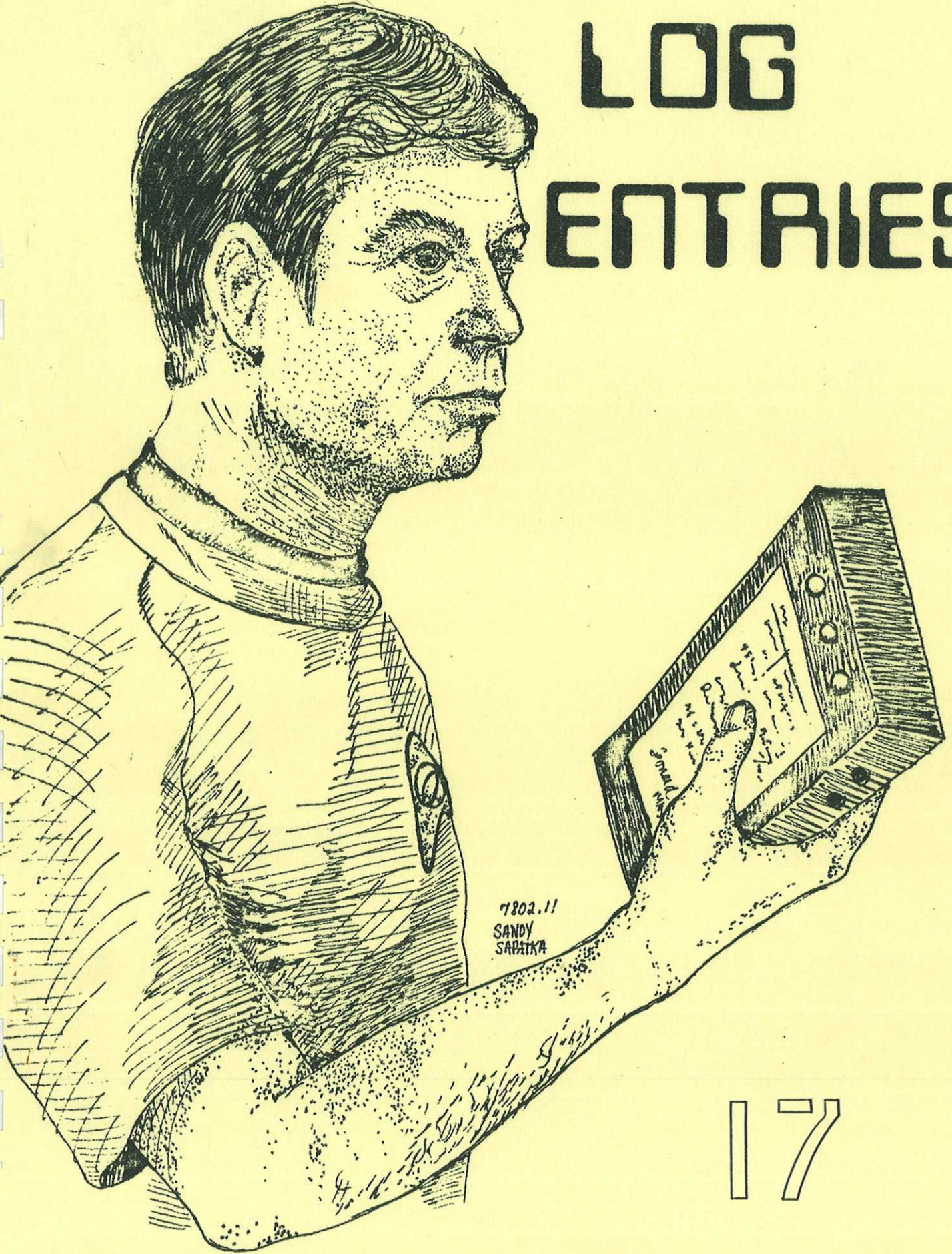


LOG ENTRIES



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Sandy Sapatka Cover, P13, 15, 51, 56
Betty De Gabriele P2, 38
Beth Hallam P 21
Ena Glogowska P 21
Alan Mason P 31, 35

Competition winner - The Bonding by Susan Meek

A STAG publication.

STAG committee - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark, Beth Hallam, Sylvia Billings.

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Hello again - doesn't time go fast!

Well, I managed to get in all the stories I said would be in, this time - and even, for once, managed to get in a little more poetry than usual!

I'm hoping in future to include a crossword occasionally - I did hope to have one in this time, but the machine I use to cut stencils has gone on strike. I found out too late to try to do the square by hand - it'll take quite a while to do that way - but I have two months before next issue, and hope to have it ready for then. I don't know whether the machine will be repaired - at the moment it seems unlikely - so we'll probably have to cut down a bit on the number of illustrations we include in future - to get stencils commercially cut is eight times dearer and would inevitably result in our having to put the price up. We feel we'd rather keep the price steady - however, let me know if you'd prefer to pay a little more to get the illustrations, and if enough would, then we'll get them in. We won't cut out on illustrations altogether, you understand, there will be some included, but not as many as most of the issues of Log Entries have had in the past.

Talking of artwork - I need more P2 type illos. I have one in stock; once that one is used there'll be no P2 illo unless some of you can produce some for me. Come on, you budding artists - you know the sort of thing we put on that page.

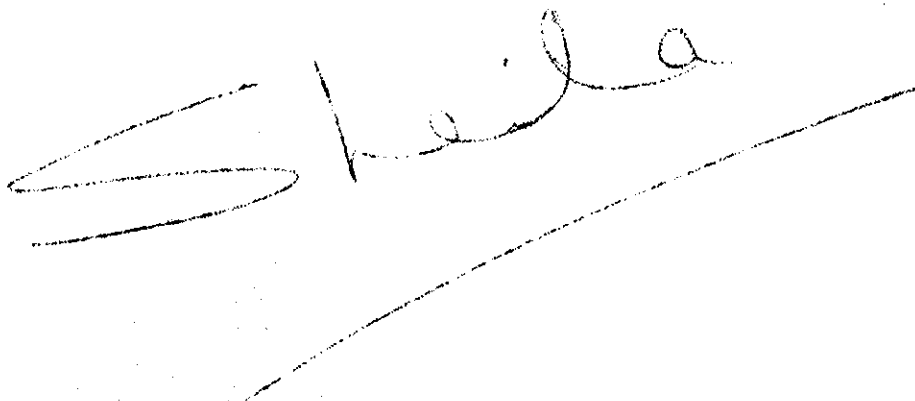
We're hoping to have Log Entries 18 and 19 ready in time for Slough; writers lined up for these are Simone Mason, Valerie Piacentini, Meg Wright, C.E. Hall, Janet Balch, Susan Meek and Pamela Dale, though I'm not sure yet which of them will be in which zine.

Thanks as usual go to Valerie Piacentini for proofreading - if it wasn't for her, you might be struggling to read something like this! (I'm a teacher, not a typist...) ((There are no prizes for guessing what those eight words say!)) Also to Janet for doing the running off. Janet and I will be doing the collating... if anyone would like to come up to Lochgilphead to participate in a very monotonous job, we'll be delighted to see you!

Non-members of STAG can get information on zines in print and on new and forthcoming zines by sending SAE or addressed envelope and IRC to

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Scotland.

August 1978

A large, handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sheila", is written across the bottom half of the page. The signature is written in dark ink and is quite fluid and expressive.



A LITTLE LEARNING..... by C.E. Hall

In the main recreation room of the U.S.S. Enterprise, an amicable argument was going on between two of the ship's most senior officers. But, for once, Dr. McCoy's sparring partner was the Captain, James T. Kirk. Their discussion was basically about the relative merits of specialisation as against diversification.

"To have complete mastery of a particular subject," Kirk was saying, "surely gives one the opportunity for the highest recognition, and, incidentally, the greatest financial return."

"Yes, maybe," conceded McCoy, "but surely it's a lot better to know a little about a great many things. At least, it means you can hold your own in any conversation you get involved in, and you never know just when a bit of information will come in handy in a practical way."

Spock, the Vulcan First Officer, who had been a little later reaching the recreation room than the others, collected his refreshments, and approached the table where the two others were sitting. "May I join you, gentlemen?" he asked politely.

Kirk nodded assent, and smiled welcomingly. McCoy, too, was pleased to see him, eager to ask his opinion on their disagreement. He'd probably side with the Captain - he usually did, but he was far more fun to argue with than Jim.

Spock gave the matter his customary serious consideration before replying. "On the whole," he said, "I concur with Dr. McCoy on this subject. Specialisation is limiting. More diffused knowledge brings with it a further incentive to learn, and to acquire added information, and therefore encourages a wider development."

McCoy almost gasped with astonishment to find Spock on his side for once. He shot a triumphant glance at Captain Kirk. "See!" he crowed. "Spock thinks like I do!"

"Indeed, I sincerely hope not!" retorted Spock in a dry tone, and McCoy's grin turned to a glare. Kirk gazed at them both with an amused smile. How they both enjoyed their verbal fencing! It was interesting to watch, though by now all three of them were aware that it belied the mutual respect and unspoken affection they all shared.

Kirk also was pleased, for the incident offered him a little diversion from the boredom he felt about his present mission. The Enterprise was on her way to Neesken's planet, a small isolated world near the rim of the galaxy. Kirk had been instructed personally to hand over some secret files and reports to the Governor there. Kirk resented such missions. He hated feeling just a messenger-boy, and knew that proud Starships were meant for better things.

But evidently Starfleet considered it vitally important, though he'd been given no details as to why they did so. He thought over what he knew of Neesken's planet. It was really an example of a colonisation failure. It had been started by a philanthropic, multi-millionaire idealist, who had hoped to create a refuge for high-idealised thinkers who found it hard to settle into ordinary societies.

But the entry formalities had been very lax, and it had become instead a haven for all the misfits of the Universe. It was a fairly affluent society, but it had a high crime-rate, which was barely kept under control by an efficient but sorely over-worked police force. The Governor, an earnest conscientious man, was still striving to bring his charge nearer to the ideal of its founder, but was fighting a losing battle. The centre of his capital city Aldanti boasted several excellent cultural centres where the genuine idealists lived in a little world of their own, but the outskirts were the haunts of a varied assortment of rogues and criminals. Not a pleasant place to visit, mused Kirk, but we won't need to stay there long, and there'll be no question of any shore leave for the crew, either.

Kirk suddenly became aware of the silence, and looked up to see two pairs of eyes regarding him. He smiled back at them. "I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said. "I was thinking about our present mission to Neesken's planet."

"It won't take long, will it?" asked McCoy. "It's not a place for social calls, I understand."

"No," agreed Kirk. "I'll only need a couple of hours to deliver and check the records, etc, that I have to give to the Governor, and to pass on a few important messages."

"Would it be possible," asked Spock, "for me to spend an hour there too?"

"Oh - why, Spock?" asked Kirk, knowing that the Vulcan wouldn't ask without a logical reason.

"In the capital city, Aldanti," explained Spock, "there is a very excellent library. The great free-thinker Sorav, who was exiled from Vulcan, ended his days on this planet. I have read most of his earlier works, but his last writings are only available here. I would welcome the chance to examine them, and perhaps make a record for my own use."

"Well, I'll have to ask the Governor's permission, of course," said Kirk, "but I don't see why he should make any objections."

So, several hours later, when the Enterprise had gone into holding orbit around Neesken's planet and contact had been established, Mr. Spock accompanied Captain Kirk and the crewman detailed to help transport the various large files and bundles of records that were to be delivered.

They were cordially greeted by the Governor, a man called Bortoni, and after a few minutes' conversation, Captain Kirk put in Mr. Spock's request to visit the library. Bortoni agreed readily, but added one proviso. "You must take an armed guard with you," he insisted. "The area round the library is not safe."

Spock was about to protest, to say that he was quite able to look after himself, but a nod from Kirk silenced him. "Thank you very much, Governor," said Kirk. Orders were issued to an aide, and within a few minutes, an armed policeman appeared.

"How long will you be staying, Captain?" Spock asked.

"Oh, about two hours, I expect," said Kirk, "but I'll wait here till you return."

"I shall return in two hours, then," replied Spock, and taking formal leave of the Governor, departed with the policeman in attendance.

Kirk and the Governor began their work, checking the lists that Kirk held against the formidable assortment of files and records.

Spock meanwhile was on his way to the library. The policeman was a good guide, pointing out to the interested Vulcan the various imposing buildings of the city. Once they arrived at the library, he introduced Spock to the librarian, explaining that the Governor had granted permission for his research, and then he retreated unobtrusively to a seat near the door to wait.

Spock soon became absorbed in his studies, reading avidly and rapidly, stopping only occasionally to record some particularly interesting passage on the ever-useful tricorder. He could have been forgiven for losing track of the time, but he did not. As the allotted two hours drew near to a close, he carefully replaced all the books and manuscripts he had been studying, and after thanking the librarian for his co-operation, re-joined the patiently waiting police officer.

Together they left the building and started back towards the Governor's Residence.

Knowing time was short, the officer had a suggestion. "We can save some . . .

time, sir, if you like," he said, "by going through some of the side streets."

Spock readily agreed, and followed on as the man led the way through his short cuts. But the thoughtfulness on the man's part turned out to be a mistake.

As they turned down a narrow alley, they were suddenly surrounded by at least half-a-dozen men, jumping out of the dark doorways on either side. The gang of attackers did not wait to see who their victims were, but charged in with upraised coshes and flying fists. Although taken by surprise, Spock and the policeman put up a spirited resistance. The officer managed to draw his pistol, only to have it knocked from his hand by an iron bar. Spock had no weapons but his skill in unarmed combat. Both he and the policeman could have handled any of the attackers individually, but the cumulative effect of numbers was too much for them. The policeman dropped first, knocked out by a pile-driving fist, and the surrounded Vulcan finally succumbed to a blow on the head from a vicious cosh, and sprawled limply to the cobbled floor of the alley.

Robbery being the motive for the attack, the victors lost no time in rolling their victims over and rifling their pockets. They were disappointed at what they found however, for the policeman's wallet furnished only a new notes and some credit cards, and Spock was carrying no valuables at all. The communicator on his belt was rejected as useless, and thrown aside. The tricorder had come adrift earlier with a broken strap, and lay unnoticed in a dark corner.

They were just about to abandon them and make off, when one, brighter than the rest, asked a telling question. "This guy's uniform - what is it?"

"I think it's Starfleet," replied another. "I heard there was a Starship in orbit."

The man crouched beside Spock, fingering the blue sleeve. "By the look of the gold braid, he's an officer," he commented. "Foxy might find that interesting." He mused a moment, then snapped an order. "Bring him along - he might be useful."

A great fellow, built like a gorilla, heaved Spock's limp form over his shoulder effortlessly, and the party made off into the darkening streets.

Captain Kirk had completed the checking of all his lists with Governor Bortoni, and was just enjoying a sociable drink with him. He would be returning to the Enterprise as soon as Spock got back, which shouldn't be long now, he thought to himself, knowing the Vulcan's meticulous time-keeping ability.

The door of the room opened suddenly to admit the harassed figure of the policeman, dusty and dishevelled, and sporting a livid bruise on his chin. He was carrying a tricorder with a dangling broken strap, and hurried towards the Governor with a worried expression on his face.

"Mellor!" exclaimed Bortoni. "Whatever has happened?"

"We were attacked, sir," explained the man, and described the incident.

"Where's Mr. Spock?" demanded Kirk anxiously.

"That's it - I don't know," Mellor stammered. "When I came round, there was no sign of him."

Governor Bortoni moved quickly to the door, and had a few words with one of his aides. Then he returned, saying, "I've instituted a search - he might have tried to find help, and got lost in the side streets." He questioned Mellor again. "Did you recognise your attackers?" he asked.

"Well, Big Joe was there, so they're Foxy Burton's men," answered Mellor.

An expression of mingled dismay and anger crossed Bortoni's face. He explained to Kirk. "Foxy Burton is our biggest problem here. He's a gangster in the old style, and has a finger in every criminal set-up in this town. He's evil and ruthless. If we could catch him, we'd imprison or deport him, but his control

of the worst side of town is so complete, that it would take a small army to get near him."

Now Kirk's worried expression was matching Bortoni's. "Still," continued the Governor, "we'll have to try and find him to discover what's happened to Mr. Spock."

"I'll get a security squad down to help," said Kirk, and got busy with his communicator, calling the Enterprise.

He emerged from the front entrance a few moments later, just as the last relay of security men was beaming down. He found the sight of nearly twenty red shirts very comforting, but was surprised to see that one of them, adorned with extra gold braid, contained the bulky form of Chief Engineer Scott.

"What are you doing here, Scotty?" he asked curiously.

Scott's expression was grim as he answered, "Sir," he said, "I've run into Foxy Burton before - on a mining planet. He was responsible for the death of a good friend of mine. If he's harmed Mr. Spock too, I'd like a hand in catching up with him."

Aware of the aura of grim Scots determination, Kirk didn't argue. He just patted the red shoulder in silent approval, and set about organising his force. Governor Bortoni was also busy marshalling a group of policemen.

"Where do we start?" Kirk asked him.

"I suppose the alley where the attack took place would be best," returned Bortoni, "and from there into the rest of the city. But he could be anywhere there," he added helplessly.

"I've got the Enterprise's sensors busy," said Kirk. "They may come up with something useful, but in the meantime, we'll carry on with a methodical search, one place after another."

And that is how it was. Starting from the dark alley where the attack had taken place, and where Kirk was secretly dismayed to notice several splashes of dark green, they moved towards the worst side of the city - an area of poverty-stricken housing, empty shops and stores, and derelict factories and warehouses. The Enterprise party took one route and the police another, and systematically combed building after building. But they did no more than disturb a few tramps and drunks, Human derelicts in a decaying world, who scuttled away at their arrival, only to return after they'd gone, to reclaim their miserable sanctuaries,

The 'bleep' of the communicator attracted Kirk's attention. He quickly answered its call.

"Captain," said a voice, "there are quite a number of people in the factory two blocks ahead of you on the right."

"Any Vulcan readings?" asked Kirk eagerly.

"Not determined yet," replied the voice. "We're still checking."

"Right, keep me informed," ordered Kirk, and closed the communicator.

He quickly identified the factory building in question, and led his force there. They entered cautiously, feeling their way through the doorways leading to the main factory floor.

Then, quite suddenly, all the lights snapped on. The surprise rooted them to the spot. They saw a long room, with serried ranks of work-benches, now dusty and deserted.

At the end of the long aisle facing them stood a large group of men, rough vicious-looking thugs, most of them armed with an assortment of conventional guns, pistols and automatics.

In the middle, wearing a pin-striped suit of ancient Earth design and a black trilby hat, was a mean-looking man, his narrow weaselly features emphasised

by long side-burns and a wispy sleeked moustache.

Well, they'd found their quarry - this must be Foxy Burton, thought Kirk to himself.

The man advanced a few steps, grinning slyly, and addressed himself to Captain Kirk. "Ah, Captain Kirk, I believe," he said. "Just the man I was looking for."

"Why? What do you want?" replied Kirk shortly.

"Your ship, my dear Captain," responded Burton, still grinning in an oily fashion.

