

LOG ENTRIES 33

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Hello, and welcome to Log Entries 33.

Sheila has decreed that I am to do the introduction to this issue, so I've decided to take the opportunity to mention a point that crops up from time to time.

Occasionally someone will say that a story in Log Entries has given them an idea for a sequel; or that they would have liked to see the plot developed along different lines; or that they feel the characters would have reacted differently in the given situation.

Our response is, "Don't talk about it - write the story!"

There is no need to feel nervous - this form of creative response is a well-established tradition in fan fiction, and has produced some excellent stories. Indeed, all fan fiction is in itself a creative response to aired Star Trek.

To give an example from personal experience, our own series, "Variations on a Theme", was derived from one of the characters in the "Kraith" series; we know of at least two writers who are now working on stories set within the "Variations" framework.

With that, I'll now leave you to the zine - we have a really good selection of stories for you this time, so happy reading!

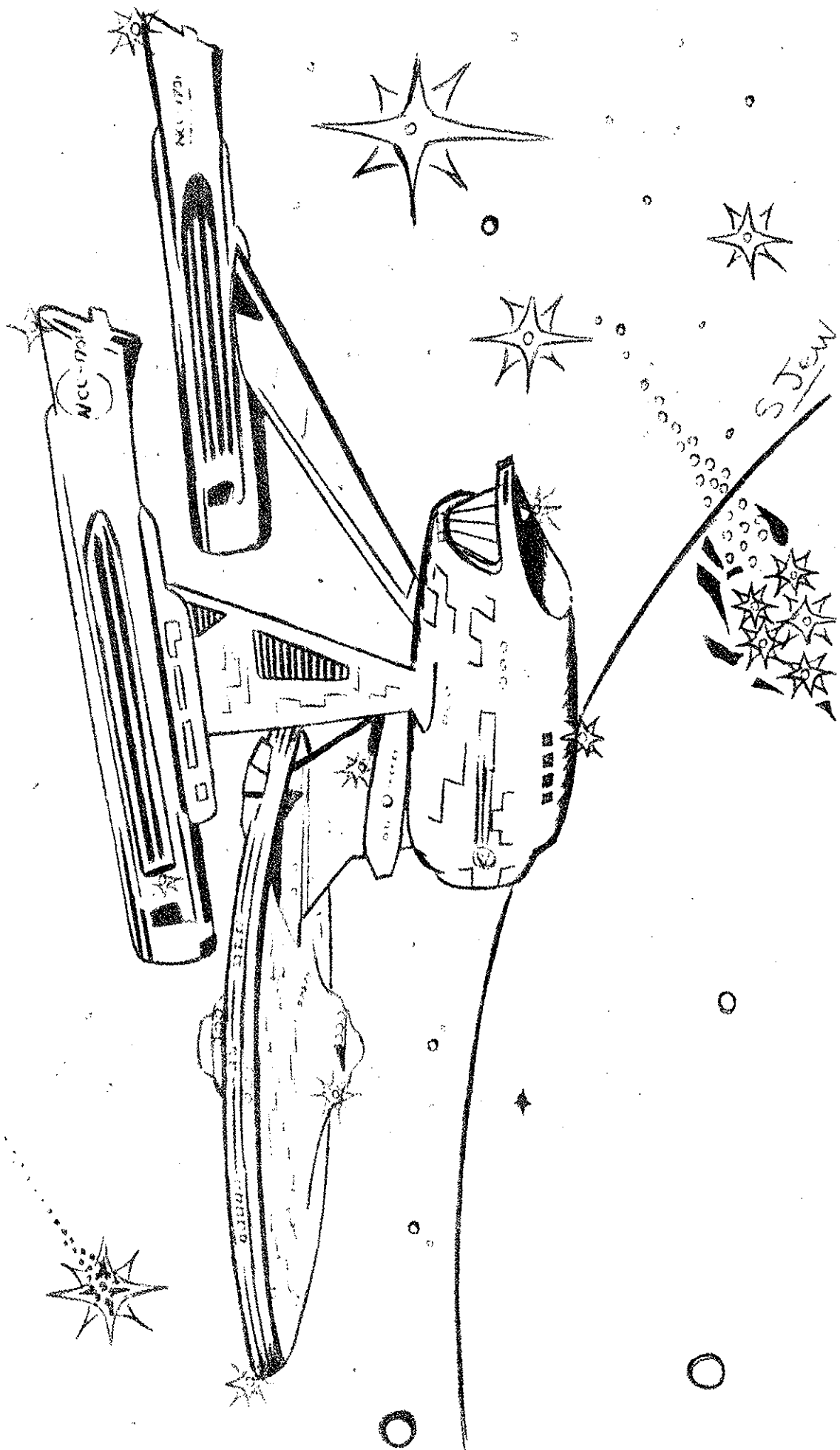
Valerie

We hope to have this issue of Log Entries out in time for UFP Con.

However, a Klingon agent disguised as a Ronco engineer has been feeding James T. something that disagreed with his digestive system. He has also encouraged him to start smoking, which in this case is not only detrimental to James T.'s health, but doesn't do much for Janet's nervous system either.

The Klingon agent has been persuaded (courtesy of Janet's phaser) to correct matters. Initially minor surgery will be attempted, and the appearance of this zine on schedule will indicate its success.

No flowers or letter, please!



A NEW BEGINNING ? by Charlotte Davis

"That newly settled planet on which we left those Vulcan scientists is being developed with remarkable speed and efficiency," Kirk remarked to his First Officer Mr. Spock, who stood at his side. "At the present rate of progress I'd guess it should be self-sufficient within a couple of years."

"Sir," the Vulcan replied, "the colonists estimate requiring 6.31 Terran years to attain their aim of total self-sufficiency; that includes a modest amount of trading in the element ryetalyn, and diverse other elements which have been discovered there. Specific research work is still in progress, with most encouraging results which will be released to other science centres on completion."

At that moment McCoy entered the bridge, and glancing at Spock commented, "It seems those living computers down there are going to create a perfectly organised sanctuary for logic - a shore leave paradise for the likes of you, eh, Spock?"

"Dr. McCoy, permit me to remind you that Vulcans require neither rest nor recreation in your sense, our mental disciplines being..."

Sulu interrupted. "Coming on the screen! A small vessel... Vulcan in configuration, 158.604 kilometers ahead, advancing on impulse power only."

"Another new group of colonists from Vulcan. I believe they have a xenobiologist and his wife among them. It would have been interesting to meet them." It seemed that Kirk experienced some regret at having to continue on his present mission when he said, "Lay in a course for Epsilon Indi, Mr. Chekov, warp factor two. It seems we're in for a relatively quiet mission, picking up a group of scientists to be transferred to Starbase 6."

He had turned to McCoy when Sulu's startled exclamation arrested his attention. "Sir! I just picked up a Klingon battlecruiser on the sensors... there, it's on the screen now!" Relaxation turned to activity.

"Red alert! Put up deflector shields, man all stations! Lt. Uhura, open hailing frequencies!"

Spock announced the next, more disturbing observation. "Captain, Klingon tractor beams have locked onto the colonist vessel and it is being drawn into the battlecruiser's hangar."

"Uhura?"

"All frequencies open, Captain, but no response as yet."

"Of course. Those Klingons are waiting in order to create a proper and hopefully impressive effect," was McCoy's angry comment as he stood behind the command chair, staring at the screen with frustration. Even Spock seemed slightly distracted by the situation.

In the meantime a group of guards led by Commander Kerath had surrounded the captured vessel on the Klingon ship.

Kerath activated a communicator. "You are trespassing in our territory, Vulcans. You will come out, one by one, without hostilities, or you will be immediately executed as spies and enemies of the Empire. Officially you are now our prisoners."

The Vulcan men and women on the colonist vessel exchanged glances, then one of them spoke.

"It is only logical to assume that our captors will not permit themselves to be convinced of the fact that we are peacefully settling the planet allocated to us. We have no immediate possibility of defence or escape - our only chance of survival lies in obedience and surrender. The men will leave the ship first."

The others nodded assent - they had, in fact, no other choice. The leader of the group was a tall, handsome Vulcan, proud and self-assured. By profession a xenobiologist, he was to become the Chief Scientist of his department on Suran 1. The other men, also scientists, respected him for his knowledge and efficiency. They knew his reasons for applying for this particular outpost, though they were never openly mentioned.

The leader stepped to the door of the craft. When it opened he descended to be met by a guard who searched him for weapons, then motioned him to the centre of the deck where he was joined by his companions - 15 men and 15 women all told. Although the Vulcans were unarmed the guards held their disruptors at the ready. Apart from threats the Klingons did not harm them as they knew of the Vulcans' inherent love of peace, and so did not consider them worth the trouble.

When all had assembled Kerath shouted at them, "Who is the leader of this expedition? Let him identify himself."

The young Vulcan stepped forward to face the Klingon, who regarded him cynically. Kerath wasted no time on formalities.

"Why are you trespassing in our space?"

"We are not trespassing. We are under way to Colony Suran 1, which was allocated to the Planet Vulcan, Stardate 5925.81. We are in Federation space."

"Allocated? By us?"

"No. By the United Federation of Planets."

"You mean to say that you are Federation spies."

"No. We are here to establish a colony. That is all."

"To what purpose?"

"To further peaceful research of the galaxy."

"You mean, to spy on the Empire, Vulcan!"

"Vulcans do not function as spies. A spy has no honour."

Kerath, annoyed to violence by the Vulcan's quiet answers, advanced and slapped him. The Vulcan did not react. "You would do well to notify the colony that it is to be abandoned immediately. It is an illegal settlement in our territory, which constitutes an act of war." Kerath eyed the group of Vulcans standing calmly nearby. His eyes glittered unpleasantly as an idea occurred to him.

"Where is your woman?"

A flicker of indecision crossed the Vulcan's face, then, "Wife, attend me." A girl who had been standing apart from the others advanced slowly to remain some paces behind her mate; hands clasped, head inclined in a gesture of submission. Kerath aimed his disruptor at her and deliberately set it to 'kill', all the while assessing the couple.

"Send off that message, or your mate is dead."

"This serves no purpose, as she has no knowledge, and I will not disclose mine, even if you were to carry out your threat. Moreover, there is a Starship outside, scanning your cruiser. I am sure that you know what that can mean," was the unpreturbed reply.

"Husband, my fate is of no import, and would never justify aggression. I am expendable," the woman interrupted softly. "The colony is more important than our existence."

"Those peacemongers! You could kill them one by one - and they'd still run on about unjustifiable violence! Well, I think I know how we can get what we want. Guards, bring the men to the detention area, chamber 5, close guard. As for the women, take them to the bridge for some amusement. Keep this female separated from the others. She will be useful in dealing with the Earthers." Kerath was becoming angrier by the moment at the impassivity of the hostages. Even the woman displayed no emotion of any kind.

At last on the Enterprise Uhura exclaimed, "Audiovisual message coming in from the Klingons, Captain. Shall I put it on the screen?"

At Kirk's nod the screen cleared immediately to show the face of a Klingon Commander who had made quite a name for himself in the past few years. He was a highly intelligent and shrewd commander, an opponent to be reckoned with.

"Kerath! I thought so," Kirk said as if to himself, recognising the hard features and brutal expression. This Klingon had made his way up through the ranks by the most treacherous of methods.

"I see you recognise me. So much the better for our negotiations - we will have no trouble understanding one another. This colony is being established on a planet claimed by our Empire. You and the Vulcans are trespassing here and committing an act of aggression, appropriation by force... 'squatting' is, I believe, the old Terran expression for it. We could blast the entire colony into non-existence, but we will be merciful..." He grinned viciously, "On the condition that you evacuate it within twenty-four Terran hours. You have three hours in which to decide. If not, we will all have some entertainment. The guests on our ship will... cease to exist... one by one, here on the bridge in the presence of their companions, and of course before your eyes. Be assured that intership reception will function most efficiently."

Kirk struggled to remain calm and self-possessed as he formulated his answer. "You have no legal right to this planet. It was claimed by the United Federation of Planets with all due formalities Stardate 1092.03. Moreover, this colony was established after proper notification of all parties - including the Klingon Empire - so there can be no doubt that it is a legal settlement. It is nowhere near, let alone within, Empire space. Release the colony ship and the hostages immediately, unharmed; otherwise measures will be taken against you. You are the aggressor here."

"There is no time for Federation whining. Scan our ship and you will see how many lives depend on your decision."

Spock glanced up from his computer console after making the necessary adjustments. "Vulcanoid readings, Captain. A group of thirty is being held on the Klingon cruiser."

"Satisfied, Kirk? This group has a leader of some importance, and his wife is with him. Let us see your reaction to a little... demonstration." He turned to his officers. "Now we will see if the Federation men feel called upon to aid a female of any race. Kerath, bring that woman here. If she gives you any trouble, don't waste time - there are fourteen others."

As the bridge crew of the Enterprise stared helplessly, a group of Vulcan women appeared in the doorway of the Klingon ship's bridge. One of them - small, slender; with a mass of dark brown hair - was pushed roughly onto the bridge where Kerath gripped her by the arms and forced her to face the screen. She started at the sight of Kirk, but quickly had herself under control again.

Kirk, astonished, turned to Spock. "I remember that girl, Spock! Are you running another scan to verify?"

Spock had abruptly turned away, trying to disguise an expression much like antipathy. "Yes, Captain."

McCoy muttered to Kirk, "Jim, I had hoped we would never see that particular woman again." Kirk shook his head.

Kerath had now released her and walked to a position where she half faced him. "Now, Vulcan, tell the gallant Captain Kirk what we expect," She did not move or reply, only kept her eyes fixed on the screen, their expression unyielding. The Klingon waited for some moments.

All of a sudden Kerath, roused to fury, struck her a savage blow across the face. She fell against a guard, who pushed her back to face Kerath.

"You will speak!" What he heard was not to his liking.

"We are under duress, Captain Kirk of the Enterprise," she said without inflection, "but this colony must not fall into..."

She was unable to finish the sentence, for Kerath, enraged, rushed at her. He hit her repeatedly with all his strength, causing her to fall heavily against a support to which she clung, dazed and bleeding, a hand to her lips. The guard dragged her forward so that she once more faced the Klingon commander and the screen; she wrenched herself free and proudly confronted Kerath.

"So, you try to defy us, woman. You will suffer for this, I assure you. The Federation men prefer to leave you to your fate, it seems. Guards, take the others to the detention area - this one goes to the interrogation chamber."

