating Captain Kirk. The 'yacht' is equipped with a transporter, which may be necessary to ensure his retrieval. As soon as sensors show an extra person aboard, we can be towed out of the energy field. Obviously, I will fire impulse engines to assist in this process. The 'yacht' is equipped with excellent shields, better in fact than those of this ship."

Sulu frowned. He asked, "How strong a tractor can *T'Lal* set up? Wouldn't *Excelsior* be better for that?"

"Indubitably," Spock replied.

"Then, when you launch, I'll put everything we've got into holding your 'yacht' in place. What is it really? A shuttlecraft with a transporter?"

"In effect," Spock agreed. "A very well-shielded one with a small warp drive, only really useful for short range work. The thinking was that it might be useful to be able to keep *T'Lal* out of

sensor range of a planet on which I needed to land. I considered the idea fanciful and thought I would never have any real use for the craft. I reckoned without Captain Kirk, of course."

Sulu laughed.

McCoy had been mulling over Spock's plan, as described. He asked, "What was all this *I'll* do this, *I'll* do that? We are going to rescue Jim. Suppose he's hurt? You need a doctor along."

Spock said, "You will be able to treat any injuries he may have as soon as we are aboard this ship, Doctor. We have no reason to think him hurt, but I am glad you are here, in case he is. There is no need for you to risk..."

"I came all this way to help rescue Jim, who may be hurt and need me. I came on a floating palace loaded with centenarians, with hardly anything to eat. A trip that cost enough to practically *pay* for a shuttle," McCoy declared, "and then on an Ellian freighter; all because you were too lazy to divert to pick me up. Now I'm here, I'm damned well coming with you!"

Spock steepled his hands and regarded his fingertips with some intensity. He said, softly, "Doctor, I believe that Jim is alive. I cannot prove it. You could be risking your life to no purpose."

"Since when did I ask you to prove Vulcan mind links?" demanded the outraged doctor. "You know Jim's alive and that's good enough for me!"

"I cannot claim that my knowledge comes from a link, precisely," Spock admitted. "When he disappeared to Triskelion..."

"You knew where he was?" Bones

asked.

"Not precisely, Doctor. I was unaware of the existence of Triskelion. I merely knew the direction..."

"Well, there you are then!" Bones exclaimed. He then realised, "You never told me at the time!"

"I did not expect you to believe me. I had no proof."

"Well, I know you better now," McCoy said.

It had not occurred to Spock that he would have this much trouble explaining the situation to McCoy. He now realised that he should have expected exactly the reaction he was getting. Patiently, he said,

"Doctor, I am trying to point out to you that the incident occurred before any sort of Vulcan mind touch between myself and Jim. I believed I knew his direction. It transpired that I was correct, but I cannot claim the knowledge arose from a Vulcan mind link."

"You're telepathic," cut in Sulu. "We all know that."

"Across light years?" Spock asked. "Vulcans are touch telepaths."

"You're aiming to go into that... that ribbon of flame, aren't you?" McCoy stated rather than asked.

"If, by that flamboyant and inaccurate description, you mean the energy field, yes, Doctor."

"Then I'm coming with you," McCoy stated flatly. "No argument."

"You have a daughter, grandchildren. I have no dependents and..." Spock paused briefly, before adding, "I need to

get my Captain back."

The doctor was too busy reacting to the first part of Spock's statement to catch on to what struck Sulu, who asked, "Your Captain?"

"I have the agreement of the Council of Elders that I may select my own Captain for *T'Lal*," Spock said. "When I first went to Vulcan, I could not be sure that the Council would agree that my own transport would greatly facilitate my value as a peripatetic Ambassador. I therefore did not broach the matter with Captain Kirk. When *T'Lal* was ready, I was required to go at once to the Klingon home world to engage in urgent further negotiations, now finished, so I had no opportunity to contact him. However..."

"What kind of ambassador did you say...?" Sulu asked.

"One engaged mainly in First Contact missions," Spock amplified. "I will not be assigned to a particular planet, but will be available as needed. *T'Lal* has excellent sensors, so, when no diplomatic duties require my attention, we will carry out surveys of a scientific nature."

"Well, that's certainly what Jim Kirk needs," Sulu observed. "A ship!"

"That depends on the ship," put in McCoy, with vivid memories of the bridge of *Proxima Queen*.

"What's *T'Lal* like?" asked Sulu.

"Very like a Starfleet Scout, but with rather better shielding and somewhat improved sensors," Spock told him.

"Weaponry?" Sulu queried.

"I am in process of explaining to the Council of Elders that some weapons are necessary. I have quoted a number of

occasions on which we experienced their usefulness in dealing with natural phenomena of a hazardous nature," Spock said calmly. "The encounter between *Enterprise-B* and the energy field is a case in point. Moreover, self-defence is logical and not really contrary to the teachings of Surak. I am sure it is only a matter of time before the Council agrees to instal at least minimal phaser power and a photon torpedo launcher."

"That ship has no weapons at all?" Sulu asked, startled.

"Not at this time," Spock said.

"Oh joy!" exclaimed McCoy.

"Jim Kirk will *love* that!" was Sulu's reaction.

"I am sure he will assist me in putting our case to the Council," Spock said.

"Forcibly!" Sulu agreed. "In the meantime, I hope for your sake that you don't meet any Romulians!"

"Thinking about it," McCoy mused, "Jim'll complain, of course, but he'll probably see the lack of weapons as a challenge. He'll be quite disappointed when that ship finally gets some fire power and he no longer has to use crazy off-the-cuff tactics to get out of dangerous situations!"

That set Sulu laughing. He got up to make them some Ellian coffee, still chuckling.

Behind him, McCoy was aware that Spock had brought Jim exactly what he needed and wanted. He hadn't really thought that Jim would be so happy inside that energy ribbon that he didn't want to leave, although his experience on *Proxima Queen* had underlined the evils of life with no purpose, no real interest or

challenge. However, Spock could now say, 'Come and take the Con of your new Ship,' and Jim would leap at that, weapons or no weapons, since it was clear that the bridge of *T'Lal* was nothing like that of a Cruise Liner.

He then realised that the discussion had shifted away from its original subject. Unsure exactly how this had happened, but suspecting that Spock had led it that way deliberately, he said, "All this about the ship hasn't made me forget that we are discussing how to get Jim back, and I'm coming with you, Spock!"

"Doctor, it is illogical for you to risk your life, when it is not necessary for you to do so," Spock demurred.

"You can't *know* whether I'll be needed," McCoy pointed out. "I think I'll need to keep an eye on you two!"

"Really, Doctor?" Spock asked. "What do you think we can do in an energy field from which it would require either your medical expertise or your peculiar brand of illogic to rescue us?"

"I haven't a clue, but I'm sure Jim'll think of something, if you don't," Bones replied.

"Doctor, you are being illogical."

"Well, *that* can't surprise you! Now, all we're doing is delaying Jim's rescue, so shut up and let's get on with it."

Sulu, coming back to the table with cups of delicious coffee, grinned and said, "Spock, he isn't going to take 'no' for an answer. You should know him by now."

Spock sipped his coffee appreciatively before replying, "Captain Sulu, you must realise that some risk is involved in my plan and that only one of us is needed to carry it out. I am a rather superior shuttle

pilot. Also my study of the reports of the refugees implies that what one experiences within the field depends upon one's own mental wishes. Mind control is clearly desirable in order to locate Captain Kirk. On both counts, I am the logical choice to enter the field."

He glanced at the doctor and did not see agreement in his expression. Instead, it seemed to him that McCoy was looking more stubborn than usual, if that were possible. He said to Sulu, "Dr. McCoy is not needed and would be risking his life to no purpose. In fact, his experiences within the field would probably be quite different from mine and I might well be obliged to rescue him as well as Captain Kirk. Can you not persuade him to remain on *Excelsior*?"

Before Sulu could even open his mouth, McCoy said, "Spock, when we went to that planet where the... the... Melkots made us fight the Earps, you set up a mind link with Jim, Scotty and me, to make sure we didn't believe it was real. You can do the same to make sure I see what you see inside the ribbon, can't you?"

"It was a meld, not a link," Spock said.

"Don't split hairs! You can set one up, can't you, to keep me with you while we find Jim?"

"I could," Spock admitted.

"So do that small thing and we can be on our way."

Sulu leaned across towards the Vulcan and said, "You aren't going to win this argument, Spock. I've seen that look in Dr. McCoy's eyes before!"

"Why won't you call me Bones?" asked the doctor, diverted. "Your daughter calls me 'Uncle Bones'".

"You told her to," Sulu reminded him. "Anyway, I wasn't talking to you, I was describing you to the Ambassador here."

"If I cannot persuade the good doctor of the undesirability of risking his life for no good reason, I rather suspect that my usefulness as an ambassador will be somewhat limited," remarked Spock, ruefully.

"Oh, I shouldn't think many aliens are as pig-headed as he is," Sulu assured him.

McCoy had the good grace to laugh.

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Spock agreed to form a mind meld with McCoy once they had boarded his 'yacht'. Sulu went to his own bridge to organise the best possible tractor beam, while McCoy and the Vulcan set off to *Excelsior's* transporter room, to beam over to *T'Lal*. As that ship would then be going to Earth, while Sulu remained to chart and investigate the energy ribbon, the doctor would travel home on the Courier Vessel and was carrying his coffee and pack of personal items as well as his medical equipment.

"How did you get the Vulcan Council to agree to let you have Jim for your Captain?" McCoy asked as they travelled in the turbo-lift.

"As I shall need to visit *T'Lal's* bridge before boarding the 'yacht', you will see, Doctor. They are very grateful that he is available. I only hope he will not object to the fact that I presumed his agreement."

"Don't be crazy. He'll jump at the chance."

"He was rightly angry that I volunteered *Enterprise-A* for the mission to rendezvous with Chancellor Gorkon."

"That was different and you know it. He was all screwed up over David's death and not thinking straight. Now, you know very well, he isn't proud of the way he behaved over that. The one thing Jim needs, Spock, is a ship and you're giving it to him. So stop worrying that he won't like it after all."

They arrived at the transporter room at that moment and Spock asked Shaw to beam them and their packages across to *T'Lal*.

"Aye, Sir," responded the Transporter Chief, sniffing the coffee with relish and regretting that he was unlikely to have a chance to taste it. He would never forget the steak!

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The corridors of the *T'Lal* gleamed with new paint work. The colour scheme was odd, to McCoy's eyes, brighter than any 'fleet ship and with strange juxtapositions, such as apricot and mauve. It was not often that he remembered that Spock's eyes were built for a different star system than his own, but this ship brought the fact very much to mind.

They diverted to drop off the coffee and McCoy's personal items. The brief glimpse the doctor had of his assigned quarters showed him Vulcan simplicity of style, but a colour scheme he could certainly live with. Spock was thoughtful in matters like that. It underlined why, despite their differences, he was so fond of the guy. Spock opened his own door for only such time as he needed to throw in his sack of coffee. The next door along was labelled, 'Captain James T. Kirk' with something in Vulcan script, presumably the same again, underneath.

"You knew Jim would never settle for life on Earth," McCoy remarked.

"Evidently. Come, now, to the bridge."

As soon as they arrived, the doctor realised exactly why Vulcan thought an experienced Captain a desirable asset for this ship. He could not know the age of any one of the assembled crew, but they were all quite obviously very young indeed. Given Vulcan life-expectancy and development patterns, this meant that they were really children. He stood back and simply observed Spock's dealings with this floating High School.

"With Dr. McCoy, I am about to board my yacht," Spock said, in Standard English. "*Excelsior* will hold the craft in a tractor beam. You will back off and stay well away from the energy field, at least five thousand kilometres at all times. Is that clear?"

There was a chorus of agreement.

"In the unlikely event that I do not return, you will continue on course to Earth and report to Ambassador Sarek. There is a message chip addressed to him in my quarters, which you will give to him."

"Sir, what about your *katra*?" asked the youth at the Con.

"That is not your concern," Spock said, flatly. "The safety of this ship and her crew is your only responsibility, Sivan. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir," said the young Vulcan, with evident reluctance.

Spock simply raised one eyebrow.

"Of course, Sir," agreed Sivan, hurriedly, "I ask pardon for revealing an emotion."

"Granted," Spock assured him. "Carry on. Come, Doctor."

Once off the bridge, McCoy asked, "How come they are all so young?"

"Doctor, you know that the whole point of assigning me to this work was to take advantage of my ability to survive unmarried. There would be little point in giving me a crew who themselves did not have this advantage. All aboard are well below the age of first *pon farr*. Jim, being Human, does not suffer from the problem, so is clearly a logical choice as Captain."

"What training do those kids have? What experience?"

"They have all trained either at Science Academy or Navigation School. The helmsman is the son of traders and was taking the helm of his parents' ship from a very early age. The rest have virtually no experience, but they are learning quickly. This is part of their training, of course."

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"Your mind to my mind, that we shall move as one. What I see, you shall see. Where I go, there shall you go also."

McCoy didn't feel any different, once it was over. The sight through the viewing window of that roiling ribbon of flame still scared him stiff. It was getting closer and closer.

"*Excelsior* to Spock," Sulu's voice announced, "we have augmented our tractor beam with power from the Warp Drive, since we only need just over Warp 2 to keep pace with the energy ribbon. As soon as it reaches you, I'll increase our speed to hold your craft in the same relative position."

"Our shields are at 100%," Spock replied. "Wait until the field itself reaches

us. The surrounding energy envelope is not, I think, where Captain Kirk is trapped. When the true field surrounds us, we may lose communication. You will see a decline in shielding efficiency. Do not pull this craft out until you can detect three aboard."

"If your shields are nearing zero, I'll have to act," Sulu objected. "You can always try again."

"Agreed, but I believe only one attempt should be necessary," Spock said, then, to McCoy, "We will go to the point at which Jim realises he is in an unreal situation, with no meaning or purpose."

The doctor simply hung on to the arms of his seat, as their glorified shuttlecraft rocked violently. He didn't have a clue how Spock aimed to find Jim in this. It didn't seem in the least like the descriptions given by those refugees.

On *Excelsior*, the whole bridge crew was trying not to stare with fascinated horror at the flaming ribbon bearing down on the tiny vessel in their tractor beam.

Janice Rand, in particular, was forcing herself to keep her attention on her instruments, as was the Science Officer, who reported, "Their shields are losing power. Down to 70%."

Sulu moved to help his helmsman if necessary, saying, "Chan, keep us in exactly this position relative to that ribbon." To Rand, he said, "Ask Spock to find Captain Kirk as fast as he can. The ribbon is depleting our tractor beam."

"I'm not sure if he's receiving us, Sir," she said, worried sick about that brave Vulcan, the doctor and her erstwhile Captain, whose life was the stake for which these risks were being taken.

A tendril of flame seemed to reach out suddenly and envelop the 'yacht'. Before the Science Officer could open his mouth to report the effect of this on the small vessel's shields, the craft disappeared in a flash of brilliant white light.

Sulu swore fluently.

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"I hope this 'yacht' of yours can stand this pounding," muttered McCoy.

He had hardly finished the sentence when, incredibly, he was standing in a woodland glade. The change from being seated would have been enough to shake him up; this allied with the total change in his surroundings made him feel distinctly sick and to sway where he stood. It had been nothing like the transporter effect, which somehow let you down gently. He had never thought of being transported in quite those terms before, but the contrast sprang forcibly to mind now.

"Ah," said Spock from beside him, apparently totally unfazed by the experience.

The doctor's whirling brain became aware of the sound of horses' hooves, and he turned. Below him, in a much bigger clearing, Jim Kirk, on a very large horse, was in the act of jumping a seemingly bottomless ravine.

In that instant, McCoy realised that he hadn't quite believed that his friend was really alive; hadn't dared to, perhaps? The sheer relief which flooded through him stressed the fact that, to believe it, he had needed to see Jim alive and well. He wanted to grab his one-time Captain in a bear-hug, to *feel* that he was real, fit,

healthy and solid, not a dream. Unfortunately, having cleared the ravine, Jim was riding away at some speed.

"Spock..." began the doctor.

"Hush," whispered the Vulcan, as Kirk stopped and turned his horse, looking back at the ravine. Almost at once, another rider appeared.

This one, quite a small man with virtually no hair, was wearing an outfit in Starfleet colours. The clinging garments were cut in a similar way to the uniforms of about twenty years ago, although in those days the colours were quite different. Something bright gleamed on the man's chest. It might be a Starfleet badge, but McCoy could not be sure. Certainly, no uniform of that exact design had ever been worn.

"I must have jumped that fifty times," Jim Kirk called to the other rider. "Scared the hell out of me each time. Except this time. Because it isn't real."

His companion said something, which the doctor did not catch. He strained to listen, wishing, for the first time in his life, that he had Vulcan ears.

Kirk looked over towards where McCoy and Spock stood, but over their heads. He did not notice them, perhaps because of the undergrowth around them.

"...is she?" the doctor heard. Then, "Nothing here is. Nothing here matters."

Well, McCoy thought, Spock had turned up trumps in terms of finding Jim when he realised this, but who was this other guy? Could they get Jim away in front of someone else? What was Jim doing in this damned wood anyway?

Kirk, who had walked his horse right around the other mount and then caused

it to sidle alongside, talking too softly for McCoy to hear, answered one of these questions and amazed the doctor by looking at the other man and saying, "Captain of the *Enterprise*, huh?"

"That's right." The other had a European accent of some kind.

"Close to retirement?" Kirk asked him.

"I'm not planning on it."

"Well, let me tell you something," Kirk said, earnestly. "Don't! Don't let them promote you. Don't let them transfer you. Don't let them do anything that takes you off the bridge of that Ship. Because while you're there, you can make a difference."

McCoy winced for what that said about Jim's life in the last two years.

"Come back with me," the European said. "Help me stop Soran. You can make a difference again."

Kirk rode around so that his horse was facing the other way.

"Who am I to argue with the Captain of the *Enterprise*?" he asked, with a smile in his voice. Then he added, "What's the name of that planet? Veridian 3?"

"Yes," replied the other rider, the Captain, it seemed, of some ship named *Enterprise*!

"I take it..." said James T. Kirk, in a tone McCoy knew well, "...that the odds are against us and the situation is grim?"

"You could say that," agreed the other.

"You know," said Kirk, "if Spock were here, he'd say that I was being an irrational, illogical Human being for taking on a mission like that." He laughed. "Sounds like fun!"

Both riders started to gallop away and then vanished.

"What...?" exclaimed McCoy. "Where... how...?"

"I am confused," Spock admitted. "That, manifestly was, or rather will be the Captain of a future *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Yet, within this field nothing is real or can make a difference. Clearly that Captain believes it is possible to leave the field in his own time. I need more data. He had given an explanation to Jim in a previous conversation. Let us find out what that was."