Kirk's only reply was a snort of disbelief, but Foxy evidently expected no more yet. He nodded to one of his men, who waved an arm at someone out of sight. Big Joe appeared from behind a cupboard, pushing someone in front of him.

As Kirk recognised Spock, he was torn between relief at seeing him still on his feet and anger at the state he was in. His hands were evidently pinioned behind his back; his usually immaculate uniform was dusty and muddied, a torn sleeve revealing a green-stained shoulder. A dark graze marred one high cheekbone, and one pointed ear-tip bore an emerald stain. But his expression was calm and unafraid.

Kirk heard the angry murmur from the security men behind him. Fortunately they were sufficiently well-trained to take no rash action, but awaited orders with as much control as they could muster.

"As you see, Captain Kirk," gloated Foxy, "I have a valuable hostage. If you want him safely back, you'd better listen to what I want."

"I'm listening," said Kirk shortly. The men behind him heard the suppressed grimace in his tone, and hoped fervently that Foxy would get whatever Kirk was wishing for him.

"I'm tired of this planet," continued Foxy. "There's no profit to be made here any more. So I want to transfer all my assets, my men and all my gear, to some richer place in the galaxy, and your ship is just right for the job."

"Impossible!" snapped Kirk.

"Then you'll leave here minus a First Officer," retorted Burton. "Big Joe here would enjoy taking him apart, wouldn't you, Joe?" The giant of a man flexed his great fists and nodded, grinning widely. "I mean it," said Foxy viciously. "If you don't agree, I'll kill him." He caught Spock's arm and yanked him forward. "You tell him I mean it, Vulcan," he ordered.

Spock met Kirk's eyes squarely. "He means it, Captain," he said, "but may I take this opportunity to remind you that in Starfleet's book, the Enterprise is indispensable, while I am not."

Foxy had expected his hostage to plead for his life, and it took him a few moments to realise just what the Vulcan had said. As it dawned on him, he let out a snarl of anger and swung a vicious back-handed blow at him. Caught off-balance, Spock staggered and fell to his knees. Bound as he was, he would have sprawled headlong, had not Big Joe reached forward and dragged him unceremoniously upright. Spock stood, looking rather shaken, a trickle of bright green blood at the side of his mouth.

Behind him, Kirk heard a barely-smothered Scottish imprecation, and felt rather than saw Scotty surge forward. He put out a swift restraining arm.

"Steady, Scotty," he warned. "I know how you feel, but we've got to play it cool, or Spock may be hurt further." Scotty nodded and came to a halt.

"What are we going to do?" he whispered.

"I don't know yet," answered Kirk. "Play for time, I guess, and try to think of something." He spoke more boldly than he felt. "Burton," he said. "You can stop that! We won't get anywhere if you ill-treat him."

Foxy grinned, knowing he had an advantage. It was stand-off at the moment, both sides ready and armed for a battle, but unable to act because of the helpless hostage in the middle.

Kirk felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Scotty.

"Captain," he whispered, "I've spotted something! This place is so big that there are light switches at each end. One quick move and I could plunge the place in darkness. We could catch them by surprise."

"Just a minute, Scotty," returned Kirk, thinking fast. "Let's work this out properly." He pondered aloud, keeping his voice very low. "We could prime all our men without warning Burton's, but somehow we've got to warn Spock. If he could be ready to make a dash this way, we might pull it off. Now, how can I let him know?" he mused.

An idea began to dawn in his active mind. If he could convey the suggestion to Spock in a language his captors couldn't understand - that could do it. Spock was always mentally alert, he would be quick to pick it up, wouldn't he?

"Scotty," he whispered. "You alert the others without letting Burton's men suspect what you're up to, and I'll attempt to warn Spock."

With his mind racing rapidly over knowledge acquired in his schooldays, trying to recall the words he wanted, he began to talk to the group facing him.

"Mr. Spock," he began, trying to capture the Vulcan's full attention, "I appreciate what you said, but sometimes we have to let our actions be guided - by other people's words, for instance." Watching the Vulcan closely, he saw the slanted eyebrows rise fractionally, a sign that meant something to him after years of studying his friend's tiny variations of expression, but would be totally missed by his captors. Heartened, he carried on. "For instance," he said, "We must pay attention to the ship's motto - you know, 'Quando illumini extincti sunt, festina ad hoc'." He paused, wondering if his ploy had worked, then was rewarded by an almost imperceptible nod from Spock. And also, for a moment, though the distance between them might have deceived him, he thought he saw a slight gleam of amusement light the dark eyes.

Turning back to his men, he hissed a swift order. "All phasers on stun only! Ready when you are, Mr. Scott!"

Scotty sidled unobtrusively a few steps to his right. Then his hand moved swiftly, and the whole place was plunged into darkness.

There were confused shouts and yells from the other end of the factory. Burton's men, taken by surprise, cannoned into each other as they sought the light switches their end. Then someone got lucky, and the lights blazed on again!

Kirk peered out from the shelter of a cupboard. Not one of his men was in sight - all had shot swiftly to cover behind the first three rows of work-benches.

Burton's men were still milling about at the end of the aisle, and the accurate phasers of the security men downed at least a dozen before they scuttled for shelter among the benches their end.

But Kirk's main attention was elsewhere. Spock was running down the centre aisle towards them. He had to pass a large central gap before he could reach safe cover. As the lights came on again, he began to weave from side to side, anticipating the shots that might follow him. As the gangsters recovered from their confusion, they were quick to use their guns, and the fleeing figure was the obvious target. The men from the Enterprise did their best to discourage them with pin-point phaser fire.

But barely a yard from safety, the Vulcan suddenly stumbled and faltered. Bound as he was, he was unable to regain his balance and fell heavily. Kirk started to rise from his place, but the chief security officer moved faster.

"I'll get him!" he shouted. "Lights again please, Mr. Scott."

Quick on the uptake, Scott dashed over and doused the lights again. This time, more prepared, it didn't take Burton's men long to snap them on again.

But it was long enough. When Kirk looked, the central aisle was empty.

Thoughts ran rapidly through Kirk's mind. Where had they gone so fast? Had Spock just fallen, or had he been hit - and if so, how badly? He interrupted his reverie long enough to down one of the gangsters who had raised his head too high above the work-bench. There can't be many of them left now, he thought.

Then suddenly there was a clatter and a banging. The doors at the far end burst open, and Bortoni appeared with his band of policemen. The noise of gunfire had led them there, and they made short work of the rest of Burton's men, taking them from the rear and overpowering them easily. Soon the whole disarmed gang, including Foxy himself, all securely manacled, were being marched out, the biggest of them obliged to carry stunned comrades.

Kirk didn't see much of this, however, for as soon as he realised the battle was over, he was up the empty aisle, searching for Spock and his rescuer. He found them behind the sixth row of benches. Spock lay flat on the floor, and the security man was crouched beside him, tying a folded handkerchief around the Vulcan's leg. He answered Kirk's anxious look.

"He's been hit, sir," he said, "but I don't think it's too bad."

Kirk's eyes went to Spock's face. He was conscious and fully alert. "How are you, Spock?" he asked, reaching out to help the Vulcan who was struggling to sit up.

"If someone were to release my hands," Spock replied, "I should be in less discomfort."

One of the security men who had followed Kirk produced a knife, and carefully cut the bonds. With Kirk's eager assistance, Spock sat up, rubbing his aching wrists.

"My tricorder?" he inquired; seemingly unruffled by his adventure in spite of his dishevelled appearance.

"Mellor retrieved it," said Kirk. "It's undamaged - I had it beamed up."

"I am relieved," said Spock. "It contains items of value that I would regret losing."

"I know just what you mean," replied Kirk, thinking to himself that the item he was pleased not to have lost was slightly different - one priceless Vulcan!

Governor Bortoni and the policeman Mellor came hurrying up to join the group. "Is he all right?" asked Bortoni, gazing anxiously at Spock.

Captain Kirk echoed the question some hours later as he called down to sick-bay. Beaming up from the planet, he had delivered Spock there and entrusted him to Dr. McCoy's care, while he returned to the bridge to supervise taking the Enterprise out of orbit and away from Neesken's planet. He had taken formal leave of the Governor, who had been profuse in his thanks to the men of the Enterprise for ridding his world of one of their greatest scourges.

Now all he wanted to know was whether Spock had suffered any real harm.

McCoy replied to his query. "He's fine," he said cheerfully. "He was lucky, really. He took a nasty bang on the head, but he's not concussed, and the other injuries are only superficial, including his leg which is only a flesh wound. He's asleep now, but he'll be up and about again tomorrow, though I'll try to get him to take it easy for a couple of days."

"You'll be lucky," retorted the much reassured Kirk.

It was late the following 'afternoon' before the three met up again during a recreational break. They each collected their chosen refreshments, and made their way to an empty table. The only visible signs of the Vulcan's trials of the day before were a drying graze on his cheek and a suspicion of a limp as he walked.

Once they were settled, McCoy picked up again on the argument that they had been having just a few days before.

"Your adventure on Neesken's planet," he began, "bears out my point about the value of knowing a little about a lot of things. If Jim hadn't been able to recall his little bit of Latin, things might have been different."

"Well, maybe," conceded Kirk. His expression brightened. "Mind you, it was rather clever, wasn't it? Didn't you think so, Spock?"

"No," replied the Vulcan. "I think it bears out my opinion that a little knowledge should lead towards further study. And the Captain's knowledge of Latin is very little - his grammar and usage are execrable. I really think an early refresher course is indicated."

Kirk was just about to make a vociferous protest, when he met Spock's eyes. This time there was no mistake - a gleam of amusement shone clearly in the dark depths.

Well I never, thought Kirk, Spock is learning to give as good as he gets! He's actually teasing me, for a change. And with that amiable thought warming his heart, he joined in freely with McCoy's chortle of laughter.

THE UNIVERSE by Sandie Cowden

The dark velvet void
Turns so slowly round.
The star-studded universe
Whispers no sound.
The glorious suns
Burn brightly, and then
They slowly turn red,
And then black, and then...

Life lives on,
As worlds are born.
New races see
The glorious morn.
A rising gold sun
Dispels the sight -
That glory of glories!
The black, starlit night!

Long aeons pass...
The worlds grow old.
Lives they have known
Have perished of cold.
Peoples have fled
Or died, as they must.
Now no-one knows:
The memories are dust.....

Security man Grundy
Joined on Sunday -
Dead on Monday!

THE BONDING by Susan Meek

There is nothing unusual about a mother attending her son's wedding. But, thought Amanda, there can be few who could claim to have done so when their offspring was only seven.

The ceremony taking place this day would not be recognised in any Earthly terms as a wedding, yet the end result would be the same; the joining of two people together, probably for life.

There was certainly a fair gathering of important Vulcankind here today. The family from whom Spock's mate had been chosen was as ancient and respected as Sarek's own. The 'Kah' ceremony traditionally took place at the home of the girl-child. On the other side of the spacious room with the rest of her family stood T'Pring's grandmother T'Prena, one of the most respected women on Vulcan after her - Amanda's - own mother-in-law. T'Pau herself, as Matriarch of the groom's family, was here to preside over the ceremony. She stood in the centre of the room, the two children in front of her, about to commence.

Sarek was by Amanda's side and she knew what he must be thinking; today is is yet another step, another stage in the path of our son's becoming a true Vulcan. Father had been coaching son for weeks in the correct forms of the ceremony, helping to ready his telepathic abilities, as T'Pring's mother would have been preparing her.

In many Earth cultures the practice of arranging marriages when children were very young had been going on for millenia, but had never been carried to the extent it was taken to on Vulcan. This was no mere betrothal that could be broken when the parties became old enough to make their own decisions. For all she had accepted Vulcan traditions and life, this was still a little difficult for Amanda to come to terms with.

She felt T'Pau's usual searching glance moving over her, then over her son. She was careful to keep her face composed, her posture erect and proud. There was good reason for that pride. T'Pau would find nothing to criticise in her son today. He looked very calm and serious. Despite his youth, he was beginning to show a strength of character that would no doubt be needed to help him through the years ahead. All youth could be cruel, but Vulcan youth, it seemed, especially so, taunting the half-breed for his humanity, his difference. It was strange how these people, who valued difference so much, could be so intolerant of it during their youth.

T'Pau began repeating the very old, time-worn words that would end in the forming of the 'Kah'. Her voice took on an almost hypnotic quality as she got the two young ones ready for the all-important mind-link.

What, thought Amanda, will the future hold for these little ones? Her son Spock, treading a path that was not easy at the best of times, would have to try twice as hard as the others. Would there ever be a real home for him on Vulcan? And little dark-haired T'Pring... what kind of wife would she make? She had a pretty face with high cheekbones that held the promise of great beauty in later life. Yet Amanda thought she could sense a certain quality of over-self-possession, haughtiness, even. There seemed to be just a hint of disdain in the otherwise expressionless face. While no doubt an obedient, disciplined child, perhaps little T'Pring did not like the idea of being bonded to a half-Human? Or maybe Amanda was reading too much into one so young. T'Pring had many years in which to grow.

Amanda had hardly realised that T'Pau was almost finished her recitation, and her son's voice, young but controlled, was making the time-tested response, "Kah-if-far." He took a deep breath, his face set in concentration. Suddenly, he looked so much older than his seven years. He must be aware of those critical Vulcan eyes focused on him from all over the room. This was Spock's first real test of his telepathic abilities and no doubt many wondered if the Human taint had weakened the trait.

His hand reached out to touch T'Pring's temple. After a long moment of looking into his eyes she replied, "Kah-da-mor." Then her hand reached up in a similar gesture.

Minds... touching yet not touching. A brief contact, for a second seeing each other's selves, but too young to understand what it meant. Bonded, yet still strangers...

It was over in seconds. The 'Kah' was formed. The consequences of this day would not be felt for a long time, but they would come, as inevitably as Vulcan's sun rose every morning. While these two children grew and developed into the people they were destined to be, the link would lie dormant in their minds. Even if as adults they found their personalities and temperaments were not suited, if they discovered other people they would prefer to have as life partners, it was irrelevant. When the time was ripe, the 'Kah' would pull Spock irresistibly from wherever he was to the ancient family ground, to Koon-ut-kal-if-fee.

After that, logic would probably dictate they stayed together the rest of their lives. Only one thing could break that. The awful Kal-if-fee. The Challenge.

But the odds of that happening, thought Amanda, are so slight, they're hardly worth thinking about.

Then for a fleeting moment, as she looked at the two children a strange feeling passed over her. She dismissed it. Deja vu... is not logical.

She was extra-careful to hold herself calm, erect. It was over now. And after all, no-one cries at Vulcan weddings.

LEAVING by Gillian Catchpole

"You must go after him, speak to him,
 You can't let him leave like this,
 Not without saying goodbye.
 He's told you his decision,
 Accept it, for he will never change his mind.
 He has his father's stubbornness.
 Let him leave,
 Let him be judged, not by blood
 But on the merit his skill and knowledge deserve.
 On Vulcan, his Human blood in the eyes of some
 Will lower his status,
 Whatever achievements he might attain.
 Listen to him,
 Give him time to explain
 And understand him just a little.
 On Vulcan he has sought acceptance
 And found only himself apart -
 Never quite belonging.
 The struggle has been long and hard
 To become the perfect Vulcan you most desired;
 In truth he has become
 All you could ever have wished for
 In a wholly Vulcan son;
 More so than I once thought ever possible.
 So be proud of your Vulcan son
 For he will aspire always to your highest hopes,
 But understand just a little
 The anguish of his life."

TREFFPUNKT* by Sandy Sapatka

"Hey, Runt! Watch where you're going!" The yell sounded off the metallic walls of Space Station K-10.

The object of the warning stumbled on the moving walkway at the last word, and then neatly regained his balance.

"I'm O.K.!" he shouted with laughter, obviously enjoying himself.

Sam tried to catch up to his wayward brother, who now purposely careened off the tubular walls of the walkway, and, reaching the end of the tube, disappeared from his sight.

The older brother sighed, with all the resignation of a seventeen-year-old asked to watch a younger brother who didn't need watching. He started to step on the walkway but changed his mind, retreating the way he had come, muttering.

"Runt can take care of himself. I have studies to work on..." A passerby looked at him strangely as he talked to himself.

Ever since the disastrous backpack trip of which he and Runt had been a part, Sam was well aware of his brother's independent capabilities, much to his own embarrassment. Runt had taken over the situation with courage and leadership, but he was the youngest of the group. Sam still smarted from that affair because it had forced him to examine himself and his goals. He had had the painful experience of having to grow up.

The realisation that he was not the kind of person that could be a part of Starfleet, the dream of so many young men, was especially painful. What added to the ache was the obvious qualification of his younger brother and he didn't think Runt was fully aware of the implications. He was fourteen, an age of paradoxes; man-boy, security-insecurity, dreams-reality, freedom-restraint and little responsibility or decision. Sam saw much in his brother - some of which he viewed with suppressed jealousy and some which he grossly underestimated. The backpack trip last year had revealed the latent strength and sureness that lay dormant in the sheltered life of a boy.

Sam reached the corridor of their assigned rooms on the Space Station, and met his father coming out.

"Dad, I lost Runt in Tube 6."

"No matter, he can't go very far and we both know he can take care of himself. He just wants to explore." The older man's eyes twinkled and Sam basked in the father-love. "Your mother is over-concerned, Now, I have to go make the final arrangements for our departure. The ship leaves for Tarsus IV in twenty hours... Uh, are you packed up, son?"

"Yes, Dad, and I would like to study for a while."

The father touched his son's shoulder and went on. Sam stood in front of their door, and pressed the entry combination. As his father stepped into the tube, he heard the swoosh of the sliding door.

* Treffpunkt means 'meeting point' in German.



George Kirk was a tall, handsome man who carried an air of assurance. He was enormously proud of his sons. Sam was enrolled in a leading scientific university and would be carrying out his studies independently on Tarsus IV where the family was to be involved in a colonization project. It had taken a great deal of talking to get his wife to accept the idea of leaving Earth and becoming part of a young colony on another planet. George knew it was the closest he would come to wandering the spaceways again. He had resigned his commission in Starfleet when Sam had been eight, and Jimmie, five. It had come to him that he had barely seen Sam one year in the eight he had lived, and Jimmie even less. It had been with honor that he had served in Starfleet and he often missed it, but he loved his family more. His wife was a simple, sweet woman who, as a wife, mother and companion, excelled. She hadn't had a career though she had the education and intelligence for one. She had been happily nested on Earth. Going to Tarsus had seemed ridiculous to her. However, she also loved him and knew he needed to be off again, and so had let him talk her out of her reluctance. Space travel made her nervous.

George smiled at the thought. Passing the entry to the observation deck, he didn't notice his younger son staring motionless through the observation port.

Runt thought he could feel the stars staring back at him. His heart was beating wildly in contrast to his relatively calm exterior. This was so exciting! Going to another planet! - but, even better, was the trip through space! It was even exciting to be on a space station waiting for the next part of their journey. There were all kinds of people and beings coming and going. He had even managed in their short layover to sit in the bar and watch everyone that came and went. He especially watched Starfleet personnel and noticed how they carried themselves, and envied them.