For once Sulu did not smile at Chekov's "Cossacks!" All those on the bridge, including Spock and McCoy, were disgusted by this display of force. It was in keeping, though, with what they had heard of Kerath. They knew the choice of subject had been his in order to test Kirk.

Kirk decided to play along until he had decided what measures to take. He called out furiously, "You will release those hostages immediately, and without further mistreatment. Phasers are trained on your ship, and I will not hesitate to use them if you murder any of those people."

"Our shields are up - rave all you like. I have told you how to save them... think it over well. You have three hours in which to reconsider. Kerath out." The screen darkened.

Kirk was first to speak. "Lt. Uhura, establish contact with the colony and send a message to both Starfleet and Vulcan. Give a detailed report of the present situation." Rising and walking to the turbolift, he added, "Mr. Spock, Mr. Scott, Mr. Chekov, Dr. McCoy... report immediately to the briefing room."

Kirk waited for the others to pass ahead, stopped Spock, and whispered to him, "That woman on the bridge - it was T'Pring, wasn't it? Why did you turn away?"

Spock's eyes met his for only an instant; then, painfully, "She almost made me kill you in the plank tow, and I cannot forgive that most unpleasant experience."

"There is something I don't understand, Spock. Why didn't any of her companions try to help her? She was within their reach that last time, and they could see that she was hurt."

"Captain, on Vulcan physical injuries do not arouse solicitude, and it would have been illogical for them to risk violence on her account. Moreover, she no longer has any rights, having been ostracised because by challenging she invoked a custom long fallen into disuse, and thus showed a callous disregard for the fact that she would thereby be responsible for a man's death. No-one would think of speaking to her directly, much less touch her. She accepts this... she knew it would happen when she challenged." At Kirk's concerned glance Spock continued, "Do not think of us as reacting as Humans would, Captain. We are Vulcans."

With that they entered the briefing room for a conference. Kirk began, "As you know, we have a deadline of three hours."

"Two hours and fifty-four point one zero minutes."

Kirk shot his First Officer an irritated glance and continued, "At the end of which those people will be executed, and twenty-four hours later the colony will be destroyed. Any suggestions while we wait for an answer from the colony?"

"Captain?" Uhura's voice came over the intercom.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"The colony agrees to the evacuation as the only logical way to save the hostages and avoid unnecessary warfare. They have already contacted Vulcan to send them ships capable of warp drive to transport them back to Vulcan."

"Give in to Klingon blackmail? We're not even sure they'll keep their word!" McCoy exclaimed unbelievably.

"Bones, I understand how you feel, but it is their decision. We must, however, find a way to save the colony."

"Sorry, Jim. But the thought of those Vulcan hostages got to me."

"A surprise attack," suggested Chokov. "That should do it. They're so confident they've lowered their shields. Their detention area is close to the hangar deck on that class of cruiser. Got life support and energy, and the hostages could run for the hangar deck - none of them are injured."

"Yet," put in McCoy.

"Think, Chokov," Kirk replied. "Got in one hit, or even miss that ship, and the hostages will be slaughtered in a matter of seconds."

Scott moved. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Yes, Scotty?"

"We have a cloaking device on board. I could build it into a shuttlecraft, enter the Klingon ship with Security men, and fight my way to Deck 6."

"And that's just what they're waiting for us to do. What a prize that would be! Thirty Vulcan colonists, plus some of our men... and I doubt the shuttle would be waiting there for anyone to board it and escape."

Spock then gave his plan. "Captain, the deflector shields being down, I can envisage a possibility."

In the meantime the women, with one exception, had been brought back to join their mates. Not exactly to join, as the men were in a separate compartment. In the room next to theirs T'Pring was being questioned - Kerath had ensured that they could see the process on the screens in the brigs.

After being obliged to take off her travelling robe - which left her only a thin, Vulcan-style dress - she was attached by the wrists to the two supports of a half-circular construct which would offer no protection. She inclined her head, closed her eyes, and called on all her strength to endure the questioning.

"You will give us information on planetary defences, number of colonists, security installations - all you know. You see, we have time enough for a profitable conversation. If you do not cooperate, it will be... unpleasant for you, and subsequently for the others. You decide their fate. And you will survive long enough to watch your husband's death - that is a promise."

Her dark eyes remained calm as she looked up at Kerath.

"Sound waves, high frequency but slow rise." She became rigidly tense in an effort to control the agony of those sounds which seemed to tear through her mind and body. "Kathan, your agoniser." He set it on highest level, then signalled a medic to inject a drug to lower resistance. Kathan then slowly, deliberately, touched the agoniser to the woman's temples, her shoulders... he knew the nerve points of Vulcan anatomy. But she did not react.

Stonn, staring at the screen, became tense when he realised his wife was under a mind-sifter. The sound waves had now reached the appropriate pitch, making it difficult to distinguish between hallucination and reality.

"She is now receptive. Show her what we are doing." The questioner turned on an adjunct to the mind-sifter. The machine began to project into T'Pring's mind a vision of her mate being tormented and dying in agony by ancient Vulcan methods. Stonn, in the adjoining room, rushed to the wall, touched it with outspread fingers, and opened the mind link, though his wife was still controlled. His mind was hit by such a surge of physical and mental anguish and terror that he stiffened and nearly collapsed. T'Pring noticed the link, but thought the

agony in her mind was her mate's... or was it her own...? She could no longer tell...

Then, with a shock, the sifter tore open her subconscious, activating the collective Vulcan memory of a now violent and brutal past. It was a terrible experience for a Vulcan, and Korath knew it. She tried to fight back, to repress, but it was magnified by the machine. T'Pring's resistance was broken when the sifter was readjusted to a higher setting, and emotional overload was created - under the influence she began to scream piercingly, her eyes wide with terror; all of this amplified by the mind-sifter. With nearly insane strength she struggled against the bonds, and it was the sharp pain from her lacerated wrists that summoned her back to a semblance of control - the visions persisted, but her screams and terrified sobs abruptly ceased. Only her eyes reflected the horror of the atrocities she was still 'seeing'. The other hostages had not reacted to what they had seen.

Her mate realised what had been tapped, and shuddered when it hit his mind through the link. The violence of Surak's time, he could see it and feel it! He was sickened by the recollections, but kept up the link, not wanting to abandon his mate to insanity. The others moved to hide him from view.

Suddenly Stonn pressed his hands to his head in extreme pain and fell to his knees, fighting for consciousness... T'Pring, in the interrogation room, convulsed with pain and shock. The Klingon mind-sifter had located the link with her mate and ruptured it. Stonn struggled to his feet and opened his mind, first searching, then projecting. He could help, but his wife was too weakened to 'reach' for the mental touch offered her.

The torment continued for over an hour, then Korath switched off the machine. He considered T'Pring. She was pallid, her eyes dark with pain.

Korath spoke soothingly. "You are injured, your mate is dying, but you can still save the others. Give me the information and you can all be free. Your stubbornness is costing one life already."

She did not answer. Her stance and expression showed clearly enough that the torture had not yet broken her will.

"Continue!" Questioning and persuasion continued for the next hour, reinforced by indiscriminate blows to create as much discomfort as possible. When Korath saw that she would not yield he called a halt.

"Keep her alive! Release her, and take her to the others."

She slumped onto her knees when she was freed, and the guards pulled her up and dragged her back to the other women who moved aside, eyes averted. She was shoved roughly to a bunk onto which she collapsed with a sigh of pain, her hands pressed to her temples to maintain control.

The others realised what had been done to her, but could not cross the 'barrier' created by ostracism. Only one of them, T'Preda, went over to her, and when T'Pring looked up, helped her put her travelling cloak on.

"If she weakens through the cold, when she is questioned again she may be incapable of resistance," she explained. This was logical enough for the others, but T'Preda knew that T'Pring needed help. Here, a healing trance was out of the question... the Klingon guards were watching them closely.

In the cell across the hall Stonn relaxed. Taking his hands off the wall adjacent to the interrogation room he looked over, trying to see his mate, who remained where she had settled, her attitude stressing her fight for control over



physical and mental anguish. Shanak, one of the younger scientists, said to him, "I grieve with you over the violence offered your wife. It was unnecessary, and is regrettable."

"We have had no success up to now, with either that woman or her mate. It is true that Vulcans do not react to violence, but the mind-sifter has previously been effective with all races. We did not gain any information, in spite of breaking through all other barriers. We have had few cases like this before. It is fact that we cannot make good our threats unless directly attacked, a risk I doubt those disgustingly soft Federation people will take - they will never risk the death of one of those pacifist Vulcans. If we openly killed one, it would mean a glorious battle and the possibility of capturing the Enterprise - a splendid show of power that would help us gain allies in systems as yet undecided as to joining us or letting themselves be led like sheep into joining the Federation. You know, however, what the result would be. Notify our Fleet, and we run the risk of at the same time attracting interference by the Organians. I think you remember the way they ridiculed the Empire once before."

His officers looked away; they had heard of the whole shaming affair, and it still rankled with them.

"They would just immobilise both sides again. We must also not forget that we are acting on our own, and can only contact our Fleet if we are successful - or if we are attacked. The Empire could use that planet as a base for operations and expansion, and it possesses considerable wealth in ores. We must get it by any means, thus gaining honour and high positions for us all. The Empire knows nothing of hostile actions - it never does. This it has already transmitted to Federation Headquarters."

On the Enterprise the briefing was at its end. Kirk was telling Spock of the risks of intership beaming, even though the Vulcan already knew them for himself. Spock had chosen Lt. T'Preen to accompany him. She was of Vulcan origin, tall and slender, very attractive with surprisingly light hair and golden-pale complexion for one of her race. T'Preen was the first Vulcan woman to have sought a career in Starfleet sciences, and had had to work her way through both studies and service. Her choice of career had been unheard-of for a Vulcan woman. She had been readily accepted by the crew, though; her gentle yet dignified ways they found appealing. Of her bondmate nothing was known - only Spock knew anything about him, and he remained silent.

"Your idea of intership beaming seems the only practical possibility mentioned up to now, but you're taking a great risk. You must arrive inside the detention cell, and not the bulkhead. Do you have the neutralisers? The Klingons will let you beam in, but not out."

"I assure you that the coordinates have been set as precisely as possible, Captain. We shall assume Vulcan attire now."

Scott brushed past them saying, "I'll prepare the transporter to beam you over on your signal."

Kirk smiled, and hit the intercom button. "Send a message to the colony. We are sending down our shuttlecraft to help with the evacuation. We cannot risk the lives of the hostages and the colonists. Commence evacuation. A new colony planet will be allocated. Kirk out." He turned to McCoy. "That should give the Klingons something to think about."

As expected, the Klingons were absorbed in their observations - their threat had apparently had the desired effect. They were so confident that they had relaxed their guard, even in the detention area.

"Beam us over, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, and good luck to ye." Scott watched the two Vulcans in their native dress dematerialise. "And I'll be waiting right here to see ye up again." He went to the intercom. "Man all secondary transporter units. Locate and track all Vulcan readings for emergency beam-up at any time."

Spock and T'Preen materialised safely enough in the respective detention cells, to the controlled surprise of the Vulcans imprisoned there. After a moment of orientation, Spock found himself facing the emigrants' leader. Xenobiologist Stonn walked towards him, hand raised in the Vulcan salute. His expression was open.

"Peace and long life, Commander Spock of Vulcan," was the calm greeting.

"Live long and prosper, Scientist Stonn." Further formalities were dispensed with.

"Specify the purpose of your appearance here. You have been notified to negotiate for our liberation, not to undergo any unjustifiable risk on our account."

"Scientist Stonn, it is not certain that you and your people would ultimately have been released, so our plan is as follows. Klingon guards are efficient, but as is the case with emotional beings, they relax their guard if their duty is uneventful. They will not fail to grow careless after a short period because of the apparent success of their threat. We will then employ the field neutralisers, put the guard out of action, and have the Enterprise beam us over by transporter. The plan is extremely simple, but still hazardous enough as the corridors here are heavily guarded."

Stonn inclined his head in thanks, but it was apparent that he was uneasy. His wife - would she be capable of rapid movement? Spock seemed to sense Stonn's unease, and the reason behind it.

"Lt. T'Preen will assist in evacuating your mate."

Lieutenant T'Preen was giving the same explanations in the other cell when she caught sight of a barely conscious woman on the bunk. "What has happened to her?"

"She was questioned." No more could be said as a sudden blaring sound echoed through the ship... red alert! The transporter interference from the Enterprise had been registered and traced to the detention area where the captives were being held.

"Increase the guard around those chambers. If anything unusual is seen, report immediately. Fire at any unknown alien with heavy stun. We want those hostages for the entertainment of the crew. In any case, we have Kirk this time. Lie as he might, he will be accused of negligence by their Starfleet Command, or by the Vulcan government. We have him this time!"

The guards began their search. The detention rooms revealed no change. Luckily they did not bother to count their hostages, not expecting anyone to be so foolish as to beam into the cells. The Vulcans calmly looked at the guards, except for Lt. T'Preen, who had given T'Pring a stimulant, and was attempting to alleviate the effects of the questioning enough to permit her to retain control until they could all reach safety. After some time T'Pring regained some strength. She got up, and walked to a short distance from the others. T'Preen moved to the force-field, watching Spock, who motioned to her to stay with the group. She understood, and spoke with the other women, who after some deliberation came to an agreement. T'Preen again caught Spock's attention and made a pinching motion. He nodded; their plan would have to be modified slightly.

Six guards had remained, and were joined by four more. The intercom beeped. "Kagai here."

"Bring the hostages to the bridge to prepare for a demonstration of what happens to those who defy us!" bellowed Korath.

With something very like alacrity the two groups were released, but kept carefully apart. The men were under heavier guard, as the women's subservience made resistance appear unlikely. As the two groups passed through an unguarded hall of the ship, T'Preen whispered in Vulcan, as though to the woman she supported, "Now - create a diversion!" As the guard nearest her turned on her to impose silence, one of the women stumbled against another guard, whose subsequent threats distracted his fellows - only for an instant, but long enough for the men to turn on their guards and those of the women.

"Quick, into the gallery... T'Preen, neutraliser in reverse!" The unconscious guards were dragged into the deadend corridor leading to the disposal units, where they would, hopefully, not be discovered for quite some time.

Spock activated his communicator. "Mr. Scott, beam us over immediately! Lt. T'Preen, Xenobiologist Stonn, his mate and I, will go last. Dr. McCoy to the transporter room - one of the women has been injured."