The shock of finding himself suddenly within centimetres of a log wall made McCoy reel. Before he could look round, he heard, from through the wall, the European's voice saying, "Captain Kirk, I need your help. I want you to leave this nexus with me. We have to go back to a planet, Veridian 3. We have to stop a man called Soran from destroying a star. Millions of lives are at stake."

The wall vanished and the disoriented doctor found himself back on the wooded hillside. He swayed, feeling sicker than ever.

"Spock," he yelled. "Will you tell me what's going on?"

"If I were sure of that, I would," replied the Vulcan calmly. "However, if by any chance that Captain intends to change his own past, that is interference with the time line and against logic, science and Starfleet orders. It is unclear to me if he entered this field to save the lives he mentioned or if deaths had already occurred. Doctor, I believe we need to see the situation which brought that Captain to request Jim's aid."

"Spock, I don't understand a damned thing, but that guy mentioned millions of lives at stake. You're saying he shouldn't try to save them? Well..."

Before he could give his opinion of such heartlessness, Spock said, "Doctor, I am saying that I need more information."

"If you aim to stop them from saving millions of lives, we shall fall out," McCoy told him. "But, O.K., get your more inform...."

With no warning, and with his last word still unfinished, the doctor found himself standing on a dusty, rocky hillside in brilliant sunshine. The air was still and very warm. He felt as sick as a dog once more, due to the total disorientation of the instantaneous change.

None of those refugees had mentioned feeling ill, McCoy realised, despite the fact that some of them had described what sounded like pretty surreal experiences. Why should he suffer? It suddenly occurred to him that his symptoms might be due to being dragged along with Spock by the mind meld. If he mentioned how he felt, no doubt that damned Vulcan would delight in pointing out that he had asked to come, so he was just going to have to grin and bear it.

From beside him, Spock touched his arm and pointed.

High above them was a construction of scaffolding. Below it a man stood. He had a shock of white hair, which stood on end. He was looking down towards a point to the right and below the doctor and Spock. He called, "Welcome Captain!".

McCoy followed the line of the man's

look and saw the Captain of the future *Enterprise* moving forward.

The white-haired man was descending towards him, saying, "You must think I'm quite the madman."

"The thought had crossed my mind," called the Captain.

"I know why you're here!" declared the other. "You're not entirely confident you could shoot down my probe, so you've come to dissuade me from my horrific plan." He laughed, then said, "Good luck! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm rather busy." He turned and walked away, up towards the scaffold.

The future Captain started to follow calling, "Soran!" There was a flash of light which knocked him backwards off his feet. He rolled some way back down the mountain and lay still.

Soran glanced back and called, "Do be careful, Captain. That's a 50 gigawatt force field. I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

He climbed up the scaffold, ignoring the other man who lay winded for a moment, then struggled to his feet and called, "You don't need to do this, Soran. I am sure we could find another way of getting you into this nexus."

Soran fiddled with something in his hand and a missile launcher suddenly appeared on the scaffolding above him, its support clearly the reason for the entire construction. On the launcher was a large, very deadly looking missile. Still busy with his control device he called, "I've spent eighty years looking for another way." Then he looked down to the Captain and added, "Believe me, this is the only one."

McCoy suddenly realised he had seen

Soran before. He had been one of the refugees rescued by *Enterprise-B*, and not just one of them, but the one who had objected most violently to being rescued, the only one whose sanity had seemed to the doctor to be debatable.

"We need to talk," Spock's voice whispered not so much in McCoy's ear as in his mind. "We will go somewhere quiet, where we will be undisturbed."

The doctor shut his eyes. No way was he going to endure the shock of a sudden change in location *again!*

McCoy was burning up. He gasped and his lungs filled with fire. He coughed. He choked. His eyes snapped open. Everything was red, a searing carrot red. His eyes burned and tears sprang into them, drying even as they formed...

He was standing on a cool hillside under a clear blue sky, overlooking a string of lakes far below. He felt as sick as a dog, despite the fresh air calming his tortured lungs, and it was some time before he realised that he knew this place, this view. He was above Blue Ridge in North Georgia, his favourite spot in the entire Federation, but one he hadn't seen in decades.

"My apologies, Doctor," Spock said from beside him. "I inadvertently took us to a quiet place on Vulcan, which, of course, was not comfortable for you. I then brought us to a place I found in your mind."

"What...?" gasped the outraged Human, still panting for breath. "You could...?"

He suddenly realised that he didn't care that Spock could find places from his memories, or that this place had been

special for reasons that were particularly personal. He said, "Oh, never mind. But that hell hole? That was on Vulcan?"

"In the desert below Gol," Spock told him. "The hottest place on Vulcan. I do apologise."

"Ouch," McCoy muttered. "Sometimes I realise just how different you are. But you keep *T'Lal* at..."

"Jim is to be her Captain," Spock pointed out. "She is maintained with environmental conditions comfortable for a Human." Almost in the same breath, he added, "You recognised Soran?"

"The rescued refugee I thought might have totally flipped out."

"If he intended to kill the population of a planet in order to facilitate his entry into this energy field, Doctor, I believe your diagnosis to be accurate."

"That missile?"

"The Captain of the future *Enterprise* told Jim that Soran meant to destroy a star, presumably Veridian; by an artificially induced nova, I presume. We do not have any missile capable of causing that, but in eighty years, or rather, I would estimate, seventy eight years, much can be achieved..."

"Achieved? You see that as an *advance*?" McCoy snapped, outraged.

"I do not approve, Doctor, I assure you. However, that was an alternate Universe."

"Spock?"

"I wanted more information because I was concerned by the apparent paradox of the situation. We are here to rescue Jim, yet the Captain of a future *Enterprise*

had found him. If we went back a little in time here, to get Jim before he met that Captain, the scene we saw could not occur. That Captain's plan seemed to involve altering his own past, an alteration of the time line against Starfleet standing orders."

McCoy opened his mouth to defend the man's determination to save all those people, but, before he could get the words out, Spock said, "Now it transpires that, in our Universe, Soran will never be in that position, the destruction of Veridian will never occur and that Captain will never seek Jim's aid."

"What? How do you know that?" McCoy spluttered. "Will you explain? I can't make sense of any of it."

"Do sit down, Doctor," said Spock, selecting a suitable looking tree stump and gesturing McCoy to another.

The doctor muttered under his breath, but sat.

"Soran wanted to enter what that Captain called the 'nexus'," Spock said. "A nexus is a bond or connection. Since, as a result of his efforts, that Captain ended up in this energy field, it is reasonable to presume that this is the nexus referred to. Within this field, we can view, and appear to be part of, any point in space-time and in different realities. That Captain clearly believed he could leave into a point in space-time of his choosing, before he entered. So this field is a connection between Universes and all points in their space-time continuum close enough to its passage through space-time." He paused, then asked, "Do you understand, Doctor?"

"I'm not sure," admitted McCoy. "But carry on."

"When we return to our own space

and time with Jim," Spock told him, "Soran will know that he can enter his 'nexus' by obtaining a Warp driven shuttlecraft, positioning the craft in the path of the nexus and raising shields. He will surely do exactly that, as soon as he can appropriate a suitable vessel. Thus, he will not, in seventy eight years, still be searching for a method of entry and willing to use one which causes the sacrifice of millions of people. In the Universe we saw, either I died during one of our various missions or I was never retrieved from the Genesis planet, since, in any Universe in which I live, I would come here to rescue Jim." He paused, then said, "I suppose there might be a Universe in which I act totally out of character and abandon Jim to his fate, but I find that difficult to believe."

McCoy shifted on his tree stump, which was not the most comfortable of seats, but gestured for Spock to continue. He was, to coin a phrase, fascinated.

"When we rescue Jim," Spock said, "We shall be ensuring that the actions of Soran in the Veridian system cannot happen in our Universe. Soran will get a ship and enter this 'nexus' within weeks, if not days. Veridian 3 will never be put at risk. That future Captain will have no reason to need help from Jim. In fact he will never enter the nexus at all."

"O.K., yes, I catch to that," McCoy nodded. "But look, that guy... the other Captain, how was he going to get out of here?"

"He seemed to believe that he only needed to specify the time and place to which he wished to depart," Spock said. "Presumably he had some evidence for that. If this field, this nexus, is an exploration vehicle for a life form we have never encountered, it would seem logical that they designed it to be entered and left at will. Certainly, we entered it at

a point specified by my need to find Jim in a certain frame of mind."

"You mean, we just think 'we want out' and we go?"

"Something like that, doctor. We would need to specify location and time of destination. If that Captain was correct, the time could be prior to our entry, but I would not be willing to test that and interfere with our time line."

"You mean, we might be able to stop Jim getting trapped in here in the first place, but it's a whole lot better just to get him out."

"Precisely, Doctor. Speaking of which, let us now go to meet Jim at the instant of his entry into this field."

"How do we do that?" asked McCoy, more confused than ever.

"Certainly, within this... nexus, one merely specifies what one wishes to observe and one is there," Spock told him in tones of one humouring the mentally inadequate. "Come."

McCoy never had a chance to shut his eyes. The peaceful hillside vanished, to be replaced by greyish mist and a sensation of floating. Then, with that sickening shock, he was standing by a pile of logs in front of a cabin.

He opened his mouth to admit that his stomach wouldn't stand much more of this, but never said the words, because he suddenly realised where he was, or seemed to be. Before he could say so, Jim Kirk popped into existence in front of him, bringing back his dizziness in full force.

"Welcome, Captain," said Spock.

McCoy was totally unable to say anything.

"What...?" James T. Kirk looked as confused as McCoy felt. He stared around him, stared at his friends and finally said, "I sold this place seven years ago. And.. you only came here together once and Spock never dressed like that. In fact, Spock, I've never seen you dressed like that in my life!"

"Jim, think carefully. What do you remember?" Spock asked.

Kirk frowned.

"I was... I was on *Enterprise-B!*" he exclaimed, torn between confusion and certainty. "I got talked into going to the launch and it was hell. The damned media... But then there was a distress call. Two refugee ships were trapped in a kind of ribbon of energy. That poor kid, her Captain, was out of his depth and everything we needed wasn't installed. I went down to..." He frowned. "I was... I was on that ship and... then I was here."

He glanced round, stared at the wood pile, saw an axe and hefted it. He looked at it closely, frowning, then swung it. Clearly he recognised it. He asked, "But how can I be here?"

"You are not," Spock told him. "At least, you are not at your cabin. You are inside the ribbon, an energy field. You became trapped inside it. When I found out, the good doctor and I came to retrieve you. Within the field it is possible to move to any point in time and there seemed no logic in forcing you to endure the situation for longer than absolutely necessary, so Dr. McCoy and I chose to meet you at the instant of your arrival."

"Wait a minute..." Kirk frowned. "You came from... where?"

"I was on Earth," McCoy said, finally getting in a word, but glad, in a way, that Spock's explanations had given him time to get used to Jim's presence, here, with them, and, indubitably, alive.

"I don't wonder you're confused," he added. "I am and I've had longer to get used to this place."

"I had just left Klingon space on my way back to Earth," Spock contributed. "In real time, ten days have elapsed since you were trapped, Jim, but, from your point of view, only a few seconds have passed."

"Well...thanks," Kirk said. Then, "Wait a minute... I'm not really here? If this isn't real, why does it look like my cabin?"

"You must have had this place in mind just before you were sucked into the energy field," Spock told him. "When in here, you see what you want to see."

"You mean this is where I wanted to be?" Kirk asked. He frowned. "Well... O.K., when I found out Sulu has a daughter in Starfleet... How he found the time...? I did think... if David had lived... but he didn't. Then I remembered Antonia and thought, if I'd married her, at least I'd have a family. Instead... outside the 'fleet..." His voice died away.

"As you are no longer in Starfleet, Jim," Spock said, "I hope you will agree to Captain the Diplomatic Courier Vessel, *T Lal*. She is like a Starfleet Scout, but with rather better sensors and..."

"No weapons," put in McCoy, grinning, because Spock had been gabbling and he'd caught him in one hell of an emotional display, desperately trying to get his point over to Jim, to snap Jim out of the depression which had clearly been gripping him lately.

"What?" gasped the object of Spock's concern.

"I assure you, Jim," Spock said, in his usual calm tones, but with a tiny hint of mischief, "It is only a matter of time before the Council of Elders is persuaded to agree to the installation of at least minimal weaponry. I am sure you will help me to put the case for their usefulness."

Kirk laughed. He shook his head, trying to clear it, then realised he was still holding the axe and dropped it back among the logs. He said, "Let me get this straight... this ship...?"

"My father stressed, if you remember, the fact that my unmarried status would make me useful for diplomatic missions of a slightly hazardous nature... not a simple posting to a planet," Spock said. "Our likely work will be First Contact Missions; perhaps a little trouble shooting. It was clearly desirable that I should be able to reach any such planets as rapidly as possible, so the provision of a ship for my use was logical. If no diplomatic work is available, then we can spend the time between missions doing surveys of a scientific nature, thus making best use of such talents as we have."

A broad smile spread over Kirk's face.

"Lead me to it!" he said. "Sounds like fun!"

"You *would* say that!" exclaimed McCoy, remembering Jim saying exactly the same in another Universe, only moments ago. "Did you take in the fact that the ship is totally unarmed?"

"I assure you..." began Spock.

"We'll sort that out, between us," Kirk nodded. "What are we waiting for?"

Spock removed a small instrument from a concealed pocket and did something to it. He frowned.

"Have we got a problem?" asked Jim Kirk cheerfully.

"Oh joy!" muttered McCoy.

"I suspect, Jim, that the only shuttlecraft carried by your new command no longer exists," Spock said. "This should have activated a transporter. However, we did not beam here. In effect, the doctor and I should still be on that small craft. I cannot will us to be aware of it at a time after it entered the actual energy field. This implies that in no Universe did it survive entry."

"Spock, are you saying we're trapped in here with Jim?" McCoy demanded to know.

"We have some data which implies we can leave at will," Spock reminded him. "It is merely that the craft known as my 'yacht' is not a possible destination. We have the choice of the bridge of *T'Lal* or that of *Excelsior*. Since Captain Sulu is Human and therefore probably suffering emotional disturbance if he has just seen that craft cease to exist, his ship would be the... Human place to go."

"Sulu?" Kirk asked, latching on to the bit of that he could understand. "He's here?"

"Indeed, Jim. He eagerly offered his help in your rescue. Let us go and show him that it has been accomplished."

"But..." began Bones McCoy.

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Sulu swore fluently.

"I have discovered the value of a colourful metaphor," remarked Spock, "but in this case..."

Sulu swung round, staring.

"Spock!" he exclaimed, "Doctor! *Captain Kirk!*"

"Hello, Sulu," said Jim Kirk, with a grin. "Permission to come aboard?"

"But..." Sulu choked as he turned back to gesture at the viewscreen, which showed the tractor beam auto-disengaging due to its loss of anything to lock on to, and the rapidly dissipating cloud of brilliance which had sprung up in the near edge of the ribbon of flame. He whipped around again to face the three who had miraculously appeared on his bridge.

"Now nobody will ever believe it if one of you is reported dead!" he declared.

Somewhere between laughter and tears, Janice Rand managed to report, "I have someone called Sivan calling from *T'Lal*."

"That is our First Officer," Spock said. "May I reassure him on the subject of my continued existence? Otherwise *T'Lal* will depart without me."

"Be my guest," Sulu grinned. "Rand, put him on screen. Chan, get us back away from that ribbon, move to keep station alongside *T'Lal*."

"Aye, Sir," chorused two voices and the face of the youthful Vulcan replaced the energy ribbon on the viewscreen.

It would be unkind to any Vulcan to

say that his eyes bugged, but Sivan's did just that as he beheld Spock.

"Sivan?" Spock raised one eloquent eyebrow.

"My... apologies," gasped his First Officer. "I showed an emotion. We did not detect the transporter beam."

"There was no beam," Spock told him. "It transpires that it is possible to exit the field by effort of will. Keep *T'Lal* in the same position relative to the field. I will return shortly and bring your new Captain, James T. Kirk." He gestured to the man at his side.

"Sir!" Sivan said. "It will be an honour to serve under you. *T'Lal* out."

"I have a question," declared Bones McCoy, who had been trying to ask it since before they arrived on this bridge. "How do we know we're really here?"

"*Doctor?*" Sulu had been in the act of sitting down in his chair and nearly fell over it instead.

"How can I know you're real?" McCoy demanded. "Or that any of this is real?"

"This is a solipsistic Universe," Spock said. "Many philosophers have discussed at length the problem of proving that anyone exists but oneself."

"That isn't what I meant," protested McCoy, "and you know it!"

"Spock, be fair," Kirk put in. "You told me we weren't really at my cabin and that made sense. There was no way I could have got there. So, if that wasn't real, how can we know we're really outside that energy field now?"

"Captain?" Sulu was very confused, "It's out there... look!" pointing at the

viewscreen, which showed the ribbon seemingly growing smaller as they moved away from it.

"It *would* look like that, if we were still in it," McCoy said, causing Sulu to choke.

"Sulu," said Spock, "I must explain that, within the field, which is a sort of connecting node between all points in space-time, a nexus, one might say; it is possible to select any known location and any known time and view it as if present. From within, we could have asked to seem to be on your bridge and, no doubt, the viewscreen would have showed what seemed to be the nexus ribbon, because that would be a necessary part of the illusion."

"Er...?" was Sulu's bemused reaction.

"Before we entered the nexus field, I set up a light Vulcan mind meld with Doctor McCoy to ensure that we remained together within it," Spock added. "I will break that now."

He closed his eyes briefly and then said, "So."

"I don't feel any different," complained McCoy.

"I am gratified to hear it; the meld was not intended to be intrusive," Spock told him. "However, it is broken. So, Doctor, if you now think of a place of which you are fond and a time there which you particularly enjoyed, and wish strongly to reexperience then, if we are still within the nexus, you will leave us."

A confused expression spread over McCoy's face.

"You're still here, Bones," observed Jim Kirk.

"Dammit, Jim, I don't know how to

tell the thing to send me somewhere. Spock did all that. He even looked in my head for a place to take us!"

"Not so, Doctor," Spock assured him. "I merely requested that we go to a place which you knew to be quiet and peaceful. I did not look to find such a place in your thoughts. Presumably that particular location had made a strong impression upon you, so was 'logged', so to speak, in your sub-conscious as particularly peaceful."

"Private, more like," McCoy muttered. He realised he was in danger of blushing and hurriedly added, "At least it was better than that Vulcan hell hole!"

"Bones?" Kirk asked.