The observation deck was usually unpopulated. Those who stopped at a space station were usually too busy to stop or the sight was all too commonplace. Runt wanted the sight he looked at to become familiar, but he doubted whether he would ever weary of it. He wanted the universe to explore. His goal was Starfleet and he was determined to reach his goal. Everything on Starfleet that he could acquire from the tape library he read avidly. They were talking of a new fleet of Starships that would be the contact between new races and colonies and would explore the uncharted reaches of the Galaxy. He couldn't even tell his father of the tremendous ache in his heart to be on such a Starship, because he knew his father would hurt for him if he didn't make it. The competition would be so fierce!

Voices interrupted his reverie. Someone was talking just out of eyesight in the corridor.

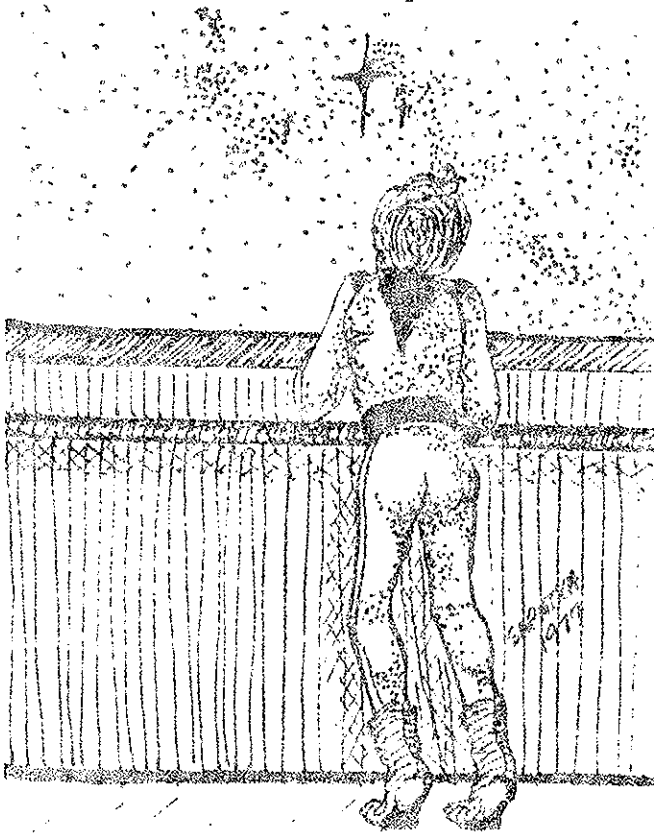
"This is the observation deck, the only place on the space station with an actual view of the 'outside'... in here, please. It can also serve in an emergency..."

Runt turned around to see the tour group coming through. He stared. There were ten people who moved with somber authority and dignity, although at least four of the group were children, some younger than himself. Only one member of the party had a smile on her face. She was Human to outward appearance; the others were not! They had sallow complexions, black hair, and pointed ears - Vulcans! He had never seen a Vulcan before and he had never seen any children of an alien race. The men all wore the mark of an ambassador. Runt felt strangely out of place. He felt that he should kneel or something. There was such authority here! As a typical Human boy, however, he was intensely curious. He saw the Vulcan children eyeing him as well. As the tour guide talked on, and the children studied each other, Runt's young heart had instilled in it another twinge of restless longing - for the kind of life that would bring him into contact with many beings and races.

There was one Vulcan boy whose glances at him were more frequent. In order to appear casual under this scrutiny, Runt leaned back against the rail, misjudged the distance, and landed unceremoniously on his derriere, hurting his pride! As he landed, he saw the boy who had been watching him break into a smile, check himself, and look away abruptly. He received a stern, reproving look from one of the men, and the man received a sigh from the Human woman. Runt was more concerned with recovering his dignity. As he got up he turned towards the disappearing group. He caught the dark eyes of the Vulcan boy once more, and nodded an acknowledgement. Then they were gone.



As he turned back to the viewport, his attention turned back to the stars, and he attempted to catalogue the sight in his mind, the preceding incident not even enough to talk about later to his family.



In the tragedy and excitement of the next two years he almost forgot the incident entirely, except for the essence of his first lesson on the stoicism of the Vulcan way and that there were exceptions to this value. The tableau of the Vulcan boy's suppressed smile, the disapproval of the man and the look of the woman would be forgotten, but the dark eyes would some day seem familiar.

The experiences that awaited young James Kirk were of such magnitude that his entry into adulthood would be abrupt. When the dreams of this time would become reality, he would not remember the longing of the present. When his contact with alien beings and life forms became to him a part of his background, his first meeting with Vulcans wouldn't even be a thought, but somehow Vulcans would remain special.

The blond highlights in his hair picked up the dim light of the deck. The small thin form of a boy, just ready to turn into a man, stood and looked in the waning days of his childhood.

THOUGHTS by R.E. Young

Words with little meaning:
 "Seek and ye shall find"
 For I sought throughout the Galaxy
 Only to find
 Ignorance, Prejudice, Fear...
 I was barely existing in my loneliness
 When you found me -
 Unlocked this cold embittered
 Heart of mine
 And threw away the key.
 Then slowly
 My eyes were opened to its wonders
 And I knew
 Joy...
 Comfort, Acceptance, Refuge,
 Once unreachable
 To such as I.
 And now, I rejoice...
 For in knowing its meaning and its beauty
 I can accept... and return...
 LOVE.

VOYAGE by Ellen L. Kobrin

Come with me, my friend,
 To my desert world.
 Perhaps you will gain more insight,
 An understanding of the conditions
 That molded my character.

Land of my fathers
 And of their fathers.
 Land of bleached sand
 And sun-reddened sky,
 Dryer than the dust
 Between the stars we travel.
 Dark-bright, omnipresent heat
 That purges mind and soul,
 Leaving only the discipline
 And pure clarity of logic.

Would that we were able
 To travel there together.
 But your alien, Human structure
 Could not withstand the climate;
 Could not exist for long enough
 In the scarcity of oxygen
 To see the truth of me.
 So in place of a real journey
 We shall have this instead.

Come. Touch my mind
 And I will share with you
 My thoughts, my memories, my heart.

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY by Meg Wright

"Maintaining standard orbit, sir."

"Very well, Mr. Sulu. Lt. Uhura, pass the word to Kyle to start beaming down supplies as soon as they are ready. I'll be in my quarters if anyone wants to apply for shore leave. You have the con, Mr. Sulu."

As the helmsman took the command chair, Chekov snorted derisively, "Shore leave - here?"

"Well, we shall be here for fifty-six hours should anyone want to take the opportunity for a little R & R." Uhura's tone was bland.

"Shall we go?" Sulu grinned at her over his shoulder.

She grinned back. "Some other time, Mr. Sulu."

"It's not the time that's wrong," Chekov said gloomily. "It's the place!"

Kirk did not seriously expect anyone to apply for shore leave under a pressurised dome manned by scientists; when those scientists were exclusively Vulcan no-one on board would be crazy enough to consider a visit relaxing.

His door buzzer sounded. "Come. Bones! I hope this is purely a social visit. I'm looking forward to a day or two's peace."

"Not entirely social." The doctor seemed ill-at-ease, his normal sarcasm for once abandoned. "Jim, I'd like to apply for shore leave for a couple of days."

"You'd - what?"

McCoy acted annoyed. At least, Kirk thought it was acting. "Is there any reason I shouldn't apply?" he asked truculently. "I get tired the same as everyone else."

"Yes, but... "

"Well, do I get shore leave or not, Captain?"

"Quit pushing, Bones. Sure you can have shore leave if you want it."

"Good. I may be gone the full forty-eight hours." He turned to go.

"Bones!" Kirk shot out of his chair and round the desk. "Why?"

"Is there anything in the regulations that states I have to give a reason? This isn't a prohibited area, is it?"

"No, of course not. But you, of all people, to apply for leave here - you must have a reason."

"Is this for the record?"

"No, and I shan't hear what you say."

McCoy nodded. "Good. I haven't said anything."

The doors had hardly closed before Kirk's bemused eyes when the buzzer sounded again. This certainly wasn't a social call.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Spock?"

"I should like to apply for forty-eight hours' shore leave, sir."

"You, too?"

"Sir?"

"Taking McCoy on a Vulcan pub crawl?" Kirk grinned.

Spock's expression was glacial. "I fail to understand why I should encourage

the ship's Chief Medical Officer to attempt a pergrination on the ginglymus joints to find an inn of a type that is unknown in my culture."

Kirk knew when he was defeated, but before he could say so the door buzzer called his attention for the third time in ten minutes.

"Permission granted, Mr. Spock. Come in, Nurse Chapel. What can I do for you?"

The nurse shot one reddened glance at Spock and stammered uncharacteristically. "Nothing, Captain, that is - yes - I mean - may I have forty-eight hours' shore leave, sir?"

Kirk glared round at Spock, but the doors were already closing behind the Vulcan.

"Shore leave, Nurse?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here?"

"I understood it was in order, sir."

"Yes, it's in order, Nurse. I'm just surprised." He paused, giving her time for an explanation. The silence lengthened until the nurse's embarrassment almost became audible. "You'd better get going, you don't want to cut your leave short. We're not going to be here for long."

She mumbled something incoherently, and practically ran.

Kirk ruffled his hair pensively. Were they all going together? He could think of few more unlikely trios. He left his cabin abruptly.

After all, a good Captain has to make regular checks on all departments.

All three of them were in the transporter room. As the doors opened McCoy swung round - guiltily? - and stumbled up the step. He hurriedly thrust the bundle he was carrying into Christine Chapel's arms.

"Are we all ready? Energise, Scotty."

As the beams flickered, one round, pale pink sphere wobbled from its precarious position on top of Christine's armful. It rolled clear of the pad and down the steps, rattling as it did so, and came to rest at Kirk's feet as the landing party disappeared.

Kirk bent and picked it up by its twisted plastic handle; he shook it tentatively - it gave a brief surge of musical notes. A second movement produced a soft trilling sound. Scott came round the console and inspected it. Kirk obligingly shook it; a peal of tiny bells rang out. Scott nodded. "I see, sir. A random selection of sounds produced by oscillation. What is it, sir?"

Kirk cocked an eyebrow at him. "A baby's rattle, Mr. Scott."

They surveyed it blankly.

Curiosity killed the cat, Kirk mused, it has been known to put a Vulcan I know into danger, but it's driving me to drink. He poured Scott another Scotch. For once the Engineer had abandoned his technical journals and joined Kirk in the rec room. Kirk endeavoured to maintain a lofty indifference.

"Is the supply transfer going well?" he enquired.

"Aye, sir." Scotty studied his glass reverently and drank. "All going according to plan. Unfortunately! No problems here."

A wild idea hit Kirk. "Any their end?"

Scott lowered his glass just far enough to see Kirk's face. "None they haven't been able to handle," he said regretfully.

"Scotty, you haven't...?"

"Me, sir?" The Engineer was outraged. "Nothing they've been able to trace," he expanded, confidentially.

"Thank God for that." Kirk relaxed. All the same, it would have been good to find some reason to beam down and find out just what was going on. He straightened. "Scotty, has that - Nurse Chapel's - er - hand luggage, has it been sent down to her?"

"I don't think so, sir. I'll find out."

"Oh no you won't." Kirk got up. "Rank has its privileges, Mr. Scott. I'll handle this one."

Dignity, he reflected as he waited for the viewscreen to light. Dignity and decorum when addressing a Vulcan. No good trying the 'all pals together' approach. He brought his hand up smartly in the Vulcan salute. Thank goodness he'd practised it until it no longer took a measurable time for his fingers to acquire the correct outline.

"Dr. Sanek. We have discovered a piece of equipment left behind by Nurse Chapel. Have I your permission to beam down and hand it to her personally?"

"You may do so, Captain. We shall welcome the opportunity to meet you."

The tall, greying Vulcan awaited him at the arrival booth. "We are grateful to you, Captain, for allowing your Doctor and Nurse to attend T'Pela. I imagine the equipment Nurse Chapel omitted to bring was not vital to this mission."

"I imagine not." What the hell was their mission? At least he knew now they hadn't come down on a bust. Not that he'd ever seriously imagined they had. Not here. And not with Spock. "However, I thought it best to bring it down. May I see her now?"

"I believe so." Sanek paused before a closed door. Unless Kirk was suffering from an auditory hallucination, the thin wail of a very young baby was coming from behind it. It slid open.

"Come in, Dr. Sanek." McCoy's voice was formal. "Come in, Captain."

As Kirk followed behind the Vulcan, McCoy gave him an unholy grin, instantly checking his features to solemnity as the Vulcan turned.

"Ah, Dr. McCoy - er - I thought you might need this." Kirk fumbled at his belt and brought out the rattle. "Nurse Chapel dropped..." He ran out of voice.

Christine had entered from an inner room, carrying a tiny, protesting form. "Healthy lungs," McCoy commented, watching Kirk's face.

"Er - yes." The kid was certainly cute. Those upswept ears emphasised the elfin quality and the likeness to Spock was astounding.

"Isn't she just adorable?" Christine was all mother. "Have you ever seen anything so sweet?"

Sanek's eyebrows lifted imperceptibly. "I will leave you with your crew, Captain. Please stay as long as you wish."

McCoy shook his head at Christine. "I keep telling you not to coo over that baby in front of Sanek, Nurse. He's a scientist, not one of the medical staff. He doesn't understand the necessity."

"Bones!"

"Yes, Jim?"

"Stop giving me that wide-eyed innocence. Why are you having a busman's holiday?"

McCoy's control slipped again. "I told you he'd get down here somehow, didn't I, Nurse?"

"Whose is that baby?"

"Don't look at me," McCoy protested, "and don't raise your voice; you'll frighten the child. Even a Vulcan baby doesn't like loud noises and this one has Human characteristics."

"Whose is it?" It was a good phrase for hissing, Kirk discovered.

"Perhaps we may return my cousin to her mother now," a calm voice interpolated. "The child is hungry and should be fed."

"Spock!" Kirk whirled round. "Your cousin?" Well, it accounted for the likeness and was a more likely, if less satisfying, explanation than the theories he had been extrapolating.

"To be more precise, sir, her mother is my second cousin. Her father was Human but unfortunately died soon after the marriage. As the Enterprise was due for a visit here, T'Pela asked me if I would stand in his place at the birth ceremony."

"I see. But why didn't you tell me?"

The eyebrows rose fractionally. "It did not occur to me that you would be interested, sir."

"Interested!" He rounded on McCoy. "That was your doing, Bones. You made the whole thing into a cloak and dagger affair!"

McCoy was frankly grinning. "Thought it might give you something to think about, Jim. Well, I've work to do, haven't time to socialise. See you back on board tomorrow."

Kirk finally cornered him in his office. McCoy noted his expression and decided to come clean.

"Spock told me their medical team would like a little advice on the handling of Human babies," he explained. "T'Prill has different needs from a fully Vulcan child and she has no father to help supply them. Christine and I went to demonstrate Human mothering techniques, that's all."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

"It was worth it," McCoy told him. "If you could've seen your face when Christine walked in - I couldn't believe my luck when I saw how like Spock that baby is - poor little mite!"

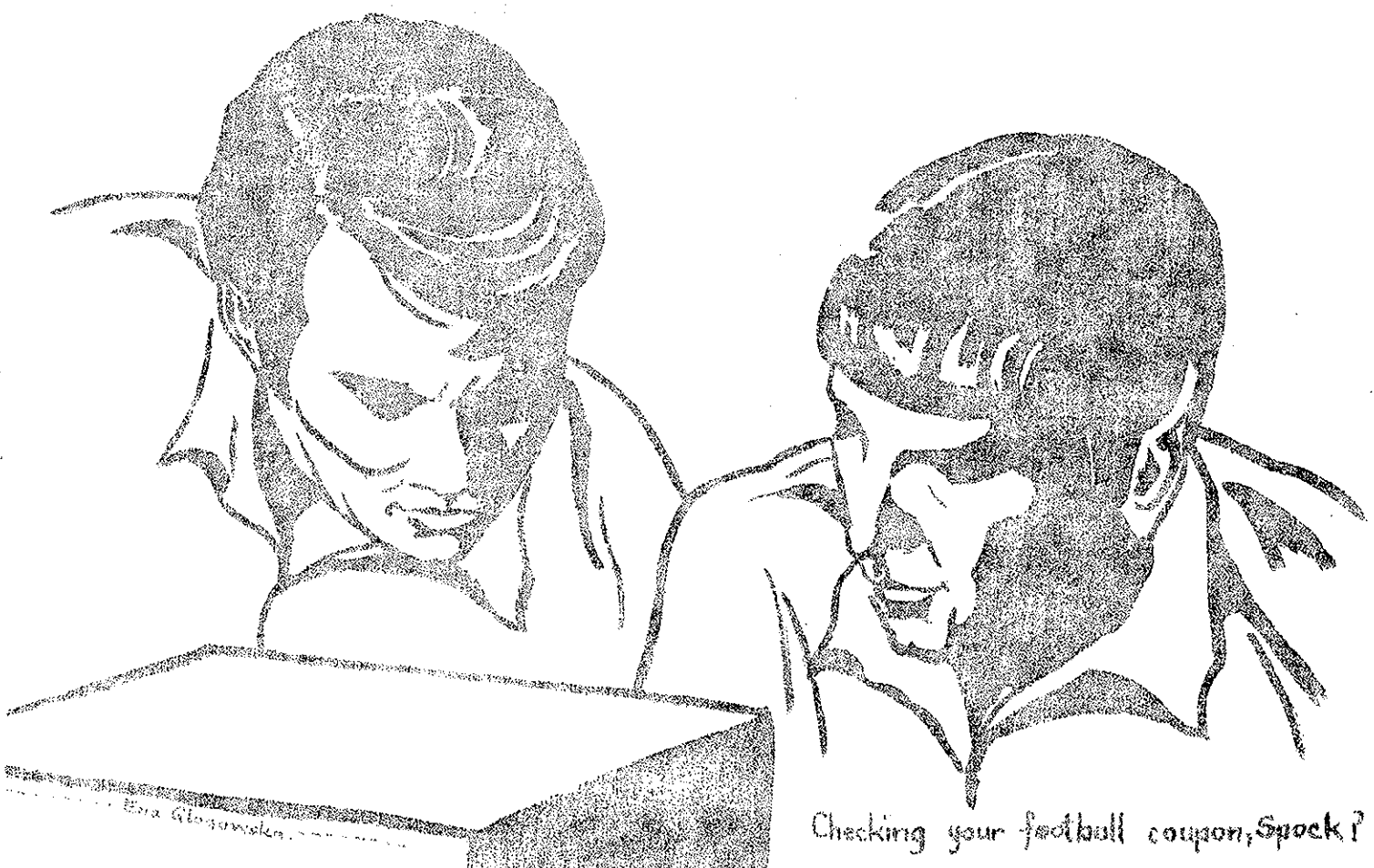
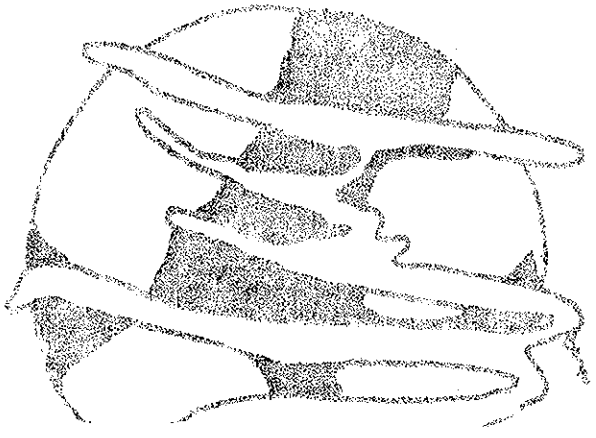
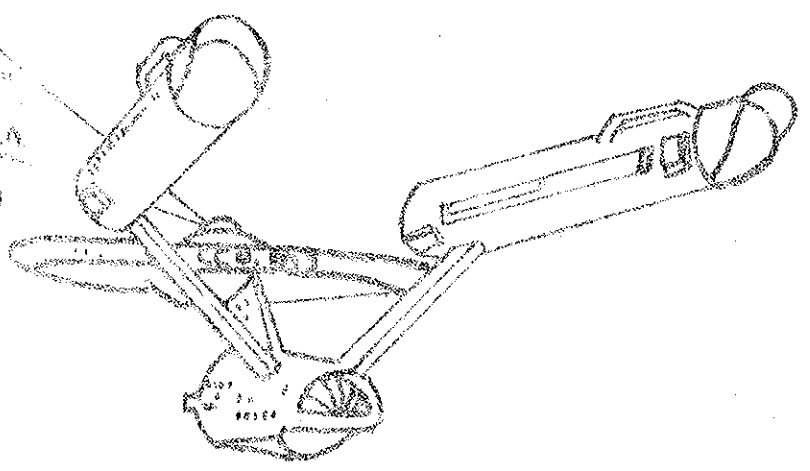
Kirk frowned. "You shouldn't have done it, Bones. It might have harmed his position with the crew."