The entire operation went smoothly and efficiently, as was typical of the Chief Engineer and his men. Their scanners had faithfully tracked the Vulcans' life readings.

"There they are! Take them - and don't worry about their lives!" A group of guards, alerted by the communications frequency and the renewal of transporter activity, ran around the corner to face the four remaining Vulcans. In the brief encounter that followed, no weapons could be used because of the close quarters. In seconds, both Klingons and Vulcans were beamed over to the Enterprise, and the Klingons were marched off to the brig.

The Vulcans were met by Kirk, Scott, and McCoy; and McCoy welcomed them in his usual manner.

"You really carried it off! Scientist Stonn, you're safe here. Dr. M'Benga and my staff are already checking your people."

Spock looked at McCoy, puzzled. "Carried off what? Dr. McCoy, I assure you that I have acquired no Klingon artifacts."

"Never mind! You're back, you organic computer. Now come down from that platform - you're all due for an examination, especially you, Mrs. Stonn." Spock and the others descended.

T'Pring, exhausted, staggered and fell at the base of the transporter alcove. In an instant Stonn was kneeling at her side. He looked up at McCoy. "Healer, my wife requires your assistance."

"I can see that for myself. Hurry, we'll take her to sickbay." He called into the intercom. "Dr. M'Benga, Nurse Chapel, prepare for possible surgery." He turned back to the others. "Spock, T'Preen, what happened?"

"Dr. McCoy, I only know that she was injured during interrogation."

"It happened before your officers beamed over," Stonn interposed as he lifted T'Pring into his arms. "My mate was mistreated mentally and physically in an effort to induce me to yield important information to spare her torture. I alleviated the pain to a degree through our link until it was broken. The Klingons used every technique, even to primitive brutality. To resist as she did in spite of the danger was her duty, as she has specific knowledge vital to us." Stonn's concern showed only in the rapidity with which he walked to the turbo-lift following McCoy, and in softly pronounced Vulcan words at a suppressed cry of pain from his mate.

All had been prepared by the time they arrived in sickbay. "Put her on that bed, and get her travelling robe off." During the examination McCoy was angered for the victim's sake, in spite of his dislike for her since Spock's first pon farr. "Those Klingons!" he muttered more to himself than to Stonn. "To brutalise a woman like that... they have no decency! Look at her: heavy bruises, inner lesions, massive shock, not to mention the effects of the mental torture she was subjected to." McCoy drew the Vulcan aside. "Mr. Stonn, evacuation has closed your medical facilities, but an operation, though minor, is unavoidable. Dr. M'Benga interned on your home planet, so you can trust us."

Stonn nodded. "I understand." He lowered his voice before continuing. "Dr. McCoy, I dare not touch her mind because of her condition. It could harm us both. If she should show emotion... I request you to show no awareness of her lack of control. Perhaps if Lt. T'Preen could stay with her for a while... I leave her now in your hands. I must trust you implicitly."

With these words Stonn left - a bit too hurriedly for a Vulcan, McCoy noted with surprise. He turned back to T'Pring. Christine had given her an injection to ease the pain, and Lt. T'Preen was assisting her to attend to minor injuries. A Vulcan woman... Stonn had pleaded for this for his mate.

"Nurse Chapel, I believe two of the Vulcan women have her blood group. Call them."

After a few minutes they entered the ward. After acting as donor, T'Preda went over to T'Pring, who lay impassively on the bed. Christine, concerned about T'Pring's silence, nodded, and T'Preda spoke to her gently in Vulcan. T'Pring listened, then to Christine's and T'Preen's relief she answered hesitantly.

T'Pera, who had been watching, said contemptuously in Galactic, "Why do you speak to her? She is one apart. She has challenged."

"T'Preda countered with, "T'Pau has lifted the sanction of silence," but moved reluctantly to the door. Both left without another word or glance.

"There are limits even to the logic of sanctions!" With that T'Preen, livid, rushed out after them, much to Christine's consternation.

Christine looked down at T'Pring, who turned her head away in despair. She began to weep, bitterly but silently, and trembled with the effort to suppress her emotions. Christine impulsively bent over her, drawing T'Pring's hands from her face, and forcing her to meet her eyes.

"I shall not tell of what I am seeing now. I shall call your mate for you when all this is over. You will not be left alone here, I promise you that."

T'Pring looked at her unbelievably; empathy, for her, from this one? But in a moment she again assumed the quiet, controlled expression of a Vulcan. Christine touched T'Pring's shoulder, then rose to see McCoy staring at them in disbelief. "I believe I have tended to her needs for now."

McCoy had seen and heard it all. He felt concern, but only said, "I hope

our Lieutenant can make the others see sense. We can begin now, Nurse. Put her under."

On the bridge of the Klingon ship feelings of a very negative kind were running high. The dazed guards had been found. To add insult to injury, Captain Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise had had the gall to congratulate them on their efficiency while notifying Kerath of the capture of four of his guards.

"As you see," said Kirk, "we have freed the hostages and also have four of your guards. We shall, of course, return them to you if you agree to leave the area immediately, without further hostilities."

"You can take those idiots with you into oblivion! Here is your answer, Terran! I intend to blast that ship of yours out of the galaxy!"

Luckily the power surge on the enemy vessel had been registered by the sensors, and the deflector shields were up in time to ward off the surprise attack. No damage was done except for a mild shaking.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Lt. Uhura?"

"Message from Vulcan, sir. 'If necessary, sacrifice the colony and negotiate for the hostages. Prevent needless aggressive actions.' End of message."

"Too late. Transmit the following to both Starfleet and Vulcan. 'We are under attack by the Klingon vessel. The hostages have been freed and are aboard our ship. Kirk out.'" Uhura turned back to her communications board.

"Mr. Sulu, arm all phaser banks and lock phasers on target. Engage warp drive, Mr. Chekov. I'd like a bit more elbow room."

Sulu and Chekov made the necessary adjustments. "Phasers armed and trained on target, sir."

"Fire phasers."

"Phasers fired." Sulu paused. "No contact made, the Klingon's shields are holding." The Enterprise lurched again, more heavily this time. The intercom on Kirk's chair beeped.

"Kirk here."

"Sickbay. Jim, Dr. M'Benga and I are trying to finish our work down here. Stop shaking the ship - I'm getting casualties by the dozen."

"There'll be some more shaking ahead of us - we're under attack by the Klingons." The next exchange of fire brought no decision either, though Klingon shields were weakening from the Enterprise's phaser fire, followed by photon torpedos.

"Captain! Just approaching within range - a small vessel. It's one of our shuttlecraft!" Sulu turned to his Captain, startled.

Spock continued. "Scanning reveals it is being operated by one man alone, Vulcanoid."

"Uhura, open hailing frequencies."

"Open, sir."

"Identify yourself. Leave this region immediately - you are in danger of being destroyed. Your duty is to assist in the evacuation of the colony."

"No reply, Captain. Communications must be shorted on that craft; all I'm getting is static."

"Keep on trying, then."

"Yes, sir."

The shields of the enemy ship wavered for a moment as the Klingon's tractors locked onto the shuttlecraft. There was nothing the Enterprise transporters could do for the occupant, the small ship was well out of range.

The Klingons were triumphant. With this new pawn in their hands they could now dictate conditions. Kerath watched Kalen work the controls. "Bring it in quickly before the Enterprise interferes!"

"Locked onto it, Commander. Drawing it into the hangar deck."

"Do not lose it, or you'll be a likely candidate for demotion. Send guards over to take charge."

"Commander, it is now on the hangar deck."

Kreth, a little way off, turned hastily to Kerath. "We must eject that vessel! Its engines are on overload - the Vulcan is resorting to self-destruction!"

On the Enterprise Spock remarked, with the Vulcan equivalent of surprise in his voice, "Captain, sensor readings are registering a considerable build-up of energy on that shuttlecraft. It appears its engines are set on overload."

At the same moment there was a blinding flash of light from the Klingon ship. The screen went dark for a moment to compensate. When it cleared it revealed the Klingon cruiser... lights dimmed or out, a gaping hole where the hangar deck had been.

"Explosion registered. Considerable damage to hangars and life support. Shields are also down." Spock gave the results of his readings, though they were all too evident.

"Captain, the cruiser is incapable of damaging the Enterprise and is turning away," Sulu reported.

Kirk sat thoughtfully for a moment. "Uhura, open hailing frequencies to the Klingon ship."

"Hailing frequencies open."

"Commander Kerath, are you in need of aid? We do not wish to waste life unnecessarily."

"We may have lost this time, Kirk, but we can still manage on our own without Federation spies meddling in our affairs!" came Kerath's curt reply.

The Klingon cruiser, unable to retaliate, slowly moved off on impulse power; it would just barely reach the outskirts of their Empire.

"I wonder who the man was. The one who flew that shuttle, and sacrificed himself," Kirk asked quietly. No-one answered, all were shattered by this courageous yet desperate action.

"Message from the colony, Captain."

"Put it on the screen, Uhura."

A proud and dignified Vulcan of indeterminable age appeared on the screen.

"Captain Kirk of the Enterprise, it is my duty to notify you that one of our security officers, Sublieutenant Steran, has appropriated one of your shuttlecraft and has left the colony with it. We regret the incident, and will make full restitution. The officer in question will be turned over to Starfleet to stand trial, and of course measures will be taken against him on Vulcan." It was evident that the change of situation had not yet registered on Suran I.

"Sir," Kirk replied, "that one man has put the Klingon battlecruiser out of commission, and ensured the safety of the colony. The evacuation can now be

discontinued, and your people may return to Suran 1 in safety. As for your officer, he will receive posthumous commendations from Starfleet Command after I send in my report."

The Vulcan seemed to relax a little. "I am gratified to hear that Officer Steran acted according to his duty and Vulcan honour. We deplore his loss. Our thanks to him, and to you, for preserving this colony. Live long and prosper, Selak out."

An hour later things were returning to normal on the ship and in sickbay. Injuries to the crew, while numerous, were not serious, and all casualties quickly returned to their stations.

The operation on T'Pring had been completed without complications; but on awakening, overwrought by her ordeal, T'Pring had spasms of vomiting which she could not control, and which added to her distress. Stonn, who had waited in McCoy's office talking with T'Preen, entered at the doctor's alarmed call. He was able to calm her, then asked for privacy; when Stonn left the cubicle his wife was in a healing trance.

McCoy, his face showing his anger, went to him. "Stonn, physically T'Pring will recover, but Dr. M'Benga and I are concerned about the psychological aspect. She is extremely weak, and the mental torment has totally broken her emotional control. T'Pera said something about her being 'one apart'. Look, in order to recover fully, T'Pring desperately needs understanding, acceptance, and security. You and the others must decide what is to become of her." His expression softened when he saw the pain in Stonn's eyes. "Look, her readings are almost normal!" He pointed to a screen. "You can go to her as soon as Nurse Chapel calls you over the intercom."

"I am gratified to hear that she will recover." Stonn's expression was calm and controlled, but not cold.

McCoy hesitated, then, "May I ask a question?"

"You may."

"Will she always suffer for... for the challenge?"

Stonn hesitated for a moment, then somehow sensing this Human's innate kindness and concern he replied, "No, she is a worthy mate. The challenge will never be forgotten, as it points to possible emotionalism. Our ostracism entails no cruelty, only absolute isolation. It will gradually lessen, and she will be reaccepted into our society. Then we can lead a normal life, even on Vulcan, should we ever decide to return. The new, less deadly challenge here will demonstrate everyone's strength; hers has already been amply proved. It is better you do not know the full extent of the social consequences we met on Vulcan prior to our departure. Had she refused any other than your First Officer, the sanctions would most probably have been less severe, as illogical and arbitrary as that may sound. It took three years for the first sanction to be lifted. We had to search for a new beginning." He glanced back to the cubicle.

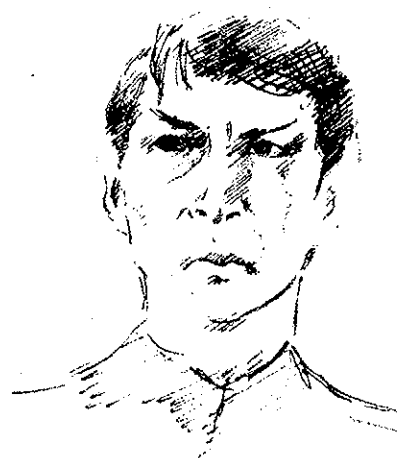
"I hope you find it, Stonn," said McCoy. "Rest for a while. T'Preen is with your wife, as you asked." The doctor had expected reticence, not openness and even feelings.

Twenty-seven of the colonists beamed down before their leader to join their predecessors in arranging the return to normal of life on the colony. They did not, as Vulcans, thank a 'logical decision', but rather commended the efficiency and adherence to Federation principles shown by the Enterprise crew.

Some hours later Stonn followed with T'Pring, accompanied by T'Preda who had waited. T'Preda's husband Shanak had agreed to this on McCoy's counsel. Being Stonn's assistant, Shanak would be spending the next days in the Science Centre

setting up computer terminals in preparation for research. He had previously shown that he had no interest in adhering to T'Pring's ostracism. This was Suran I, not Vulcan, a new world for all those who helped to form it.

Before dematerialising on the transporter Stonn, with a slight smile, expressed his gratitude for their deliverance. He wished the Captain, McCoy, and Spock peace and long life. Spock, with whom he had toured the ship and spoken at length, was now manning the transporter in honour of the new Chief Scientist.



Some time later all were once again on the bridge when Uhura announced, "Captain, a message from the colony."

"Let's hear it - put it on the screen."

Stonn, now familiar, appeared.

"The colony of Suran I wishes the Captain and crew of the Enterprise peace and long life. It was an illogical and unjustifiable risk you took on our account, but you succeeded in preserving this planet for us. We do not thank a logical course of action, but your assistance will not be forgotten, either here or on the home planet."

"We thank you, Scientist Stonn. May you too live long and prosper, with success to your endeavours," replied Kirk.

To the surprise of the bridge crew a short message for Spock alone followed in the expressionless Vulcan language, the contents of which made Spock show a slight but definite reaction. He replied in the same language, then gave the Vulcan hand salute. Then once again the screen showed only the familiar stars.

"Transmission ended," said Uhura.

After some moments Kirk looked around at the familiar faces of his bridge crew. "Well, this has been a very quiet mission so far. Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Chekov, lay in a course for Epsilon Indi, warp factor five. We still have an assignment to take care of."