"We were investigating the nexus," Spock told him, "to determine the best way of retrieving you. I wanted to talk to the good doctor and inadvertently took him to the place logged in my subconscious as most peaceful and undisturbed. It was the desert below Gol and I have apologised to the doctor for the experience."

James T. Kirk cracked up with laughter.

"It wasn't funny!" McCoy protested. "And I still don't see how we can be sure we're really here!"

"I will endeavour to return to Gol," Spock announced.

A second later, he said, "I am still here. I did exactly what I did within the nexus field to change my apparent location, with no result. I appreciate that it is hard to learn from the experience of another, Doctor, but I can detect no evidence that we are anywhere but where we seem to be. In logic, a difference which makes no difference is no difference."

Beside him, Jim Kirk thought hard about the bridge of the old *Enterprise*, NCC-1701. He recalled Spock at Science, Sulu at the Helm, Scotty over at the Engineering Console, Chekov at Navigation and Uhura behind him at Communications. Bones was down in Sickbay. It was easy to picture. He remembered it vividly. However, Bones remained at his side and the bridge was still that of *Excelsior*. He said, "I believe we're really here. I just tested it."

"Look, I'm supposed to be analyzing that ribbon, field, nexus...whatever it is," Sulu put in. "I hope you'll report your findings, Spock, because I'm not at all sure I understand. What I am sure of, is that this ship never got into it, not even the very edge, so I can't see how you can possibly be in there now."

"I guess that's good enough for me," McCoy decided, since he certainly felt alive and as if his surroundings were real. If he was transported to *T'Lal* with a normal transporter effect, he guessed he'd definitely believe *that!*

On cue, Spock said, "I will indeed submit a report to Starfleet Command, with a copy to you, Sulu. Now, I believe the doctor, Captain Kirk and I should beam over to *T'Lal* and set course to Earth."

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POSTSCRIPT

"Sir," reported the Communications Officer, "we are receiving an 'all ships' alert from Starfleet Command."

"I'll view it down here," said James T. Kirk. "Put it through to my quarters."

He moved over to his viewscreen and watched as Admiral Forsyth appeared.

"To all ships," she said, "a Starfleet shuttlecraft, equipped with Warp Drive, has been stolen from Space Dock Earth by a man called Soran, a refugee, to whom the Federation was giving hospitality. The shuttlecraft is to be apprehended and Soran returned for trial. Forsyth out."

"Marvellous!" remarked Kirk. "You welcome someone and they..." He paused. "I wonder if that was one of the crowd picked up by *Enterprise-B*? Well, I'll just call Sivan and tell him to watch out for the shuttle..."

"Jim," Spock said, "this is not a Starfleet vessel. We are unarmed, so cannot fire any kind of warning shot. Our tractor beam is not intended for stopping a craft passing us at high relative Warp speed. If the shuttle should happen to come this way, all we can do for Admiral Forsyth is report the fact."

"Damn," muttered the Captain, "I keep forgetting. These quarters are so like mine on *Enterprise*, and the bridge isn't that different..."

"It's full of Vulcans!" protested Bones McCoy.

"There is that," Kirk grinned. "O.K., I'll tell Sivan to report back to Starfleet if the shuttle passes us, then we can get on with drinking this coffee!" He frowned slightly and then said, "You know, it's a relief, really, that I'm not expected to save the Federation with this ship. It's great to *have* a ship, don't get me wrong, Spock, but it's quite pleasant having time to relax with my friends over a cup of coffee with an easy conscience."

McCoy relaxed a tension he hadn't known he'd been suffering. Jim was happy now. He needed a ship, no doubt about that. He'd never be happy anywhere else, but he was getting older and didn't need the adrenalin jolt of high drama at regular intervals. It was a relief to know that. He, himself, could stay on Earth and let his two friends galivant off on *T'Lal* without worrying too much about what they might get up to. He sipped his Ellian coffee appreciatively.

The end of a new beginning....



THE DELTAN WAY

by

Alan Butler

Kirk tilted his head and let the warm water flow across his face and down his chest. He ran his fingers through the hair there to disperse the soap suds that still remained. He could feel the tension in his back beginning to subside when the front door alarm rang.

"Damn!" muttered Kirk. "Always when you're in the shower."

Wrapping himself in the robe he had discarded earlier he went to the door and pressed the manual override, to be greeted by the sight of his First Officer.

"Spock, come in and pour yourself a drink. I think at least one bottle isn't alcoholic. I'll be with you in a moment."

"I believe I have stated before that a sonic shower is a much more logical approach to the process of cleanliness, taking only a few seconds to complete the process."

"That's true," Kirk replied, "but some of us still prefer to do things the old-fashioned way."

"Indeed," Spock replied, looking at the antiques spread throughout the apartment. "I would imagine, Admiral, that you are awaiting some explanation for my arrival."

"It's 'Jim' when we're not on duty. Hell, it's 'Jim' when we *are* on duty, if you like. I thought we'd resolved that out in space."

"We did... Jim, it's just that certain things remain unsaid between us."

"Such as?"

"My return to Vulcan to study the ways of the Masters of Gol. At the time, you did not approve."

"Spock, we all of us made decisions and reacted to others' choices back then in ways that we can see now were wrong. Look how Leonard and I fought over my promotion to admiral. 'Course, as it turned out he was right."

"Be that as it may, there was a time when you asked me to stay, for the sake of our... friendship, and I refused."

"We must all of us follow the dictates of our hearts. If you'd stayed and been bitter, then that would have forced our friendship apart far more completely than your absence."

"You didn't think that way at the time."

"Spock, I'd just returned from commanding a five-year, history-making mission. I was the man of the hour and thought nothing was beyond my command. A few years in the Admiralty have made me grow up quite a bit. I understood your reasons for leaving, and why it was so important to you, but I was still selfish enough to try and keep you in my life. If anyone should be offering an apology here, it's me."

"Then we remain T'hy'la?"

"I don't know. No-one's ever given me a proper definition of that word, despite the number of times I've heard it used to describe us. I couldn't even get Amanda

to spill the beans last time I was on Vulcan."

Spock squirmed slightly. Kirk doubted that there was another soul in the galaxy who would have noticed that but, years of separation or not, he could still read this Vulcan better than any other.

"Friend," Spock replied, his voice little more than a whisper. "It means friend."

"Right," Kirk answered, sipping from his glass and wondering why the Vulcan was still holding something back. "Then that's what we are."

Twelve hours later Kirk woke in bed and stretched out luxuriously for a moment, then glanced reluctantly at the antique clock on his bedside table. Making the necessary calculation to convert the reading to Stardate figures, he realised that he had a little over an hour to reach his meeting at Starfleet Headquarters. He slipped out of the sheets and headed for the bathroom and the sonic shower, muttering something about Vulcan logic under his breath.

Kirk reached Starfleet Headquarters with only minutes to spare. As he walked through the corridors he attempted to prepare himself for the next in a gruelling series of debriefing sessions that he had undergone since the V'ger incident.

"It's not like I was hoping for a hero's welcome," he explained to the latest in a long line of officials ten minutes later, "but a 'Thanks, Jim, you did okay' would have been nice. Instead I find myself being forced to analyse every moment, every instant, until I can't understand myself why I made a certain decision, let alone explain it to you."

"Well as far as we're concerned, Jim,

it's over and done with," Admiral Gaiman explained, a smile forming on his lips. "And you did do okay, Jim. It's just that we've received a request from the Deltan Embassy that you meet with one of their ambassadors."

"I've already given them a full statement about what happened to Lieutenant Ilia."

"I know, but it seems that this ambassador's request is of a more personal nature, and... well, to be frank, Starfleet owes her one."

"I don't suppose you'd care to elaborate on that for me?"

"You suppose right. Look, Jim, it will take two hours, tops. Do it as a favour to me."

"Ilia was part of my crew. I'll do it for her."

Moments later Kirk was led to the main conference room by a young ensign who showed him the door but didn't enter with him. The room was dimly lit, and for a moment Kirk thought he was alone until he saw her silhouetted at the far side of the room.

He could scarcely make out her features, but the sexual tension was instant and electric. He had always been more than just a little interested in the female sex, and a Deltan female was very much forbidden fruit.

Breathing deeply, he attempted to regain his composure as the woman came towards him. She was dressed in a long flowing gown that was deepest blue in colour and clung to every part of her body. He was struck by an image of the ocean as the dress plunged at the neckline and great billowing waves of colour surrounded her legs. He couldn't decide if

it was the dress itself that was so stunning, or the simple fact that it was so unlike anything Ilia had ever worn. While Ilia had attempted to sublimate her sexuality, this woman appeared to relish it.

"Admiral Kirk, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I realise that it is something of an imposition."

"No imposition at all, Ambassador...?" he began, delighted that he could form coherent words but realising that he had no idea what her name was.

"Xi'an," she replied, an amused smile appearing on her face. This became almost a grin as he attempted to pronounce the name using the correct Deltan accent.

"Actually," she said, motioning to two chairs, "that's one of the best attempts I've heard from a Terran. Perhaps you'd sooner call me 'Shan'. That's as close as English gets, and Will always seemed to prefer it."

"Will? Will Decker?"

"Yes. We spent a fair bit of time together while he was - what's that quaint expression he used? Oh yes - courting my cousin."

"Well that explains your personal interest in my navigator, Shan. What can I tell you?"

"I've read the ship's logs, but I'm still not clear on the details of how she... died."

"She didn't, not strictly speaking. After her initial 'death' V'ger created a probe in her image, but it was so correct, so perfect, that it contained all her thoughts and her emotions." He paused. "Are you familiar with the Vulcan term Katra?"

She nodded briefly.

"Well that's what was in this probe, and when Decker showed V'ger its next level of awareness the three of them were merged, joined into something, some union, beyond our understanding."

It was at that point that Kirk realised that she was crying. He cursed his insensitivity. She had seemed so in control, so businesslike about the whole incident, and he had taken his cue from her, providing the information as if giving a report to a colleague - which in a manner of speaking he was.

He had never seen a Deltan cry. It was indescribable. He felt sure that the action must increase the production of the pheromones that made her so amazingly desirable, because for a moment he felt as if he was losing control and all sense of self. In that moment he would have laid down his life to ease her pain.

Kirk reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder. A foolish move with a Deltan, he quickly came to realise as waves of sexual excitement rippled through his body. Still, that had always been his way. Physical contact always came very easily to him, and had caused no end of problems when he and Spock had first started working together.

Xi'an placed her hand over his, politely ignoring the faint moan that escaped from his throat, and turned to face him.

"It's not your fault," she began to explain. "I thought I was in control, but I was wrong. I miss her so much. She was like a sister to me as a child. Do you understand that kind of loss, Admiral?"

Kirk nodded briefly. He was unable to find the right words, and for a moment his thoughts were filled with a vision of

two small boys playing in a cornfield in Iowa, but that image was quickly replaced with that of a corpse on Deneva.

"I'm wrong to grieve," Xi'an continued. "She loved Decker, yet we all told her it was impossible, that they would never truly be together and achieve a union. They proved us wrong."

For the next few minutes the room was silent.

Unsure of what to do next, Kirk coughed discreetly. "If that will be all, Ambassador?"

"There is something more. Admiral, something that even Starfleet isn't aware of."

Intrigued, Kirk folded his hands together and sat on the edge of the table while the Ambassador went to a tray that had been left nearby and began to pour coffee into a cup.

"I've developed quite a fondness for this beverage. Join me?"

"Black, two sugars."

She handed him his cup and then stared thoughtfully into her own. "The moment she... passed on, we felt it. You are aware that we are an empathic race; well, when a loved one departs this universe we are normally aware of the fact, no matter where in the galaxy they may be. I felt what happened to Ilia. I didn't understand it until this morning, but I was aware that something had happened. The surprising thing is that every other Deltan I've spoken with, many of whom had never met her, also felt her ascent."

"In the moments before they left this dimension they became something beyond our comprehension. Perhaps her

empathy was broadcasting on levels that no-one else had ever attained."

"Now that I've spoken to you I'm inclined to agree, but you see that although that in itself would have been an interesting phenomenon, what followed is of far greater importance."

"Such as?" Kirk asked, setting aside his coffee cup and leaning forward with interest.

"Many of my people have begun lapsing into a kind of trance, and our physicians are unable to establish a cause or a cure."

"I'm sorry, but how could that be tied in to what happened to Ilia?"

"I don't know that it is. I just know that two previously unheard-of phenomena, occurring within hours of each other, have struck my people, and it seems likely to me that there's a link."

The pain on her face was visible, as were lines of stress that were forming across the smooth contours of her brow. Not for the first time that morning, Kirk's heart went out to her.

"How can I help?" he asked, not even considering the implication of his words until it was too late.

"You and the other two who were present at the time of V'ger's rebirth can accompany me back to Delta."

"But what do you expect us to do?"

"Your knowledge of the events could prove invaluable in our research. Also, Dr McCoy's and Mr Spock's reputations precede them, and to be honest, Jim... I can call you Jim?"

A smile touched his lips, and he

nodded his assent.

"To be honest we need all the help we can get!" The smile was returned to him.

"Well I really shouldn't speak for the others, but I feel safe in saying that if there's any way we can help we will do so. Problem is, the Enterprise is currently undergoing another refit, and seeing as how it was me who forced Starfleet into undertaking the work, I really can't ask them to turn her over to me at the moment." He shuddered slightly as he remembered the near-catastrophic events on the way to intercept V'ger, when he had attempted to fire phasers in a wormhole, unaware that the power was being boosted through the main engines.

"That will not be a problem," Xi'an replied. "I travelled here in a Deltan vessel, and as it is only the three of you that we require it does seem something of an overkill to take a whole Starship."

A grin spread across Kirk's face. "You're correct, of course. It's just that I'm used to steering my own course."

"I don't think that you'll find riding with a Deltan too unpleasant," she replied, and flashed a smile of her own that turned the great James Tiberius Kirk's knees to jelly.

An hour later the Enterprise's First Officer found himself once again outside the Admiral's apartment.

"Come on in, Spock - it's open!" a voice yelled from the recesses of the apartment. "I'll be with you in just a moment."

Good as his word, Kirk soon strode into the living room, rubbing a towel through his hair.

The Vulcan's ascending eyebrows did not go unnoticed. "This is becoming something of a habit, Jim."

"Believe me, Spock, sonics are all very well in their place, but there are times when only cold water will do."

Spock pondered that for a moment, and wondered if he was mentally prepared for the illogical statement that would be sure to follow if he pressed the point. He decided it was too late in the day, and changed the subject. "I am assuming that your request for my presence is in some way connected to your debriefing session this morning."

"Very astute. I've... er... sort of volunteered us for a mission."

Kirk quickly brought the Vulcan up to date with the facts as he knew them. Spock listened intently and without comment until he was finished.

"Fascinating," he remarked finally. "Naturally, if the Deltans feel we can be of assistance, then we are honour bound to comply."

"I don't think Bones is going to take this interruption to his shore leave quite so well," Kirk replied, only half joking.

Terminating a viewscreen communication half an hour later, Kirk realised his concerns had been well founded. Leonard McCoy was not by nature a military man, and did not respond to a call to arms in the same way that his commanding officer did. He was, however, a healer, and could not pass up a plea to heal the Deltan people.

"I can't possibly leave until morning, though," he had told Kirk. "My lab work has reached a vital stage and I can't just walk out on it. Oh, and in many ways Christine Chapel was more familiar with

Ilia that I was. I'll be able to rope her in, but there's no way she'll be ready before tomorrow."

Kirk agreed to the time lag, as he hadn't specified a departure time to Ambassador Xi'an.

"In fact," he told his First Officer, who had remained on hand while he spoke to the Enterprise's Chief Surgeon, and who was presently preoccupied with trying to decipher a particularly colourful metaphor that McCoy had used in describing the Admiral, "we should probably arrange that with the Ambassador now."

"Shall we contact her?" said Spock, turning the viewscreen to face him.

"No," said Kirk, just a little too quickly, "it would probably be best to meet with her in person."

During the journey to Starfleet Headquarters, Kirk found himself questioning his reasons for a face-to-face meeting with the Deltan. Surely the fact that he hadn't been able to get her face out of his mind wouldn't have clouded his decision? He knocked with some trepidation on the door of her room, and braced himself physically and mentally as the door swung open. It wasn't enough.

Xi'an was dressed in a jet-black halter top and wore a pair of reproduction denim jeans in the same colour.

"Jim!" she exclaimed happily, a smile spreading across her face. "I didn't expect to see you again today." A questioning tone crept into her voice as she looked down at herself, trying to assess what the Human was staring at. "The jeans," she smiled, comprehension spreading across her face. "Do you like them? Will always told me that they were the finest clothing the Terrans had devised, and they

certainly did something for him. He spent months trying to talk Ilia into wearing them, but she was too much the conventionalist at heart. That, I'm afraid, is something I can never be accused of." As she spoke she spun around to provide Kirk with the full effect.

His blissful appreciation was interrupted by a cough from behind his right shoulder. "Oh yes. Ambassador, please meet my First Officer, Mr Spock."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ambassador...?"

"Xi'an, but you are more than welcome to call me..."

"Xi'an," repeated Spock, without a hint of hesitancy.

"Show-off!" Kirk muttered to him under his breath, but the only response he received was an arched eyebrow.

In the conversation that followed it was agreed that they would leave the next morning, and should be able to reach Delta in a little over a day.

"So what have you got planned for us tonight, Jim?" Xi'an asked with a perfectly innocent tone to her voice even as he choked on his latest cup of coffee.

I swear she's doing it on purpose, he thought to himself as he composed himself to answer. "What exactly did you have in mind, besides clearing this little jaunt with Starfleet?"

"Already done. I took the liberty this afternoon. What I would really like is to sample some of this nightlife I've been told so much about."

"I would have thought that a party would have been the last thing on your mind."

"That's a Human response. I can't do anything for my people tonight, aside from sit and brood. Well, that's not going to help, so I might as well take an action that will pleasure me."

"Eminently logical," Spock chipped in.

"Good. Well, as I've got your approval, where are you two gentlemen going to take me?"

"I just knew this wasn't my best idea," Kirk rumbled to Spock. "I mean, who in their right mind takes a Deltan to a nightclub? Remind me when I'm next at the Academy that I've come up with a scenario to beat the Kobayashi Maru."

In its day The Energize had been San Francisco's top nightspot. That fact was causing Kirk considerable concern, as that had been his day too. Fortunately time had been kinder to the Admiral than it had to the club.

"What does she think she's doing, anyway?" he asked his First officer.

Spock was in no mood to be tactful. On his list of favourite things nightclubs came in just before disruptors, and his presence disturbed him as he couldn't remember at any point that evening agreeing to come here.