McCoy's eyes opened in an innocent stare. "Might have made him seem more Human, Jim. In any case, no-one knows anything about it except Scotty - and Uhura, of course."

"Uhura knew?"

McCoy chuckled. "She is Communications Officer, Jim. She gets to know most things; and she knows when not to communicate as well." He sighed. "Oh well, back to routine. Where are we due next?"

I don't care what your
history tapes say, Mr Spock.
We are not going down to
10,000 fengle so you can
see 'Crossroads'!



Checking your football coupon, Spock?

VISIT TO AN ICE PLANET by Simone Mason

On the bridge of the Enterprise, Kirk was listening grimly to the reports from his senior officers. It was clear that there was little hope of saving what was left of the Coldar Colony, in spite of the haste with which they had answered the distress call.

But the colonists had been a courageous group, determined to overcome any obstacle, and well equipped for any emergency. Nevertheless, illness had beaten them, and many were already dead when the Enterprise arrived.

"I've found the medical log, Jim," McCoy was saying, "and it's not a pretty picture. The disease - it can only be called a plague - is unknown, and in spite of intensive work on an antidote, the doctors here found none."

"How long does the illness last?"

"Between two and four months. My lab is at work, Jim, but everyone's baffled."

"Spock?"

"No success either, Captain. We have combed the planet as widely as we could, and the disease is definitely not native to this world. No insect, plant or any other factor has been discovered which could cause the 'plague'.

"Thank you, Bones, Spock. I'll beam down and see for myself before making my report to Starfleet."

On his way to the transporter, after being fitted with protective clothing against infection, the Captain reflected on the ghastly problem. The conclusion that it was of alien origin was the next logical step, and Kirk knew the planet was of strategic importance, but who...? Klingons? Romulans? Orions? An unknown race? Whoever it was was not likely to help save the colony, and the Captain felt powerless against a race using such a weapon and killing women and children to gain a world.

McCoy and Spock went with him on a tour of the settlement, and the Doctor said with understandable dejection, "We're beaten, Jim. We found nothing, nothing at all, which could cause this. It's highly contagious, therefore hopeless! We can't save any of the colonists."

"Spock, have you any theory?" asked Kirk.

"Only one, Captain. A substance, unknown to us, had been introduced here to provoke the plague, but has dissipated by now, hence the lack of success."

"Yes, that seems possible," sighed Kirk, "and whoever did it won't tell us! All the culprits have to do is wait some time in order not to arouse suspicion, then arrive here as though discovering the planet, and occupy it. We could prove nothing."

"I doubt that it would help even if we knew the cause, Jim," said McCoy, scanning a report handed to him by M'Benga. "This plague resembles the one which destroyed the Lampden Colony about ten years ago. No cure was discovered then. There was a natural cause there, though, while here we've found none."

"So all I can recommend is to put the planet off limits for an unknown reason!"

The door of a dwelling burst open and a man ran out shouting curses. He ran at the group and seized Kirk roughly. "What are you doing to help us? Nothing! If you had the plague, you would do something... "

The colonist was trying to rip Kirk's clothing off when he crumpled under Spock's nerve pinch, dragging Kirk with him. The protective clothing was strong and would never have ripped had not the Captain fallen against a sharp stone edge which tore a hole.

McCoy and Spock extricated Kirk from the colonist's clutch, still fierce although he was unconscious, and it was the First Officer who saw the hole. As befitted such highly trained Starfleet officers, no-one panicked. The Captain was beamed back immediately and put into an isolation unit for observation. Fifteen days was the incubation period; that much was known.

It was a rather depressed and impatient Kirk who paced up and down his isolation chamber, although Spock kept him informed and took his orders at regular intervals, apart from the frequent visits, protected by special clothing, that the First Officer and McCoy made. The Captain was resigned to his isolation however, not wishing to be a danger to his crew, and ticked the days off impatiently.

It was with relief that he saw the fifteenth day arrive and called Spock. "Well, Spock, when are you letting me out? We'll have a celebration in my cabin tonight."

"Captain, as today is the fourteenth day... "

"So I miscalculated! Oh well, one more day only, thank God!"

That night, Kirk woke up in a sweat. He was hot, burning, stifling, there was no air anywhere... He tried to get up for a drink and could not. Everything was going round and round...

A sudden insight made him gasp and he fell back on the bed pressing his hands to his head. This was it, he had the plague! And there was no cure... He whimpered once with the anguished realisation, rolling on the bed and trying to control his shock and initial terror before he had to face anyone. The door was opening, and he turned over to face the wall. He did not want to be seen... Then he heard Spock's voice and recognised the tall figure with a relief which made him want to run to his First Officer and clutch him as though to a lifeline.

"I don't want to die yet, Spock," he murmured, uncaring if his friend saw him in a moment of weakness.

The protective clothing was no barrier to the mind meld and the Captain welcomed the warm touch; he was no longer alone to bear his burden. He lay down again and whispered, "I have the plague, Spock."

"Only McCoy and his scanner can tell for sure, Jim, but I think you're right; the symptoms you had were typical of the commencement of the illness."

Somehow the truth no longer held the same terror for Kirk. Whatever happened, Spock would be at his side to help as he was doing now, or so the Captain assumed.

"Try to sleep, Jim. I'll have McCoy see you as soon as possible. There is nothing you can do... "

"No, nothing," muttered Kirk bitterly. But he controlled himself to continue, "You'll take care of the Enterprise, Spock, for my sake. No nonsense about refusing the Captaincy."

"No, Jim. Sleep now."

Kirk was soothed into sleep by the mind touch and Spock went out silently. He left an order on McCoy's desk to see Kirk - no point in disturbing the Doctor's sleep to confirm what they already knew - and shut himself in his quarters where he sank into deep meditation, interrupted only from time to time by a question and answer to and from the computer.

In the very early hours of the morning Spock came out of his apparent lethargy and instructed Uhura to call Commodore Mendez and transfer the call immediately to his cabin.

It was with a sinking feeling in his stomach that McCoy diagnosed the horrible disease, and he could only stare at Kirk's calm with a bewildered admiration.

"How long?" Kirk asked quietly.

"Could be two months, could be four. As you're strong, it's more likely to be four months."

"I don't suppose I'll be allowed to die aboard my ship - or rather, Spock's ship."

"I'll come to Earth with you, Jim. I've enough leave... "

"No, not Earth. If Spock can swing it, I'd rather stay aboard. If not..."

"Yes, I understand, Jim, but Spock has some leave due too, and could come - " He was interrupted by the Vulcan's entrance.

"Your diagnosis, Doctor?"

"The Captain definitely has the plague, Spock," murmured McCoy, looking down helplessly.

The First Officer nodded and approached Kirk, who was sitting up in bed.

"Jim, I must go on leave."

The Captain nearly fell back as though struck while McCoy exclaimed, "Spock, you can't desert Jim now... "

"Leave us, Bones," ordered Kirk. The Doctor hesitated, shrugged and obeyed, and the Vulcan sat on the bed.

"I did not make the decision lightly, Captain, but I must... "

"Why? I want you to have the Enterprise, Spock, but if you... "

"I will accept the captaincy, Captain, but I requested leave first. I have enough accumulated leave for my purpose, I believe."

"What purpose?"

"I would rather not tell you yet, Captain. I may... not return, but I have to go... Will you trust me?"

Kirk was watching him intently and could see that the First Officer's mind was made up. To do what?

"Are you hoping to find a cure, Spock? There is none. I was hoping you could let me stay aboard, with Starfleet's permission, so that you... we... You can't go yet, Spock. Please don't!" begged Kirk, gripping his hand and no longer hiding his misery.

"I'll mind-link with you, Jim, so that you can reach me whenever you wish."

"Will that make you return?"

"I'll return if at all possible, and in time, I hope. If I don't, you'll know why - and I'll be with you at the end if I possibly can."

Kirk felt the gentle touch of the mind meld and sensed grief and desperation in Spock's mind, and a wish that he could stay...

"Spock... "

"If I stayed, I could only watch you die, Jim," murmured the Vulcan softly.

"I know you must have a logical reason... Go if you must, only... come back!"

Spock nodded and Kirk caught the thought - If I don't, I'll be dead, with a start. "Please, no questions, Captain. Concentrate on fighting the illness and living as long as possible, nothing else."

He did not have time to say more before McCoy entered, to ask, "Well, have you convinced that stubborn Vulcan that his place is at your side, Jim?"

"I'll be leaving shortly, Doctor," stated Spock, going out of the room.

"He can't be going... "

"Leave him be, Bones. Whatever his reasons, I trust them... How long before the disease becomes painful?"

"You should have no more than a couple of mild attacks daily for the first two or three weeks, then they become more frequent and painful... I have drugs I can use to help, Jim, and I won't desert you. I won't be long, but I want a word with Spock..."

McCoy went straight to Spock's quarters, where he found the Vulcan packing. "And where are you going?"

"On leave, Doctor."

"What about the ship?"

"A temporary Captain will come aboard until I can take up the captaincy on my return from leave."

"So you are the new Captain of the Enterprise? I wasn't sure how much of that was wishful thinking on Jim's part..."

"Yes, Doctor."

"How do you know?"

"I talked to Commodore Mendez early this morning and he stated that it would be confirmed during my leave."

"And Jim? Does he stay aboard?"

"Yes, Doctor; his request has been granted as the Enterprise has only routine missions scheduled for the next few months."

"Then why go on leave now?"

"Commodore Mendez thought it reasonable that I should want some of my accumulated leave to prepare for the captaincy."

"And the fact that Jim needs you now more than ever before won't make you cancel..."

"No, Doctor. It is... essential that I go."

The Enterprise had left the Coldar Colony when everyone was dead, and Spock had given the order to go to Vulcan at maximum speed; there, a temporary Captain would meet the Enterprise.

The crew was upset by Kirk's fatal illness and rather at a loss to understand Spock's decision to go on leave. No-one was looking forward to having a new Captain, even although it was only temporary, and it was hoped that Spock would return soon.

On Vulcan, Spock went straight to his home and was relieved to find his father there.

"Welcome," said Sarek in his even voice, touching hands lightly with his son.

"I am not staying, father. May I borrow your personal cruiser and could you use your authority to get a ship to take it and me to the edge of the Romulan neutral zone?"

As befitted a true Vulcan, Sarek betrayed no surprise, but his eyebrows rose in the typical gesture Spock had inherited. "I believe an explanation is in order, Spock."

He listened without interruption, then nodded. "A logical course of action, although success is perhaps uncertain. Should I accompany you?"

"No, father. You would endanger your life to no purpose."

"Your freedom of action will be greater without me, I agree, Spock. Very

well, I'll see that you get away with the shortest possible delay."

Spock changed his uniform for Vulcan clothes and spent an hour with his mother, at the end of which Sarek returned and stated that all was ready. His son thanked him briefly, hiding his full gratitude, and left to board the Vulcan ship.

On the edge of the Romulan neutral zone, Spock went aboard the cruiser and headed into Romulan space, knowing that he would be captured sooner or later.

It was rather unfortunate, though, that one of the three Romulan vessels which challenged him had a Romulan aboard that Spock had already met, Sub-commander Tal, now promoted to Commander. It meant that this particular Romulan would find it hard to trust him.

Spock was ordered to bring his cruiser aboard and was taken under escort to the Commander's office. Tal was waiting, weapon already drawn.

"What is to stop me from shooting you here and now, Commander Spock?" asked Tal, levelling his weapon.

"It would be an illogical act, sir."

"Why?"

"You would not then learn the reason for my visit."

"Your visit! You were captured... "

"With respect, sir, I deliberately entered the Romulan neutral zone in order to be captured."

"Then you are insane. Or is it a trick? I warn you, Commander Spock... "

"Not 'Commander'. You'll notice that I am wearing Vulcan clothing. I am on leave and my 'visit' is purely for personal reasons."

The handsome Romulan facing him was watching him suspiciously, intrigued nevertheless.

"I am perfectly willing to have a lie detector connected to me if it will make you any happier, sir," Spock added.

"Which means you are confident of being able to fool it. Vulcans are different... "

"You attribute to Vulcans powers they do not have, sir. Perhaps if you'll let me explain... "

"Go ahead. You are only postponing the hour of your execution for spying."

Spock related the story of the plague and its success on the Coldar Colony, and the Romulan listened with increasing amazement that changed to anger.

"If you came to accuse us... "

"No, Commander, I am sure the Romulans are not responsible."

"Oh. Why not?"

"Had you wanted that planet, you would have killed the colonists in a swift and painless manner, not by a protracted disease."

"Yes, Mr. Spock, you are correct," said Tal, slightly mollified. "Why, then... ?"

"I believe I know the culprits, and also that you could assist me... "

"Why should I be interested in assisting you?"

Spock ignored this. "The planet in question is too far from Orion territory to be of any interest to them, so that leaves the Klingons."

"Who are our allies!"

"Yes, Commander, but do you really trust them not to use such a weapon on your race?"

Tal looked at him. "No, Mr. Spock, we don't completely trust them, I agree. But... "

"The Klingons may have an antidote to this plague. Indeed, they must, as safeguard against accidental infection. It would be in your interests as well as mine to gain such knowledge and protect your race should any quarrel occur with your 'allies'."

Commander Tal was thoughtful for a moment. "I have to admit that your argument is valid," he said at last. "But why should I help you?"

"How will you know what to look for? I'm the only one with direct knowledge of the plague."

The Romulan got up and paced the room with some agitation. "What you are really asking is my help to save Captain Kirk. How dare you? I won't lift one finger... "

"In that case, there is no point in further discussion, Commander. Just remember that should the disease appear among your people, no-one can help you. Vulcanoid races are susceptible to it too."

"And if all this is a trick, I'll be the one paying... "

"No, sir. You may shoot me at any time. I have no weapons; even my cruiser is unarmed."

Tal was staring at him with mixed feelings. "We may be on opposite sides of the fence, Commander Spock, but courage is something I can admire even in an adversary, and for courage, I salute you."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'll go along for the moment, share any plan you may have, if practical. Tell me, though - once we have the antidote, if it exists, what is to stop me from shooting you?"

"Nothing, Commander, save your own honour. My life is in your hands."

"You are either insane or very clever. I am not sure which - yet."

"Perhaps I can also admire courage, Commander, and the Romulans have no reason to be ashamed on that score. We are of the same race, if distantly related... "

"Very distantly! And yet we cannot hate Vulcans... Never mind. What is your plan?"

"I am afraid I have no specific scheme, sir. I could become a member of your crew first... "

"To spy on our weapons!"

"Simple lab assistant work would be best, and I have no objection to being watched. It would be up to you to arrange a visit to an appropriate Klingon science centre."

"Very well, I'll see to it. Outside your duty hours as lab assistant, you'll be my personal attendant."

"I have no objections, sir."

"You'll be under surveillance at all times and shot where it hurts most at the first suspicious act. I'll expect my orders to be obeyed."

"They will be, sir."

On Tal's orders, Spock was taken to be fitted with a Romulan uniform and

shown to the lab, while a worried sub-commander told his superior, "I am not sure your decision was wise, Commander."

"Neither am I, yet, but if the Klingons do have such a weapon, we want the antidote. There is one thing I do know, however."

"What is that, sir?"

"You would never do for me what that Vulcan is doing for his Commanding Officer."

Orders were given to alter course for a Klingon planet and Spock, as he had expected, was given either all the menial jobs in the lab, or the most boring ones. At the end of his first day, he reported to Tal for what he expected to be more menial jobs. But the Romulan called him over to his desk where a chess set was laid out.

"I am not a very good player, Mr. Spock. You will teach me."

"As part of my duties, sir?"

"If you like. You may have misunderstood my intentions. Being my attendant simply means that I want to keep you under observation at times. I have no wish to humiliate you in any way; it would be 'illogical', as your expression has it."

"May I ask why, sir?"

"People like you and me don't let such trifles affect us when we are pursuing a specific aim, therefore the humiliation is pointless and achieves nothing. Let us play."

Conscious of the compliment the Romulan had paid him, Spock endeavoured to accomplish his set task to the best of his ability. Tal was a very apt pupil, and one who expected to be beaten while he learned, so there was no need for subterfuge.

The Romulan starship maintained maximum speed and reached its destination in a surprisingly short time. Permission to orbit the Klingon planet was granted readily enough, a permit to visit having been obtained for a scientific study.

Spock went as a member of Tal's suite. The Romulan Commander's enquiries about new weapons met with an apparently blank stare. Tal did not insist, but tried to visit the whole science complex, only to be told that one area was prohibited because of dangerous experiments.

That same night, a party of Romulans, which included Tal and Spock, raided the place with success. The Romulan sub-commander was familiar with Klingon computers and had a tape on the plague located quickly, with Spock's assistance. A copy was made so as not to arouse suspicion, and Tal took charge of it. As they were leaving, they were surprised by two Klingon guards. One of them shot at the Romulan Commander and only Spock's quick action saved Tal from death as he was thrown to the ground. The guards vanished in the killing phaser beam.

No other guard challenged them and they got back to the ship safely, having left no trace of their raid behind apart from the two missing guards, and the mystery of their disappearance would probably confound the Klingons for a long time to come.

Tal looked at Spock with some puzzlement as they settled in his office. "Why, Mr. Spock? Were you trying to buy your life by saving mine?"

"Not consciously, sir. I am a member of your crew, if a temporary one, and like to think I behaved as such."

The Romulan did not comment as they watched the tape, which was connected to a suitable translator. The plague was caused simply by a gas which was odourless and dissipated very quickly, giving the victims no immediate symptoms, so that they did not know they were breathing it. The quick disappearance of the gas meant that only a few people were affected at first, but as the plague was highly contagious...