While preparations were being made Kirk and McCoy looked over at Spock, who was working at his station. McCoy finally could not contain himself.

"Spock, what was all that about?"

"That, Dr. McCoy, was a very personal message; but part of it may interest you. A preliminary step in normalisation of interpersonal relations is to be noted. Moreover, a report of the incident is being sent to Vulcan. And that is all I am permitted to say on the subject."

"What about those four Klingons?" asked McCoy.

"Oh, they'll probably be handed over to Starbase 6, and be picked up later by one of their own cruisers," was Kirk's answer. "I don't envy their fate once Kerath gets them back in the Empire, though."

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INCIDENT ON VEGA OKEN by Elizabeth Sharp

Somewhere a bird sang. The sound drifted across the cool air, and was lost to the distant hills. Sunlight broke through the towering trees that stood with branches stretching and bending across the sky.

McCoy blinked as the light danced on his face and he stared upwards at the fluttering leaves that twitched like insects flying from flower to flower. He closed his eyes, but still felt the presence of the trees above him - their power absolute and overwhelming. Beneath his body the ground felt damp, but not uncomfortably so.

McCoy lay still, listening to his heart beat. While he heard that sound he knew he was still alive, but the knowledge that he was dying did not trouble him. The air around him felt like warm cotton wool and he was lying in it, feeling it slowly cover him.

With an effort he turned his head to see the shattered wreckage of the shuttlecraft. The forest around it was a mess - trees stood torn and broken by the savage impact of the alien vessel. Bits of metal had stuck in his left leg, but due to the effects of the planet's strange radiation he no longer felt the pain. The slow, inevitable march of death had taken the sensation from him.

For all the hours he had lain there, there had been no movement from the wreckage. A thin line of smoke drifted from the remains of the pilot's seat and disappeared into the trees. Watching it, McCoy decided it had been easier for the rest of the shuttle crew - at least they had all died instantly. At least, the doctor hoped so.

A noise made him look back. The communicator that had been thrown out of reach several yards away was speaking again. Several times before they had called, asking for the shuttle's position, but he could not move, and they had received no reply. The Enterprise must be passing directly overhead, probing the planet's surface, hoping for some sign of the shuttle. It had been several hours now, so they must realise the shuttle was no longer operational, but the radiation that affected the planet would be causing problems, as Spock had known that it would. The sensor readings were no doubt way off, and even if they did find him now, it was far too late. He had only minutes of life left.

"... radiation levels reaching critical. Can you hear me, Galileo?... Come in please..."

"I hear you...", but even as he spoke the words McCoy knew that Spock could not hear him. His voice was so weak, and he was too far away from the communicator. Still, it was only polite to answer the Vulcan, since he wouldn't be alive to hear the next time the Enterprise came over his position. The voice was getting very weak now, but before it disappeared altogether McCoy had the satisfaction of hearing Jim Kirk's voice for the last time as he called over to the Vulcan. And then there was silence.

There was a rustle of leaves, like footsteps. Gazing into the sky McCoy saw that the sun was going down. Suddenly the evening light was broken by dancing shadows that united to form a semi-solid vision - a spectre - an illusion of the 'dying' sun and his own sick mind. McCoy blinked, and it was gone, absorbed into the lengthening darkness of the forest. Gone, like a visitation of death.

When he opened his eyes again it was cold and dark. McCoy was not surprised to see the pale, feeble light of the planet's only moon. What did surprise him was that he was still alive to discover the fact. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes, only to open them again when someone touched his face. The figure that knelt beside him was clad in a spacesuit.

I must be getting worse, thought McCoy. I can actually touch this hallucination.

Then there was only the silent blackness again.

They faced him now in a circle about the briefing room table, their eyes puzzled, curious and somehow strangely accusing. He looked at each one in turn, and as he made silent contact each one looked away.

All except Spock. He did not look away, but accepted the contact for what it was for he, alone of them all, did not accuse. And McCoy smiled at him in relief and gratitude.

Jim Kirk bit his lip, then leaned back in his chair. Silently he surveyed the people about him, assessing their reactions. Both Scott and Uhura sat with their eyes fixed on the table. M'Benga, on the other hand, seemed distinctly worried. He frowned visibly, and his hand played with the pages of his report. Spock, however, seemed totally unpreturbed, which was to be expected from the Vulcan, no matter what happened. And it did not escape the Captain's notice that he had been the only one among them who seemed prepared to look McCoy in the face. It was this reaction that decided the Captain's mind for him.

"Doctor McCoy, you cannot give us any explanation as to what happened on Vega-Oken?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Very well, then. I suggest we leave it there."

M'Benga looked up at the Captain. "We cannot afford to leave it now, sir. There are so many questions to be answered."

"It is obvious, Doctor, that McCoy cannot answer them, so why bother to ask him?" The Captain surveyed the others. "Very well, then - you are all dismissed."

There was a brief silence. Uhura was the first to stand, and when she did she was quickly followed by the others. Eventually everyone had left except Kirk, McCoy and Spock.

They sat quietly for a moment, all three unwilling to break the silence. But then all the emotion welled up in McCoy - emotion he had been trying to hide while the others were there; but now there was no longer any need to run away, no need for the long silences, and the accusing eyes.

"I tell you, I was dying."

"Bones, how could you have been? There wasn't a mark on you. When M'Benga got to you, you were asleep."

McCoy stared back at him desperately, remembering the warm cotton wool surrounding him, and the feeling of sinking deep into it. How could he convince them?"

"I was thrown into a world that is constantly bombarded by dangerous radiation. I was on the surface for over twelve hours. My left leg had been torn to bits in the crash, and I could feel the metal still in it. My sensations began to fade - the pain disappeared, my hearing began to go, and my sight was being distorted. I could hardly move."

Kirk flinched at the remembered horror in McCoy's voice. It was plain the doctor was reliving a terrible experience. It was therefore with considerable surprise that he heard what his own voice said to McCoy.

"Then why aren't you dead?"

McCoy stared at him, eyes widening. Slowly, incredulously, he turned to face Spock.

"What have I done, that he should want me dead?"

It was the Captain's turn to be horrified. Coming to stand beside the other Human he grasped his shoulders tightly.

"Bones - that's not what I said."

McCoy looked back at him, his face unreadable. "Didn't you? I thought that's what you did say. Forgive me. Perhaps my hearing is not fully recovered."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. Not knowing what to say or do, he was aware that he had handled this entire thing wrong from the very beginning.

"Bones, please believe me - you know that's not what I meant. But you must understand how I feel - six of my crew are dead, all killed by the impact, or by the radiation on the surface of Vega-Oken. You were there as long as they, but you came back without a mark! Now, I don't think you've told us everything..."

"There's nothing else to tell! Vega-Oken has plants and animals that seem to thrive on the radiation, but I'm not one of them. I don't know why I'm alive - I'm just glad that I am."

"And so are we."

Both men turned to look at the Vulcan. He had broken his long silence at last - a silence McCoy had found distinctively supportive. He smiled in answer.

"Yes, Spock, I know. And I'm sorry, Jim - I know you didn't mean what I said you did. But if you will excuse me, both of you, I'll go and lie down for a while. I'm feeling rather tired."

Kirk smiled and nodded. The smile faded as the door closed behind the doctor. He turned to face Spock, and instantly understood the Vulcan's silence.

"I know," he said softly. "I handled that all wrong, didn't I?"

He lowered his eyes as Spock nodded slowly in agreement.

It was about two weeks later that the engines started giving them trouble. It was nothing too serious, except that it was, to say the least, inconvenient. For some reason the ship refused to go faster than warp one, but eventually Scott located the trouble - a breakdown in the link between the warp drive and the dilithium crystals. It was going to take several days to repair, even with Spock's help, but there was no urgent business to attend to anywhere, and Kirk figured that he could afford the time. The engineer and the Science Officer became so preoccupied with the problem that the Captain hardly saw Spock outside of duty hours on the bridge.

McCoy also seemed to have settled down. He was his old familiar self, and the rest of the crew had long ago forgotten the mystery that had surrounded his return from the doomed Vega-Oken mission. Everything seemed to be running along nicely, even if, after two days of intense work, they were still travelling at warp one.

The star pattern changed slightly against the black background. The Captain hoped they would soon repair the fault as he realised he was in danger of never wanting to move faster than the speed of light. It was such a slow, leisurely pace and he was enjoying every minute. Right on cue, the intercom came to life.

"Spock to bridge."

"Yes, Spock - go ahead."

"We think we have achieved some success, Captain. We therefore request permission to try an experiment. It should be possible to increase the ship's speed to warp three."

"Very good. Do you require any help from us?"

"No, Captain, that will not be necessary. In about ten minutes, if we are successful, the change in speed will register on Mr. Sulu's board."

Kirk nodded. "That's fine. Good luck, Spock."

"Thank you, Captain."

Kirk leaned back in his chair and waited. Had he known that he had already spoken his last words to Spock - that he would never speak to the Vulcan again - that these ten minutes ticking resolutely away were all that was left of his

friend's life - Jim Kirk's feelings would have been vastly different. But he did not know - could not know - so he sat and wondered who it was he hadn't written to in the last seven weeks. It was someone he should have written to, but he just couldn't remember who it was.

The ten minutes were up and nothing had happened. Oh well, Spock, back to the drawing board!

"Captain, this is very strange."

"What is, Mr. Sulu?"

There was a silence that lasted fully a second, then the navigator looked up, horrified. "Sir, the force fields between the matter/anti-matter drive have ruptured!"

A chance in a million, a chance in a thousand million, and it had to happen to them! Instantly Kirk punched the intercom. "Spock, are you there? This is an emergency - answer me!"

"Scott here, Captain. What's wrong?"

It wasn't Scott operating the controls at the engineering panel, it was Spock. The thought was like an icicle in Kirk's brain.

"Get Spock away from there! The anti-matter's breached the chamber..."

That was all Scott heard, for suddenly he was racing down the corridor to the control room.

Spock watched the dial setting. Warp one was slowly changing into warp two. Even if he couldn't achieve warp three, they had still made progress. Far behind him, atom met anti-atom - they united - they ceased to exist. Carefully Spock reached for the controls. Somewhere to his left he heard the sound of running footsteps - then nothing. He was still reaching for the controls when the board blew up in his face.

Kirk knew what Starfleet Command would say. About that he had no doubts.

- A great misfortune, Captain, which could well have been much worse. Something no-one could have foreseen or prevented. We are indeed fortunate that Commander Spock (great though his loss will be to science and to Starfleet) was the only fatality. Regulations requiring his replacement... -

But at that moment, as he stood in the engineering control room, Jim Kirk didn't see how the situation could be any worse. He didn't seem to feel anything very much, except complete and utter surprise. The truth of the matter was, he just didn't believe it. Not even with the proof lying in front of him. And for one very simple reason - the corpse that lay in front of the engineering panel had no face. It just didn't register that this was Spock. But in the back of his mind he knew that he must accept it, for no-one else on board wore the uniform of a starship Commander, and no-one else had green blood. But it was so difficult. Fate had left him nothing - no help, no comfort - nothing. If only the explosion had left Spock's face untouched...

It was then he realised that Scott had been talking to him, trying to say something to him, but he didn't understand what it was. He hadn't listened. Scott had evidently given up, and moved away.

Dimly he noticed the hoards of people crowding into the room. M'Benga was completing the formality of declaring Spock dead, although you didn't need to be a doctor to know that. The others were merely looking on, just watching. Something told him that Spock wouldn't like it - that he wouldn't want to be seen like that.

"Everyone who has no business here, get out!"

They stopped talking and looked at him for several stunned seconds. He had been standing so quiet and still that they hadn't expected him to speak, especially

with such cold harshness. But they turned and went, most of them talking in small groups, some silent; as they left Kirk saw that one or two were crying. It didn't affect him, didn't bother him. He was only just beginning to realise what had happened.

What struck him most of all was the silence. There were only a few people left - M'Benga, Scott and two security guards - but he felt that they should have said something - that he should say something - but there was nothing, absolutely nothing he wanted to say.

Twenty minutes ago Spock had been alive - he had existed. Twenty minutes ago he had spoken his last words. He had been a scientist, a brilliant scientist with a great mind, a soul with thought, feelings and hopes.

And now there was nothing. Spock did not exist any more.

The door opened and McCoy came in. Kirk saw his face twist in horror at the sight that met his eyes. Here at last was someone he could relate to - someone whose grief was as great as his own. He waited, hoping McCoy would turn to him and seek his comfort, but the doctor knelt beside the body as if in a trance. Once he shook his head, unbelievably. Kirk went to him.

- I don't believe it. - McCoy spoke the words, but there was no sound; only his lips moved. - I don't believe it. -

Kirk felt he should say something, but dared not speak. The emotion that was building in him was too great.

As if suddenly inspired McCoy leaned forward and raised the body's shoulders off the floor, cradling the faceless corpse in his arms. At that moment Kirk felt he wanted to die. Quite suddenly, he didn't want to live through this. McCoy must have known, for he looked directly at the Captain.

"It's all right. It's just that two weeks ago he was the only one who would look me in the face."

Kirk closed his eyes, only to open them again at the sound of cloth tearing. McCoy had ripped off a piece of Spock's shirt that had been torn in the blast. He looked into the doctor's eyes and saw something there that utterly horrified him - an expression he had seen in some man's eyes before, but he couldn't remember where.

McCoy held out the cloth to him. "There's a water dispenser behind you. Go and wet that rag. Please go," he said in answer to Kirk's puzzled expression. "It's all right, really it is. I won't let him down."

At that moment Kirk feared for McCoy's sanity, but he did as the doctor asked and brought the soaking rag back to him. McCoy took it without looking at Kirk, and gently began to wipe away the blood from the ruined face.

Kirk watched, knowing that he must somehow get McCoy away from the body and let the guards take it to sickbay, but he didn't know how. Hopelessly, instinctively, he looked back at the dead man.

He waited a full minute before he finally accepted what his eyes told him. The shattered face with the blood wiped away was slowly beginning to reform. Eyes, nose, mouth, skin - all took on their familiar shape and texture. The burns disappeared, on the hands as well as the head, and after three minutes Spock lay there, dead but apparently untouched.

A low moan escaped Kirk's lips. This was totally outside his experience - totally alien. Dimly he realised that McCoy was crying, which only added to the strangeness of it all.