"I would say that as she is standing in the centre of the stage moving her body in time with the music, she thinks that she is dancing."

"She's Deltan. Doesn't she know the effect she's having?"

"She is a telepath, so she is more than aware of the reaction those men are having to her." As he spoke Spock pointed to a group of men who were

watching Xi'an with more than a passing interest. "It's something of a failing with Humans that they impose their own views on other cultures. In her own way she is showing proper respect to her people, but the Deltans are a sensual people who enjoy the attention of others. I believe it's a case of 'Whatever gets you through the night', Jim."

Xi'an must have picked up something of the conversation, because it was at that moment that she stopped her dance and walked back to her table.

"Show-off!" Kirk told her, smiling in spite of himself.

"I get the feeling you're no wallflower yourself."

"Yet another English anachronism. Will Decker has a lot to answer for."

"Yes, he does," she replied wistfully, then turned her attention back to the music. "How about it, Jim? Dance with a Deltan. It's kind of like dancing with the Devil, only much more dangerous."

A burning desire deep within his soul overcame him, and he held out his hand. She took it, and her touch was like being struck by lightning.

As they danced he allowed himself to look at her. The proud Deltan had disappeared and been replaced by a scared child who clung to him with such desperation.

His contemplation was ended abruptly by a hand on his shoulder.

"I think you've hogged the lady for long enough, don't you, pal?"

"The lady's here with me, *pal*, so why don't you just leave well enough alone."

"Yeah, buddy," Xi'an added. "Make like a bird and fly away!"

"Why you...!" the drunk spluttered, swinging a punch in their general direction.

Silently cursing Will Decker's tuition in the English language, Kirk moved. Pushing Xi'an to one side he ducked down below the punch and dropped to his knees. A swift jab to his attacker's midriff quickly sent him reeling away, but by now most of the club's patrons had decided that this was just the opening they had been waiting for, and a free-for-all broke out throughout the room.

Kirk overcame the first wave of his attackers with the assistance of a broken chair, but he knew he wouldn't be able to hold hold out for long. Glancing around for help he watched Shan place her hands on the cheeks of a particularly large patron. His eyes contorted in a moment of sheer ecstasy, and in that moment she kneed him in a particularly vulnerable part of his anatomy. Within moments the man fell to the floor, doubled over in agony.

There's an unusual approach to empathy, Kirk thought as he watched his First Officer join the fray.

With the Vulcan's superior strength the three of them were more than capable of dealing with the remaining party-goers, many of whom were already somewhat the worse for wear. As they stood among the debris Kirk turned to Xi'an.

"Ambassador, I'm sorry about the turn of events." Despite the fact that he felt Ambassador Xi'an was mostly responsible for this fiasco, it seemed prudent to apologise.

"No problem, Jim. Best night I've had

since the Preen uprising."

"Right," replied the Admiral, exchanging a sideways look of despair with his First Officer.

The next morning the Deltan envoy ship blasted into hyperspace, leaving Jim Kirk convinced that his head hadn't quite made the jump with him.

"I don't find it funny, Bones. You weren't there, anyway - it was an unavoidable situation."

"Okay, Jim, okay, I'm just joshing you," replied Leonard McCoy without a hint of sincerity. "You have to admit, though, it's pretty funny - a member of the Admiralty involved in a bar-room brawl."

"Hysterical. Anyway, you're suddenly very cheerful considering we're all supposed to be on shore leave."

"Well Jim, I must admit I was a little peeved when you called me yesterday."

"Slight understatement," Kirk muttered under his breath.

Ignoring that, McCoy continued, "Then I saw the lovely Ambassador, and it struck me that a trip to the planet that she and Ilia hailed from might not be such a hardship."

"In some ways spending time with Deltans is the hardest thing of all." As he spoke Kirk nodded in the direction of Ambassador Xi'an.

"What do you make of her, Jim?" McCoy asked.

"She's like no other Deltan, no other being, I've ever known. I admit my

knowledge of Deltans was somewhat limited before Ilia, but she doesn't act quite right."

"I don't see what you mean."

"All Deltans have a degree of sexuality that is unmatched by any other species in the galaxy..."

"Even you?"

A look from his Captain led McCoy to conclude that he wasn't in a humorous mood.

"... but most Deltans seem to make a deliberate effort to suppress that side of their nature. Shan doesn't. She delights in it."

"The only Deltans you've known have been part of Starfleet. Shan is a diplomatic ambassador and doesn't have to subject herself to the same disciplines."

A twinkle appeared in Kirk's eyes. "I wonder if she's taken the oath of celibacy."

"Jim, that's all I've wondered since I came aboard."

A few hours later the image of Delta came into sight on the ship's viewer. Spock went to the quarters that had been allocated to Kirk, and found him pacing from one end of the room to the other.

"Jim, we have just entered the Deltan system. Ambassador Xi'an tells me we should be planetside within the hour."

When no reaction came he moved closer and repeated the message, adding, "Are you quite all right, Admiral?"

Kirk turned to him and presented him

with a sheepish smile. "It's silly," he explained. "I don't like being a passenger on this type of trip. I grew so used to calling the shots during our mission, and I've tried to avoid prolonged space trips since joining the Admiralty. The fact is, it's not in my nature to sit back and let someone else steer the course of my life, even if it is just for the duration of a space trip. Stupid?"

"Well it is not what I would call logical, but I would think it understandable, considering your character make-up."

Kirk smiled. "Strange, isn't it?"

Spock's left eyebrow rose to question the comment.

"In all the galaxies there can be few beings who are more dissimilar than you and me. Yet we understand one other perfectly, we each anticipate the other's movements before they're made, and I swear there were times, out in space, when I thought I was reading your mind."

"Perhaps you were," Spock replied softly, and for a moment it appeared as if he was trying to call back the words.

Kirk toyed with the idea of bringing up the 'hy'la reference again, but decided that his friend wasn't at all comfortable with the direction the conversation was taking, so he let it drop.

The two of them arrived on the bridge and were greeted by Xi'an. She smiled as she moved towards them, but the smile could do nothing to offset the fear that was in her eyes.

"Gentlemen, I understand that the situation has worsened immeasurably since I left. The Union has requested that we beam directly to the Commune to save any further delay."

"This isn't an official Starfleet mission, but Mr Spock and Doctors McCoy and Chapel have given me permission to speak for them," Kirk explained, "so let's go."

Five minutes later the five of them appeared in the structure the Deltans called the Commune. Christine Chapel let out a gasp as they looked around, and Kirk had to admit that he shared the sentiment. The ceiling of the structure rose up so high that it was just visible from the floor, and both it and the walls were made up of hundreds and hundreds of different types of flowers and plants in thousands of different colours, many of which Kirk couldn't pin down using the Human colour reference. The whole place had a kind of pine smell, but much sweeter than anything Mother Earth had ever offered.

McCoy leaned over to Kirk. "How do these people ever bring themselves to leave?" he whispered.

Kirk offered a non-committal shrug and followed Xi'an to the centre of the room where two Deltans sat on a structure somewhere between a throne and a four-poster bed, again made entirely of organic substances, in this case reeds and grasses woven into the desired shape. None of the landing party could give this throne more than a moment's notice, however, as the beings who sat on the structure were much more enthralling.

There were two of them, one male, one female, Kirk assumed, but they seemed somehow beyond gender. The female was slight and almost elfin in appearance; the male was larger, though not to the extent of Kirk or any of the male members of his party, and he was beautiful - not handsome, that word was

simply not adequate. Both of them, male and female, were beautiful. Perhaps their most striking feature was their long blond hair, that seemed almost intertwined. In fact, that seemed to be their nature. It was almost impossibly difficult to decide where one stopped and the other began.

Kirk felt Xi'an's hand touch his shoulder, and for a moment her thoughts touched his mind. *That is why we call them the Union. Two perfectly bound as one. All Deltans aim for such a fusion.*

"As do all Humans," he whispered back to her.

For a moment time passed unnoticed. Kirk's party was as mesmerised by the two aliens as they seemed to be by one another. To each of them, their other half made up all the universe.

Finally Xi'an stepped forward. "I have returned as charged, and with me are the members of Starfleet who stood with the one no more at the time of her departure from this realm."

The male half of the Union rose to his feet. "Gentlebeings, our sincere gratitude is yours for making this trip to assist us in this our time of need."

Kirk stepped forward to offer some reply, but both of the Union were now moving towards a doorway set in the wall directly behind their throne. They moved separately, but in perfect unison. The connection between them was almost visible.

As they all hurried to follow Kirk leaned as close to Xi'an as was possible without suffering a momentary loss of his senses. "I was under the impression that all Deltans were naturally bald."

She laughed slightly, running her fingers across the sheer skin on the crown

of her head. "A popular fiction. In the early days of space travel, before the question of artificial gravity was answered, short hair made working in off-world conditions easier. In time all the spacers wore their hair as short as possible as a kind of badge of honour. Then, when we began meeting other races and found out the effect our appearance has on them, it was decided that total baldness would reduce our desirability. Time has told us that this is not the case, however."

Kirk smiled at her and shook his head to confirm the extent to which he agreed with that sentiment. She returned the smile with one of her own.

As they passed through the doorway they saw the vast room beyond filled with unconscious bodies. Shan recoiled in horror and Kirk noticed a similar reaction in his Chief Medical Officer. Despite the years he had spent trying to develop a suitably stoic bedside manner, McCoy had never quite succeeded.

As McCoy and Chapel busied themselves with tricorders and consulted with the Deltan physicians, the Union attempted to describe a phenomenon for which they had no explanation.

"To begin with it was a number of isolated incidents. Over the course of a week or so several of our people from all corners of the planet slipped into this strange sleep state. Our physicians were concerned, as there was no common factor, but there seemed no reason for undue distress. Over the past two days, however, the problem has become far more widespread. It is calculated that at this rate the whole of Delta will be affected by the end of the week."

"Highly likely," offered Spock, "considering the relatively small size of Delta's population compared to other

worlds."

Kirk couldn't help but wonder why the most sexually active people in the known galaxy had one of the smallest populations, but decided this was a question best left for another day.

Christine Chapel's worried voice interrupted his thoughts. "I've never seen anything like this, sir. These people have no brainwave patterns at all, no REM response, and yet all their bodily functions continue as normal."

"It's as if someone just reached into their minds and switched them off, all except for some kind of automatic pilot function," offered McCoy.

"Hardly a scientific explanation, Doctor," Spock pointed out, "but you are correct in your deduction. I am sensing no mental activity from those affected by this condition."

"Neither do I," called Xi'an. She was leaning just a little too heavily against one of the beds, and her words were full of concern. "Perhaps if I attempt some kind of connection?"

"I would recommend against that. There is no way of knowing why the remaining Deltans are unaffected, and a mind link could prove hazardous to you. It would be far more logical for me to attempt a mind link." Spock looked towards Kirk for approval, and saw the concern in his eyes.

"Are you sure you can handle it?"

"Negative, but I don't see an alternative course of action open to us."

Kirk pondered for a moment. "No," he agreed, "but break contact at the first sign of trouble."

Without another word Spock moved towards the nearest comatose Deltan. Spreading his fingers in a manner that Kirk had seen him use so many times before, he placed his hands on her perfect features and whispered almost silently,

"My mind to your mind, my soul to your soul. We are as one."

For a moment his face became even more impassive, and Kirk feared he had been claimed in a similar manner. Suddenly his face contorted in an expression of pain and despair.

"Incomplete!" he gasped. "What has been taken has not returned."

A look of puzzlement crossed Shan's face and she moved towards Kirk, wanting something from him but not knowing quite what. And explanation? Understanding? Comfort? She didn't know, but she was Deltan, and a Deltan does not question instinct but acts on it.

For the first time since he had met her Kirk barely noticed her presence. His gaze was drawn to Spock. The Vulcan's face was twisted into an expression unlike any he had ever seen on his friend's face.

"He's in trouble," he told Xi'an, and without another word grabbed his friend and pulled him away. The psychic backlash was so intense that Kirk could feel it despite his lack of telepathy.

For a moment Spock crumpled to the floor, but quickly stood, although he was forced to lean a little on his friend.

"Well, Spock?" asked Xi'an, unable to control her impatience. "What did you learn? What could you sense?"

Spock answered with one word. "Loss."

"I... I don't understand," said Kirk, releasing his hold on Spock as the Vulcan drew himself up into his normal stance.

"The only emotion, the only sense that the comatose Deltans have is a sense of loss, a sense of being incomplete."

"And this ties in with what happened to Ilia?"

"I could not learn the cause of this state, just its nature."

"Then we're no closer, dammit!" said Xi'an, smashing her hand into the wall. "We don't know the cause, and unless we know that then how can we... Look!"

Spinning round Kirk watched as all the sleeping Deltans began to rise from their cots, and for a moment he shared Xi'an's joy, but then experience, gained from years of dealing with the unknown, came to the fore. "Shan, no!" he yelled as she ran to greet the Deltan closest to her.

His warning caused her to pause for a moment, and it was that delay that enabled her to avoid her fellow Deltan as he grabbed for her. Shock prevented her from moving for a moment, and so Kirk moved forward and drew her back towards his group.

She turned towards him, her voice trembling. "Did you see their eyes? They were blank - pure white."

"I am still not sensing any thought patterns," offered Spock.

Kirk turned to Xi'an. "No, I'm not picking up anything either," she said, anticipating his question.

"Then what's happening to them, and what's making them act in this way?"

"We don't know, Jim," replied McCoy,

"but can we puzzle it out somewhere else?" He nodded in the direction of a large group of the sleepwalkers which was about to descend on them.

"Everyone split up," Kirk ordered, "then scatter for the door." As he spoke he knew that not all of them could hope to make it. Spock could probably give him the exact odds, but at that moment he would rather not know.

As he made for the door he tried to keep an eye on his colleagues, but the sheer number of Deltans descending on him made that impossible. He did hear a muffled cry from Christine Chapel, however.

"Can't do her any good now," he whispered, mostly to convince himself. "Better we mount an organised rescue later."

Moments later sheer desperation propelled him out of the grip of a particularly large attacker who was trying to drag him to the ground and through the doors of the Commune. They seemed reluctant to leave the building, although Kirk was sure that wouldn't last. Running to a safe distance from the structure, he found Spock waiting for him.

"Bones?" he gasped.

"Doctors McCoy and Chapel were overcome by the attackers," replied the Vulcan in a tone that would have seemed impassive to anyone else.

"Do you think they're in any immediate danger?"

"That is unclear, but it would seem that the Deltans were trying to maintain our presence rather than cause actual harm..." His voice trailed off, and Kirk spun round to follow his line of vision

down towards the Commune.

Damn! he thought, wishing - not for the first time that day - for a phaser. Moving on pure adrenalin he sprang towards the woman who was bearing down on him, not hearing until too late Spock's cry to stop. He slammed into the woman's midsection and she hit the ground with a groan. Instantly he knew this was wrong, as their attackers had been entirely silent.

"Jim!" came the indignant voice of his victim as he realised his error.

"Shan, er... sorry."

She was lying flat on her back with Kirk on top of her. Her crystal blue eyes bored deep within him, and despite herself she couldn't keep a hint of laughter out of her voice. "Admiral Kirk, whatever gave you the impression I was that type of girl?" She thought for a moment, and watched the expression on Spock's face change to one of disbelief. "Okay, don't answer that."

The two untangled themselves from one another and Kirk managed to curb his embarrassment, which was increased by his awareness that Xi'an could sense how much he had enjoyed their proximity.

As Kirk rose to his feet Spock held out his hand to the Ambassador and helped her to her feet.

"Ambassador," the Vulcan asked, "does the word 'Appian' hold any meaning for you?"

"Yes, it's our spiritual centre. I suppose the closest Terran expression is a temple. Why do you ask?"

"The word has been echoing in my thoughts since the mind meld, although it

is only now that I have become aware of it."

Xi'an moved towards him and held her hand, palm upright, towards his face. "May I?" she asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then nodded his assent.

Xi'an was more than aware of how private Vulcans were. She didn't understand such reserve, but respected his nature. Softly she touched his face and linked her mind to his.

Kirk watched, transfixed. He realised how difficult this was for his friend, and knew also the effect that such intimacy with the Deltan would have on him. He had never been more impressed with Spock's self control.

Xi'an released a gasp, and realised that she had been holding her breath. As she separated herself from the Vulcan's consciousness she felt a kind of sadness. There was a sense of order there, a feeling of peace that she had never had in her life, but there was a great deal that was suppressed, so much that went unsaid. As the last traces of his mind left hers she turned to tell Kirk what she had learned, and for a moment saw him through Spock's eyes. The image was amazing. Drawing breath, she composed herself.

"Jim, Spock's right. The Appian is they key to this. All those Deltans are being guided by a single need that must be fulfilled."

"And we'll find the source of this need at this Appian?"

She nodded.

"But why did Spock's mind meld awaken them all?"

"That I don't know."

"Well I suppose we'd better get going. How far away is it?"

"Several hundred kilometres, but it's through the woodland, so I should be able to get us a ride."

Kirk looked at Spock, but decided not to ask her to elaborate. Something about Xi'an made him take her on trust.

The three of them walked for the next hour, led by the Ambassador, who seemed to have perfect knowledge of the direction in which they should go, despite the fact that they were surrounded by woodland, with little or no distinguishing features. When Kirk asked her about that, she seemed surprised.

"How could I possibly be lost on Delta?" she asked.

Kirk had heard stories of Deltans' connection to their planet. It was without a doubt one of the most beautiful in the known galaxy. Much of it had remained woodland, despite the amazing technological progress that the Deltans had made. Their sense of connection to their homeworld was far more profound than with other species. It was widely considered that this was the major reason so few Deltans ever went off planet. When Xi'an had spoken earlier of the Spacers' baldness being a badge of honour, she was referring to the elite of her world. Those who served in Starfleet were a special cross-section of any species, but with the Deltans choosing that life took a special kind of courage.

His train of thought was broken by Xi'an's voice. "There are our rides," she called, pointing to a group of what obviously passed for horses on this planet. They were smaller and sleeker, however, and their hair was a

combination of colours and dots. Shan moved towards them, speaking softly as she went. The three nearest came towards her and within moments she was leading the, back towards Kirk and Spock. "They've agreed to help us," she explained.

"Agreed?" Kirk asked with just a hint of disbelief.

"Deltan telepathy doesn't just extend to humanoids," she explained. "That's always been the problem with you Humans - too much of an ego concerning your own kind."

"Perhaps," Kirk admitted. "Now how about one of you two helping me up onto one of your friends?"