To Spock's hidden relief the tape indicated an antidote, if a rather bizarre and elaborate one for Humans, while Vulcans or Romulans could be immunised by the simple injection of a drug. Spock memorised the formula.

"I expect you wish to leave now, Mr. Spock?" asked Tal.

"Yes, sir," replied Spock.

"And if I refuse to let you go?"

"Then I'll endeavour to escape, sir."

Tal nodded. "Of course. You may leave first thing tomorrow. Tonight, we'll have a last game of chess. I still require the practice."

"You have made considerable progress, sir. You should have little difficulty now in beating most players."

Tal kept his word. The Romulan starship travelled within reasonable distance of the neutral zone limit and the Romulan Commander accompanied Spock to the hangar deck where his cruiser was waiting.

"You did us a service, Commander Spock, with that antidote, so I'll forget that it will also help Captain Kirk."

"It may not, sir. The method described for Humans is so strange I wonder if it is genuine."

"It probably is; the Klingons must have tested it on Human subjects - they had to discover if there was in fact an antidote as well as a preventive. They must have been pleased to see how unlikely it was to be discovered."

Spock nodded in agreement as Tal continued, "My Chief Medical Officer told me how you improved some of his lab equipment, Mr. Spock, and you never once tried to spy on our weapons or engines."

"No, sir. It would have been illogical."

"Because it would have compromised your task. And yet you betrayed my ex-commander."

"Not an accurate statement, sir. She assumed facts which were... erroneous, and I did not enlighten her."

"What facts?"

"That I could be bribed or bought, or influenced by her... personality."

"Yes, she should have known better."

"Besides, the situation was different. This... was a temporary alliance for the benefit of both our races. The situation then would have benefitted only the Romulans, and it was my duty to resist."

"Yes. She should definitely have known better. Well, Commander, this is goodbye. I have given the necessary instructions so that you won't be challenged during your journey."

"Thank you. Live long and prosper, Commander Tal." Spock gave the Vulcan salute, and the Romulan responded instantly in what Spock recognised was a rare mark of honour to an enemy.

As the Enterprise's First Officer walked to the cruiser, the sub-commander

whispered, "Shall I shoot him, sir?"

Tal's look was not pleasant as he faced his subordinate. "Are we Klingons? If I had wanted to shoot Commander Spock, I would have done so openly. He kept his part of our bargain scrupulously and we have benefitted. Honour alone demands that we keep our part of the bargain as scrupulously, and if you do not possess that honour, then you are no sub-commander of mine."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

Meanwhile, aboard the Enterprise Kirk's health was deteriorating as expected. The first two weeks had been bearable - although he had missed Spock - but the pain was now more continuous and McCoy used only small amounts of drugs to avoid habit-forming; and things were likely to become worse, not better... The doctor was not happy when the Captain started talking strangely during the attacks. He called out to Spock, which puzzled McCoy, linked as his words were to references to Romulans and Klingons, but he often managed to go to sleep after the weird words. In fact, Kirk did manage to reach Spock thanks to the mind link, but put the pictures of Romulans and Klingons down to his fever, thinking he was imagining them in Spock's mind. The Vulcan did not contradict and helped him to sleep, telling him to take no notice of what he thought he saw, and not to worry.

But Kirk, in his lucid moments, did worry. When Spock's leave was nearly finished, McCoy was startled to hear the Captain say, "I hope Spock makes it, Bones."

"Why shouldn't he? Vulcan isn't all that far."

"He's not on Vulcan, he's with the Romulans."

"What? You're delirious."

"No, I'm sure he is."

"Whoever heard of a Federation officer spending his leave with Romulans?" exclaimed an unbelieving doctor.

When Spock returned to the Enterprise, Kirk had only two to three weeks to live at the most. The temporary Captain was relieved of duty and beamed down to the planet they had just delivered supplies to, in order to await transport to the nearest Starbase. Captain Spock however still wore his usual blue shirt as he ordered Mr. Chekov to find the nearest ice world with breathable atmosphere, and Mr. Scott to take the Enterprise there at full speed.

"But sir," protested the Chief Engineer, "our next call is planet... "

"I am aware of it, Mr. Scott, but that matter is not urgent."

"While an unscheduled call to an ice planet is?" asked McCoy, beginning to fear for Spock's sanity.

Spock refused to answer any more questions and went to see Kirk, followed by a grumbling and bewildered McCoy. "Your protective clothing, Spock... "

"No need, Doctor, I have been immunised on Vulcan."

"Then you discovered a cure... ?"

"No, Doctor, the drug in question is ineffective on a Human." This naturally made the Doctor grumble even more about pointed-eared freaks having all the luck as he followed the Vulcan to the isolation chamber, duly attired in the special clothing he still needed.

Kirk's eyes lit up at the sight of Spock and he clutched at him with what strength he could muster, not trying to hide his emotion. "I was worried, Spock. How did the Romulans let you go? But never mind them, you'll be with

me at the end now."

"I hope not, Jim. Drink this every hour." He put a flask on the table, and added, "I have a further supply when that is finished."

"So you did find a cure!" exclaimed a baffled McCoy.

"Perhaps, Doctor - only time will tell. Details were rather vague and the disease may be too advanced, so don't hope for too much."

"Were the Romulans responsible?" asked Kirk.

"No - the Klingons were."

"I don't know what you've been up to, Spock," muttered McCoy in his gruff voice, "but if you were going in search of a cure, I wish you'd taken me with you."

"It would have been illogical, Doctor, you would not have fitted in. You had to be a pointed-eared freak where I went." He continued before McCoy could retort, "I must get back to the bridge and make sure an ice world has been found."

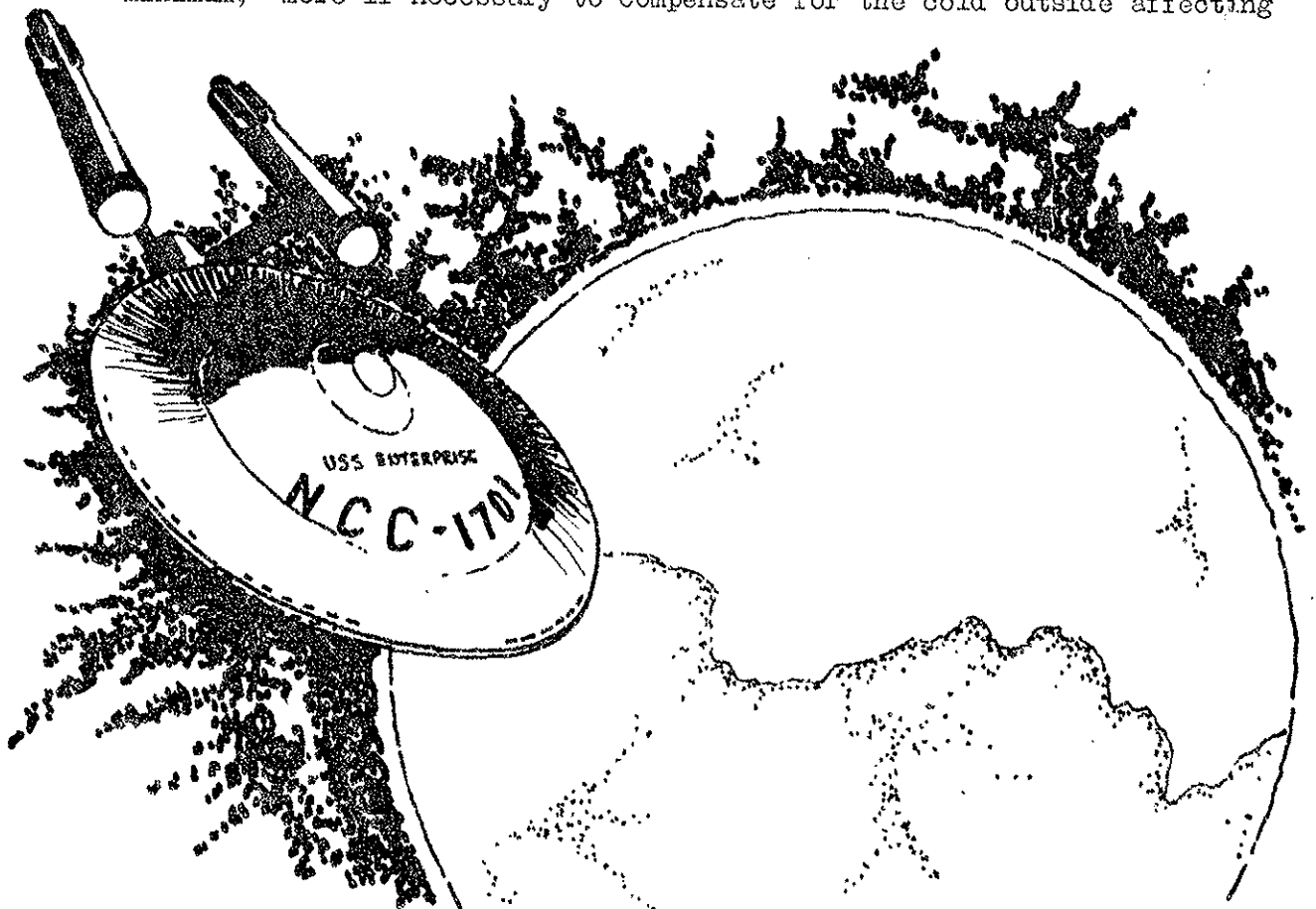
"Just a minute, Spock," asked Kirk. "Why aren't you wearing Captain's uniform?"

"As long as you are alive, Jim, you are the Captain."

Mr. Scott reported that the Enterprise was on her way to a planet of arctic conditions. Spock thanked him and added, "Have a shuttlecraft prepared, Mr. Scott, with a booster heating system able to give a minimum temperature of 50 deg. centigrade inside it."

"Sir?"

"I believe I spoke clearly enough, Mr. Scott; a temperature of 50 deg. minimum; more if necessary to compensate for the cold outside affecting



the inside temperature, no matter how slightly."

The Chief Engineer left to put the work in hand but took time to inform McCoy of the strange order, which naturally made the Doctor run to the bridge.

"Spock, are you feeling all right?"

"Certainly, Doctor."

"Then what are you... Why such a high temperature? It's too high even for Vulcans to tolerate for long! What do you plan to do in that craft? Fry?"

"It need not concern you, Doctor."

McCoy got nothing more out of him and left the bridge grumbling and a little upset. He had stood by Kirk and done what he could to help since the appearance of the disease. Now that the Vulcan was back, Kirk lived for his visits and did not seem to care or even notice if the Doctor was there or not. Still, if Spock has found a way of curing the Captain, thought McCoy guiltily, I should not resent it, but I'm the doctor, he should tell me!

By the time they established orbit around the ice planet, the shuttlecraft was ready and Spock went to Kirk's isolation unit, dressed him in protective clothing and carried him to the hangar deck. Several medical scanners had been put aboard the craft, and McCoy joined them.

"Are we going now?"

"Not you, Doctor," replied Spock, settling Kirk on a couch inside.

"That is not logical, Spock! If you're attempting a cure, I have to be there to know if it's working... "

"Doctor, if it does not work, there is nothing you can do about it, and it'll hasten Jim's death - a principle contrary to your ethics since it is a method that will kill or cure. I wish to administer the treatment without interference, however well-meant."

"Jim... " appealed McCoy.

"I'll go along with Spock and take my chance, Bones. If the worst happens, he's not to be blamed, is that clear?"

McCoy nodded and walked out in a sombre mood he tried to shake off. He wasn't the jealous type, for God's sake! What was wrong with him? But reason it as he tried, he was feeling cheated of his role as a doctor and a friend, and Kirk could die down there while he was still on the ship...

Once the shuttlecraft had landed on the planet, Kirk looked curiously at the wide expanse of snow. Equally icy conditions could have been obtained aboard the Enterprise, so it appeared that Spock had brought him down here so that they would be alone. What was in store... ? He turned back to his First Officer, whose expression betrayed a slight worry.

"Jim, what I have to do to you is not pleasant, and if you feel like screaming at me and abusing me, do so by all means."

"I see now why you didn't want McCoy! Abuse from one is enough... but I hope it won't come to that, Spock."

"Don't let it worry you if it does. To insult me might distract you and help you," assured Spock as he dressed in warm clothing. Then he came to Kirk, who was too weak to walk unaided, and started removing his clothes, to Kirk's bewilderment. Then understanding came.

"Do you mean I have to go out there with nothing on?"

"Yes, Captain."

"But... I'll die of exposure!"

"It is a possibility, Captain, but if we don't try this, it is a certainty that you'll die of the plague."

"And this is the only cure?"

"The only one I discovered, Jim. The herbal beverage I brought back from Vulcan slows the disease, that is all. The one possible cure mentioned in the Klingon tape for Humans is exposure to an icy temperature followed by exposure to intense heat, repeated a considerable number of times."

"I see. Right, Spock, let's get on with it," said Kirk grimly, with his usual courage. "I realise this is not a pleasant job for you. If I start ranting after a while, take no notice, just go on."

"Yes, Captain."

Spock helped Kirk to the airlock after setting the inside temperature to rise to 50 deg. while they were outside, then stepped on to the snow with his Captain, whose teeth started chattering immediately.

"Lie down on the ice, Captain."

"Oh no! I'll get frostbite."

"I'll keep a check."

Kirk obeyed and nearly screamed. This cure, if cure it was, was worse than the illness! But he clenched his teeth resolutely. The disease was mortal... and he wanted to live!

The cold was seeping to his very bones and he could no longer stop his teeth from chattering, then he began to get numb; and as he did, he began to feel sleepy. He closed his eyes... just for a moment...

He dimly sensed that Spock was helping him up and carrying him to the craft. The heat inside soon revived him. It felt heavenly!

But that did not last. After a short while, the heat became oppressive, stifling, and sweat ran down his body. He was literally melting! Spock had discarded most of his own clothing and even his Vulcan body was streaked with perspiration.

"How long?" croaked Kirk.

"Approximately twenty minutes more, Captain. Then outside again."

"I don't know which is worse! May I have a drink, please?"

"No, Captain."

"Look, Spock, I'll die of cold or of thirst before I die of the plague at this rate!"

"Perhaps, but it is not certain, Captain. Death by the plague is certain."

He was right, of course. Kirk tried to remember this as he sweated and felt weaker, gasping for a breath of fresh air and a drink.

Then it was out into the cold again, a blessed relief at first, then renewed agony. He attempted to bite a mouthful of snow, but Spock made him spit it out so his thirst remained and increased when the Vulcan took him back inside the craft.

"A drink, please," he begged in a thin voice.

"No, Captain. May I try to distract you?"

"If you can."

Kirk felt the light touch of the mind meld and stared out of the porthole at the expanse of snow as Spock directed. Then the Vulcan literally became one with

the snow, exploring the beautiful white carpet under their eyes and admiring its dazzling brilliance as the sunlight reflected from it. Then the sky darkened and a light fall of snow began. The Vulcan mind focussed on one snowflake, whirling and drifting in the wind.

"Beautiful!" sighed Kirk, lost too in the mental flight.

"Try it, Jim."

"I can't." Kirk sounded regretful.

"I'll assist you... The wind, for instance... "

Spock had to take the lead again though as they seemed to become one with the wind and carried the snowflakes in clouds of white dust, soaring and falling around them, a mist of myriads of particles disappearing over the horizon as the sky lightened again and the sunlight reigned once more everywhere. It had helped; Kirk had forgotten his thirst.

The successive cold and heat went on and on and the Captain lost all notion of time as his world became one of ice or of fire, both more and more painful. He just couldn't go on, his sanity would snap! Wouldn't death from the plague be more desirable than this continuous torture? He started to believe it as he begged Spock to stop, begged for a drink, but he was feeling weaker and weaker and his voice came out thin and croaking. His weakened condition had also weakened his self-control and a state of semi-consciousness settled over him. He stopped caring; he wanted to die. Anything was better than this!

But Spock mercilessly would not let him.

Kirk no longer knew what was happening. Delirium alternated with semi-consciousness when he did not want Spock to see the deterioration of his inner self. Part of his mind knew he should not say what he was saying... but was he saying it? He could no longer talk... only his mind... and yet Spock kept trying to soothe him, how? He had managed to mind-meld! He could see how degraded and no longer Human...

Kirk attempted to reject the Vulcan, but was unable to. He had not realised before how strong Spock could be if he tried, or was it that Kirk himself was too weak? Whatever it was, Kirk was Spock's prisoner and his victim; he had to escape... see the end of that torture...

Then he was too weak to feel much, and his animosity vanished. He was dying anyway, what was the point? In the distance, he heard Spock's voice whisper, "You're not dying, Jim. It worked, you'll live. Sleep now - you need it, and so do I."

This time Kirk enjoyed the soothing of the Vulcan mind and sank into sleep peacefully. The end of the nightmare at last...

Kirk woke up with no knowledge of the passing time, and felt comfortable for the first time since landing on the ice planet. He was neither too hot nor too cold. His sore skin had had a soothing ointment applied to it and he was not very thirsty. Spock had clearly seen to all that. A glass was at his side and he drank, more to savour the taste than because he really needed to, then looked around and saw Spock asleep sitting on the floor with his head leaning against his bed, clasping one of his hands. His features were drawn with fatigue and his skin also looked sore and inflamed.

Kirk felt very weak, but knew any fever or disease had gone, and he could remember Spock's words. He was going to live! Sheer joy made his eyes fill with tears, and he touched Spock's head gently with his free hand. To his surprise, the Vulcan did not waken. Oh, no! He must be ill! thought the Captain with horror as he tried to shake him, withdrawing his hand from the tight clasp to do so. This woke the Vulcan, and he looked at Kirk with a start.

"Jim! You are crying! Why?"

"Are you all right?"



"Yes. Just a little... tired."

"Thank God! I would never have forgiven myself... You know Humans cry with joy, and to live is very attractive just now, Spock."

"Yes, Captain, I can understand that."

Kirk smiled at him, then attempted to lower the emotional level of the moment. "I'm very hungry."

"So am I," smiled the Vulcan, getting up. He insisted on feeding Kirk who could not object much, he was too weak. Then the First Officer ate in turn and the Captain watched him with an expression that turned to a worried frown as he remembered...

"Spock, I said things I'm ashamed of... and I hurt you... "

"Jim, I told you I would take no notice of what you said. I knew you did not mean any of it. Your rejection of the meld did hurt a little, but only temporarily."

"And yet you managed to meld... "

"I had to. I wanted to assist you."

"What can I say, Spock... except thank you."

Spock ran a scanner over the Captain. "Time to let McCoy know he can have his patient back," he said. "He'll enjoy 'building you up again', as he calls it."

"But I won't," moaned Kirk. "Must we go back yet?"

"Jim... your ship is waiting for her Captain. The sooner you go back... "

"What about you? You are Captain."

"I only accepted to stop anyone else being nominated, and on condition that

I would return to being First Officer again if necessary."

"Yes, just what you would do! Spock, I can't say our sojourn here has been pleasant. It can't have been for either of us, and yet... you fought death with me," finished Kirk, realising that his friend's ordeal had been little better than his own - Spock had literally suffered with him, as his obvious exhaustion and sore skin indicated.

"We won, Jim."