And then suddenly the horror disappeared and everyone began to feel the miracle of what was taking place. M'Benga was on his knees, medical tricorder in his hands, not knowing what to expect. All the readings indicated that Spock was dead.

"It's all right, Spock... this won't hurt... We'll show them, all of them..."

I won't let you down, God help me!" McCoy spoke the words in between his sobs. Kirk felt tears brimming in his own eyes, aware now that something was going on over which McCoy seemed to have control. No-one moved, they hardly dared breathe. They all prayed.

"A heart beat!" M'Benga's voice rose in excitement as they looked at him. "Yes, it's positive - his heart's beating! Captain, he's alive!"

It was too much, far too much to accept - but it was actually happening.

"Come on, Spock... that's it... you can breathe now... come on..." The doctor spoke gently, as to a child. As if in a dream, they saw Spock breathe.

There was a voice talking to him from somewhere far away. Realising it was McCoy, Spock let go of the weight that seemed to be dragging him down and slowly drifted towards him, trusting the Human completely. He didn't know what was happening, or where he had been, except that there had been darkness - and it had let him go.

McCoy crouched in the cold gloom of his quarters and wept miserably. For a week now he had allowed no-one close to him - permitted no-one entry to his solitude. The few times he had appeared in public had been a nightmare for him, and the last two days he hadn't come out of his room at all.

He couldn't bear the watching eyes, the whispered comments, and the silences. M'Benga had taken over the running of sickbay, and officially entered in his log that the chief medical officer was sick.

Kirk blamed himself for the entire episode. Spock had been right - he had handled McCoy all wrong, and now he was suffering the consequences of the Vega-Oken mission. He was sure it all had to do with that. Once or twice he had tried talking to him, hoping to make sense out of an apparently hopeless situation, but McCoy would not allow it, would not see or speak to anyone.

The atmosphere on the ship was strange. All the crew seemed to talk about was McCoy and Spock. The senior officers didn't say much except quietly, among themselves, but the crew talked of nothing else except 'that day last week'. Kirk himself knew that he would never forget it, but Spock... the situation just hadn't affected him at all. Kirk was at a complete loss to understand this.

"But Spock... you were dead... it happened to you. Not to anyone else, just to you. You must feel something."

Spock had looked at him, his eyes curiously tolerant. "How do you feel about McCoy's death on Vega-Oken?"

The question took Kirk off his guard. It hadn't occurred to him that McCoy might actually have died on the Galileo's last mission; what had concerned him before was the reason why McCoy hadn't died. But after what had happened to Spock, it was now a possibility...

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I wasn't there."

"No, you were not," agreed Spock. "And that's exactly how I feel about my death. I wasn't there."

And remembering the corpse with its face blown away, Kirk had to agree to that. Spock hadn't been there. Not even in death.

McCoy crawled his way up from an exhausted sleep. The artificial darkness told him it was very late : perhaps early morning. He lay staring at the ceiling, hoping that someone would come, someone he could talk to. But he had sent them away, and after the first few days they had left him alone. It wasn't what he had wanted at all.

He must have fallen asleep again for he woke suddenly from one of those dreams of falling through space. Slowly he rolled onto his side and saw the figure sitting on the edge of the bed. At first he couldn't make out who it was, then he

smiled in recognition. A black, solitary figure, the darkness swallowed him - almost.

"Why are you here?"

"You called, so I came."

The Human smiled again, marvelling at the Vulcan's telepathic powers. "I'm glad you're here. I wanted to talk to someone."

"Jim tried to talk to you before."

McCoy nodded. "But he wanted explanations, and I have none. I don't know what's happened to me."

Spock frowned slightly. The doctor was obviously greatly upset and his voice shook when he spoke. The Vulcan didn't know what to do or say. Something awesome had happened to McCoy - it had changed him.

"You don't have to tell me anything, but it might help if you tell me how you feel. Something has changed you. I mean - your medical ability was good, but not that good."

For the first time that week, McCoy laughed. He looked very tired, almost ill in fact, and Spock was worried. The Vulcan hadn't known anything about the accident in the engineer's control room, but he certainly felt something towards McCoy. Perhaps the Humans would call it gratitude?

Eventually the doctor looked up. "I knew... when you were killed I knew that I could help you. Don't ask me how; I just knew. I never dreamed in a million years that I could do anything like that."

There was a silence. Spock waited patiently. Suddenly McCoy clambered off the bed.

"I've got something to show you." He went over to his desk and opened one of the drawers. When he came back Spock saw the blade of a knife glinting in the darkness. The doctor turned on a side light so that Spock would have a good view. McCoy glanced at the Vulcan.

"I've tried this several times, always with the same result."

Placing his left hand on the table he cut deep into it with the knife. For a second the blood rushed to the surface, only to disappear as the skin closed, regenerating instantly. McCoy looked at Spock.

"You see. It happens that way every time."

The Vulcan gazed into the Human's eyes. He knew where Kirk had seen that look before. Reaching over to McCoy he took the knife from him and placed it on the table. Not knowing what prompted him to do it, Spock placed his own hand over McCoy's cold fingers.

"You're terrified, aren't you?"

Without answering or looking up, McCoy nodded.

"Absolute power always corrupts, is that what you're saying, Spock?"

The Vulcan paused, considering. "No, Captain, I don't believe so. I merely said that I know of no-one absolute power hasn't corrupted - although I am prepared to admit that McCoy may be an exception."

Jim Kirk leaned forward on the table with his head in his hands. "I should have known," he said. "I should have realised where I had seen that expression in McCoy's eyes before. But it's been so long since Gary died."

"There are two basic differences, however, between McCoy and Gary Mitchell. As we remember, Mitchell's eyes took on an alien appearance of their own - something that hasn't happened to McCoy. Also, McCoy has this power, and he is terrified. Mitchell wasn't."

Kirk nodded. "But is this power the same as what happened to Gary?"

"Absolutely not. McCoy's power seems to be confined to one area - medicine. He was anxious in case he would kill someone in a moment of anger, so we tried it."

Kirk looked up from the almost abandoned chess game between them. "What did you say?"

"He attempted to kill me. After what happened last week we knew that there was no real danger. But it didn't work. McCoy suggested that it was because he didn't really want to do it, so he tried it on some of the laboratory animals. Fortunately that didn't work either."

"Spock... I'm speechless... I really am! I can't turn my back on you for a minute, can I? One week you get blown up by the warp drive, the week after you're persuading the Chief Medical Officer to kill you! Do that again and I'll kill you myself! Got that?"

Spock did not reply, but Kirk felt all the same that his First Officer was faintly amused.

"All right, then. What else did you discover?"

Spock paused for a moment, remembering the incident. "He was frightened. He felt he was no longer Human. Fortunately his own Human constitution proved him wrong."

"How did that happen?" Kirk asked, his interest growing with every second.

"He had been to sickbay to do the test with the animals, and we were coming back. He only agreed to go because it was so late and no-one would be about. We had almost reached his quarters when he passed out. It's what you would expect with any Human who hadn't eaten for almost three days."

Kirk smiled. "Is he all right now?"

"Better than he was. At least he's willing to talk about his problem now, and he is eating."

The Captain stood and put away the forgotten chess pieces. "That was a very busy night you had there, Commander - a very busy night. And you say he has agreed to come this evening and talk with us?"

"He's coming now."

"How do you know that?"

Spock almost smiled. "Since last week I have felt the presence of a very tenuous telepathic link between McCoy and myself. I don't know what he is thinking, and I would never pry anyway, but I do know what he feels. At this moment he is very apprehensive at the thought of meeting us."

"At the thought of meeting me, you mean," corrected the Captain. "He hasn't exactly confided in me - I'm sorry he didn't feel able to."

Before Spock could reply there was a quiet knock at the door.

Such a quiet knock, thought the Captain, for a man who holds such infinite power. Kirk got to his feet and opened the door himself. As soon as he saw the doctor his heart went out to him, so tired did he look.

"Come in, Bones - please, come in."

Spock stood as McCoy entered. The doctor waited nervously by the closed door, unwilling to make the first move. Kirk touched his shoulder lightly, and felt the tense muscles relax. McCoy smiled at the Captain in relief, now knowing that Kirk wanted to help.

The Captain guided him to a chair. "Where have you been this past week? I've missed you."

McCoy looked down. "I'm sorry. I should have let you talk - shouldn't have locked myself away like that. It was wrong of me."

Across the table Spock leaned back in his chair. Contact had been made between the two Humans, and he was content. Kirk produced a tray with three glasses, and set it down on the table. He poured from a bottle Spock recognised as having been 'confiscated' from the Chief Engineer only two days before. The Security Chief had given it to the Captain for safe keeping. Had Spock been Human, he would have smiled.

Kirk filled two of the glasses. "I know you will, Doctor. I've got lemonade, Spock, if you prefer?" He glanced across at the Vulcan, whose dark, amused eyes met his.

"No, thank you, Jim. Scotch will be fine."

Kirk poured out the drink and handed it over. Taking his own glass, he looked at McCoy.

"What's the matter, Bones? You're not drinking."

The doctor said nothing, and pushed his untouched glass away. His eyes seemed tormented, and he looked down, not wanting them to see his fear.

But Spock could not be fooled. He stood up, and coming to where McCoy was, sat on the edge of the table.

"I know it hurts you. I can feel it hurt. Why don't you talk about it? Tell us what happened on Vega-Oken."

McCoy looked up, puzzled. "Nothing happened on Vega-Oken. Nothing that I can remember."

Kirk leaned forward. "You have told us what you experienced - the crash, being thrown from the shuttle, and the hours you lay there. Perhaps there is something you've forgotten, or don't think important."

The doctor frowned. "Only my hallucinations - a side effect of the radiation."

"But can you be sure of that?"

McCoy glanced at the Vulcan. "You mean my hallucinations may have been real? Not a chance."

Kirk was curious. "Why are you so certain?"

"It was just a shadow - a transparent, illuminated shadow."

"Why are you so sure that's all it was?"

"Because of the fact you gave me, Spock. That planet has no intelligent life."

The Vulcan nodded. "None that we know of."

McCoy searched his memory. "It had no form, no substance. It was a figment of the sunset, and my imagination."

There was a brief silence as the other two men digested this new information. Then Spock stood and walked between the two Humans. He looked down at McCoy.

"Doctor, I have an idea. Something happened to you, which you don't remember. With your permission, I'd like to try the mind meld. It would be an invasion of your privacy, I know, but I may discover something that could help."

McCoy smiled. "I had hoped you would offer. I didn't like to ask."

Spock drew up a chair and sat opposite McCoy. His dark eyes searched the doctor's face. McCoy's eyes were locked onto Spock's.

"I trust you."

And Kirk knew that it was fact. The familiar scene began again, as the two minds were united, Vulcan to Human. Spock closed his eyes, his mind reaching

inside - then outward. All the emotional blocks were removed and he laid himself open to the raw feelings of the Human whose face he touched. He was ready for the familiar music of McCoy's soul - the music that made him unique - an individual in an endless universe.

And then, for an instant, Spock's eyes opened wide in pure astonishment. The contact was broken as the Vulcan toppled from the chair to fall heavily on the floor. He stayed down and did not move.

McCoy was on his feet, his heart pounding in his ears. "Oh God, I've killed him!"

"You haven't killed him, Bones. He's breathing."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Kirk looked up at McCoy from where he knelt beside Spock. Such an expression he had never seen on the doctor's face before. It was of horror and relief mingled. He looked down at Spock, and felt deeply worried. Something had pushed Spock away - broken the contact - something violent, that came from within the doctor. McCoy knelt on the opposite side of Spock. His small medical scanner was in his hand, and he passed it over the motionless Vulcan, his eyes narrowing at the reading. Slowly, he nodded.

"I think he's all right."

"What happened?"

"I don't know, Jim. It didn't affect me at all."

- You are not a telepath. -

They both turned at the strange voice. McCoy's eyes opened wide as he beheld a young man with deep green eyes. His golden body was translucent, shimmering in and out of existence. He was very beautiful. Kirk stood to face the intruder, enchanted by the alien's beauty, yet unsure as to how he should greet this being. If he had hurt Spock...

- Be not concerned. Your friend is unharmed, and will recover. -

McCoy advanced slightly. "Were you on Vega-Oken?"

The alien nodded.

"Why did you not speak?"

- My thoughts spoke to you, as they do now. -

Kirk nodded. "His lips never move, Bones. Your 'hallucination' is a telepath."

- That is correct, Captain Kirk. I mean no harm to you, or anyone aboard your vessel."

McCoy had gone back to Spock. He was taking further tricorder readings when Spock's eyes opened. The doctor leaned closer, trying to ignore the golden light that now filled the room.

"Spock, are you all right?"

The Vulcan eyes met his. They were puzzled, but instantly alert. He sat up, looking steadily at the alien.

"Decaloo?"

- Your telepathic powers are most admirable, Spock. I apologise if I hurt you."

The Science Officer shook his head. "You did not hurt me."

Kirk helped him to his feet. "Is that his name, Spock? Decaloo?"

Spock nodded. "That is all I learned - just his name. He obviously learned more than I did." He turned to McCoy. "I gather this is your hallucination, Doctor."

The Human nodded. "I'm sorry - I should have mentioned it before. But he

was just a shadow to me."

Now that he knew Spock was unharmed, the Captain no longer felt so threatened by the alien's presence. But there were still many questions he wanted to ask.

"Decaloo, why are you on board my ship?"

- I mean no harm. - The green eyes glittered, but as before there was no movement from his lips. - I wish merely to go where you are going. -

Kirk smiled. "And where exactly are we going, Decaloo?"

- To that part of space you call the Crab Nebula. There I will make my home. -

"Your home will be in the Nebula?"

- That is correct, Spock. The energies contained in the Nebula will support my life adequately for a long time to come. -

The Vulcan nodded. "Can you tell us, then, why you were on Vega-Oken?"

- We travel as a group. I was forgotten, and left behind. When I found McCoy I gave him his life so that I could share his mind. I am only sorry it caused him so much distress. -

The doctor smiled. "I wouldn't have minded, had I known it was you. And you did save Spock's life, too."

"Very well, Decaloo," said Kirk. "If you wish to stay with us until we reach the Crab Nebula, you will be very welcome."

The young alien looked down, then back to Kirk's eyes. - I cannot survive in this environment for long, Captain Kirk. I need energy - a living being to inhabit. On Vega-Oken there were the animals and plants. I am a creature of energy, and I shall die out here. -

A warning bell sounded in Kirk's mind, but he ignored it. He was sure there was no danger from this angelic creature. But before he could reply McCoy was speaking.