The next few hours passed quickly, and would almost have been fun if not for the circumstances. Kirk had grown up riding in Iowa, and it seemed as if Xi'an had similar influences in her upbringing. Vulcan, unfortunately, didn't have much in the way of horses, but Spock was a quick study and kept up with the other two.

As he rode Kirk's thoughts turned to his friends he'd left behind. Logically he knew that abandoning them was the only decision he could have made, but he'd never been the one for logic. He hoped that Bones and Christine would understand.

As it turned out the Enterprise's medical officers were far too concerned with their present position to give too much thought to the circumstances that had brought them there. Neither had been harmed, but they had been locked away with the Union and a few other unaffected Deltans.

"What the hell happened?" McCoy asked the Deltan leaders for the third time since their capture.

"We do not know, Doctor," replied the female. "Up until now those affected have shown no sign of independent thought."

"But is it?" asked Chapel.

"Is it what?" replied McCoy, his patience worn completely away.

"Is it independent thought? Watch them, Leonard - their movements are interchangeable, as if they are all extensions of one another."

"Mind control?"

"Can you think of any other reason?"

He shook his head. "Well whatever the reason we'd better come up with a way out of here - and fast!" As he spoke he leaned closer to his fellow captives.

Meanwhile Kirk and his party emerged from a clearing in the woods and saw a group of Deltans waiting there. The terrain prevented going around them, so it seemed that they would have to go through them.

"Are either of you picking up any thought patterns?" Kirk asked.

Both shook their heads

"Then if they're under whatever spell affected those at the Commune, and if they are all linked at the sort of levels they appear to be, then they may be on the lookout for us."

"I don't see we have much choice but to proceed, Admiral," advised Spock.

Kirk nodded his agreement. "We're lucky this wasn't an official Fleet mission, or you and I would have been in uniform. We'd have no chance of looking inconspicuous then."

Xi'an smiled. "I can't really see either of you vanishing into a crowd, but we'll do our best anyway. Spock, if you can attempt to keep up your own mental shields, I'll try to cover up both of your distinctive thought patterns. If they don't go out of their way to scan us we might just make it."

Hesitantly they moved forward, Spock pulling his hood up over his head to cover his best feature.

As they passed between the Deltans Kirk heard Xi'an give a soft gasp as she noticed that the eyes of all these people were blank. He was aware, however, that she was trying to convince those around them that they had no individual thought patterns, so he tried to keep his thinking on an instinctive level.

As he considered that he passed a little too close to one of the female Deltans, and felt a surge of excitement. He saw Xi'an close her eyes and attempt to block it out, but it was too late. Instantly the Deltans descended upon them. The closest man grabbed him around the chest and Kirk allowed himself to drop from the horse in a rolling motion and managed to dislodge his attacker. Grasping him round the neck he tightened his grip, preventing him from drawing breath, and after a few moments the man slumped unconscious to the ground. As Kirk turned two more Deltans were approaching him from behind, and he quickly found himself involved in a fist fight.

"Do you see how sluggish their movements are?" he called to the other two.

"Indeed," Spock replied, discovering that Deltans, even possessed ones, were susceptible to a Vulcan nerve pinch. "Almost as if their movements are not their own."

"Kind of like remote control," offered Xi'an, elbowing another in the stomach.

Within moments the fight was over and they remounted and moved on. Xi'an brought her horse up next to Kirk's.

"So what's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "Well, aside from the fact that everyone on this planet seems to be out for our hides."

"No joking. This is on the level. You're pained about something."

"Well it's my fault the Deltans sensed us in the first place, and it's just so typical of me. I've always had an overactive libido, but at my time of life you'd think I'd have it under control."

"You're not really asking the right person about self control. I don't think I've ever had an impulse I haven't acted on."

"Perhaps," Spock offered to Kirk, "you should have been born a Deltan."

Kirk laughed so hard he nearly fell off his horse.

By now the light was failing and they were soon forced to bed down for the night. They took it in turns to keep watch, but the hours of darkness passed uneventfully and they were soon under way again.

Towards the end of the day they came upon a river.

"Any way around or over it?" Kirk asked.

She paused and looked at their surroundings. "No," she said finally. "We're going to have to go through it."

Spock had the point, so he urged his horse to enter the water first. The current upset all three animals, not to mention their riders. The water was not so deep that the horses couldn't walk most of the way, but the ground dipped just before the other side and they had to swim the final few metres. Kirk and Xi'an managed to urge their mounts to do so, but Spock's was far more unsettled by the water, and was reluctant to make the swim.

Xi'an's horse reached the other side first, with Kirk's only seconds behind. The speed of the current was such, however, that he ended up several metres downstream. As he turned back towards the water he watched as Spock finally managed to urge his mount onwards. Then, only seconds away from the shore, the horse, in a state of panic, tried to rear up and was totally submerged.

"Spock!" Kirk cried out in horror, watching as his friend surfaced again only to disappear under the speeding current. "Come on!" he yelled at Xi'an, and the two of them took off downstream.

It was a testament to their riding abilities that they managed to keep the Vulcan in sight for as long as they did. After covering about half a mile, the river swerved sharply to the left, and the terrain meant they couldn't follow.

Without a moment's hesitation Kirk turned his horse away from the river and headed up a grass verge that ran alongside it. Xi'an didn't protest, she simply followed his lead. After following this course for a few minutes she realised

that they were veering back towards the river, and that its course was turning in the direction they were travelling. Most amazing of all was the fact that they had arrived at the spot a moment before Spock. Even her instinctive knowledge of the terrain couldn't be so accurate.

In what could only be considered a moment's madness Kirk ploughed his horse into the current and grabbed wildly at the Vulcan. Spock reached for his hand, but the effort only served to drive him under the surface of the water, and he missed contact with his Captain altogether. Kirk let out a cry of anger and turned his steed back towards the shore. He would never know how he made it out of the churning current, just that through pure strength of will he drove the horse back to safety. He slumped down on the bank, dropping his head and gasping for air. When he looked up the sight of Xi'an filled his vision.

"C'mon!" he barked. "We have to find him." As he spoke he leaped back onto his exhausted mount.

Xi'an watched him, and looked for a moment as if she was going to say something. A sad half-smile crossed her lips as she decided against it and climbed back onto her horse. She followed Kirk for several kilometres down-river, urging her mount to keep up with the Admiral's erratic movements.

The light was failing fast, and he was having a problem coaxing his mount to keep going. Finally he slowed up just enough to let her catch up with him.

"Can't you sense anything?" he asked angrily.

"Jim, all I'm sensing is blind panic from you. It's far too intense for me to focus beyond it."

She braced herself for the Admiral's fury, but instead his attention was distracted by something in the water.

"There!" he shouted, pointing at the object as he ran to the side of the river and dived in.

Xi'an groaned quietly to herself and moved to the edge of the river.

After much thrashing about Kirk discovered that he was rescuing a large branch. In that moment all the anger went out of him and he was left feeling scared and alone, even incomplete. He waded back to the bank where Xi'an was precariously balanced on the edge of a rock. She offered him her hand and helped him out.

"I've lost him," he offered weakly.

"Do you believe he's dead?"

Kirk thought for a moment. "No."

Then he is not lost to you. In fact, even if he was gone I think what you have would endure. Has Spock ever spoken to you of Thy'la?"

"Yes, he's used that word when talking of our friendship."

Xi'an pursed her lips. "I see." She tightened her grip on his hand. "Come on. The light's failing and neither of these two poor animals is prepared to go any further. We're not going to find him tonight."

A short time later the two of them sat together watching the flames of a camp fire dance.

"It's lucky we found this cave," Kirk began.

"Luck has very little to do with it.

Delta takes care of her own - or at least, she has done up until now."

In the silence that followed Kirk found himself pondering his friend's current fates. Bones and Christine in the hands of those zombies, and Spock... Well, he didn't know anything of Spock's present condition, only that every fibre of his being told him he was alive.

His reverie was interrupted by the Deltan Ambassador's eyes boring into his. He realised with a hint of embarrassment that the woman had been reading his thoughts. It unnerved him slightly. He had never been in the company of such a direct telepath. Most, like the Vulcans, held themselves aloof and at a distance. Xi'an had no such reservations.

"You," she said, smiling, the red embers reflecting in her eyes, "are such an interesting man. I don't believe I've ever come across anyone quite like you."

Overcome by a madness, a need he couldn't resist, Kirk leaned towards her and kissed her softly on the lips. For a moment he hoped and feared the kiss would be returned, but she turned her head away.

"I'm sorry, Jim, but I won't come in second place to anyone."

"I don't understand," he replied, moving his head away from hers.

"You and Spock..."

"Oh, that's ridiculous. Have you been listening to rumours at Starfleet Headquarters?" He stood up and strode some distance from her. "I thought we'd put a stop to that tittle-tattle years ago."

Xi'an didn't even flinch during the verbal attack, and when he had given his anger due expression she stood up and

moved behind him, slipping her arms around his waist from behind. If she noticed his gasp for air, she didn't mention it.

"You Humans are a strange breed. Far too tied up in gender, or age, or any one of so many factors that you feel are important when it comes to having a relationship with another. A Deltan simply accepts whatever emotion he or she feels for another entity and acts on it." She brought her mouth up to his ear, as if to share a secret. "It's simply the Deltan way. You Humans work too hard trying to put all your feelings and emotions, all your needs and longings, into clearly labelled little boxes with set definitions. Caring about someone is an action, a verb not a noun. As long as we reach out to someone, in some way, that's what really matters."

Kirk broke free from her hold and turned towards her. He opened his mouth to say something but she pressed one finger on his lips.

"I wasn't implying that you and Spock are anything other than you appear to be. The fact remains, however, that this is the single most enduring relationship of your life. Any intimacy that you could achieve with another being will never come close. No other will ever be as important to you."

Kirk's expression softened. There was a logic to her words that he couldn't dispute. He turned back towards the fire and knelt before it, prodding at the embers with a stick.

"I've only spent a short time with you both, but I can see the connection between you so clearly. I'd bet you haven't even questioned how you were able to track him so easily earlier. It was only when he lost consciousness that you couldn't sense his location and began to

panic. The two of you may never have acknowledged the fact openly, but you are T'hy'la."

"We've never made any secret of the fact that we're friends."

"Oh yes - that's what Spock told you it meant."

Kirk looked at her, a puzzled expression on his face.

"But he didn't give you the full story, dear. Yes, T'hy'la can mean friend, but it can also mean lover, it can mean brother, and yet it means none of those things. To be frank, I don't think there's a Terran word that compares to it. When Spock refers to you as his T'hy'la, he means that you are his other self, an extension of his being, bound together on the deepest levels. Be honest with yourself, Jim. Is he any less to you?"

There was a pause for a moment as Kirk considered his feelings. "No... But why didn't he tell me, help me understand?"

"Jim, you more than anyone know his nature. How could he have spoken of this with you?"

A sad half smile crossed Kirk's face. "But none of this will help us find him now."

"Maybe it will. Do you trust me?"

The smile increased, and he nodded.

"Then give me your hands."

He placed both his hands into hers, enjoying her touch despite all that had gone before. She looked deep into his eyes for a moment, and abruptly shut her own tightly. For a moment Kirk felt lonely. Then, whispering in a dialect that

he had never heard before, she brought one hand up to the side of his face.

He prepared himself for her hand to take the Vulcan mind-meld position on his face, and was surprised when the back of her hand connected with his cheek. As the hand moved across the contours of his face he suppressed a shudder, and felt himself carried along on a wave of sensuality and spirituality.

She pressed her mouth against his ear. "The flesh is but a vessel," she whispered. "Cast it aside."

In that moment Kirk's perception of the universe around him was altered. Everything was reduced - or perhaps increased - to waves of energy, waves of power. He instinctively knew that he wasn't seeing this through conventional vision, but through some kind of inner eye. The universe was a seething mass of energies and emotions. *We are all bound to each other in some way, and some of us are bound far more tightly. In the real world this can make us family, lovers, friends, enemies... or perhaps something more. Thy'la.*

As the thought ran through his mind Xi'an's voice sang out through the rapport they were sharing. "Look for the light, Jim. The brightest light in your life."

Instinctively Kirk's attention was drawn to a glow that filled him with a comforting joy. So familiar and yet new and exciting. He reached out to that force and held on tightly, swearing that in all the ways that really mattered he would never let go.

Then he became aware of Shan's touch on his face again. "Accept this," she told him. "It will only make you stronger."

The abruptly it was over. He sat down, just a little more quickly than he

had planned, and looked up at the Deltan.

"Wow!" he gasped.

"As I told you, our bodies are only the beginning. Do you know where he is?"

Kirk thought for a moment, then leaped to his feet. "Yes. Not on any conscious level, but if I let go and trust my instincts, I know where to find him."

"Then let's go."

What followed was an hour-long gallop through the woods. Dawn was beginning to break but the light wasn't really good enough to be sure of direction. That didn't matter to the Human or the Deltan as both were being guided by their own inner voices, and at the end of the hour they found the unconscious Spock, washed up on the bank.

Kirk was off his horse before it had stopped moving, and dropped to his knees at the Vulcan's side.

"He's not good," he told Xi'an as she dismounted and walked towards him. "He's hit his head hard, and Vulcans are more susceptible to the cold. He's gone into shock."

Through her empathy Xi'an felt Kirk's pain almost as intensely as she felt Spock's, but she steeled herself and moved closer. *Gods*, she thought, *how can he endure this agony?*

Spock's breathing was remarkably shallow, but she matched it with her own and began to breathe in unison with him, slowly increasing her own heart rate and willing him to match it. Then, with as much concentration as she could spare, she reached into Spock's mind and filled it

with a sense of heat. In truth the Vulcan's body temperature remained unaltered, but he gained a sense that he was burning up, and his body gradually came to believe the lie, and began to warm up.

She was barely aware of Kirk pacing the ground beside her, and she maintained the healing trance for almost an hour until she felt that Spock was strong enough to sustain it himself. Once that was the case she released her hold on him and fell away.

For a moment Spock's eyes opened and he looked around, unable to hide the fear there. Kirk took his hands between his own, and that seemed to calm him.

"Jim," he groaned, "while I was unconscious I felt your mind. You reached out to me. You understand?"

Kirk nodded, blinking back a tear. "Why... Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'd hoped you'd known," whispered the Vulcan as he slipped into a deep slumber.

"Wake up, dammit!" whispered McCoy to Christine Chapel. "It's time."

"For what?" she asked sleepily.

"To make our move."

As Christine roused the Union and the other Deltans imprisoned with them, McCoy began to bang on the door of their makeshift jail. He watched the Deltan outside pause for a moment as if waiting for some silent command. This must have been forthcoming as after a few moments he moved to the door.

"Quickly!" rasped the Doctor. "She's dying!"

Christine looked around and realised that he must be referring to her. "Ohhh!" she moaned woefully, wishing that McCoy had seen fit to give her a few moment's notice.

There was another delay, and finally the Deltan opened the door. As he entered McCoy took advantage of his sluggish movements and grappled him to the floor. Once down there he had a quick attempt at a Vulcan nerve pinch, which went wrong as usual, so he settled for a blow to the back of the neck. He felt the body slump into unconsciousness, but the eyes retained the same blank yet active appearance. McCoy was far too pleased with himself to worry about that, though.

"Aha! Did you see that, Chris?" he said happily as he was dragged away by both halves of the Union and the other Deltans. Obviously whatever had been protecting them from the spell had run out.

"My hero!" sighed Christine.

It was mid-day before anyone in Kirk's party felt strong enough to move on. They rode throughout the afternoon, hardly saying a word to one another. After the night's events words seemed woefully inadequate.

It was Xi'an who finally broke the silence. "The Appian is just beyond that hill range." Both she and Spock looked expectantly at Kirk.

"How close can we get before we're seen?" he asked.

"About fifty metres, providing we tread very carefully."

Five minutes later the three of them

were crouched down behind a bush directly in front of the Appian.

"Fascinating," whispered Spock. "The entire structure appears to have been crafted out of crystal. It is a staggering feat of engineering."

Kirk nodded his agreement as he shielded his eyes from the dazzling collage of colours being reflected from the building's walls.

"Its origins are unknown," explained Xi'an. "It's simply always been here. I've heard it referred to as the Heart of Delta."

"Hmmm," replied Kirk, but his attention had been caught by a group of Deltans who were standing by the entrance. "Spock," he asked, "going on the assumption that those people are hostile, any observations on how we can gain entry?"

"Regrettably, a direct approach seems to be the only option. However, the odds involved are -"

Kirk shook his head and patted him on the shoulder. "Probably better that we don't know, my friend. Don't you agree, Ambassador?" He turned to Xi'an, and was horrified to see a pained expression on her normally serene features.

"Something is reaching out for me, Jim," she whispered, sheer terror in her voice for the first time since Kirk had met her. "I've been shielding myself since that encounter at the ravine, but the power here is too great."

"Jim." Spock's voice made him turn away from the woman. "I think it would be safe to assume that they are aware of our presence." As he spoke he nodded his head in the direction of the group of Deltans who were heading up the hill towards them.

When Kirk turned back to Xi'an she was no longer there, but instead was shambling down the hill towards the Appian. Her will was clearly not her own.

"Nothing else to do but go for broke," said Kirk grimly. "Whatever happens, press on for the entrance. The answer to this is in there somewhere."

Years of experience came to the fore as the two of them sprang out from behind the rock. This time, however, there was something else. Both men found they had perfect knowledge of the other's movements and actions at the moment they occurred. In fact, as the battle went on they began to anticipate each other's course of action, and surprisingly found they were closing in on the entrance to the Appian.

Then, despatching his most immediate threat with a nerve pinch, Spock felt a sense of danger - but not his own. He spun round to see one of their attackers bearing down on Kirk from behind his left shoulder, brandishing a makeshift wooden club.

"Jim!" he called out, and watched, relieved, as Kirk pivoted and struck his would-be attacker square on the jaw.

"Why, thank you, Mr Spock," he offered.

"You are more than welcome, sir."

Smiling despite himself Kirk turned to face the Deltan who was impeding his progress, and was shocked to see that it was Ambassador Xi'an. He had automatically raised his fist into an attacking position but waited, looking into those crystal eyes for some hint of the woman he'd come to know so well.

They stood like that for several

moments, frozen in time, and Kirk watched her face contort into an expression of pain. Her lips parted.

"M... M... My will is my own!" she cried out finally, and then screamed from the depths of her soul.

Sobbing, she fell into Kirk's arms. Before either of them could speak, however, Spock came up behind them and pushed them both through the doors of the Appian.

Forcing his attention away from the sobbing Deltan, Kirk helped Spock jam the door shut. Both were delighted to see that there were no Deltans in the interior, and so they set to work barricading the entrance with the Appian's furniture, which seemed to consist of very plain wooden tables and benches.