"No thanks to me. Spock, before we go, how about a final mind meld to soar with the snow, the wind...?"

"It is not snowing."

"You know what I mean!"

The Vulcan agreed, and Kirk, not distracted this time by any discomfort or pain, enjoyed the rapport with the snow with exhilaration.

"It is even more fascinating to project your mind into the infinity of space, Jim. I'll show you when you are well, aboard the Enterprise."

"I'll look forward to it, Spock. It'll help me put up with McCoy's 'building up' treatment."

"Talking of McCoy, Jim, he should have reassurance, feel needed... He was upset by my taking over, but I could not... It would have been pointless to have him suffer too."

"I understand, Spock. I'll see to it."

A curious McCoy opened the shuttlecraft door when it returned and Spock carried Kirk out and deposited him with care on the mobile bed.

"What on Earth have you done to him, Spock?" exclaimed the doctor as he ran his scanner over the Captain. "He's lost at least ten pounds and his skin is raw! But you did it, he's cured!" he added enthusiastically, clapping Spock on the shoulder.

The Vulcan gasped and bit his lip and Kirk exclaimed in turn, "That hurt him, Bones - his skin is raw too!"

"Right!" smiled McCoy, rubbing his hands. "Down to sickbay, both of you!"

"Doctor, I have the ship... "

"Give the necessary orders, Spock, and then come to sickbay; it's a medical order. You're overtired and I want to see that skin of yours. If you don't, I'll pronounce you unfit for duty right now."

"You win, Doctor," replied Spock with resignation.

McCoy went to the intercom to inform sickbay of the arrival of two patients while Kirk smiled at his First Officer. "Never mind, Spock; Bones will enjoy having both of us at his mercy, and it'll soothe his rumpled feelings."

"There is that, Jim," admitted the Vulcan.

McCoy did enjoy having them both in sickbay and had forgotten any jealousy of Spock, too happy to see Kirk saved from death. The Doctor and the Captain heard the details of Spock's visit to the Romulans and were thankful the Vulcan had returned unharmed after putting himself into the lion's mouth, so to speak.

"But I wish you had let me come down to the ice planet to help, Spock," said McCoy.

"It would have been illogical, Doctor. You were needed in good health to

take care of Jim's building up treatment."

Even the good Doctor had to recognise the logic of that argument!

The First Officer was able to leave sickbay first and Kirk sighed as he watched him go, then ordered, "Bones, get me well as soon as possible. I have an appointment to keep."

"Who with? Some female somewhere?"

"No, Bones - with space."

A REASON TO STAY by Wendy Walter

I came in search of my love,
 And found another.
 I see him often, walking in the corridors
 Of the Enterprise,
 Always alert.
 Needing no-one
 Least of all me.

Each time I see him my heart jumps
 Like a schoolgirl with a crush.
 Surely it's more than that.
 Love - one-sided but true.
 He does not need me
 but
 I need to be close to him.

I held his hand
 And told him how I felt.
 I thought he couldn't hear me
 But he could.
 At once, he is a child who needs understanding -
 Love?
 And he is a man who cannot accept it -
 At least
 Not from me.

"Why don't you transfer?" I'm often asked.
Why don't I? I ask myself.
 Then I see him again -
 Tall, beautiful, unreachable -
 And I think
 Maybe one day
 He will need someone
 And I'll be there
 Waiting.

Jimmy had a little ship .
 Its paint was shiny, new;
 And everywhere that Jimmy went
 The shiny ship went too.



You risked your life again today.

I had no choice.

There was no need; any competent officer...

The responsibility is always mine.

You have responsibility to your ship, your crew -

I know that you can always fill my place.

You even told me not to follow you.

I would not risk your life as well -

Logically, I am the more expendable.

I could not bear to see you die.

You know I do not wish to see you die.

I know, we need each other. But -

But still you take the risks upon yourself.

I have no choice.

EDGE OF OBLIVION by Jean Barron

Unable to relinquish a last fragile hope, McCoy checked the medical panel for the third time but all indicators remained stubbornly at zero. There was nothing more he could do for his patient except to switch off the life support which had served no purpose at all and, with the cessation of the soft humming sound, that last scrap of hope died.

The tall, blue-uniformed figure entering at that moment observed the doctor's dejected attitude. "Is he dead?"

McCoy rounded furiously on the speaker, anger and frustration sweeping aside reason. "Yes, Spock, he's dead! Despite all expectations, I wasn't able to work any miracles!"

"You did all you could, Doctor."

"I did nothing except watch him die! Do you know what it's like to see a man's life slip away and not be able to do a thing about it?"

Spock was silent, aware that McCoy did not expect an answer to his anguished question.

"There must be something I could have tried... some treatment, but what?"

"He had lost the will to live, Doctor. Without knowing what caused this state of mind, there was nothing anyone could have done."

"I just don't believe that, Spock. If you're trying to console me... "

"I am merely stating a fact, Doctor. It is pointless for you to blame yourself. If there is any guilt, it is mine."

This statement shook McCoy out of his self-accusatory mood. "Because you couldn't reach him in the mind-link? He was in a deep coma, Spock. No-one could have reached him."

"Then you must know how irrational are your own feelings of guilt."

McCoy smiled tiredly. "All right, Spock. You've made your point. I'd better report." He flipped the intercom switch. "Sickbay to bridge."

"Kirk. What is it, Bones?"

"Jim, Geologist Thorne just died."

There was a brief pause before Kirk replied. "I'm sorry to hear that, Bones. Did he come out of it at all?"

"No, Jim. I'll do an autopsy, of course, but I don't expect to find anything. The trouble, whatever it was, must have been in his mind."

"Let me know the minute you're through, Bones. Kirk out."

Kirk released the intercom button and sat back in his command chair, fixing his brooding gaze on the main viewscreen. The section of the planet's surface projected there seemed innocuous enough and yet, within forty-eight hours of adopting standard orbit around Phi Lesca III, a member of his crew was dead.

Thorne, a gregarious young man who had only recently joined the Enterprise, had been chosen for the first landing party, led by Kirk himself, and his obvious enthusiasm for his first assignment had amused the rest of the team. There were smiles all round when his over-eagerness had earned him a mild reprimand from the Captain.

"Mr. Thorne, if you can manage to stand still on that transporter pad for a moment, we might be able to get this survey started."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

The six men, Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Thorne and two security men, Tedeschi and

Wyatt, materialised at the edge of a forest of conifer-like trees. The air was pleasantly warm and pine-scented and the grass springy underfoot. Spock, unaffected by the balmy atmosphere, began at once to scan their surroundings, checking his tricorder readings with typical caution before turning to Kirk.

"There are no humanoid life forms in the immediate area, Captain, although readings indicate the presence of a village some ten kilometers due west of this point."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. I would remind you gentlemen that the prime directive is in force and you will avoid contact with the inhabitants at all costs. Bones, take Wyatt with you and check the area to the south. Thorne, you and Tedeschi will survey that outcrop of rocks - and stay within communicator range. Understood?"

Flushed with excitement, Thorne nodded and clapped Tedeschi on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get going."

The security guard looked at the others and shrugged good-humouredly before following the geologist towards the distant rock formations.

"Spock, you come with me. We'll take a look at that high ground to the north."

McCoy allowed Wyatt to get out of earshot, then came back and said plaintively, "Will you do me a favour, Jim - stay out of trouble?"

Kirk's eyebrows went up. "What do you mean by that, Bones?"

McCoy, with a look that encompassed both the Captain and the First Officer, began to move off mumbling under his breath on the subject of expensive medical equipment and overworked doctors.

"What do you suppose he meant, Spock?"

Kirk's tone was innocent but his eyes were sparkling with laughter and there was an answering gleam deep in the Vulcan's dark eyes. "I regret, Captain, that I have so far been unable to master the intricacies of the Human brain, particularly Dr. McCoy's. I seriously doubt whether I shall ever become proficient in that direction."

"Don't tell me you haven't begun to understand me yet!"

Spock changed the subject abruptly. "I think we should be moving on, Captain. I believe you wished to complete this survey without undue delay."

Kirk grinned and led the way through the pine trees. They kept up a steady pace for the next twenty minutes during which time Spock continued to take tricorder readings apparently without finding anything worthy of comment. Small, unfamiliar wood creatures bounded away into the shadows, uttering tiny screeches of alarm, but no larger animal threatened the safety of the two bipeds as they plunged deeper into the forest. Eventually the trees began to thin out until they came to a clearing on the opposite side of which the ground rose steeply to a jagged ridge. Without pausing, they climbed the slope and stood on the crest, surveying the planet from this vantage point. Immediately below them they could see only trees but, in the distance, they could just make out the high rocks which Thorne should be examining at that moment.

Kirk flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to Mr. Thorne. Mr. Thorne, are you receiving me?" There was no reply. Kirk sighed and tried again. "Mr. Tedeschi! This is the Captain. Are you receiving me?" The silence grew. "Dr. McCoy. Kirk to Dr. McCoy."

McCoy replied with gratifying speed. "McCoy here. Anything wrong, Jim?"

"I can't contact Thorne or Tedeschi, Bones. They might be out of range, but somehow I don't think so. Try them from your position and come back to me. Kirk out."

Kirk's scalp was beginning to prickle with apprehension when McCoy finally got back to him. "I can't contact them either, Jim. Wyatt and I are making our way over to their location."

"Watch your step, Bones."

"I'm the one who worries about you, remember?" came the dry response.

"Never mind that, just be careful. Kirk out."

Spock had already begun to descend the slope as Kirk returned the communicator to his belt.

McCoy was bending over Tedeschi's body at the foot of the cliff when Kirk and Spock arrived at the scene. There was no sign of Geologist Thorne.

"What happened, Bones?"

"As far as I can make out, someone or something knocked Tedeschi out and made off with Thorne."

Tedeschi groaned and tried to sit up.

"Lie down," ordered McCoy gruffly.

"Yes, sir." The security man sank back, then caught sight of the Captain. "I'm sorry, sir. I just don't know what hit me. Is Mr. Thorne okay?"

"We don't know, Mr. Tedeschi. He appears to be missing." Kirk looked enquiringly at Spock who shook his head. A scan of the area had shown no trace of the missing man.

"Where's Wyatt?"

"Here, sir." The second security man appeared from the other side of the rocks. "I've had a look round, sir, but there isn't a footprint or a drag mark anywhere."

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Scott here, Captain."

"Scotty, I want you to make a full scan of this area on ship's sensors. Mr. Thorne is missing and we can't get a fix on him with our tricorders. I'll wait fifteen minutes for your report. In the meantime, you'd better beam up Dr. McCoy and Mr. Tedeschi."

"Acknowledged, Captain. Scott out."

The hours that followed had been crammed with activity - to no avail. Thorne remained invisible to the ship's sensor probes and relays of search parties returned with the same negative report. It seemed that the young geologist had vanished from the face of the planet.

Spock had gone to his library computer station immediately upon beaming back to the Enterprise and had remained there, running one check after the other in an ever-widening search pattern. It had taken a great deal of restraint on Kirk's part not to ask if he was meeting with any success.

Gradually the determined air of optimism that had pervaded the bridge began to flag. The crew carried out their duties as efficiently as ever but were becoming increasingly discouraged by the continued failure of their efforts. In fact, Kirk was seriously considering calling a temporary halt to the search when Spock reported laconically, "Sensors are picking up faint life form readings in the area of the original beam-down point, Captain."

"Thorne?"

"It would seem so, Captain. All members of the search party at present on

the planet's surface are accounted for."

Kirk swung round to face Uhura on communications. "Lt. Uhura, contact the search party, instruct them to return to the location which Mr. Spock will indicate to you."

Aware of the barely suppressed excitement on the bridge, Kirk deliberately maintained an air of composure during the minutes that followed, outrivalled only by the impassivity of his First Officer.

Uhura turned to him at last. "The search party has located Mr. Thorne, Captain. He's unconscious and they are unable to revive him."

Kirk punched a button on the arm of his chair. "Mr. Kyle, prepare to beam up the landing party plus one casualty. Sickbay - Bones, report to the main transporter room, please. Mr. Thorne is about to be beamed up and is in need of medical attention. Kirk out."

Kirk shuddered involuntarily as he recalled his first sight of Thorne lying comatose in sickbay, the once smiling eyes fixed in a ghastly, unblinking stare. In reply to his questions, McCoy indicated the medical panel. "Body functions minimal, brain activity virtually non-existent. Jim, the man's barely alive and yet there isn't a sign of injury."

"Can you explain it, Bones?"

"No, Jim, I can't. At a guess I'd say he'd suffered a shock so massive that his mind just couldn't take it, but that isn't a professional opinion."

"How long can you keep him alive with readings as low as that?"

"I'll fit him up with a life support unit but the next eight hours should tell one way of the other."

Unable to face the look of helpless anger in McCoy's eyes, Kirk had made his excuses and returned to the bridge. Less than seven hours had passed when the Doctor reported Thorne's death.

In the briefing room, a grim-faced Kirk regarded his First Officer across the table. "I propose transporting a small party down at first light to have a look at that village, Spock. What do we know about the inhabitants?"

"Phi Lesca III being an extremely minor planet, Captain, we know very little of its people. It would seem however, that the Lescans are a comparatively primitive race. They are hunters, although it is known that they were once warriors until tribal wars decimated their people and forced them to change their way of life. For some reason, as yet undetermined, the population continues to fall and only one village has been detected by our probes."

Kirk frowned. "It doesn't seem likely that they were responsible for Thorne's condition. What do you think?"

"I concur, Captain. The ability to reduce a man to such a state would argue a sophisticated mentality which the Lescans most certainly do not possess."

"Nevertheless, they are our only possible source of information and I am determined to discover how and why Thorne died. You will join me in the main transporter room in ten minutes with Mr. Sulu and one security guard - no phasers will be carried."

"Do you not feel, Captain, that this action is a little precipitate?"

Kirk glared at him. "No, I do not, Mr. Spock. What would you suggest?"

"There would be less danger, perhaps, if I were to transport down alone. One man would be less likely to antagonise the Lescans."

Kirk's anger subsided abruptly and he smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Spock, but since we cannot be sure the Lescans have given up their warlike activities, I would prefer the safety of numbers."

"Very well, Captain." Spock's voice was stiff with the embarrassment of having allowed his concern for the Captain's welfare to become apparent.

"Ten minutes, Mr. Spock."

They materialised on the planet in the cold light of dawn and Kirk, flanked by Spock and Sulu and with the security man Wyatt bringing up the rear, led the way into the sleeping village. Kirk was experiencing some misgivings about his action but could see no other way of obtaining the information they needed. He had half-turned to address Spock when a young man emerged from a hut almost in front of them. Clear blue eyes regarded them blankly for a moment, then he gave a yell of alarm.

Within seconds they were surrounded by a group of thirty or more Lescans in roughly made garments of coarse cloth and leather, each man carrying a spear and wearing a long-bladed knife at his side. The womanfolk were more timid, being content to stay in the background while their men advanced on the strangers. A voice suddenly shouted angrily, "Destroy them - they are Kolyma's people!" More voices joined in. "They are from Kolyma! Destroy them!"

Kirk stepped forward to protest but, misunderstanding his motive, a half-grown boy in the forefront of the crowd sent his spear hurtling through the air towards him. For one heart-stopping moment it seemed that Kirk would be transfixed, then Spock, moving with lightning speed, hurled him to the ground. Even so, the falling blade caught Kirk's thigh and opened up a long, ragged cut which bled copiously. On his knees by the Captain, Spock was too preoccupied to notice the stunned expressions on the faces of the natives. Kirk, white-faced, stifled a groan as Spock applied direct pressure to the wound to stem the flow of blood.

Sulu stood protectively over them, alert for the next attack, but the open hostility of the Lescans had inexplicably faded. It was obvious, however, that the men from the Enterprise were still being regarded with suspicion. The crowd parted and a tall, grey-haired man came forward. His dignified bearing made it apparent that he was a man of some importance in the village. The colour was returning to Kirk's face and he propped himself up on one elbow to get a better look at the newcomer.

"I am Nku, leader of my people."

"My name is James Kirk, and these are my people."

"You will give up your weapons."

Kirk decided not to argue the point, since the actual purpose of the communicators would have been too difficult to explain, and handed over the equipment, indicating that the others should follow suit.

"Who is Kolyma?"

"Kolyma is evil. He has killed many of my people."

"We believe he has killed one of our men. Will you tell us where we can find him?"

Nku made a sweeping gesture with one arm. "He is everywhere. His eyes watch us even now from many places."

"Eyes?" Kirk looked at Spock who stood up and walked towards the surrounding trees. No-one attempted to stop him. He paused beneath one or two of the taller pines, gazing up through the branches, before returning to Kirk.

"Scanning devices of some kind, Captain. There must be a monitoring station somewhere on the planet."

"We can show you the entrance to the place where Kolyma lives but it will not help you, it cannot be opened."

"Take us there," demanded Kirk instantly. "We may have the means to open it."

Nku shook his head. "It is too far; you could not walk there. I will send my son, Niaga, with the two black-haired ones and they will see for themselves that what I have said is true."

Spock and Sulu looked at Kirk, waiting for his decision.

"Will you at least return the equipment you have taken from them?"

"No." Nku was adamant. "We do not yet know who you are or where you come from."

"Spock?" Kirk met his First Officer's calm gaze, knowing in advance what his answer would be.

"It would be illogical to refuse such an opportunity to learn more of Kolyma."

Kirk nodded reluctantly and turned to Sulu who smiled. "Count me in, Captain."

"Very well, gentlemen, Just remember that this Kolyma character may already know that you're on your way, so be on your guard."

Nku spoke briefly to his son, a muscular young man with his father's pale blue eyes, before dispatching him on his way with Spock and Sulu in close attendance. Spock had paused only to exchange a few words with the security man.

Kirk watched them go, cursing the injury which kept him from going with them. However, he had no intention of allowing his leg to stiffen up and so prevent him from taking part in any future action.

"Mr. Wyatt!"

"Sir?"

"Give me a hand up."

"Do you think you ought to, sir? Mr. Spock said... "

"Mr. Spock said what?" snapped Kirk, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Er... nothing, sir. If you'll put your arm round my neck, sir... "

Gritting his teeth, Kirk allowed himself to be hauled to his feet where he stood leaning heavily on Wyatt and staring about him. Most of the natives had drifted away to resume their normal activities but Nku remained.

"Your wound should be attended to. If your man will carry you to my hut, my wife will do what is necessary."

"I'll walk," said Kirk quickly.

"But, sir... !"

Kirk glared at the security man. "What was it Mr. Spock said to you, Mr. Wyatt?"

Wyatt swallowed. "He said I was to do my best to keep you off that leg, sir. He said he realised it would be difficult but I was to do what I could."

"Well, you did what you could, Mr. Wyatt. Now I intend walking to Nku's hut."

"Yes, sir."

Progress was slow and Kirk's face was bathed in sweat by the time they reached the hut. Nku watched while his wife washed and bandaged Kirk's wound. She was obviously very nervous and Kirk smiled at her in an effort to put her at

her ease but, although she ventured a tiny smile in return, a frown from her husband sent her scurrying into an inner room.

"I regret that you were hurt," said Nku, "but we know now that you are not one of Kolyma's people."