"Decaloo, do you wish to inhabit me? I don't mind, knowing the powers are yours, not mine."

Decaloo smiled. - You are a healer. It is your function to heal the sick. Yet my powers did not give you joy. Why? -

"I thought my humanity had gone," said McCoy. "I was afraid I'd kill someone."

- That is a possibility, but not likely. My powers, when linked to the mind of another, simply enhance the intellectual abilities of my host. There should be no danger, since killing is destructive, and I am most careful as to whose mind I inhabit. -

"Then you will use me again?"

- Alas, McCoy, I cannot. I can enter a mind only once, then it is forever closed to me. -

The deep, golden glow had faded slightly. There was no panic from Decaloo, but Kirk sensed the alien's approaching death. He knew there was very little time. Glancing over to Spock, he knew the Vulcan had also sensed the need for urgency.

"Decaloo, could you inhabit my mind? I could screen against the power of your thoughts."

The alien shook his head. - Our minds have touched, Spock. They cannot touch again. -

"It was but a realisation of your existence. I barely touched you."

-Nevertheless, it cannot be. -

Kirk cleared his throat. "Then it looks as though it will have to be me. Is that acceptable to you, Decaloo?"

The golden light seemed to grow slightly as the alien smiled. - Entirely satisfactory, Captain. You will not even know of my existence. -

The Nebula with its red/green glow and blue misty radiance stretched vast and crab-like arms of light across black space. Within its beauty it hid the ancient memory of destruction - a star had gone nova. If violence and beauty could ever mingle, then it was here, between the stars, in a universe blessed with life and death.

Within him, Kirk felt the alien awake. The personnel on the bridge watched as a golden glow enfolded their Captain, then left him to stand alone in the shimmering form of Decaloo. The alien's green eyes shone with pleasure and joy as he beheld his new home. He turned towards the Captain.

- I thank you, Captain Kirk, for the use of your mind, and you also, Dr. McCoy. - Decaloo turned to the doctor, his eyes smiling and warm. - You have both been of great service, and have taught me much. -

McCoy smiled in return, grateful that he had been of some help, and happy at his release from 'Godhood'. Power of such calibre did not belong to man.

Decaloo surveyed the beings around him. - I owe you all a lot, for you have shown me how my own people must have lived, millions of your years ago.- He walked round the well of the bridge, finally coming to a halt before the Vulcan. - But my greatest thanks must go to you, Spock.-

The First Officer looked up, surprised. "Why thank me, Decaloo? Our minds hardly touched. What can you have learned from that?"

Decaloo smiled. - I saw what you are, Spock. You found me in McCoy's mind and you opened your thoughts to me. These people here, they see only the surface of you - I see the depths. How can they know that you live in daily communion with the universe? -

The light around Decaloo's body began to intensify until it totally engulfed the bridge. Then, suddenly, the glow vanished, absorbed into the great light of the Crab Nebula. Decaloo had gone, and only the echo of his last words still hung suspended in the air around them.

- How can they know that you live in daily communion with the universe? -

Kirk looked at Spock. Perhaps the alien had meant to say, - In daily communion with God. - Or perhaps the universe and God meant the same thing to Decaloo. Kirk reflected sadly that now they would never know. He stood up and went over to Spock.

"Well, that's the last time we'll see him, I suppose."

Uhura looked up from her board. "What do you mean, sir, see him? Surely you saw that Decaloo was a woman?"

Kirk looked at her, stunned. "But Uhura, Decaloo was male. He was young, with blond hair and green eyes."

As McCoy nodded agreement Sulu chimed in. "No, sir. He was young, but definitely brown-eyed and oriental."

"Well, you're all wrong," insisted Uhura. "She was young, black skinned, black haired and exceptionally beautiful."

Kirk, leaning on the rail, looked towards his First Officer, eternally grateful that Chekov was not on duty, for God only knew what the Russian Ensign would have seen.

"Well, Spock, are you going to tell us what you saw? Was Decaloo a young, dark-haired Vulcan male?"

The dark alien eyes looked into his and smiled their rare, warm smile. "No, Captain, I did not see a young Vulcan male. I saw only light."

McCoy frowned. "Only light! Is that all?"

Spock leaned back in his seat. "Believe me, Doctor, if you've seen the darkness that I have, light is quite sufficient."

Kirk smiled. He wanted to ask, "The darkness of death, or the darkness of life?" but decided the question should be kept for later. Instead he said to Sulu, "Maintain course for Starbase Two, Lieutenant. Warp one."

"What sort of being was he, Jim, this alien who appears in different forms?"

The Captain sat down in the command chair, his eyes still watching Spock. "And to whom is granted the gift of bringing the dead back to life." He shook his head. "I don't know, Bones. Perhaps one day we'll find out - or our children will."

The Crab Nebula was left far behind as the Enterprise sped on onto the dark.

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FRIENDSHIP RENEWED

Cold.

Unresponsive.

Cut off from all you once knew.

Totally... alien.

That was the mask that greeted me
On that frightened, bustling day.
From friend to stranger in so short a time...
Within my hurt confusion I tried to understand;
Memories of our past conflicting with the present.
Doubt, anger, all were there, but
What difference could that make
To a true son of Vulcan?

Come, my friend.
Walk with me again on the
Pathways of Human folly.
I could not believe your total rejection,
So I ask you to remember.
Together we quested,
I thought you found your answer...
I had found mine.

You should've known...
I am ashamed I could not teach you.
Let us begin where we parted, my friend.
Will it be so impossible?
Return to what you were, what you are.
Let me show you again the joys of being... Human.

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BRIEF THOUGHT

You are always by my side.
Solid, dependable as a rock.
I know you will stand by me
Without my asking.
I thank you for that.

Lorraine Goodison

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ECHOES OF PAST AND FUTURE by Lorraine Goodison

There was no dawn on the spaceship. No gradual building of light, no bird-song, no awakening of life in the green undergrowth of a perfect world. Day came abruptly, with the sudden surge of power as lights automatically switched on and the ship's computer beeped the signal that meant it was time to rise. Humans woke and rose in silence, their eyes taking in the time on the chronometers. They dressed and ate, changing places with fellow shipmates in the midst of the bustle and chat that heralded the start of another 'day'.

Deep in the heart of the unmarked ship Dr. Leonard McCoy sensed the awakening and thought of a similar event taking place in another ship at this very moment. He could practically see James Kirk walking down the corridor towards the turbo-lift and arriving on the bridge only to be told that his Chief Medical Officer and First Officer were still missing. What would Jim be doing now? Still searching, or would he have given up? no, not Jim; but Starfleet Command might have ordered him away, and he could do nothing against that.

Brilliant white light suddenly flooded his dark prison, and McCoy saw the door open to admit a stocky, bearded man carrying a tray. McCoy eyed the two plates of brownish gruel and decided that he was definitely not hungry.

The man put down the tray and gestured towards the bed neighbouring McCoy's.

"What's up with him?"

"He's unconscious, of course," the doctor replied with all the sarcasm he could muster. "So would you be if you'd been walloped with an iron bar."

The man snorted explosively, which McCoy supposed was a laugh of some sort.

"Well, he'd better wake up soon. Our Captain doesn't like people who sleep while he's talking!"

As the cell door closed McCoy cautiously dipped a finger into the gruel. He grimaced at the taste, and sighed. As a doctor, he knew he should eat something, but as a man with normal tastes he found the food the most unappetising he'd ever seen. He was just steeling himself to eat some of the mess when the occupant of the other bed stirred and groaned softly. McCoy dropped the spoon and hurried over.

"Spock, you awake? That was some knock on the head you got."

The Vulcan gingerly felt the back of his head and looked up at McCoy. "My assailant must have had a particularly heavy weapon," he said, wincing as his probing fingers found the point of contact.

"You could say that."

As Spock pushed himself up off the bed a wince of pain briefly crossed his face, a wince that had McCoy reaching out to help him. Spock firmly pushed him away, trying to suppress the sudden stabbing agony in his left shoulder.

"You're hurt!" McCoy protested, his medical instincts coming to the fore. "Here, let me..."

"I need no help, Doctor."

"You're in pain, dammit! At least let me see what's wrong!"

Resigning himself to the logic of the situation, Spock sat in silence while McCoy probed the swollen shoulder. As the Human examined the half-Vulcan he sensed rather than felt the tensing of lean muscles as he touched Spock's arm. Was it true, then, about the Vulcan dislike of physical contact? Five months he'd been on the Enterprise, and he still knew very little about Spock. He was learning, though...

McCoy sat back as he finished the examination, a concerned frown creasing his forehead.

"It's dislocated - pretty badly, too. I'll have to pull it back into place before it swells up much more. You ready for this?"

"Is there any reason I should not be, Doctor?" Spock enquired innocently. Two piercing blue eyes stared hard at him, then back at the shoulder. McCoy took a deep breath.

"Okay... This is gonna hurt a lot, so if you feel like..." He stopped short, remembering the nature of his patient. Catch Spock yelling...

The bone slipped into place more easily than he had expected, and throughout the painful operation Spock remained silent, much to McCoy's surprise. Most men would have passed out with the agony of the swollen and strained tendons; but the Vulcan remained fully conscious, only swaying slightly when the bone finally clicked back into the socket.

McCoy watched as Spock looked round the small grey room. The Vulcan rose and began to examine the locked door, gingerly moving his arm as he did so.

"Where are we?"

"On board their ship," McCoy replied mournfully. "I guess they want us as hostages or something."

"The others?"

"Dead, as far as I know. I've only seen a few crew members since they brought us aboard. I gather we'll see the captain in a while."

"Indeed..."

McCoy tried not to be irritated by Spock's manner any more than he could help. Of all the men to be prisoner on a pirate vessel with...

"Captain Kirk will be looking for us," he said brightly. Spock declined to answer as he carefully tasted the food left minutes before.

"Don't eat that," warned McCoy. "It'll burn your stomach out."

Spock's eyebrow rose in mild reproach. "I fail to see how that may come about, Doctor. The food, unappetising as it is, seems edible, and surely it is wiser to gain nourishment this way than..."

"Never mind. Forget I ever spoke... Remind me never to tell jokes, that's all."

"Was that a joke, Doctor?"

McCoy did a double take, unsure what exactly the Vulcan had meant by that. Spock sat down again rather suddenly, and in the silence that followed McCoy remembered the sequence of events that had brought them here.

Two weeks earlier, in his office on the USS Enterprise, Captain Kirk had told him of orders from Starfleet to pick up a group of science and medical personnel and transport them to a remote planet recently colonised. There had been reports of a revolutionary break-through in medicine and science due to information found in the remains of the planet's once-prolific cities. The scientists were going there to investigate the claims.

"That's nice, Jim," McCoy had murmured. "Sounds interesting."

A wide grin spread across Kirk's face. "Good, because you're going too. So is Spock."

McCoy's face dropped a mile, and Kirk tried not to laugh at the expression of pure horror. The doctor sat back heavily in his chair, his medical reports forgotten.

"We go with that... that walking iceberg? Now wait a minute..."

"No 'buts', Bones. Starfleet Command wants you both there, and I'm afraid that's that!"

"For how long?"

"We pick the others up tomorrow, and we should arrive at the planet within 48 hours. You'll be there for about two weeks while the Enterprise completes this routine mapping job, then we'll pick you up by shuttlecraft."

McCoy was aghast. Two weeks with Spock! At least here on the Enterprise he could avoid the Vulcan for a while, but there would be no chance of that where they were going. In desperation he appealed to Kirk's better nature.

"Jim, you've got to get me out of this! Two weeks of him and I'll go mad!"

Kirk shook his head ruefully. "Sorry, those are the orders, Bones. Spock isn't that bad..."

McCoy smiled grimly as he remembered the conversation. How could they have foreseen the attack on the shuttle as it sped to its rendezvous with the Enterprise?

There had been no warning of the pirate ship's approach; no time to manoeuvre away even if they had had the speed. Within ten minutes the craft had been boarded and all resistance quashed. McCoy had been hustled onto the renegade ship along with Spock, and there they had remained. As far as he knew the shuttlecraft had been left floating in space, dead and useless, and the thought of this gave him a flicker of hope. At least Jim would know they were not dead - yet.

The cell door slid open again, and a group of Humans walked in. The tall negro at their head moved towards Spock, gesturing to the door with his weapon.

"Out there, Vulcan! Move!"

Spock rose and calmly walked to the opening, the pirates surrounding him immediately. The blaster was shoved under McCoy's nose.

"You too!"

They were escorted at a quick trot through the twilight corridors of the aging ship, the men prodding them with their weapons if they slowed a fraction. An out-of-date elevator took them to their destination - the bridge of the ship. Once there, all the Humans except the negro and three other men left silently. Spock and McCoy stood apprehensively as the negro went forward and spoke to a tall, thickset man seated in the command chair.

With typical interest Spock surveyed the quiet, efficient bridge. The captain obviously ran a tight, discipline^d ship - a rare occurrence in the backbiting, treacherous world of renegade pirates. He raised an eyebrow slightly as he noted the presence of some rather sophisticated weaponry - unusual in a ship of this age.

McCoy, on the other hand, was watching the seated Captain with a certain amount of puzzlement. He was sure he recognised that figure - the set of the shoulders, the gesturing with the hands - but how could he?

He was still trying to dredge up memories of past acquaintances when the man rose and turned towards them. Black, wavy hair fell lankly about a heavy, thick-jawed face. Startling blue eyes, as bright as McCoy's own, opened wide in recognition, and with a disbelieving laugh the pirate captain grasped the doctor by the shoulders.

"Len McCoy! By all the suns - how?"

"Hello, Jerry," said McCoy softly, unsure what to say or do. He returned the enthusiastic greeting, and turned to Spock.

"Spock, this is Jerry Villion - an old... friend of mine. When I was on Earth..."

"You were my greatest drinking partner!" Villion interrupted. "That is, until you left to join Starfleet and I went on to greater things!"

McCoy let his arms drop and looked at his old friend with troubled eyes. "Jerry... how did you get involved in all this? Last time I saw you..."

"I was vegetating, Len," grinned Villion. "You know me - never could stay

still... You've met my second-in-command, Mericus?" He waved a hand towards the negro.

"Quite recently," Spock intoned. Villion ignored him as if he had never spoken, and this somehow troubled McCoy. His friend the captain of this ship... what would happen now? What changes had Villion gone through since their first days together?