Once they were satisfied that the Deltans slamming into the other side of the door would be unable to gain entry for some time, they turned their attention back towards Xi'an.

"Gods, Jim," she whispered, "it was awful. I wasn't here any more. All my thoughts, feelings, emotions, everything that makes me what I am was pushed aside, but what was so frightening was the fact that I felt so much a part of the whole. It almost felt natural."

"So how did you get free?"

"I looked into your eyes and saw the woman I was, a woman you've come to care about so quickly, and someone you respect. My image was shining in your thoughts, and I knew I wanted to be that way again."

"Jim," Spock interrupted, "the Deltans appear to be on the verge of gaining access to this structure. I feel some sort of escape plan is called for."

"Leave that to me," offered Xi'an. As she spoke she moved to the centre of the floor and swept the area free of dust.

There was a circular indentation, and she pressed both hands into it. A grinding noise to their left made Kirk and Spock spin round, and they watched a portion of the floor sink into the ground.

"I've gained an impression of this place since I went 'under', but none of the others are functioning on a level of consciousness that's sufficient to try and enter."

Peering down into the darkness, Kirk gave a low whistle. "Even I can sense the level of telepathy that's being projected from down there. Are you two sure you're up to this?"

"My telepathic shields are quite formidable, Jim. I shall be fine."

And through this bond we now seem to share, you'll protect me until your last breath, won't you, my friend? Kirk thought silently to himself, finding he was all too aware of the Vulcan's aims. He turned to Xi'an.

"I'll be fine, too," she told him, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "Just stick close, please."

Kirk smiled, took her hand in his own and squeezed it. Nothing more was said as the three of them began their descent into the darkness.

As their eyes became accustomed to the darkness they began to get a picture of their surroundings. Like the building itself the cavern was crystalline in nature, and although it appeared natural none of the party could believe that the steps down which they were edging their way were naturally formed.

They continued in that way for several

minutes until Spock thought that he heard the whisper of the wind.

Surely that cannot be the case, he thought to himself. Not at this depth.

He concentrated for a moment, and realised that the whispering was coming from within his head. He stole a look at Kirk and saw that he obviously wasn't picking up on this, but Xi'an was. He could see from the expression on her face that it was taking everything she had just to remain in control. He had spent much of his life wearing that expression, and he could always recognise it on others.

It's strange, he thought to himself. Most Vulcan thinkers have little time for Deltans, believing them to be flighty, undisciplined people. Yet their telepathic prowess at least matches our own, it just functions on different levels. Much like the Ambassador and me.

His thoughts were interrupted by the feeling of level ground under his feet. In this strange half light they could make out that they were in some sort of tunnel, but their eyes were drawn to a violet glow coming from straight ahead.

Not a word was said as they moved towards the light, which seemed to grow in intensity at an impossible rate as they drew nearer. By the time they reached the source all three were dazzled, and unable to see their goal.

Spock's Vulcan eyes meant that he recovered much faster than the other two, and he found himself face to face with the image of a young Deltan woman. It was clear that she wasn't truly a woman. Her body was formed entirely from the violet light, and from certain angles she was almost completely transparent, yet her form seemed to hold all the colours of the rainbow, and more beside. She looked towards the Vulcan and smiled, and in that moment Spock, who had never been

one to make snap emotional reactions, was convinced that she meant them no harm.

By now his companions' eyesight had cleared enough to share his vision, and Xi'an gasped in awe. "He's beautiful!" she cried.

"He?" Kirk asked. "I see a woman."

"As do I," offered Spock. "Perhaps we are simply being presented with a form that draws the best reaction from us."

Nodding, Kirk moved towards the image. "We mean you no harm," he tried to explain. "We are here seeking an answer to the condition that afflicts my friend's people."

The image nodded and smiled. She began opening and closing her mouth, but no sound could be heard. This seemed to distress her a great deal, and she began to wave her hands around frantically, until finally, almost in a state of panic, she reached towards Xi'an.

Possessed with an understanding that wasn't her own, Xi'an moved towards the image and took its hand. A glow surrounded her, and she turned towards her friends.

"Forgive me," she began in a voice that was only in part her own. "It has been too long since we attempted corporeal communication."

"Shan?" whispered Kirk.

"In part," she replied. "But also much more. We are the spirit of this world. We are all and nothing, ice and water, mud and flame."

As Kirk considered his next question he felt a force touch his mind.

"You do not understand," said 'Xi'an' sadly.

He felt his mind being gently probed for some common ground on which they could communicate. He glanced towards Spock, and felt the same thing was happening to the Vulcan. on some conscious level he wondered how he knew that, but now was not the time to question their rapport.

The voice began again. "The people of Delta are unlike your peoples. They exist in perfect harmony with their world and each other. To a small extent everyone here is linked to one another through their empathy. They come from the source and return to the source." Sensing that they didn't understand the last statement, she paused then began again.

"When a Deltan is born its soul comes from the source, and when it dies it returns to the source. All through its life it continues to be connected with the source, and this in turn ties the Deltan to its world and people."

"Is this why so few Deltans leave their world?" asked Spock.

'Xi'an' nodded.

"But what is the source?" asked Kirk.

"The source is all and nothing. I am the source. I am the Spirit of Delta."

Xi'an's influence was causing the Spirit to refer to itself as a single entity.

"The connection of which you spoke," said Spock, "is the cause of the Deltan people's loss of individual will."

"Yes. It is most unfortunate, but the balance has been disrupted. Part of the whole has ended, and has not been returned to us."

Suddenly Kirk understood. "Ilia. You're talking about Ilia. She has left this realm and hasn't been returned to the source, so there is a gap that needs to be filled; and through this connection everyone on the planet can feel it. In fact they are unable to function because of it. But that doesn't explain why they woke up and came after us."

"I fear that is my fault, Captain," offered Spock. "You recall that for a time there existed a rapport between the V'ger entity and myself?"

Kirk nodded.

"To an extent it must still exist, and when I mind-melded with the Deltan all of them gained a sense of Ilia's present nature."

"I meant no harm," whispered the Spirit. "I simply sensed an opportunity to restore the balance."

"So you used the Deltan people's empathic bond with one another to send them after us," Kirk said angrily.

"Jim," said Spock, "do not judge this entity too harshly. In truth it is the sum of the Deltan people, and could only act in what it thought was their best interests."

"So what do we do now?"

"I believe I can offer a solution." Spock turned to the Spirit. "I offer you a complete mind-meld. It may not be possible for Lt Ilia to return to the source, but it *is* possible that I can provide you with some sense of her present state."

Without a word Xi'an moved towards Spock. He spread his fingers into the mind-meld position and pressed them hard against her face.

Greeditly the combined thoughts of

thousands of Deltans ran through his memories, and he offered them an image of three men standing on an impossible plateau witnessing the birth of a life form. Then, using his telepathy in unison with that of the Deltan spirits, Spock reached out beyond our dimension and connected for the briefest of moments with that unique life form.

A life form composed of pure energy, but not just those conventional forces of the universe, but also those hidden powers of love and imagination, this creature was little more than a thought, a dream, yet at the same time was more than our universe could ever hope to be. A being that was far more than we could ever truly understand, yet in reality was little more than a promise made real, gifted with the ability to continue dreaming and the power to make those dreams reality, to constantly re-invent itself in the space of a human heartbeat.

As the link faded the ethereal voice of the spirit rang out. "Thank you," it said as Spock and Ambassador Xi'an collapsed to the floor.

It was some time before either of them was able to put their experiences into words, and in that time Kirk had helped both of them back up to the Appian's ground level. When they reached the surface they found that all the Deltans had returned to normal with no memory of their experiences. They questioned the party for details of what had transpired, but they felt it better not to elaborate.

Three days later Kirk and his officers stood in Delta's main starship port.

"Speaking for myself, Doctor, I found the whole experience to be fascinating."

"That's easy for you to say, you green-

blooded... You weren't held hostage by zombies."

"Oh, be fair, Leonard," offered Christine Chapel. "It's not as if they did us any harm."

"Oh no, Chris - enforced captivity is one of my favourite pastimes."

Kirk smiled to himself as he watched the three of them make their way onto the shuttle that would take them out of the deltan atmosphere and to the starship waiting to take them home. Then he turned reluctantly to his companion.

"And how are you doing, Ambassador?"

Xi'an forced a smile. "To be honest, I'm not sure. All my life I've been so independent, so sure of my own sense of self, and then to learn that some force other than that can guide my actions... and how dependent all Deltans are on one another... It's scary."

"I can only imagine how that must feel, but if it's any comfort Spock feels that it was the strength of your will that allowed you to free yourself from the collective."

She smiled. "I'm nothing if not pig-headed."

"So what will you do next?"

"This is something that I can't run from. No matter where I go I'll carry this knowledge around with me. So for the moment I want to stay here and try to reconcile myself to the truth."

"Then I... I guess this is goodbye."

Xi'an smiled and took both his hands in her own. he pondered the change in his attitude towards her. She was still one of

the most magnetic women he'd ever met but now, rather than just a feeling of excitement, her touch made him feel warm."

"For now," she answered. "But you and I, James Kirk, are two of a kind, and this galaxy isn't big enough to keep our paths from crossing again."

"I'd like that."

"As would I. You know, it's strange. Ilia used to spend hours trying to explain to me what was so special about Terrans, but as much as I liked Will, I never understood why she was attracted to him - until now."

The two of them stood there for a few moments staring at one another. They had moved beyond words, but a kiss could bind Kirk to this woman for the rest of his life. At that moment he didn't care, but she did, far too much to deny him his true destiny. She lifted her left hand, ran it softly along his cheek and teased a lock of hair on his forehead. Then, without a word, she turned and was gone.

Sighing softly to himself, Kirk turned and walked up the gangway to the shuttle.

McCoy looked up as he entered. "You okay, Jim?" he asked knowingly.

Kirk nodded and forced a smile that no-one on board believed for a moment.

Some time later Spock tapped on the door of Kirk's cabin.

"Come," came the reply.

"The Captain of this vessel wanted you to be aware that we are now in range of Earth, and will be landing shortly."

"Thank you," replied Kirk, but his eyes didn't leave the view of the stars passing his cabin window.

"Are you thinking of the Ambassador?" asked Spock, surprised by his own curiosity.

Kirk smiled and turned towards him. "A little," he admitted. "But to be honest I was thinking more of you and me."

Spock was about to form a question but Kirk continued, "How long has this 'bond' existed between us, Spock, and why didn't you discuss it with me?"

Spock looked away for a moment and then moved towards the window Kirk had been looking out of.

"When it began I cannot say. Perhaps it has always existed between us but we didn't see it - or more likely chose to ignore it. With hindsight I can clearly see a link between us almost from the beginning, but I think we feared that if we analysed it perhaps it would go away. On Vulcan I became aware of the void that your absence causes in my life, and in desperation part of me must have reached for your thoughts, and found them."

"Quite a feat of telepathy."

"Telepathically it is impossible. Those impressions were brought to me through our bond."

"Thy'la?" Kirk asked softly.

"Thy'la," Spock replied in a tone to match.

"But what does it mean to us?"

"As you know, there is no comparison in your language. It is simply two who are together and can never be torn apart."

"But now that we're aware of this link, what will it mean to our friendship, our futures?"

"I have no idea. Perhaps very little. As I have said, I suspect that both of us have always been aware of it in our innermost thoughts."

Xi'an's words echoed in Kirk's mind.
Accept this. It will only make you stronger.

"Perhaps we should attempt to find out... together."

As he spoke he held out his right hand to the Vulcan, who clasped it within his own.

And for Admiral James T Kirk the future became a little brighter.



THE LONGING WITHIN

At night I dream of faraway places,
Of distant planets and alien races.
For in my heart is a longing so deep
That the tears from my eyes are hard to keep.

For I long to be way up there,
With others who also have a dream to share,
Travelling in a gleaming silver-white Starship
And making this wonderful journey a never-ending trip.



I long for the day when they will say,
"Come with us, talk with us, and join our play.
You need no longer look up at the stars and sigh,
For now we have come to take you to the stars in the sky."

But I am Earthbound and will be all my life,
And this knowledge cuts to my heart like a knife.
For this longing within me will always be
For a place I can never go, but can always see.



Christine Jones



GREEN FINGERS?

Amanda grows roses
 And trains Passiflora
 Which she calls 'Passion flowers'
 Just to annoy me.

Amanda has roses...
 But mine is the garden.

My lawn is of sand. Sifted, raked
 With sweep and curve and flowing line
 To echo the shape and surge of mountain-dune.
 Gravel carves paths across its wilderness.

Amanda is weeding,
 Discards the things wildly.
 They land with abandon
 To root in my lawn.

My cacti flower in granite beds
 Or spear the thorned sky.
 Jade statues, shadow-pillars
 As strong as those of Koon-ut-kal-if-fee.

Amanda has roses.
 Those roses have aphids.
 The aphids have wings, and
 My cacti have aphids...

Disguised, a rock-feature fountain
 Trickles cool water. Sweet to taste,
 Silk to the ear, rustling, refreshing
 Over hot fingers.

She waters her roses -
 Not with a sprinkler,
 But a red plastic bucket
 Which she fills from *my* fountain.

Thorn-burr Lily makes a screen
 Shielding the roses from view.
 Its blue flowers, however,
 Fade and fall when plucked.

Amanda brings roses
 Into the kitchen.
 Hall, lounge and bedroom
 All scented with vases.

Illogical, how these few plants
 Affect - infect - the entire garden -
 Not to mention the house. But then
 Logic is not aromatic.

Amanda's bright roses
 Impress those who visit.
 She gives them a cutting -
 Then gives *me* the credit.

Gill Moran



MY TURN NOW

You've won too many arguments, you stubborn-headed Vulcan,
 Outranked and outmanoeuvred me, unmovable as stone;
 Convinced yourself so utterly that logic never falters,
 And sacrifice or martyrdom are meant for you alone.
 But now I've scored a victory, defeated Vulcan logic,
 My actions quite unethical, my methods underhand.
 I've seized the opportunity, ignored my Starfleet training,
 And disobeyed the orders of my second in command.
 I won't forget those seconds as the hypo took your senses,
 Your sudden comprehension under disbelief and shock.
 No chance for fool heroics as you sleep beside your Captain.
 You thought you'd got your way again...
 Not this time, Spock!



Mrs Pippin



CONVERSATION PEACE

by

Brenda Kelsey

Spock allowed a small portion of his mind to be occupied with the results of the antics of the staff he had borrowed from Excelsior. They had expressed complete disapproval of the facilities and furnishings loaned to Spock, and had supplied what they thought was more suitable equipment from their own stores on Excelsior. He found that he was diverted by the fact that Sulu used real china cups, and wondered if their appearance on his desk was with Sulu's consent. Certainly there had been a stirring amongst his young staff when Sulu had arrived. He calculated a 43% chance that 'borrowing' had taken place.

A much larger portion concentrated on the information that Sulu was relaying to him. They had been incredibly fortunate. The damage to Excelsior had been slight; the shields had held, and all personnel who had been injured would recover. The damage to Enterprise had been more extensive: a primary hull breach and thirty-seven people dead. There wasn't a person aboard who had not been injured in some way, and the medical staff had worked until they had dropped - in McCoy's case quite literally - in their tracks.

Spock forced himself to concentrate, acknowledging that his wandering attention was merely a symptom of his own fatigue.

"The conspirators are all under guard on Excelsior. I'm fairly confident of the non-involvement of my crew. We've been 'out there' for over three years, and it's unlikely that any of them are in the 'war party' now. They'll still have to be

screened, though, just like everybody else."

The words were slightly bitter, the emotion still one of shocked amazement that senior Starfleet personnel had tried to start a war.

"They were following a course of action that they believed was for the greater good of Starfleet," offered Spock.

Sulu shook his head. "Sir, they were acting for their own best interests. Everyone that we've been able to identify so far has had a militaristic viewpoint. Not one of them chose to remember the reason we're really out here, why Starfleet was created. Hell, if they'd had their way they'd have ended up creating an Empire out of the Federation, and we both know what that would have been like."

Spock thought of the personnel of the Enterprise from the alternative universe that they had encountered at Halkan. "Perhaps we merely have better imaginations."

Sulu grinned. "Fortunately the Captains of the Klingon ships that came screaming in here after we destroyed Chang could imagine what would happen to them if they declared war on the Federation while their Chancellor was down here declaring peace."

"They are managing to restrain their more bellicose tendencies?"

"They are being polite." Sulu sighed. "It is an amazing sight! My officers are

having an interesting time trying to be tactful and finding un-obvious ways to suggest to them the most appropriate orbits to keep a full security perimeter around this planet. We could use your help, sir - they seem to accept an instruction more readily if we say it comes from you."

Spock fixed his gaze on Sulu. "May I remind you that as Captain of a Starship you outrank me, and that it is inappropriate for you to address me as 'sir'."

Sulu's grin grew a trifle more wolfish and he topped up the tea in Spock's cup before he replied. "And may I remind you that for several months now you have been acting as Federation Ambassador, appointed so by the full authority of the Federation Council. How long before you retire from Starfleet and take up the rank officially?"

Spock found that he could not meet Sulu's direct gaze.

"Thought so," was the next comment.

Spock sipped at the tea, welcoming the warmth. The Khitomer dawn was cool, and the suite of offices that he had appropriated was heated to Klingon temperature norms; his staff had so far not been able to override the environmental controls.

"Am I so transparent?"

"No. It's just... Nothing lasts forever. What we had on Enterprise was... historic! But we all keep growing, and I reckon it's about time for you to close that chapter and move on. Sir."

Spock recognised that statement was a simple proof of the content. When Sulu had served aboard Enterprise he would not have ventured such an opinion. The

Captain of the Excelsior could, and did.

Spock nodded. "You are correct. I had already decided that this was my last voyage as a member of Starfleet. The Federation Council has offered me the position of Federation Ambassador and, conditional on the satisfactory conclusion of events here, I have accepted."

Spock felt a vague surprise at the genuineness of the glad smile that lit up Sulu's face.

"Congratulations, sir! I hope to retain command of Excelsior, and I'd be more than willing to act as your transport."

Spock withdrew his gaze from the misty glory of the Khitomer dawn that was visible through the window of his office and eyed Sulu with open speculation.

"I venture to doubt that the emotions which caused you to make such a generous offer would not survive more than three voyages as diplomatic transport."

Sulu's honesty won out over his embarrassment. "I guess that I'm that transparent."

"By no means. You are the Captain of a Starship, and as such you will always resent the unfortunately necessary duties which will prevent you doing what you do best. Going out, first, and finding out."

"You could do that. You could be a Starship Captain again."