"How do you know that?" asked Kirk curiously.

"Kolyma's people are not of flesh as we are - they do not bleed."

"You have fought with them?"

"One of our hunters came upon one of Kolyma's people and attacked him - a spear entered his chest but there was no blood, only a burning."

"Androids?" muttered Kirk, half to himself.

"You know of them?"

"I think I know what they are. Do you still have the body?"

"No, it was taken during the night that followed."

Hiding his disappointment, Kirk asked, "How were your men killed?"

Nku's face darkened at the memory. "We do not know what caused them to die. They were taken from us for a time, then their bodies were returned. Only one man lived for a day but he did not move or speak before he died."

A picture of Thorne's face floated into Kirk's mind and he felt a sudden chill.

Although he had been assured by Nku that Niaga would not return before nightfall, Kirk prowled restlessly about the village, followed closely by Wyatt. The feeling of impending disaster growing steadily inside the Captain accelerated when darkness came without the return of the three men.

He was on the point of demanding the return of his communicator from Nku when a shout went up from the outer boundary of the village. Niaga had returned, but he was supporting the limp form of Sulu in his arms - and there was no sign of Spock!

By the time Kirk had limped over to them, Sulu was lying flat on his back and Niaga was sitting a few yards away, nursing his head in his hands. There was a nasty cut on Sulu's forehead and dried blood streaked his face.

"Sulu! What happened?"

Sulu opened his eyes and peered up at him. "Captain?"

"What happened, Sulu? Where's Spock?"

Sulu put a shaky hand to his head, wincing as he encountered the cut.

"They took him, Captain. We were on our guard but they came right out of the rocks at us. When we came to, Mr. Spock was gone. They could have taken all three of us, Captain, but it seemed they only wanted him."

Kirk felt physically sick, as if a sudden cramp had seized his stomach. For pity's sake, he thought, not Spock!

Then the natural instinct of a commander took over, he became coldly efficient, his mind already planning his next move. He looked for Nku and found him at his son's side.

"Nku, I must have my communicators - the 'weapons' you took from us. You must know by now that we are not your enemies."

"You can do nothing while it is dark. When it is light, we will return with you."

"Captain!" Sulu's voice was growing stronger. "The place Niaga took us to - that was where Thorne was taken from."

Kirk stared unseeingly into the shadows and prayed for the dawn to come.

"Kirk to Enterprise! Kirk to Enterprise!"

"Enterprise. Scott here. Are you all right, Captain?"

"Yes, Scotty, but I need Dr. McCoy down here with three armed security guards and three extra phaser pistols."

Scotty did not waste time asking further questions. "Aye, Captain. Scott out."

Kirk had moved away from the village in order to contact the ship, having no desire to alarm the Lescans by conjuring up men from thin air. Sulu and Wyatt had stayed behind to ensure that he was not followed.

Four sparkling columns shimmered in the half-light and solidified into the figures of McCoy and the three guards. McCoy's face was lined with concern. "What's this about, Jim?"

"I'll tell you as we go, Bones."

Kirk found it almost impossible to conceal the weariness in his voice even though he knew McCoy was observing him closely. He took the phaser handed to him by one of the security men and turned to lead the way back to the village. McCoy saw at once that he was limping.

"Jim, you're hurt! Let me take a look at that leg."

"There isn't time, Bones. We have to find Spock before it's too late."

"Too late?"

Kirk began to explain in a curt, unemotional voice exactly what had happened during the last twenty-four hours and, for once, McCoy could find nothing to say in the face of the Captain's grim determination.

Sulu, looking slightly piratical with a strip of cloth binding his head wound, was waiting for them outside the village with Wyatt. "I did as you asked, Captain. Nku wanted to come along but I convinced him it would be better if we went alone."

"Thank you, Sulu. You're sure you can find those rocks again?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk glanced round, making certain that every man was now armed with a phaser. "Right. Let's go!"

They reached the rocky outcrop without incident and Kirk turned to Sulu. "Where were you when you were attacked?"

Sulu glanced round, then pointed to a smooth expanse of black granite rising directly out of the ground. "I was standing there, Captain, looking back at Niaga. He didn't seem too keen on coming any closer. Mr. Spock had climbed up onto that ledge to examine another one of those scanners. He shouted and when I turned there were three men coming at me out of a hole in the rock-face. Things got a bit confused after that but I saw Niaga knocked to the ground. The last thing I remember was Mr. Spock coming towards me but there were more men in the cave - after that..." He shrugged helplessly.

At the mention of the scanner, Kirk glanced up and saw the small hooded object on the ledge above, its malevolent eye fixed on the group of men below. The granite slab was obviously the entrance Nku had spoken about but could they open it? Close scrutiny revealed a hairline crack running vertically down the

middle of the rock but no amount of pressure would trigger its mechanism. Finally Kirk put his phaser on full power and aimed a prolonged burst at the centre of the slab. The resulting glare made them turn their heads away but the rock merely glowed red for a few seconds, then resumed its natural appearance.

"All phasers - full power!"

The seven men stood in a tight semi-circle around the entrance and aimed carefully. "Now!"

The white hot flare seemed to sear their eyes even through their closed eyelids but they kept up the lethal assault until Kirk ordered a halt. The granite was beginning to crumble - a second, shorter burst completed its dramatic collapse and, suddenly, they were staring into the inky blackness beyond it.

Kirk moved forward, his only thought to find Spock, and the rest of the group followed without hesitation. They were in a tunnel cut out of solid rock and after groping through the darkness for a hundred yards or so, they found their way lit by small radiant globes set into recesses in the walls. At one point, Kirk attempted to contact the Enterprise but without success, possibly due, he thought, to certain minerals in the rock surrounding them.

Just as they were beginning to believe that the tunnel was endless, they came upon a heavy metal door which, to their surprise, opened soundlessly as they approached, revealing a brightly illuminated corridor curving away on either side of the doorway. Kirk stepped through, beckoning the others to follow.

"Kirk to Enterprise!"

"Enterprise. Scott here."

Relief at the sound of the Chief Engineer's voice was evident in every face.

"Scotty, have you got a fix on us? Can you tell us where we are?"

"Well, Captain, you've just popped up from nowhere into a building of some sort. There's a kind of passageway circling a covered dome, but our sensors can't penetrate the dome - it seems to be shielded in some way."

"Can you get any life form readings at all, Scotty?"

"Negative, Captain. Apart from your own, of course - seven in all."

"Captain!" Sulu's urgent whisper broke in on the conversation.

"What is it, Sulu?"

"Movement up ahead, sir! Something's coming."

Kirk held the communicator close to his mouth. "Are you sure there are no other life forms in the area, Scotty?"

"Positive, Captain - none."

"All right. Keep locked in on our signals. Kirk out."

The sounds came closer, until two figures in black uniforms appeared round a curve in the corridor. Far from being startled by the presence of the Enterprise men, they continued to approach, their faces totally without expression, their eyes fixed on a point in space.

"Androids!" said Kirk decisively, his earlier suspicions now confirmed.

As the robot-like figures came nearer, he could see that they each carried a clear plastic case filled with strange green discs of some indeterminate material. It was obvious that the androids had not been programmed to expect intruders within their own complex, in fact the men had to press themselves back against the walls to allow them to pass. Kirk had already noted that

there were no scanning devices in the corridor.

"We'll carry on the way they came. Put your phasers on stun and keep your eyes open."

Spock had long since lost track of time, nor did he know or care where he was being held. The little awareness remaining to him was concentrated on fighting the continuous shafts of pain that threatened to tear his skull apart, but even his fierce Vulcan courage was being slowly crushed; sweat poured from his body as the hammer blows of sound rose again and again to a mind-shattering crescendo and waves of nausea left him dizzy and reeling blindly within the confines of the glass booth. The sound continued to smash down upon him long after he had lost his tenuous hold on reality, then it faded and died - he lay shivering uncontrollably on the cold, hard floor.

Much later, they took him from the booth and led him to a larger room. He was vaguely aware of light shifting and darting across his blurred vision, a chair, heavy straps on his wrists; his mind could absorb nothing but his eyes continued to send images to an unreceptive brain.

Figures appeared in front of him, he struggled to understand what was taking place - disjointed voices... a face... sudden piercing recognition and crawling fingers of horror... a familiar voice calling to him, begging for help ... tears spilling unnoticed down his cheeks as he fought hopelessly to respond to that cry - a hand rose with a flash of metal... it fell... the sobbing voice was abruptly stilled and Spock's animal howl of despair echoed in the high-vaulted dome. Silence fell and the Vulcan lay as still as death...

The terrible cry stopped Kirk dead in his tracks and he gripped McCoy's shoulder convulsively. "That was Spock!"

McCoy wanted desperately to deny it, to wipe that look of horror from Kirk's eyes, but he too had recognised that tortured voice and his blood ran ice-cold. With minds braced against the shock, they listened again but the silence was broken only by the sound of their own breathing. McCoy was not surprised - there had been an awful finality about that cry.

"What have they done to him?" Kirk's anguished whisper drifted down the narrow corridor and the security men who had gone on ahead turned and looked back curiously. Immediately, Kirk became the Captain again, harsh and decisive. "Have you found anything?"

"No, sir. There doesn't seem to be any way out of this corridor."

"Keep looking. There has to be a door somewhere."

The group of men moved on, examining the smooth, white walls as they went for any sign of a way into the centre of the building. Somewhere in there, Spock was being held a prisoner, cruelly injured perhaps - or dead. Kirk kept this last thought resolutely at bay but the memory of that mind-searing scream pushed him on despite his growing exhaustion and the pain gnawing at his lacerated thigh. He had no intention of waiting to find out if Spock would be delivered up like the others; for them, help had come too late.

McCoy's voice, taut with suppressed excitement, broke into his thoughts. "Jim, look here!"

He was pointing down at a dark circle close to the wall, the only irregularity in the uniform greyness of the floor. This part of the corridor seemed no different from the rest, but, when Kirk placed a foot experimentally on the circle, a large section of the wall swung noiselessly inward.

A glaring kaleidoscope of colour blinded them momentarily but, as soon as their eyes became accustomed to it, the security men stepped inside with phasers

drawn. Never patient at the best of times, Kirk followed immediately but his heart sank as he saw that the room was empty apart from a heavy chair at one end and a raised platform at the other. Like a theatre for one, he thought irrelevantly and absently rubbed his aching thigh.

McCoy noticed the gesture and produced a hypo from the medical kit. Ignoring the Captain's protests, he shot the hypo's contents into his upper arm. "Don't worry, Jim, it won't put you to sleep. It's just to keep you on your feet for a while longer."

"All right, Bones, but let's keep moving. Spock's in here somewhere."

There were several shadowed archways leading from the central chamber and, in order to expedite the search, Kirk ordered the group to split up. McCoy insisted on remaining with him.

After exploring three darkened passageways with no result, Kirk was beginning to lose hope but he kept doggedly on until he came to a barred door which creaked open under the pressure of his hand. At first, the dimly lit cell appeared to be as empty as the others and he was about to retreat when his attention was caught by a darker shadow in one corner. Moving closer, his breathing suddenly hampered by a strange tightness in his chest, he reached out hesitantly. His fingers encountered material of a familiar texture, his hand travelled upwards and encountered a face, a cold, unresponsive face which had him fumbling for the small flashlight on his belt.

The tiny beam stabbed the darkness to reveal with shocking clarity the blank, staring eyes of his First Officer.

"Spock!"

There was no movement, no sign of recognition.

"Bones! Bones, are you there?"

McCoy appeared in the doorway. "What is it, Jim?"

"I... I've found him, Bones." Kirk's voice was barely audible. "I think he's dead."

McCoy was on his knees beside him in an instant, running a medical scanner over Spock's slumped body. In the few seconds it took to get a reading, Kirk was unable to take his eyes off Spock's face and he flinched noticeably when McCoy spoke.

"He'd not dead, Jim. The readings are very faint but he's still alive. We have to get him back to the ship."

Kirk's eyes closed tightly as he struggled to control his emotions. Then he was on his feet, his face composed and only McCoy heard the slight tremor in his voice as he recalled the rest of the men. When they were gathered outside the cell, he said, "Dr. McCoy and I are beaming back to the ship with Mr. Spock. I want you to make a thorough search of the complex, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu acknowledged the order, then stared past Kirk at the huddled figure on the floor. "Is Mr. Spock going to be all right, Captain?"

"I don't know, Mr. Sulu. We can only hope we're not too late. Give me a hand, Bones."

Between them, they were able to get the unresisting figure of Spock to his feet and, each supporting him with an arm about his waist, they moved back to the outer corridor where Kirk flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"We have him, Scotty. Prepare to beam up three on my co-ordinates."

"Locked in and energising, Captain."

Two hours later, McCoy was experiencing some difficulty in hiding his growing dismay from the Captain who waited, pale and tense, for his diagnosis. Spock lay unmoving, his eyes open and staring blindly upwards, his breathing so shallow that his chest appeared not to rise at all. Above his head, the indicators on the medical panel were barely registering and, despite having used the whole range of stimuli available to him, McCoy had been unable to elicit any response from him.

"Well?"

"Jim, I... "

"What's wrong with him, Bones?"

McCoy raised his hands, palm upwards, in a gesture of helplessness. "I just don't know, Jim. I've tried everything."

"Damn it, Bones, you're a doctor, you've got to help him!"

"If he were physically wounded, I could help him, Jim, but there are no signs of injury apart from a bruised head. It's just like..." He hesitated.

"Like what?" Kirk demanded.

"It's Thorne all over again."

"No!" For a moment, McCoy thought Kirk was about to strike him and would almost have welcomed it if it could have eased the naked pain in the Captain's face. But Kirk appeared to control himself with a tremendous effort. His voice dropped to a whisper. "No."

"Jim, you need rest. I'm going to take care of that leg, then I'm ordering you to get some sleep."

"I can't sleep," said Kirk, horror-stricken.

"One hour, Jim, no more," insisted McCoy. "An hour won't make any difference."

With a quick glance at the comatose form across the room, Kirk allowed himself to be led to an examination couch where McCoy ripped the torn material of his trouser leg still further to expose the deep gash left by the Lescan spear. After cleaning and repairing the wound, he pressed a hypo to Kirk's arm, overcoming his momentary resistance, and watched him fall into an exhausted sleep.

The intercom bleeped. "Bridge to Captain Kirk. Scott here."

"The Captain's asleep, Scotty. Is there anything I can do?"

"Well, I don't know about that, Doctor. I've just had another report from the landing party. Apparently they've come across a sealed door behind that platform in the main chamber. If the Captain's out of action, I'm going to order them to cut through that door. Do you have any other suggestions?"

"No, Scotty, but I'm going to beam down. I'll find out what happened to Spock if it's the last thing I do!"

These last words were uttered with such vehemence that Scotty was startled. "Is there no change then, Doctor?"

"None, Scotty. If anything, he's getting worse. I'm reporting to No. 3 transporter room.

"Acknowledged, Doctor. Scott out."

Kirk woke slowly to the painful sensation of a crushing weight on his chest,



then realisation flooded over him and he sat up so abruptly that his head spun.

"Are you all right, Captain?"

He looked in the direction of the voice and saw Christine Chapel rising from a chair beside Spock's bed. With a sickening inward lurch, he saw that Spock's eyes were closed. He opened his mouth to speak but the words would not come.

"He's still alive, Captain... but his condition is deteriorating."

There was a curiously dull note in Christine's voice and he felt an unreasoning anger. "You've accepted that he's dying, haven't you?"

She would not - or could not - answer him.

"Well, I don't accept it - and I won't. Where's Dr. McCoy?"

"He beamed down to the planet a little over an hour ago, Captain. I have been keeping him informed of any change in Mr. Spock's readings."

"All right, Christine, you can go. I'll watch him." Something in his face prevented her from uttering the half-formed protest that rose to her lips, and she merely nodded as she walked past him and out of the room.

Kirk took her place by the bed and forced himself to look down at Spock's composed features. Would he never again see those dark eyes regarding him with that curious, half-humorous glint, or hear the familiar voice correcting his Captain, oh, so gently, or parrying a thrust from McCoy's caustic tongue? Had their friendship been destined to end like this? He felt his iron control begin to slip and, taking his friend's hand between his own, at last gave himself up to the bitter grief that was tearing him apart.

When McCoy entered sickbay some time later, he was stopped on the threshold by the sight of the Captain sitting motionless, his head bowed over the figure in hospital blue. He paused, irresolute, unwilling to intrude and yet knowing he must.

"Jim!"

Kirk raised his head slowly but did not look round. His voice was muffled. "Got out of here, Bones. Leave us alone."

"Jim, there's something here you have to see!"

The mounting urgency in McCoy's voice began to penetrate Kirk's numbed senses. He turned and a wave of compassion hit McCoy as he met those haunted eyes.

"I want you to come to your quarters, Jim. The landing party brought something back with them that you should see."

"Will it help Spock?"

"I don't know, Jim, but there's a chance."

A faint spark of hope kindled in Kirk's eyes. "What is it?"

"While you were asleep, the security guards reported finding a hidden room. Scotty ordered them to cut through with phasers and they found a massive computer. Jim, the whole complex, including the androids, is run by that computer."

"Then there is no Kolyma."

"Do you remember the odd-looking discs those androids were carrying?"

Kirk nodded disinterestedly.

"Well, there were hundreds of them in that room and we soon discovered what they were. Each one is a video record of the psychological experiments that have been carried out on the computer's orders - and they're pretty horrific, believe me!" McCoy took a deep breath. "I found the last tape still in the viewer - it was Spock."

Kirk stared at him. "What happened to him?"

"I want you to see that for yourself. I've told them to set up the viewer in your cabin - I don't want anyone else to know what's on this tape. You'll understand why."

"All right, let's get on with it. Get Christine back to watch Spock."

It was obvious that Nurse Chapel had not gone far, she was there within seconds of receiving McCoy's call over the intercom. She was aware of a subtle change in Kirk's demeanour but the two men left without acknowledging the silent question in her eyes.

They arrived at Kirk's quarters to find two security men in the process of

manhandling the viewer through the doorway. Kirk, suddenly aware of the odd glances his dishevelled appearance was attracting, quickly went through to the sleeping area and changed into a fresh uniform. By the time he returned to the outer cabin, the men had gone and McCoy was examining the controls on the squat black device that sat on Kirk's desk. Kirk's eyes went to the green mottled disc lying nearby and he felt an unaccountable chill.

"You'd better sit down, Jim."

Kirk looked sideways at him but obeyed without comment - he was aware of feeling extremely tense as McCoy inserted the disc into the viewer and pressed a button at its base. The screen began to glow and a familiar scene was revealed. It was the large chamber they had first entered from the corridor and the beams of coloured lights were moving constantly to and fro across the length of the room.

"I believe those lights are meant to disorientate the victims," said McCoy.

"But they didn't affect us," objected Kirk.

"The victims were probably conditioned first."

There was a movement on the screen and Kirk leaned forward at the sight of the blue-shirted figure being led into the room by two androids. It was Spock, looking dazed and bewildered by the shifting lights. He offered no resistance as he was led to the chair and strapped in.