"Jerry, this is Mr. Spock. He..."

"I believe Mr. Villion already knows who I am, Doctor," Spock interrupted smoothly. Villion's gaze rested briefly, contemptuously, on the Vulcan.

"Yes, I know who you are, Commander. I know also how valuable you will be to my backers, even more valuable than Len here is going to be to me."

A curious foreboding filled McCoy. He looked from Villion to Spock and back again.

"Jerry, what does that mean?"

The broad smile that was directed at McCoy did not reach Jerry Villion's eyes. He watched the doctor steadily, almost calculatingly. "Don't worry, Len. I'll explain it all later over a drink. We've got a lot to talk about, you and I."

James Kirk stared unseeing at the main viewing screen on the bridge of the Enterprise. His thoughts were elsewhere, centred on the discovery only four hours ago of the torn shuttle floating lifelessly in space. In the background of his mind he heard the quiet murmur of voices as the bridge crew checked data and correlated facts, but his eyes saw the battered vessel, the bodies of the three scientists, and worst of all, the empty seats where Spock and McCoy - or their remains - should have been.

The dead men had been brought aboard together with the shuttle's log, and then he had ordered the burned-out shuttle blown up lest it become a hazard at a later date. The log had given them few clues, for the pilot had had little chance to record what was happening, but Sulu had picked up a faint trace of energy from a ship's engines leading out into the desolate areas of unfrequented space. Grimly Kirk had ordered an immediate search along the trail, but all too soon the particles of energy became too scattered for even the Enterprise's sensors to pick them up.

Now they sat and waited impatiently for the reply to Kirk's report. A chilling thought came to the Captain as he sat. The Klingon Neutral Zone was not so very far away... supposing a ship had come out and... Abruptly cutting off that line of thought Kirk quietly cursed and tightened his grip on the arm of the chair. Where was that damned reply?

At the communications station Lt. Uhura listened to the impersonal words and turned reluctantly to her Captain.

"Captain Kirk, a..." She faltered as she realised that Kirk had not heard her, had not even registered the fact that she was speaking. "Captain? Sir, are you..."

"Yes, Lieutenant?" He swung round in his chair, but his face still had that preoccupied look. Uhura carried on regardless.

"A reply just came in from Starbase 14, sir... Commodore Bryce instructs you to return there with the bodies for further instructions, and..."

"What the... Has he no idea what's happened? What the hell..." Kirk broke off abruptly as he realised he was almost shouting. He ignored the questioning looks and slammed a clenched fist into the arm of the chair. A tired sigh escaped his lips. "Acknowledge the message, Lieutenant. Mr. Sulu, plot a course for Starbase 14."

"Coordinates plotted, sir," "sir," said Sulu after a brief moment. Kirk nodded.

"Good. Execute, warp 4. Mr. Chekov, you have the con. I'll be in my quarters if you need me."

The journey to Starbase 14 was short in terms of time and distance, but centuries seemed to pass before Kirk could beam down to the planet and hurriedly go to Commodore Bryce's office. He needed very little guessing to know what Bryce was likely to say, but the implications of the Commodore's statement hit him hard nevertheless.

"You will leave the search for the missing officers, Captain Kirk. I've arranged for another ship to follow your leads..."

"Sir, with all due consideration, I..."

"I know what you think, Captain, but a Starship is too valuable and important to use in a search for four men who may or may not be alive. Even if two of them are your men."

Kirk's jaw hardened in simmering anger. "We have not found their bodies, Commodore."

Bryce sighed, shifting a pile of papers on his desk. These anxious, loyal young captains tired him out at times. "I admire your dedication, Kirk," he murmured, ignoring the look that crossed Kirk's face. "However, orders are orders, and the Enterprise has more... pressing matters to attend to."

"Such as, sir?"

Was there a touch of insolence in that question? Or merely concern for his men over-riding all other considerations? Bryce decided it was the latter.

"There's been some activity around the Neutral Zone lately. Nothing alarming, but Starfleet Command wants a Starship in that area just in case. A show of strength, if you like. Let 'em know we're watching them."

"And the Enterprise is that ship."

"Exactly. Now, about replacements..."

Kirk's eyes widened. "Replacements?" he echoed.

Bryce barely glanced at him. "Yes, Captain. Replacements. You can't go into possibly hostile space without a Science Officer. They'll be temporary, of course, until Commander Spock and Dr. McCoy are traced..." He handed a thick file to Kirk, who declined to look at it. "As luck would have it, we have a suitable replacement for Mr. Spock here. Mr. De Salle. That's his file. You'll find him quite competent - he's served on the USS Excalibur, among others."

"I'm sure he'll be quite suitable, sir," Kirk said politely. "And the... replacement for Dr. McCoy?"

"That's a problem. There's a distinct shortage of available doctors in Starfleet at the moment. I'm afraid that means Dr. M'Benga will have to take over as Chief Medical Officer for the moment. If he does well, he may be permanently promoted to that position."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Commodore," Kirk murmured resolutely.

Bryce frowned deeply. "Don't deceive yourself, Kirk. The shuttle was attacked by a hostile force, and your men may be dead by now. You must accept that."

"I... accept the possibility, sir. May I leave now?"

Bryce wearily straightened the papers once more. "Certainly, certainly, but remember what I told you. Don't go off looking for vengeance." He paused, looking straight at Kirk for the first time. "De Salle is waiting outside. He's a good man, Kirk. He has a fine career ahead of him. Don't blame him."

Kirk turned to Bryce with genuine astonishment. "I blame no-one, sir, least of all a man who has nothing to do with it. I try never to let my personal feelings affect my relationship with my crew. I'm sure Mr. De Salle will fit in just fine."

A tall, fresh-faced young man with an air of authority about him stepped forward as Kirk left Bryce's office.

"Captain Kirk? I'm Joseph De Salle, Commander Spock's replacement."

The fair-haired Captain smiled and greeted De Salle cordially, but the new First Officer sensed a tenseness behind the friendly demeanour. The underlying concern for his friends' safety was obvious, and De Salle wondered just what his predecessor had been like. More than just a good officer, that was for sure.

"Your men may be dead..." The words echoed in Kirk's thoughts as he walked with De Salle to the Transporter Lounge. Dead? Dead, when he was only just beginning to know them? McCoy - so cynical and brusque, sharp and witty... but the best friend a man could hope for. And Spock, that cold, silent Vulcan... He had sensed a loneliness in the alien, a loneliness similar to his own. He had tentatively reached out the hand of friendship, and so far the Vulcan had accepted it, though there had been little visible response.

Bitterness flooded his thoughts. If Bryce was right, if both were dead, then he would never have a chance to break down the iron wall that closed off Spock from his friendship. To be always alone. Somewhere inside him a voice was crying in silent anguish...

Jerry Villion raised his glass and grinned at his old friend. "To old times, Len."

McCoy faintly echoed the sentiment and sipped a little of the drink. He could not feel at ease with this man from his past. He'd always felt slightly wary of him before, but now...

"Where is Spock?" he asked.

Villion smiled and topped up his glass. "Where he belongs," he said. "Back in the cell. You know, Len, when I saw it was you, I just couldn't believe my eyes!"

"Me neither." McCoy's answer was as non-committal as he could make it. Sensing Villion's eyes on him, he smiled and downed the rest of his brandy. "How the hell did you get to be a pirate, Jerry?"

The Captain's eyes closed and he leaned back in his chair. "It's a long story, Len. Too long to tell now. I'll tell you when we've more time. Hey, you never told me how Sarah is. And what about that kid of yours? Joanna, wasn't it?"

"Uhuh. Sarah and me... we - uh - the marriage broke up... That's partly the reason I joined Starfleet, I guess. I don't see Joanna often - you know how it is."

Silence fell as the two friends drank and thought of all that had happened since they parted, then McCoy abruptly broke the quiet.

"Do you do that often?"

"Do what?"

"The shuttlecraft. Attack them like that."

A wide grin split Villion's face. "Hell, Len, that's my job! Of course, if I'd known it was you on board... but in a way that's a blessing in disguise. That's what I want to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, oh." He poured out more drink and raised his glass, a crafty smile on his face. "C'mon, drink to our partnership!"

McCoy left his glass where it was. "Partnership?"

"Sure, I have it all worked out. You see, the point is, we need a doctor on this ship. You know how men get injured in raids and so forth, and sometimes we

can't get back to base in time. We need - I need - a doctor to treat the serious injuries. What do you say?"

McCoy stared at him in wide-eyed incredulity. It took him a while to find words, and Villion's expression hardened as he spoke.

"What do I say? Jerry, I was returning to my post on a Starship! I have a friend on that ship who is probably worried sick! I have my daughter on Earth, patients, responsibilities... and you ask me to give it up and join a ship-load of pirates? It's impossible! I couldn't join you..."

"Why not? I'm your friend too," Villion snapped. He pushed the glass at McCoy. "Drink it."

"I'm not thirsty."

Villion slammed a fist on the table. "I need you, Len! I need a doctor, someone I can trust! This job is tailor-made for you. Starship, pirate ship, they're all the same in the end..."

"What about Spock?" interrupted the doctor quietly. "Where does he fit in?"

"He doesn't," said Villion firmly. "Forget him."

"I can't. I have a responsibility to him too. Tell me, Jerry. Why did you attack a small shuttlecraft? There can't be much on them. What were you after?"

"Men. Starfleet personnel. I meant to take all of you alive, but my men got a little... enthusiastic."

With every word Villion said the sick feeling in McCoy's stomach grew, but he had to find out for sure. "Why Starfleet personnel?"

"Use your head. They're valuable. My backers pay me well for every one I can get."

"And who are your... backers?"

"Klingons."

Now that his suspicions were confirmed McCoy could only sit in stunned horror. His friend was a traitor to all he believed in; a trader in secrets, and in the sanity of the men who knew them. How many men had Jerry Villion calmly handed over to be subjected to the agonies of the mind-sifter and who knew what other tortures?

"I know what you're thinking," Villion said. "So look at it my way. What difference do a few bits of information make? Things change so quickly around here the knowledge is out of date before the Klingons get a chance to use it. Klingons, Federation... what's the difference? Both sides have their ways of finding out secrets. Me, I'm a middle-man, that's all."

McCoy turned a look of pure astonishment and anguish on him. "Have you any idea what you're doing? Those men - God knows what the Klingons do to them... How many have you given them? For pity's sake, Jerry - why?"

"Money, mainly. A safe base, weapons, protection, the usual things. Stop looking so horrified! It happens all the time. You'd say nothing if I hunted out Klingons... I'm a survivor, and I've found me a way to keep alive."

"By becoming a traitor to freedom!"

Villion smiled and shook his head, raising his eyes heavenward. "You don't understand, as usual. Never mind, you will soon."

"I am not joining you!"

"Yes you are," said the pirate firmly. "The Klingons will be perfectly happy with the Vulcan and the others I've captured, and they'll let you stay with me. It's not often they get a Starfleet Commander." He paused at the door, the half-mocking smile still on his face. "We reach the base in a short while, but you'll have to stay in a cell till then. I'll put you in one of your own... give you time to think. I do hope you make the right choice."

A kind of gloom had fallen over the ship. Nothing a man could put his finger on, but it was there all the same. A sense of... something missing.

During the short while Leonard McCoy had served aboard the Enterprise he had become something of a favourite personality, his forthright, down-to-earth manner making him popular among a crew strayed of individual characters. He had made many friends, though only Scott and Kirk knew his background in any detail. Kirk knew they missed him, just as they missed Spock; though not, of course in the same way.

None of the Humans - save Kirk - could bring themselves to actually like the Vulcan, but he had proved his worth in close action time after time, and most regarded him with a respect bordering on awe. Somehow the Enterprise just wasn't the same without stoic, dependable Spock at his station.

Joseph De Salle was deeply aware of this feeling as he reported to the bridge at the beginning of his shift. No-one had said anything; everyone, including the Captain, was going out of his way to make him welcome, but still the uneasy feeling of slight resentment persisted. On the Excalibur there had been much the same atmosphere at first - it was only natural - but here it was much stronger.

Maybe, he mused, it's because they think they are still alive. That conviction he could feel too, and as he sat down he remembered words someone had said to him long ago... "One of these days, Joe, you'll be too perceptive for your own good." Looked like this was going to be 'one of those days'...

Kirk finished his stint of duty and thankfully handed over command to Mr. De Salle. All day a slight, nagging headache had thudded away at the back of his head, and now that he was off-duty a soft bed and sleep sounded very inviting. With a qualm of conscience he realised that he had no intention of asking M'Benga for something for his headache, though if McCoy had been in sickbay he would have been heading there at this very moment. He left the turbolift in a depressed mood, wondering at how much he missed his two senior officers. He entered his quarters in a daze, quietly longing for the silent company of Spock as they played a light game of chess.

Loneliness, silence, the solitude of command...

Gradually that very loneliness had been eased by the growing friendship of the two men Starfleet now considered dead. Now he was back where he had started, the Starship Captain; a detached figurehead who dared not relax the rigid standards he set himself. With growing dismay Kirk made his body move enough to change and lie down on the bed. God, he needed a sleep...

"Bridge to Captain Kirk! Bridge to Captain Kirk!"

The urgent bleeping and equally urgent voice of De Salle finally broke through the mist of sleep and galvanised Kirk into rolling over to answer his new First Officer.

"Kirk here. Anything wrong, Mr. De Salle?"

"Unsure as yet, Captain. A Klingon vessel has just crossed the Neutral Zone and is heading into Federation space. At present we're following at a discreet distance."

Kirk nodded in surprised approval. De Salle was as good as Bryce had said he was. At the same time he felt the satisfaction of confirmed suspicions. Now, if they could find out exactly what the Klingons were up to...

"Very good, Mr. De Salle. Continue following out of sensor range. I want to know where they're headed - and why."

"Understood, sir."

Kirk did not speak the hope that sprang up in him at that moment. If the Klingons had attacked the shuttlecraft, then maybe - just maybe - there would be a chance to get Spock and McCoy back. A forlorn hope, but it was better than none at all.

McCoy stared at the bowed dark head with a mixture of relief and anger. Relief at the absence of wild accusations that might have come from a fellow Human, and anger at the calm, composed way the Vulcan had heard and accepted his news of Villion's plans for them. He waited for a response, and received none. With a feeling of utter helplessness he sat on the bed's edge and stared at his hands.

"I suppose you think I'll go over to his side to save my skin," he muttered after a long while.