"Yes, I could." Spock paused, trying to find words to explain the reasons for his decision to accept the rank of Ambassador rather than that of Starship Captain, which had also been offered to him, wanting to explain to this Human, a friend, the reason why he had decided as

he had.

"I have already been a Starship Captain. I know it was as a teacher, and that the circumstances are markedly dissimilar to exploration duties. As you said, we all grow, and... I find that I have grown beyond that option. It would not fulfil me."

Sulu nodded, his throat tightening. "It shows, sir. You are going to be one hell of an Ambassador."

Spock's puzzlement must have shown, for Sulu continued, "Just think about it. People will expect a Vulcan, like your father. They won't be expecting you!"

"I do not understand."

Sulu scratched at his head, his turn to search for the right words. "'People will expect you to be logical, to act logically in negotiations, to... to follow the rules. They *won't* expect you to be capable of... cowboy diplomacy."

Spock's eyebrows tilted upwards, then he nodded acceptance of Sulu's evaluation. "An interesting appraisal. I will meditate on your words. Thank you."

"It's I who must thank you. You taught me so much. You all did."

The beeping of Sulu's communicator interrupted his speech and he unhooked it, flipping it open with practised ease. "Sulu here."

"Sorry to interrupt your meeting, Captain. We have a Klingon Captain who insists on talking to you. He won't take no for an answer, and I don't want to antagonise him into doing something silly."

"Okay, I'll come up. Alert the transporter room."

"Aye, sir."

Sulu grinned ruefully at Spock. "I haven't developed beyond this yet."

Spock tilted his head. "There is plenty of time for you to do so. Do not be in a hurry to cast aside what you have in order to take up another position that may prove not to be so interesting."

Sulu's grin dimmed fractionally, memories and incidents filling his mind with vivid examples, then he squared his shoulders.

"I'd be a fool not to learn from the examples in my own history, and Starfleet does not appoint fools as Starship Captains. Excelsior, this is Sulu. Beam me up." Just as the beam started Sulu added, "Though they did give Excelsior to Styles for a while."

"But only for a short while," Spock said to the now empty office.

The feeling of regret was strong, the sense of loss even stronger. He allowed himself an amused shake of the head before he returned to his self-imposed duties as officer-in-charge of Khitomer.

It was an hour before Khitomer noon when he realised that his father had entered his office.

"I interrupt your duties. I wish to speak with you."

"Of course." Spock gestured to a chair.

Sarek considered it, then looked at his son. "I have been sitting down for... far

too long, as I suspect you have. Will you join me for a walk outside? The temperature is almost tolerable."

Spock rose and the pair paced slowly along several dark corridors before exiting into bright sunlight. Spock glanced at Sarek, noted that his hands had disappeared into his capacious sleeves, and made a mental note to consider to adoption of formal robes for his future diplomatic role. They appeared to have many hitherto unnoticed advantages.

"Your staff?" asked Sarek.

"I borrowed some of Sulu's junior officers. They are enthusiastic, and non-militaristic in their beliefs. They will have noted that I am in conference with you. I carry a communicator, should they need to contact me."

"May I enquire as to the status of the persons who were taken into custody?"

"Sulu has them on Excelsior. The Romulan Ambassador and those members of his staff who were implicated are trying to claim diplomatic immunity, as are several of the Klingons who were arrested. We await the informed decision of the Diplomatic Service as to the validity of their claims."

Sarek ignored the implicit request for information. "I understand that you have decided to accept a position in the Diplomatic Service."

"Yes."

"Have you told your friends yet?"

Spock swallowed. "Only Sulu, as yet. He approves."

"I trust that they all will."

Spock stopped and turned away,

looking out over the sweeping hills towards where he knew the sea to be. It was difficult, still, to converse with Sarek on a personal level.

"I fear that one, at least, will not understand my decision."

"Kirk."

"Yes."

"His destiny was to be a Starship Captain. Your destiny is not the same as his."

"It will not be easy for him to conceive of a circumstance which would let anyone chose to be a diplomat rather than a Starship Captain."

"His opinion of diplomats is notorious. I am told that Ambassadors, when informed that they would be transported on Enterprise, have requested alternative ships."

Spock tilted an enquiring eyebrow, half turning back towards his father, who continued,

"I, however, had excellent reasons to request Enterprise. I wished to talk with you. I knew that I was dying. Then McCoy operated, repaired my heart, and I never did say the things to you that I was going to say. I apologise for my intransigence over your decision to join Starfleet. It was unquestionably foolish to disown you, and equally so to maintain a silence of eighteen years. My conduct later also does not bear close examination."

Spock completed his turn and faced his father. "I believe that stubbornness is an inherited characteristic."

"One which will serve you well in your diplomatic career."

"As it has in yours?"

Admiral."

"Yes." It was Sarek's turn to survey the distant prospect. "We heard that there were many casualties on Enterprise?"

Spock found that he didn't even have to consider the offer. "No."

"Thirty-seven dead. Everyone suffered some injuries when the hull was breached."

"He thought that would be your answer, so he made an alternative proposal, one which has the approval of the Federation President."

"The extent of your injuries?"

"Indeed?"

"Bruising, damaged muscles. Minor and ignorable."

"Yes. You will not retire from Starfleet, you will be loaned to the Diplomatic Service. You will be promoted to Admiral, so that if the occasion should arise in the future when it is necessary for you to issue commands to Starfleet personnel, you will have the rank needed to enforce those commands."

"Have you received medical attention?"

"No."

Sarek swung about, his stare fierce.

"The medical staff had too many people far more seriously injured than I to treat. They themselves were also injured. Then McCoy collapsed." As Sarek stiffened Spock hastened to explain. "The sojourn on Rura Penthe was arduous, and he is no longer young by Human standards. The events had taken their toll of his strength, and then he operated on those injured in the battle with Chang. He collapsed from exhaustion, and is currently sleeping in Sickbay. Kirk is in the next bed, also suffering from exhaustion, although he lasted sixteen hours longer than McCoy."

Spock considered the offer and the implications. "I thought that you were were to discuss a peace treaty with the Klingon Empire?"

"For purely personal reasons, I find that I would rather discuss a peace treaty with my son."

"Aided by the Commanding Officer of Starfleet and the Federation President!"

"Affirmative."

"Do I have any choice?"

"You could say 'no'," suggested Sarek.

"And you have 'lasted' until now?"

"Somebody had to. The Starfleet officers who were here were... unwilling to accept the responsibility of taking command of Khitomer."

"I am concerned that too much value has been attached to my future prospects."

"Admiral Smillie did notice. He was quite voluble on the subject of the ability of the senior staff here to accept responsibility. He wants you to remain in Starfleet, to accept a promotion to

Sarek nodded, understanding that at least without effort. "You know that it was my recommendation that sent you to open the dialogue with Gorkon. The Federation could not afford to ignore the offer of peace talks with the Klingon Empire, yet could not risk the intelligence

that might have been obtained from a Federation Ambassador of the offer had proved to be false. I was aware of the offer of a Starship Captaincy that had been made to you; it made the task of persuading the Council and the President to risk sending you to negotiate with the Klingons that important part easier. If Starfleet thought you capable of handling first contact duties, then the task of negotiating with a known contact must be within your capabilities. You proved more than capable, as I knew that you would."

Sarek paused, waiting to make sure that he had Spock's full attention before he continued with deliberate emphasis, "Gorkon expressed his... joy at his good fortune in our choice of Ambassador in several messages."

"Joy?"

"His exact word. It was his stated opinion to the Federation Council that the success of the primary negotiations was due in no small part to you. Spock, I must speak to McCoy at the earliest possible opportunity."

"About the fact that Gorkon was not a Klingon?"

Sarek inhaled sharply, then exhaled, relaxing. "Who else is aware of this?"

"I have not heard any other venture the opinion. McCoy said that he tried to tell us in the words that he spoke at his trial. He hoped that I at least would hear and understand. I knew that he had a working knowledge of Klingon anatomy; he had occasion to treat injured Klingons on board Enterprise, and he spent the time while the Bounty was being repaired reviewing the medical files in the computer banks. When he denied having sufficient knowledge of Klingon anatomy to save Gorkon, and then emphasised

how desperate he was to save his life, I was concerned. At first I thought that his memories had been tampered with. Then I realised that he was trying to tell me that Gorkon had a different anatomy from that of a Klingon, that Gorkon was not a Klingon. He has confirmed this to me since his rescue. And also?"

"Neither is Chancellor Azetbur. For the sake of the peace treaty, for the sake of the Klingon Empire, this conversation must never be repeated. And McCoy must be sworn to silence."

"He charged me with the task of informing you of his knowledge, and of his continued silence on the subject. Also that he managed to erase the recordings from his medical tricorder before it was taken from him at the time of his arrest. It is his opinion that if Chang had known about Gorkon and Azetbur, he would have used the knowledge to remove the Chancellor, rather than risk the assassination attempt by Colonel Green. McCoy said that he'd much rather appear to be a drunken incompetent than be known as the person who triggered off a war. He was prepared to die to keep this secret."

"Your friends are all of good character. Admiral Smillie has plans for them."

"Indeed?" The challenge was open and obvious, and Sarek rejoiced within himself at the immediacy of the response.

"With the inevitable loss of many senior officers from Starfleet he feels that to waste such talented people by enforcing retirement would be illogical. After their return to Earth he intends to attempt to persuade them to remain in Starfleet."

"He cannot believe that Kirk will accept any posting other than that of a Starship Captain."

Sarek shook his head. "That, he cannot offer. There are new challenges to be met now, and new Captains must face them. The most that he can offer Kirk is a ground posting as a teacher of tactics at the Academy."

"He will not accept that. Kirk will retire. And the others?"

"Scott is judged, as is McCoy, to be too old to continue on active Starship service. Scott is to be offered as position at the Academy Engineering Facility, and will be encouraged to design Starships and engines - what he did to the transwarp engine is still remembered. McCoy is to be offered a similar latitude at the medical Facility. Both will be given suitable promotions.

"Uhura is to be offered a Captaincy, not of a Starship but of a research vessel. Her first mission is to be the investigation of the paths of V'ger and the Whale Probe. This investigation is to be carried out at the express request of the Klingon Empire. Chancellor Azetbur has informed us that both probes were first detected in the same quadrant, and as the Klingon Empire does not currently have the resources to investigate for itself, and both probes had the distressing tendency to pass destructively through Klingon-controlled space on their way to Earth, she thinks it only fitting that the Federation should investigate."

"Which ship?"

"Fortunately there is a new science vessel in the final stages of completion."

"How fortunate!" agreed Spock.

"Sulu will continue to command Excelsior. Starfleet must have at least one maverick Captain. They seem to be a very valuable type of officer."

"Which leaves Chekov."

"He is also to be given a Captaincy, of the first of a new class of ship, a specially built diplomatic courier."

Spock considered another set of implications and mentally shrugged. "Is it envisaged that the ship will be in general use, or will one Ambassador be assigned to it?"

"It was thought that the concept of a highly mobile Ambassador with wide discretionary powers would be one that it was worthwhile to investigate."

"Who will be investigating the concept?"

"You will."

"I had formed the opinion that that would be the answer."

"These plans are subject to the acceptance of the parties involved, although I think it certain that Sulu will wish to retain his current command."

"He has expressed that wish."

"It only remains for Kirk to be persuaded to return Enterprise to Earth, a task which will require all your diplomatic talents. Admiral Smillie accepts that this journey may take some little time. He mentioned that Kirk might well require to 'take the scenic route'. Do you have an estimate on the time needed to make Enterprise capable of the journey?"

"Scott's staff are patching the hull." Spock unconsciously looked up to the portion of the sky that held Enterprise, a gesture noted by his parent but not commented on. "In his last report he stated that at least fifty-two hours would be needed to complete the most necessary

repairs, and that he would prefer a further forty-six hours to ensure that all the bypassed circuits were safe. I would add a further allowance for such inessentials as sleeping and eating."

"If we plan that Enterprise and Excelsior are to remain here for a period of at least eight days, it will allow for investigations to be advanced to the point where we can be confident that all the conspirators have been removed from office. It will also prove to both Starfleet and to the Klingon Space Service that occupying adjacent areas of space does not automatically mean that one has to fight."

"It will be interesting to observe the changes that this peace treaty will bring about," offered Spock.

"I have learned that if one stops changing, adapting, one begins to end. I am too young to cease my activities just yet."

Spock straightened, trying to conceal a wince as a particularly painful set of muscles protested at the movement. "It is entirely probable that I will not agree with your opinions on future events, that we will argue."

"Life would become tedious indeed if we all believed and acted exactly as everyone else. It is our diversity which allows us to grow. Without that requisite variety our culture would atrophy. I am still learning. I anticipate some very interesting times in the Council Chamber. At last I will have a potential opponent who is my equal in debate."

Sarek turned away, pretending not to notice the outright astonishment on Spock's face, giving him time to recover his composure.

"I have been asked to ensure that you are free to dine with Chancellor Azetbur. There are aspects of the Treaty on which she wishes to obtain your opinion."

"I am honoured." Spock managed to keep his voice level.

"I have a set of Ambassadorial robes which you may find useful. The temperature in the Chancellor's chambers is... quite inclement."

"I accept both offers."

"And my physician is waiting to assist you," continued Sarek dryly. "You must attempt to remember that your physical well-being is important. As an Ambassador, one with a high profile and reputation, the loss of your talent and knowledge would have repercussions far beyond the Federation."

The two men eyed one another, knowing that this was as close as they could come to discussing past events.

Spock bowed slightly. "I concede the need."

"It would be foolish to do otherwise. And while you have, at times, been brash and impulsive, you have never been foolish."

"Never, father?"



Sick Bay Incident

by Alan Boag

Captain's Personal Log : Stardate 3717.56 : Captain James T. Kirk reporting.

It is with considerable personal regret that I record the death of Security Yeoman Hendorf, killed in the line of duty on the planet Gamma Trianguli VI. Yeoman Hendorf had served aboard the Enterprise since the start of our current mission approximately two years ago and had shown himself to be an exemplary crew member with good prospects of promotion in the near future. The full circumstances of his death are recorded in the Security Log and in the Medical and Personnel records but in recognition of my respect for this fine young man I am recording a synopsis of the incident in my Personal Log.

Gamma Trianguli VI is a class M planet of a rare beauty, as close to an earthly paradise as I have seen in my career. I had high hopes that we might have discovered a potential colony planet until the ship's sensors recorded the presence of a small number of humanoid life-forms. For a preliminary exploration I ordered a Landing Party consisting of myself, Commander Spock, Ensign Chekov, Science Yeoman Landon and Security Yeomen Marple and Kaplan.

We beamed down to the surface and landed in an area that looked just like an exotic but well cared for, garden. There were flowers of all colours and trees heavy with

fruit grew all around. Above the sky was cloudless and blue. The air was fresh and fragrant, the temperature mild with a soft breeze. I had an impulse to share this beauty with Dr McCoy and invited him to join us with another couple of Yeomen. He beamed down almost immediately, bringing Mallory and Hendorf with him.

McCoy was as enthusiastic about the place as I thought he would be.

"I could settle here," he said looking all around him, a broad smile on his face.

"It is spectacular, isn't it? But you might annoy the natives."

Spock came over with a report on the soil. The area had a rich fertile soil and a more or less perfect climate. And our sensors seemed to show that the same conditions applied all over the planet. It was more like the Garden of Eden than a real planet. A puzzle.

I decide to start by investigating a village-sized collection of dwellings our sensors had detected. It was a short hike ahead of us. I was just about to call the party together when Hendorf called out. He was a little way off, examining one of the plants, a small bush covered with large pods at the centre of which was a cluster of sharp thick thorns.

"Captain!" he called to me. "Take a look at..."

There was a slight puff of noise and one of the pods exploded. Hendorf staggered back and looked down at his chest with an expression of surprise. A dozen or so of the thorns had penetrated his red shirt, clustered close to his heart. His mouth moved in a vain attempt to speak, then he collapsed.

McCoy was beside him in an instant. It only took the briefest of examinations to confirm what we all instinctively knew. "He's dead, Captain."

I called Mr Scott and had the body transported back to the ship and, warily, we continued with our expedition. On our return to the ship, Dr McCoy carried out a thorough examination of the body to get information to help prepare an antidote against the poison if we ran across it again.

Yeoman Hendorf's body is laid out in an empty cubicle in Sickbay until arrangements can be made for a funeral. Shortly after leaving the orbit of Gamma Trianguli VI the ship was caught in a massive energy storm and many of the electronic circuits were damaged. All communication systems are down so the news of Yeoman Hendorf's death has not yet been sent to Starfleet for onward transmission to his family. Consequently no instructions have been received as to funeral arrangements and Yeoman Hendorf is denied his eternal rest.

Log entry ends.

It was early in the day and Dr McCoy

was alone in the Sickbay. He had come in ahead of his usual time to finish off some essential but tedious paperwork. During the main watch there never seemed to be enough time to fill in all the forms and statistical returns that Starfleet demanded. Despite all their advances in technology and all the electronic wizardry at their disposal it still seemed as if Starfleet - the whole damn Federation in fact - ran on paper. He had just completed the quarterly return on the crew's physical testing programme and was filling out a requisition form for the next batch of drugs when he heard a noise in the ante-room outside. Mentally cursing the absence of Nurse Chapel, he stood up and went out to greet his new patient.

His visitor was standing in the ante-room in the full dress uniform of a Security Yeoman. His hands were clasped together at chest height. Between them was a phaser aimed directly at Dr McCoy as he came through the door. McCoy could not believe his eyes. He gasped aloud and took an involuntary step backward as the Yeoman moved towards him.

"You are Doctor Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer of this starship," the voice gargled out from pale cold lips. The sound made goosepimples stand up all down McCoy's spine. Without waiting for a response and with dull blank eyes fixed on the doctor's face the yeoman spoke again. "You cannot believe the evidence of your own eyes and the sound of our voice makes goosepimples stand up all down your spine."

The eyes rolled up terrifyingly in the expressionless face, the mouth twisted in a sickening leer. The tongue lolled out of the mouth and the rasping liquid voice came again. "Our eyes roll up in a terrifying way, our face is expressionless and our mouth twists in a sickening leer."

With a huge effort McCoy took a step towards the figure, sweat breaking out on his brow, hair erect on the back of his neck. Before he could open his mouth to speak his visitor spoke his thought aloud for him.

"Good God! You've been reading my thoughts!"

The creature kept the cold eyes locked onto McCoy's astonished face and took a single step forward. Then it said simply, "Go through to your surgery, Doctor. The operating room will serve adequately for our purpose."

McCoy continued to stand, a small stream of cold perspiration trickled down his temples, he could taste the salt at the side of his mouth. More urgently, threateningly, the voice repeated the command.