Kirk felt a painful wrench at seeing his First Officer behaving with such docility. After a moment, the Vulcan raised his head and stared towards the platform where three more figures had appeared. Again, there were two black-clad androids but it was the figure slumped between them that had caught Spock's attention. Kirk stared in amazement; dressed in the yellow Starfleet shirt of command, the second prisoner's resemblance to the Captain of the Enterprise was little short of incredible!

"It's another android! It must be!"

"Yes, Jim, but Spock doesn't know it. Look at him."

Kirk's amazement turned to horror as he saw the tortured expression on Spock's face and he knew that his First Officer believed he was seeing his Captain struggling there between the guards, being forced to his knees and reaching out for help, help the Vulcan could not give. When the Kirk-android began to beg piteously for his life, Kirk realised what was about to happen and could no longer bear to watch. Still, with his back to the screen and his hands pressed to his ears, he could not drown out his friend's last tormented cry and he began to tremble violently from shock and anger.

McCoy switched off the viewer. "I'm sorry, Jim, but you had to see for yourself."

Gradually the trembling eased but Kirk's voice shook as he asked disbelievingly: "How could he think that was me... that I would do such a thing to him?"

"Spock in his right senses would have known it was a trick but you saw his eyes, Jim! God knows what it took to break him - I can only describe what I saw in that room."

"Tell me."

"This Kolyma must have been a charming character - he built that computer to do his perverted work for him and he did it so well that it carried right on even after he died. Oh yes, he's dead! That was one of the things we found out. Amongst other things, one of our men came across a kind of cubicle wired into the computer and, like a fool, walked into it while Sulu was testing out some of the gadgetry. Jim, we dragged that man out screaming! Apparently, it's some kind of sound magnifier. Fortunately the guard only had a few seconds of it, but if Spock was put in there with his sensitive hearing..." No further words were

necessary to describe the horror of such a possibility.

"There isn't much time left, Jim. Spock's sliding deeper into his coma by the hour. It's you he needs now."

Kirk's silence was a mute acknowledgement of the invisible bond that existed between Spock and himself. He met McCoy's understanding eyes without self-consciousness before turning to leave the cabin.

When they re-entered sickbay, Christine took one look at their faces and left without waiting for an order. Spock appeared to be as they had left him, scarcely breathing, his slender body rigid beneath the sheet.

McCoy frowned - had he been quite so tense before? Had something happened deep in that locked mind to make him fear returning to consciousness... and to a world without his closest friend? Perhaps Jim's grief had touched some responsive chord in him after all. McCoy shook himself mentally, dismissing the thought.

"Try talking to him, Jim. Anything you think he may want to hear."

Kirk's hazel eyes clouded with apprehension; staring down at the Vulcan face so tightly closed against him, his mind was filled with a frightening uncertainty and yet he knew he could not allow Spock to slip away from him into oblivion. To go on existing without the gentle Vulcan by his side was unthinkable and instinctively he took Spock's hand as if, by this small link, he could prevent their separation.

He waited hopefully for the familiar warm sensation that would tell him that Spock's mind was reaching out to touch his... but there was nothing, only a cold emptiness that chilled his heart.

"Spock! If you can hear me, for pity's sake don't let this happen! You don't have to die for me - I'm here!" He struggled to keep his voice from breaking. "I'm here, Spock. What you saw wasn't real, I didn't die - but I will if..." He choked on the last words and looked pleadingly at McCoy who had stayed quietly in the background.

"Go on, Jim, it's the only way."

Somhow the words came, slowly at first as he tried to maintain a rigid control over the feelings surging through him, feelings he had never put into words before, then more easily as his natural inhibitions were washed away on a floodtide of emotion; his whole universe was in that one still figure, his only contact with reality the slim hand clasped in his, and he neither remembered nor cared that a third man stood and listened with head bowed to conceal his tears.

Time passed unnoticed until finally Kirk was forced by sheer exhaustion to stop. It was then that he realised that the hand he held was cold and lifeless. "Bones!" he cried, panic-stricken.

McCoy pushed him unceremoniously aside and glanced up at the medical panel. The needles were sinking ominously and, without consciously considering his next action, he struck Spock a hard blow across the face while Kirk watched in stunned silence, wincing as McCoy administered a second blow and began to shout at his patient. "Spock! Wake up! If you think I'm going to let you lie there indefinitely, you'll have to think again! Open your eyes!"

He drew his hand back again, then froze as a single whispered word was forced from the Vulcan's lips. "Illogical."

Kirk drew his breath in sharply. "Spock... can you hear me?"

There was an agonised note in the whispered reply. "I am trying, Jim... but they will not let me go."

A dreadful suspicion was forming in McCoy's mind and he gestured to Kirk to

remain silent. Then he saw to his horror that the indicators, which had begun to rise very slightly on the panel, were falling once more.

He gripped the Vulcan's shoulders. "Spock! Listen to me! You're not going anywhere - I need you right here!"

Spock's head turned uneasily on the pillow. "Illogical. Illogical."

Hardly daring to hope for a response, McCoy asked quietly, "Why illogical?"

The ensuing silence seemed endless, then the whisper came again. "I should not be hearing you. I have heard Jim - he is dead... and I..." His voice faded but returned a little stronger. "I go to join him. But you... you are not dead. It is illogical."

Tears ran unheeded down McCoy's cheeks. "You're the illogical one, you walking computer! You can hear me because I'm alive, because you're alive - and you heard Jim..."

During this exchange, Spock had kept his eyes steadfastly closed but now he opened them and fixed his pain-filled gaze on McCoy's face. "It is no use, Doctor. I saw him die - I let him die. Why did you bring me back?"

Hardly breathing, his mind in a turmoil, Kirk stood out of Spock's line of vision, trusting in McCoy's blindly instinctive behaviour. He watched now as the doctor pulled the sheet back and said in a tone that brooked no argument, "Sit up!" Nevertheless, he was surprised when Spock moved to obey, forced by his weakened state to accept McCoy's assistance. He frowned and put a hand to his head.

"No," said McCoy quickly. "Don't let your mind wander. Just listen to me."

Satisfied that he had Spock's attention, he began to speak. "You know that you were captured?" Spock nodded slowly. "Good! But you won't remember much of what happened after that. You were unconscious - you must have been or they would never have taken you. They put you in a glass booth and bombarded you with sound waves until they broke you - and while you were in that condition, they did the one thing they knew would finish you - they killed your friend."

Spock tried to turn his head away but McCoy held him still. Again, a puzzled frown crossed the Vulcan's face.

"The people who did this to you, Spock, were androids - yes, androids working under the orders of a computer."

"Kolyma," said Spock, suddenly understanding.

"Kolyma built the computer and the androids before he died but they've never stopped operating. The computer studied the victims through those scanners until it knew everything there was to know about them. It watched you, Spock, and even during the short time you were on that planet, it saw the bond between you and Jim - and it knew what to do! There was only one problem - Jim was safe in the village so they needed a substitute."

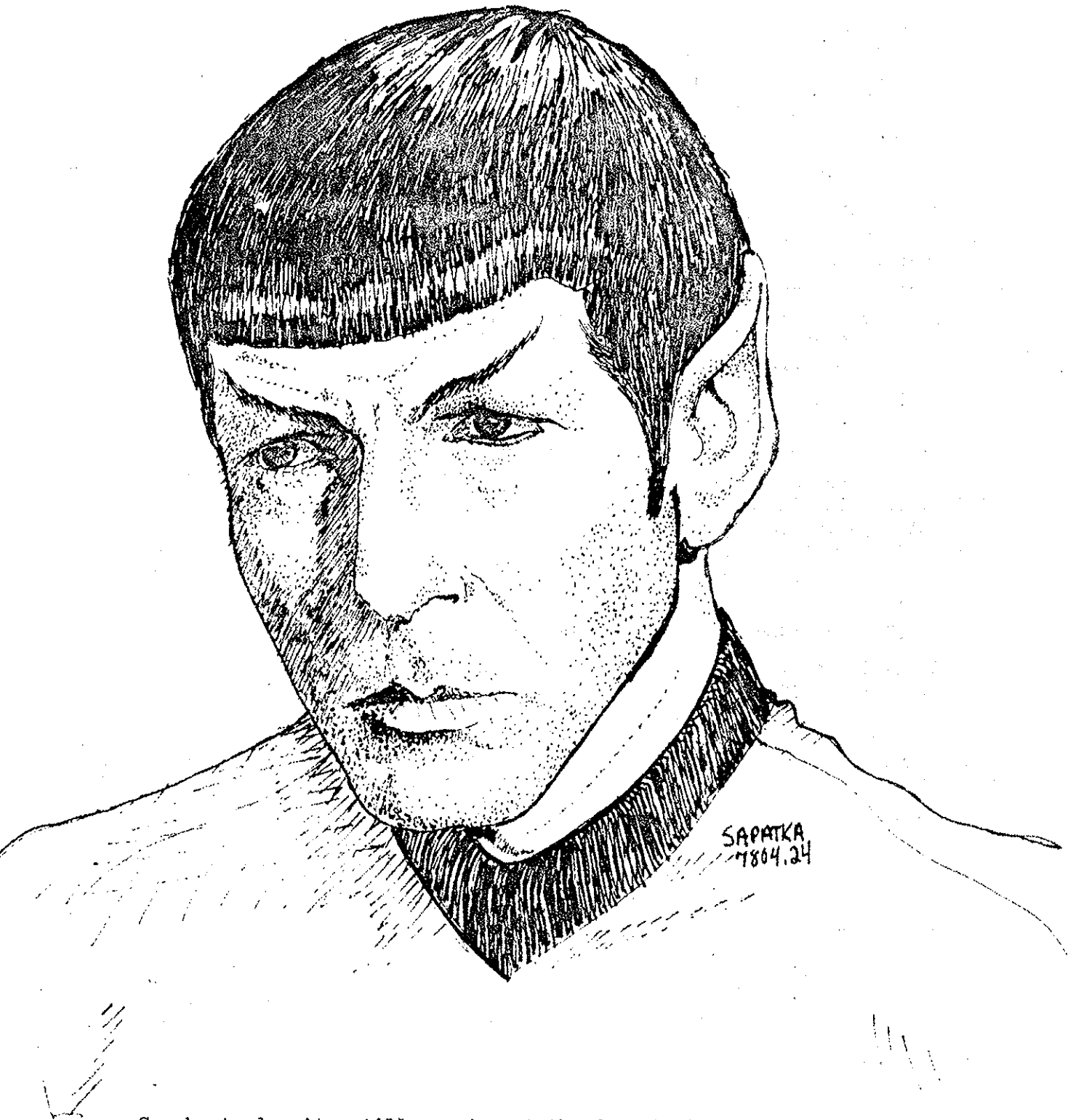
He paused to let the thought sink in but Spock rejected it. "I let them kill him."

"All right!" exploded McCoy. "If you won't believe me - just what is it that your own mind is trying to tell you?"

Spock stared at him, felt again the odd sensation that had crept unbidden into his thoughts several times since he had regained consciousness. His mind reached out tentatively, touched and recoiled violently from something he could not believe.

"No! He is dead!"

Goaded by the Vulcan's stubborn refusal to accept the evidence of his own telepathic senses, McCoy spun him round. "Does that look like a ghost?"



Spock stood quite still, gazing at the face he believed he would never see again and, for a second or two, there was nothing Kirk could do to ease the shattered look in those dark eyes. His own throat ached unbearably and something of his feelings must have been mirrored in his eyes for the Vulcan suddenly turned away and collapsed onto the edge of the bed.

McCoy walked away. He had done what had been required of him, now it was up to Jim.

The sight of his friend's distress was all that was necessary to dispel Kirk's temporary paralysis. He moved round to stand in front of the bowed figure, supressing a desire to touch the dark head. Physical contact was a need apparently confined to Humans and he had no way of knowing how the Vulcan would react.

"Spock," he said softly. "I am alive. Here's my hand if you want proof."

Spock raised his head, looked up and, without taking his eyes from the Captain's face, took the hand in a strong grip.

"Why couldn't I get through to you, Spock? Why wouldn't you listen to me?"

The Vulcan spoke with obvious difficulty. "I heard you, Jim. I was ready to follow you."

Kirk paled at the inference in those words. "But you were going in the wrong direction. I... we almost lost you."

"Had it not been for Dr. McCoy, I would not be here now. I believed you were dead. Your words told me you needed me and I only knew I had to... answer that need."

Recollecting some of the things he had said in his despair, Kirk's cheeks began to burn with embarrassment but the look in Spock's eyes, normally without a hint of emotion, was so expressive that the embarrassment vanished leaving the certain knowledge that there was nothing he dared not say to this man who would have died rather than live without him.

He looked down at their clasped hands and said musingly, "I wonder if I would have had your courage." But, in his heart, he knew the answer for the alternative did not bear contemplating. When he looked up, a smile all the more warming for its rarity had lightened Spock's pale, stern features.

At this point, McCoy decided to remind them of his presence with a lack of tact designed to clear the emotionally charged atmosphere. "As much as I hate to break this up... "

Kirk glared at him. "Yes, Bones, what is it?"

McCoy bristled. "Well, I do have a job to do."

Releasing Kirk's hand at once, Spock stood up and regarded the purposeful advance of the doctor with ill-concealed displeasure. "Dr. McCoy, I am not ill and therefore do not require your services."

"Mr. Spock, I wasn't aware you had undergone training that qualified you to pass a medical opinion."

The two men, only inches apart, glowered at each other while Kirk looked on in dismay. Then the ice in Spock's eyes melted to be replaced by a look of such deep gratitude - a gratitude he could never voice - that McCoy gave a whoop of sheer delight and hugged the horrified Vulcan exuberantly. By the time Spock had managed, with as much dignity as he could muster, to extricate himself from the doctor's embrace, his cheeks were green with embarrassment and Kirk, light-headed after the strain of the past few hours, was struggling against the laughter welling up inside him. He was still grinning when he buzzed Scotty on the bridge.

"Scott here, Captain. Any word yet?"

"Yes, Scotty - the word is excellent. Mr. Spock is recovering."

Scotty's reply was drowned by a spontaneous cheer that had broken out from the bridge personnel and Kirk grinned at Spock who developed a close interest in the bulkhead above Kirk's head until the intercom was switched off. The bulkhead having then lost its fatal fascination for him, he said, "I would like to make a study of the computer if it is possible, Captain."

Kirk's smile faded. "I haven't ordered it destroyed if that's what you mean, Spock. Are you sure you're up to it?"

"I would not have made such a request, sir, if I did not feel sufficiently recovered."

"Bones?"

McCoy shrugged. "I see no reason why not - as long as he takes it easy."

"Thank you, Doctor. I shall endeavour not to overtax my strength."

Fifteen minutes later, he was dressed and equipped for his expedition, still pale but determined. Kirk had decided against accompanying him. For one thing, his head had begun to ache abominably - a fact he was careful to conceal from McCoy, and for another, he had no wish to see again the room where Spock had been so cruelly used.

"I'm going to my quarters, Spock. Let me have your report as soon as you get back."

"Yes, Captain."

In the corridor they met Christine Chapel, who, rather nervously, expressed her pleasure in Spock's recovery. She had expected to be frozen by an icy Vulcan stare but received instead a quiet "Thank you, Christine" that almost cracked her professional calm. Before the men moved on, however, she was able to transmit a silent apology to Kirk who smiled briefly to show he understood.

Kirk tossed and turned on his bunk, wrestling with the shadows that filled his mind; it seemed he had been stumbling for hours down an endless, black tunnel searching for... what? A hand grasped his shoulder and he lashed out so wildly that he woke himself up. Spock was looking down at him, his eyes quizzical beneath their demonic brows.

"I beg your pardon, Captain. You appear to have been having a bad dream."

"Er... yes, I believe I was." Kirk swung his feet to the floor and stood up, preceeding Spock into the day cabin. "Were you able to find out anything more about Kolyma?"

"From the data stored in the computer, it has been comparatively easy to trace its history. I have prepared a full report which can be studied at your leisure, Captain. In essence, it states that the computer was built by a team of scientists, not native to this planet. Their task was to test to breaking point the mental and physical stamina of candidates for a superior race of warriors on their home planet of Manen which was in a constant state of war with the other planets in its star system. The military commanders of Manen were obliged to go further afield in their search for new blood and Phi Lesca was selected because of its warlike people."

"But they're no longer warlike."

"Captain, that computer was built in excess of one thousand years ago. Had it not been for Kolyma, it would have become obsolete long since."

"And how did Kolyma come into this?"

"He was one of the Manen scientists and the only survivor when the rest of his team succumbed to a fatal disease. Somehow he remained immune but it is obvious from subsequent tapes that he became deranged. He blamed the Lescans for the spread of the sickness and to punish them, modified the computer to override its limit factor and go beyond the breaking point of its subjects, resulting eventually in death. He also created the androids to secure his victims since he could no longer rely on volunteers when his purpose became known."

"He also built in a self-maintenance programme so that it would continue to work after his death."

"Exactly, Captain. It would seem that Manen was destroyed during this period for no-one ever returned to check on the progress of the work here."

Spock glanced at the viewscreen which still stood on Kirk's desk. "I have brought back the most recent additions to the computer's video records and would appreciate the opportunity to study them."

Kirk hesitated, aware that the tape of Spock's treatment was still inside the viewer.

"I would, of course, have the machine removed to my own quarters to avoid disturbing you, sir."

"No - that won't be necessary," replied Kirk quickly. He moved casually to the desk and reached out a hand - only to have his wrist caught in a grip of steel.

"Dr. McCoy has advised me that there is a tape which you would probably not wish me to see."

Kirk pulled his wrist free. "Dr. McCoy doesn't know what he's talking about!"

"Indeed, Captain? Then you won't object to my running the tape." Spock was polite but insistent and Kirk concealed his dismay under a mask of indifference.

"Go ahead, but I hope you won't object if I carry on with my own work."

He walked through into his sleeping quarters and closed the connecting door, wondering belatedly whether he should have used his rank to prevent Spock from seeing the tape. What could McCoy have been thinking of to tell him about it? The next few minutes dragged by, leaving him in an agony of suspense. Finally, he could stand it no longer and pushed open the door, expecting to find Spock gone, unable to face him. Instead, the Vulcan was **sitting on the edge of the desk** and watching the door, obviously waiting for Kirk to reappear. He seemed undisturbed by the experience he had just relived.

Kirk found he could not meet his eyes.

"Do not be concerned for me, Jim," said Spock gently. "In a very short time, this will become one of many incidents my mind has been disciplined to forget."

"Can you forget it, Spock?"

"Perhaps not entirely but the memory will return only when I relax the guard on my thoughts."

"I wish I could say the same." The pain in Kirk's voice brought Spock to his feet.

"It is over, Jim. I do not resent the fact that you have observed me in an unguarded moment - you have learned nothing you did not already know." He hesitated. "Perhaps the knowledge displeases you."

Moved by his friend's uncertainty, Kirk laid a hand on his shoulder. "No, it doesn't displease me, Spock." He grinned quite unselfconsciously. "After the things you've heard me say, I should ask you that question."

The smile in Spock's eyes deepened but he did not reply.

"Come on, let's go and find Bones. He's probably chewed his nails down to the elbow wondering whether he did the right thing in telling you about that tape."

Space... black void...

So very, very cold...

So far from any sun.

* * *

A silver starship -

Warmth and friendship -

Haven of comfort... home.