"Do as we say, Doctor. We are not patient."

"We?" McCoy queried, his mind reeling.

"We! There are many of us. We have commandeered this body for our use. Now move!"

"But..."

The creature gestured with the phaser. To McCoy the weapon seemed gigantic. He retreated in the face of the obvious threat. The thing, whatever it was, walked with the phaser waving dangerously close to his chest. In the operating theatre the creature gestured towards a chair. His legs weak at the knees McCoy moved towards it and allowed his body to slump into it.

"Your curiosity is natural, Doctor, and your question is anticipated. No, the dead man has not risen. He is very much dead

and will remain that way. The idea is an ingenious one but it would not explain our ability to read your thoughts, would it?"

McCoy stared up at the ghastly pallor of the other's features and stammered, "What the devil are you?"

"This," said the other, pointing a colourless finger at the motionless chest, "is a corpse."

"I know that, dammit. I'm a doctor. I know a corpse when I see one, especially when it's one I've stitched back together with my own hands. This is the corpse of Security Yeoman Hendorf. I asked, 'What are you?'"

"This is our temporary host."

"Host? Host? What are you?"

"Some time ago your vessel was caught up in a violent energy storm was it not?" McCoy nodded in silent agreement. "That was our mode of access to your vessel."

"You're some form of energy being then?"

"Oh, no Doctor, we are as physically solid as yourself but of a different order of magnitude. Microscopically small in your terms. The energy storm was simply a convenient way of effecting our entry to your vessel without your protective systems detecting our presence. Now we are using this body. We have taken possession. As the Yeoman himself might have said, this is a man possessed. It seems he had a sense of humour."

"You can penetrate the mind of a dead man?"

"Despite death there remains a residual pattern in the brain which is

quite easy to read for a while but which will dissolve in time. Your brain, however, is perfectly readable. At this moment you are wondering how you might deprive me of this phaser, you are wondering whether it is fully charged, you are puzzled as to our intentions on board the Enterprise and you are worried over the impending arrival of one Nurse Christine Chapel. There is no need for you to voice your questions, Doctor, for we can read everything that is at the forefront of your mind."

McCoy, who had indeed tensed himself ready for a leap towards the phaser as soon as an opportunity presented itself, sagged visibly. If this creature, whatever it was, was able to read his intentions as soon as the thought entered his head, what was the use?

"Exactly, Doctor, no use at all."

"Dammit, what is going on here?" demanded McCoy with a sudden burst of exasperated courage. "I don't understand, I don't understand at all."

"Silence!" The phaser waved to emphasise the command. "We shall talk and you will listen and having listened you will obey. As we can comprehend your thoughts your words are superfluous." The dull black eyes jerked wildly and the mouth twitched. The voice bubbled through bloodless lips.

"Our home world, in a far sector of this galaxy, was destroyed by natural disasters after our scientists had tampered with the very fabric of space and time. Before the end a large number of us managed to escape the destruction in the largest of our spacecraft and we have been fleeing ever since, seeking somewhere congenial to us, somewhere we could take up life again. Unfortunately the same effect which destroyed our world had also fatally

weakened the fabric of our craft. We managed to abandon it and gain entrance to your vessel at almost the last moment for us. Your arrival was most fortuitous.

"We are a parasitic race, in the sense that it is our preference to occupy and control lesser and larger beings. We can survive and operate on our own if necessary but in this environment we would not survive for long. So, we require a host. This body was the first we came across after our arrival which we could enter conveniently and so we took control of it. It took us some time to loosen the rigid joints and muscles and to restore the ability to walk and talk. Even now, our success has been limited.

"It seems that this brain in life was fairly intelligent. In death some of the memory patterns remain. We have made use of the dead brain's knowledge and abilities to formulate our communications in terms that your limited Human intellect can understand. Thus we make it possible to converse with you after a fashion. Under our control this brain, or what remains of it, told us of this weapon, its functions and operations. It also told us about you."

"Me? What have I got to do with anything? I'm a Doctor not an undertaker."

"You may be very important to us, Doctor. A dead body is not a suitable host for us. At best it is a temporary stop gap. What we need is a live body with little in the way of physical imperfections or organic disability. As we increase in numbers we will need more hosts, many more, but one will do for now. Unfortunately the susceptibility of the nervous system seems to vary in inverse proportion to the intelligence of the subject. Intelligent hosts are most use to us but are most able to resist our infiltration."

The creature wheezed loudly as it spoke; a disquieting liquid rasping sound bubbled deep down in the throat.

"We cannot guarantee to occupy the bodies of conscious, intelligent beings without sending them mad in the process. A disordered brain is of even less use to us than a dead one. No more than a broken or damaged piece of equipment would be to you."

There was the sound of movement in the anteroom, footsteps moved softly across the carpeted floor towards the door of the theatre.

"Therefore," continued the Human who was not a Human, "it is necessary for us to enter our potential hosts when they are too deeply unconscious to be aware of our presence. Thus we infiltrate the nervous system without resistance and by the time the subject is conscious we are in complete control. After that resistance is useless.

"To achieve this we need the assistance of someone who is able to deal with intelligent life forms as we require without arousing undue suspicion. In the context of your species, we require the assistance and co-operation of a doctor."

"I'll be damned if I'll help you. You can't possibly expect me..." McCoy's outburst was cut short by a grunt from the creature and an impatient gesture with the phaser. He fell silent with a look of frustrated outrage on his face.

"We can expect whatever we choose, Doctor, and no matter your personal feelings in the matter you will do all in your power to obey us. Your resistance is futile."

The awful blank eyes bulged in the pallid face. Their owner croaked and wheezed once more in a bizarre parody of

breathing, a liquid gurgling suggestive of unknown activity within the dead frame.

"This inefficient vehicle is deteriorating rapidly and it will soon be beyond our power to maintain animation. Therefore we must have a fresh healthy replacement as soon as one can be obtained."

The feet outside paused, stopped. The door opened slowly. At that instant the dead body of Yeoman Hendorf stabbed a pale finger at McCoy and burred, "You will assist us." The finger swung to point at the opening door. "And that body will be our host."

The woman in the doorway came to a halt, one hand raised to her mouth. Her eyes were wide with fearful fascination as she gaped at the bloodless mask turned towards her. There was a moment of deep silence, broken only by two sets of breathing, while the pointing finger crooked into a ghastly parody of a beckoning gesture. The grey features grew yet more ashen, the dead eyes moved in their sockets and suddenly glittered with minute specks of green light. The creature took a single tottering step towards the door. Nurse Chapel gasped, her eyes lowered from the face, took in the phaser, and as her brain finally registered the identity of the thing that held it, she fainted dead away.

McCoy reached her before she hit the floor. He covered the space in a couple of frantic leaps and caught her smoothly in his arms, saving her from bruising contact with the floor. Gently he laid her down and began vigorously to pat her cheeks.

"It's my nurse," he growled in undisguised anger. "She's fainted."

"That's enough, Doctor!" The voice was abrupt despite the liquid gurgling.

"Your attitude is irritating to us." The phaser continued to point unerringly at McCoy's chest despite the increasing instability of the body that held it. "We see from your thoughts that this condition of unconsciousness that you call fainting is a temporary one. Nevertheless it is opportune for us. You will cease your attempts to revive this 'nurse'. Instead you will take advantage of the situation. Place this body immediately under anaesthetic sedation and we will enter at once and take control."

From his kneeling position beside the inert form of Nurse Chapel, McCoy looked up at the visibly crumbling figure before him. Slowly and deliberately he said, "I'll see you in Hell first, you monster."

"There was no need to speak the thought out loud, Doctor," remarked the creature. It grimaced horribly and took two jerky steps towards McCoy. "You may do this task yourself as a living conscious entity or else we will do it with the aid of your memories and your flesh. A blast of this phaser, carefully modulated, will kill you but leave your body more or less intact and available to us. We would then take possession of you, repair the damage, albeit temporarily, and your skills would then be at our disposal. So you see, Doctor, though we prefer a living host to a dead one, either way you will do our bidding."

With a hopeless despairing glance around the room McCoy uttered a mental prayer for help - a prayer cut short by the grin of understanding that appeared on the face of the dead creature. Getting up from his knees he lifted Nurse Chapel's inert form and carried her across to the examination area. The animated corpse shuffled grotesquely behind him. Gently he laid Chapel out on one of the examination tables and rubbed at her hands and wrists, patting her cheek

again. Faint colour began to creep back into her skin, her eyelids fluttered. McCoy stepped quickly up to his work bench and reached for his hypospray. Something hard pressed against his back between the shoulder blades. It was a phaser.

"Your stubborn stupidity goes far beyond reason, Doctor McCoy. You are once again forgetting that your very thought processes are an open book to us. As soon as you can form a thought we can read it. You are trying to revive this body into consciousness. You are playing for time."

McCoy turned slowly to face the apparition. The slack face behind the phaser had sagged into a lopsided scowl.

"Return to the table, straighten out the body and apply the sedative."

Reluctantly, slowly, McCoy withdrew his hand from the hypospray and returned to the examination table where Christine Chapel lay still. Reaching up he switched on the powerful lamp that hung directly overhead.

"More delay and prevarication," gurgled the creature. "There is no need of the additional light, you are not here to examine the specimen but to sedate it. There is already sufficient light for that task."

McCoy turned off the lamp. His face was drawn with agitation but his head was erect. His fists bunched at his side he stared into the vacant eyes of his tormentor, aware of the phaser pointed at his shirt but ignoring it.

"Listen to me," he demanded. "I have a proposition to put to you."

"Nonsense, Doctor, you have no proposition. As we have already

repeatedly observed you are merely dragging out the situation in the hope that some help might arrive. You have no other proposition. Your own brain advertises the fact. And help is not at hand." The grating gargled speech stopped abruptly as the recumbent Chapel murmured vaguely and tried to sit up.

"Quickly! Sedate it."

Before either could move, Nurse Chapel sat up. She came bolt upright with her face only a few short feet away from the ghastly features looming over her. She shuddered violently, turned to McCoy and asked, "What's happening, Doctor? What's going on? What happened to me?"

A bloated hand reached towards her and she fell back again in an attempt to avoid contact with the loathsome flesh. Taking advantage of this slight diversion McCoy edged sideways in the direction of his instrument trolley. There was bound to be something he could use as a weapon against this thing.

"You forget yourself." The head swung slowly round in McCoy's direction. Points of green light glinted in the blotched orbs of the dead eyes. "Our mental attention is not limited to the direction that these eyes can see. We are fully aware of you and your activities even when we are looking elsewhere." The phaser moved to point towards Nurse Chapel. "Now, quickly, tie this body to the table and apply the sedative."

Obediently, but moving as slowly as he could without arousing undue suspicion, McCoy brought up the restraints and secured Chapel to the examination table. Cold beads of moisture formed on his forehead and upper lip as he bent over her and closed the clips. He looked into her eyes and,

assuming a courage he did not feel, he whispered, "Hang on, Christine, don't be afraid." He let slip a glance at the clock on the wall, then hurriedly looked away and concentrated all his attention on the nurse.

"So." A long drawn hiss let McCoy know that his attempts to mask his thoughts had failed. "So, you expect aid. Commander Scott is due for his regular physical, in fact he's late already. Yes, he will be of use to us. An engineer. Yes, his knowledge, especially his knowledge of the ship will be helpful, very helpful."

"You devil!" McCoy burst out, frustrated rage pushing his voice to a higher register. "You won't succeed, you monster."

"You persist in using the singular form, Doctor, as if you still think of us as the person who once inhabited this decaying flesh. You must think more clearly, Doctor. We are not singular, we are many. We are many and as we multiply we shall need many hosts, many more bodies." The pale lips parted in a parody of a smile. "Meanwhile you will proceed with this one!"

Swallowing hard McCoy picked up his hypospray and unscrewed the empty barrel. Crossing to his supplies cupboard he stood in front of it, his back to the creature, and summoned all his mental strength. Concentrating fiercely he compelled his mind to recite, "Sedative, sedative, sedative." At the same time his hand moved in another direction, towards the raw chemical shelf and the ampoule of sulphuric acid that stood there. He made a mighty effort to achieve his dual purpose. His fingers closed on the ampoule and while his brain yelled "Sedative, sedative, sedative," he loaded it into the hypo.

"Sedative, Doctor?" sneered the

tortured vocal chords of the dead yeoman, "I think not. You have been singing two songs at once. Do you think our make-up is so simple that we are not capable of detecting two competing messages from the same mind? Acid? Did you think your feeble intelligence could compete with ours? What did you think that acid could achieve? You would have burned and scarred this flesh no doubt, and speeded the decay which is already well advanced, but you cannot kill something that is already dead. We control this body through the nervous system - well out of reach of your acid. We could keep this body moving even though you burned away almost all of the flesh, and long before you could incapacitate us we would have killed you and taken you over." The body sagged and with a visible effort was pulled back into an erect stance. "Now, Doctor, get on with it."

Offering no reply McCoy moved with deliberate slowness to the cupboard, selected the correct ampoule and fitted it to the hypo. Still dragging his feet he returned to the examination table. Christine Chapel's eyes never left his face as he approached her. She said nothing but her eyes were wide with apprehension. McCoy gave an involuntary glance at the clock but, quick as it was, his tormentor caught the thought behind and emitted a liquid chuckle. "Here he is now."

"Who?"

"Your friend, the engineer, Scott. He is outside in the ship's corridor just about to enter your ante-room. We perceive the fuddled movement of his thoughts. He is apprehensive, he regrets his appointment with you, especially since it's so early in the morning. He does not look forward to the physical workout he expects to go through at your hands, he has a hangover and expects a lecture from you. In his

current state he will be an easy subject, well fitted to be our second host."

The soft swish of the corridor door confirmed the prophecy. Chapel struggled to raise her head, a glimmer of hope in her eye.

"Call the engineer in here," the liquid voice instructed. "We shall divide and take possession of both these hosts at the same time."

The veins were bulging in McCoy's head, his eyes were twitching with the effort of keeping control over his features and his thoughts. He turned to the door and called,

"Scotty, in here." Despite his best efforts to suppress it he felt a momentary surge of excitement. No phaser could point in two directions at once. If he could somehow get Scotty into the right position, somehow tip him off, if he could get on one side with Scotty on the other...

"We would strongly advise you not to try such a manoeuvre," commented the animated corpse calmly. "Don't even think about it. If you do we will kill you without fail."

Montgomery Scott entered the room without the usual spring in his step, dragging his feet in a slow, lumbering gait. He was clearly a man suffering in the grip of a hangover of monumental proportions. He came to a halt just inside the examination room when he saw Nurse Chapel held in restraining bands. He looked around the room with the air of a man struggling to make sense of the confusing messages his eyes were sending to his brain. His gaze passed over the creature with the phaser trained on McCoy and kept on round the room as if not taking in the picture. Then his head stopped its rotation, snapped back and fixed his gaze directly on the phaser.

This time the look took no time at all. His fist came up and with astounding speed slammed into the head of the former yeoman. The knuckles, with all the strength of the Scotsman's wiry frame behind them, crashed into the dead man's skull just below the ear. The effect was dramatic. The cadaver dropped to the floor with a crash that shook the room.

"Quick!" yelled McCoy. "The phaser!" Following his own advice he vaulted the examination table, Nurse Chapel and all and kicked at the weapon still clutched feebly in the flabby hand. The phaser spun across the floor and crashed against the far wall. McCoy leapt frantically after it. As the dead thing began to regain consciousness McCoy stunned it with a sustained phaser blast. Standing over the stolen body he yelled at Scott,

"Get Christine out of here. Leave this to me. Go! Go now for God's sake."

The urgency in his voice brooked no argument. Scott moved quickly to the table and released the restraints holding Chapel. Then sweeping her up into his arms he carried her swiftly out of the room.

On the floor the body of Carl Hendorf writhed and struggled to get up. The rotting eyes had disappeared completely, the sockets swirled with bilious green luminosity. The mouth gaped as it regurgitated the same bright green phosphorescence. The swarm was leaving the host. The body sat up, its back supported by the wall. The limbs jerked and twisted in nightmare positions like some life-size puppet with tangled strings. Green - bright living green - crept sinuously from all the facial orifices and pooled upon the floor.

McCoy fought back the retching in his throat, quickly set the phaser to maximum, drew a deep breath and fired.

A deep orange glow surrounded the body, pulsed impossibly bright for a few seconds, turned incandescent white and faded to nothing. When the flash faded Carl Hendorf's body and the alien horde that had possessed it were gone, their physical remains dispersed into their component elements. In his mind, though the room was silent, McCoy heard the faint dying echo of an alien scream.

In the ante-room, Scotty was comforting a shocked and distraught Chapel. It was obvious that he himself knew little of what had gone on. He turned to Dr McCoy, a series of unspoken questions on his face.

"I'll explain everything, Scotty. Though God knows it will be difficult, believe me. There is one thing though. That creature, creatures, whatever, was reading my mind, and Christine's. It knew what we were thinking practically before we did. It could anticipate my every action. How was it that you were able to hit it the way you did without it being aware of what you were doing and blasting you with the phaser? How were you able to surprise it?"

Scotty shook his head. "Ah dinna ken, Bones. At first I couldna mak ony sense o' what I was seeing, what with Christine lashed down to the table and a deid man walkin' aroon'. Then when I realised that yon phaser was pointing straight at you I just lashed out automatically. I did it without thinking."

"You did it without thinking," repeated McCoy. "You did it without thinking."

On the bridge the effects of the energy storm were being repaired, systems were being put back on-line and gradually things were returning to normal. At the

Communications console Lieutenant
Uhura spoke.

"Captain Kirk, sir."

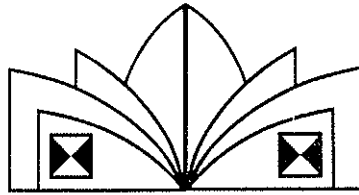
"Yes, Uhura?"

"Sir, external communications are
now restored. We have a message from
Starbase Thirteen, relayed from
Federation Agrarian Colony Ceres Beta.

The message reads,

*We await your proposals for the
disposal of the remains of our
beloved colony member Yeoman Carl
Hendorf. Please respond soonest.
Signed,*

*Arne Draco
Planetary Governor."*



A LASTING GIFT

A vision of the future,
A vision of peace,
A legacy for us to nurture,
A dream that will never cease.

His dream of life among the stars,
Of a peaceful future for mankind,
Sharing our lives with other from near and far,
Tearing down the barriers of hatred and bigotry in our minds.

So let his dream be passed from generation to generation
For it will be up to us to see it rise, not fall,
So that the children to come have an explanation
For this, his lasting gift to us all.

Christine Jones