"No, Doctor, I do not. On the contrary, I quite understand your problem."

McCoy decided to feign ignorance of the very dilemma he knew Spock was meaning. He didn't fancy a logical, cold-blooded breakdown of his thoughts.

"What problem? Who's got a problem?"

Spock looked up, one eyebrow raised. "Doctor McCoy, you never cease to astonish me with your persistent habit of denying something of which we are both aware." McCoy's mouth dropped open as the Vulcan continued. "However, that does not alter the fact that you have a difficult decision to make. Your dilemma is this: Villion plans to hand me - and nine others - to the Klingons, presumably for interrogation, then execution or slavery. He also wishes you to join him and thus avoid unnecessary pain and suffering. You are therefore torn between your loyalty to Starfleet and your ties with the past and your friendship. You do not wish to go against your friend, but you also do not feel you can let him continue his 'career'. I do not envy your position, Doctor."

McCoy grunted. "You have a logical answer worked out, I suppose."

"I do, although I do not think you will readily accept it."

"To hell with logic!"

Spock sighed and closed his eyes. "Logic can sometimes help with emotional decisions, Doctor," he murmured, but McCoy was not listening.

For over an hour they had been seated in a rough, bare room where the only entrance was a wooden trapdoor above their heads. Beside them in the room were the other two men from their party - kept separate till now - and seven others kidnapped by Villion over a long period of time. The men were silent, aware that soon they would be prisoners of the Klingons, and as such their lives were not worth living.

Above the dug-out room lay the primitive village used by Villion as his base, and a better one would be hard to find. The small red planet lay on the very edge of Federation space, and before their transportation down Villion had informed McCoy that it was a closed world, and thus ideal for him. What Starship would violate the Prime Directive in searching for pirates who might not be there? All modern installations were hidden underground, and to all intents and purposes this was an ordinary native village.

McCoy had to admit it was ideal, but it made him wonder at his friend all the more. Who could tell what effect these men would have on the primitive natives so far removed from the modern civilisation of the Federation?

Without a qualm of conscience Villion had brushed off McCoy's question. "They'll learn something to their advantage," he had said.

"And the Klingons? Where do they fit in?" the doctor had asked.

"This was their idea. Think about it, Len. In a few days a ship will come to collect the prisoners. If you've made the wrong choice, then God help you, because I can't."

The wrong choice... When did a man ever have such a choice as this? One part of McCoy knew that he could not stand by and watch ten other men be taken to their deaths, but what of the others Villion would capture in the future? If he stayed here, was there not a chance of breaking away at some later date and warning Starfleet? He glanced over to where Spock was speaking to one of the scientists

captured with them. Life, death, friendship - where did duty begin... and where would it end?

"Klingon ship changing course, Captain. Veering off on bearing 461 mark 5."

"Follow suit, Mr. Chekov. Just don't let them see us, that's all."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk left his chair and walked over to where De Salle was studying star charts. "Any idea where they're headed yet?"

De Salle confirmed his conclusions through the scanner before replying to Kirk's query. "Well, sir, going by their course and the emptiness of this region of space, my bet is they're headed for the Armethius Delta system. There's a whole collection of planets and space debris there, but only one planet is habitable."

"It's name?"

"Marbenna Three. Class N, with a small primitive culture. It's also a closed world, Captain."

"The Klingons apparently don't think that... Carry on, Mr. De Salle. See what else you can find out about Marbenna Three."

A few minutes after Kirk had returned to his chair, Scott left his console and moved over to the Captain's side.

"Captain, this ship may have nae connection wi' Mr. Spock an' Dr. McCoy's disappearance. The searchers have found nothing, an'..."

"And there's always hope, Scotty," finished Kirk. "I need to follow every clue, every trail, every hunch until I'm proved right or wrong. The trail we followed headed in this direction, didn't it? I have a very strong hunch both ships are connected. A very strong hunch."

Jerry Villion watched impatiently as the glittering pillars of light before him solidified into the shapes of the Klingon Commander and his two officers. As soon as they were safely 'whole' again he strode forward, an ingratiating smile on his lips.

"Commander Klonar. How gratifying to see you again."

The Klingon nodded tersely. He cared little for Humans, and this Human in particular irritated him beyond endurance.

"I regret I cannot say the same, Captain Villion," he said, ignoring the outstretched hand. "Your message said you had some merchandise. I trust this is so?"

"Ten men, Commander," smiled the Human. "One a Starfleet Commander."

"Only ten, Villion? Scarcely worth our trouble. You must try to do better!"

"Too many disappearances will cause suspicion, you know that," growled Villion, dropping his ingratiating manner. "Starfleet's going to suspect something if their men keep getting involved in attacks all the time."

"That is your problem, not mine!" snapped Klonar. "Where are they? We cannot wait here for too long."

Villion signalled Mericus and a group of armed men. "Bring them up."

Klonar watched silently as the men were roughly herded out of the cell to stand in a huddled, defiant group. He smiled briefly at the thought of the hours of interrogation each man would provide before he applied the mind-sifter and extracted the information anyway. He was pleased to see a Vulcan among the group. He had heard a great deal about their powers of suppressing pain, and he looked forward to testing some theories he had about these proud people. He turned to Villion with a look of cat-like satisfaction.

"Very promising, Villion. You are improving, even though you cannot count. There are eleven men, not ten. No matter... Payment will be in the usual manner. I'll order my ship to begin trans--"

"A monnet, please, Commander," interrupted the pirate captain. "I wanted to speak to you about the eleventh man." He took the Klingon by the arm and led him a little way from the others. "Klonar, I've supplied you with a great many men in the past. A great many useful men, have I not?"

"Come to the point! I have little time for games!"

"Very well, I will. I want a favour. Not much, but I figure you can afford to be a little generous... I want one of them left here."

"Left? Why? You have all the men you need, Villion."

"He's a doctor, and also an old friend. I need a doctor for my ship - I want him."

Klonar disengaged his arm with a growl of distaste. "Then you can want, Villion. Every Starfleet man is handed over to me, those were the terms. If you wish to back out..."

"Of course not! I didn't mean that! All I want is one little favour - one man. He's been a good friend in the past, Klonar. Surely one doctor isn't all that important?"

"All of them are important to my superiors."

"Klonar...."

The Klingon rounded on him, his face displaying the contempt he felt for the Human. "I shall take all of them, Captain Villion, do you understand? I give no favours to such as you! If you wish to remain alive, you will forget your friend!"

"Commander!" One of the Klingon officers came hurrying up, a communicator in his hand. He saluted and relayed his urgent message.

"Commander Klonar, our ship reports a Federation Starship heading towards this quadrant. Request immediate instructions."

With a roar of rage Klonar pushed Villion to the ground and marched towards the beam-up point. "Get the prisoners on board! Quickly!"

However, before the aliens could begin hustling the Starfleet men away, Villion seized Klonar's shoulder and pulled him round.

"Just a minute, Klingon! I've never asked anything of you, I've always delivered on time, I've never asked any questions. Well, now I'm asking. Leave McCoy here!"

A few yards away the object of the argument was watching with a mixture of hope and fear. A Starship - could it be Jim? If Jerry kept the Klingons talking, kept them on the planet's surface, he and Spock and the others might have a chance.

A nudge from Spock broke his attention on the argument. The Vulcan nodded silently towards Villion's men, who were also watching the two leaders with avid attention. So avid, in fact, that they were neglecting to keep a proper eye on the prisoners.

Swiftly a hastily-prepared plan of action passed round the small group, and Spock waited until all the pirates were watching Villion and Klonar before yelling, "NOW!"

Blessing the fact that in their arrogance the pirates had neglected to bind them, the eleven men leaped on their guards, seizing their weapons and quickly running to the shelter of a large hut behind them. Angrily Villion called to his momentarily-paralysed men, ducking behind a wall as the Starfleet group opened fire. Klonar ran with his men to the beam-up point, breaking into atoms as chaos erupted on the planet's surface.

There was spasmodic shooting for a while, then silence fell as both groups

saved ammunition and sized up the situation. On the Starfleet side Spock took advantage of the quiet to assess his fellow officers.

Most of the men were fairly young - the scientists excluded - and the other six were junior officers, ranging from Lieutenants to a technician found by one of the pirates on a drinking spree during shore leave. As a Commander he was the highest rank, and thus in command. Realising this, McCoy turned to him with an air of confidence and asked what they were going to do.

"That should be obvious, Doctor," said Spock. "We wait."

Typical! thought McCoy. Aloud, he asked, "What for?"

"For the Captain of the Starship to deal with the Klingons and beam down here. Villion has a greater number of men than we, he knows this area, and he knows our numbers. Therefore it is logical to wait and fend off the pirates until help arrives."

McCoy started to ask what would happen if help didn't arrive, but one look at the technician's pale face closed his mouth for the moment. No point in panicking people needlessly...

Over at the other side of the village Villion was studying the hut and making plans of his own. He turned to Mericus and made a motion with his hand.

"You take some men and work your way round the back. Once you're in place I'll start a diversion here..."

"I'd cancel that idea, if I were you."

Villion looked round to find a line of red-shirted men with phasers readied behind him, and a Starship Captain staring him in the eye. He made a movement towards his weapon, but was phasered unconscious before he could reach it.

Signalling to the security guards Kirk cautiously walked out into the centre of the village, unsure just who was in the hut Villion had had surrounded. He watched warily as the hut door opened, and gazed in astonishment as the Starfleet men hurried out. The two scientists greeted him with cries of relief, the younger officers standing to the side, but Kirk had eyes only for the two men he had missed so much in the last weeks. McCoy's grin was wider than Kirk's when he reached his Captain, and it grew even wider as Kirk shook his hands in amazed delight.

"Didn't think you'd see us again, did you?" the doctor teased.

Kirk nodded numbly, trying to figure out what, exactly, he was feeling at that moment. He left McCoy for a moment and turned to Spock, undeterred by the cold Vulcan mask.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Spock. Ready to take up your duties again?"

"As soon as you think me fit, Captain."

That was it, an ordinary greeting to some, but to Kirk it conveyed a great deal more than was apparent on the surface. For a moment their eyes met, and Kirk saw Spock's acknowledgement of their growing friendship in that brief glance. The Captain nodded slightly in satisfaction, then turned to the task of transporting their prisoners to the brig.

Dr. McCoy collected his tray and deftly weaved his way through the tables to where Kirk and Spock sat deep in conversation.

"Mind if I sit down, gentlemen?" he asked cheerfully.

Kirk smiled a welcome. "Of course not, Bones. Here..." He pulled out a chair and waited as McCoy sat down.

Spock nodded slightly to the Human. "Doctor."

With a slight feeling of surprise McCoy returned the greeting and turned to the Captain. "I never did find out how you found that planet. What were you

doing in that sector?"

Briefly Kirk told them of the search, and of Bryce's orders to leave it and patrol the Neutral Zone. He skipped quickly over the Commodore's insistence on 'replacements', and said nothing of his own feelings through all that time. When he came to the part where the Enterprise followed the Klingon ship to Marbenna Three, McCoy could not resist an interruption.

"But how did you know we were on the planet?"

"I didn't," admitted Kirk. "I was playing a hunch all the time, and it paid off."

"If I may say so, Captain," remarked Spock, "a 'hunch' is not a very solid premise on which to base a decision of importance."

Kirk's eyes twinkled as he turned to the Vulcan. "Mr. Spock, sometimes a 'hunch' has proved invaluable in the planning of a course of action, and I for one intend to continue paying attention to them." He got a raised eyebrow for his trouble, and with a grin continued his explanation.

"When we showed up the Klingons headed out of there at warp three, and I was going to follow them when De Salle reported activity on the planet's surface and the presence of machinery of some sort. Well, there was an old creak of a ship orbiting the planet, and I knew if I concentrated on the Klingons the pirates would have time to move out. I also knew that the chances of proving the Klingons were doing anything wrong were practically nil - you know the kind of excuses their Head Office make - so I opted for getting the pirates. You know know the rest."

McCoy smiled. That news from Klonar's officer made my heart leap, I can tell you! I've never been so relieved in my life... So it's dropping the pirates off at Starbase 14 and then back to work, huh?"

"More or less," Kirk confirmed. "Of course, Villion's got a lot to answer for, and so have the Klingons, though they'll deny all knowledge of course. I hate to think what damage they've done to the development of that planet's people... By the way, Bones, didn't I hear someone say you knew Villion once?"

McCoy lowered his eyes, and was astonished to hear Spock say, "Dr. McCoy told me he knew another man of the same name, but totally different personality-wise from this Jerry Villion. A most amazing coincidence."

"Yes," murmured McCoy, looking in mute gratitude at Spock. "Really strange coincidence."

Kirk shrugged. "Must have heard wrong," he said.

Spock skilfully changed the subject. "Captain, what is to happen about Mr. De Salle?"

"Oh, that's quite straightforward. He was on his way to another ship when he was assigned to the Enterprise. He'll just continue his interrupted career. I'm commending him highly in my report. Very bright young man - should make a Captain one day..."

"Indeed."

McCoy watched as they talked ship's business, and he watched the Vulcan closest. There was more to this man Spock than he'd given him credit for, and McCoy knew he'd have to re-adjust his opinions somewhat. Not much, just a little...

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We've been through a lot together.
Through hell -
And heaven.
Through it all you were there
At my side, silent, solid,
Dependable.
You gave me your honour.
I gave you -
Life?

Lorraine Goodison.

HOW STRANGE by Paula Greener

The planet was small, and in an unexplored sector of space. The unusual thing about it was that half an hour ago it hadn't been there.

"Spock, er..." For once Kirk was at a loss for words; it wasn't funny having planets just popping up anywhere. "Anything you can tell me?" He glanced at the planet. It was covered with huge land masses covered with ice. There were, however, several areas of land that were completely ice-free.

"No, Captain. The computer is still processing the data we are receiving from the sensors."

"Okay, let me know as soon as you get anything. Sulu, take us into orbit."

"Captain," said Spock, "if I might suggest, we know nothing of the planet, and..."

"I quite agree, Mr. Spock." Kirk turned away smiling, and Spock was left confused.

An hour later Kirk decided to chance a landing party. They had not been able to find an answer to why the planet had appeared as it had, and Kirk hoped to find out this way.

The planet was populated, and the cultural and technological development had reached beyond the nuclear fission stage, but by how much they had not been able to gauge. The atmosphere was breathable, however, surface temperature was pretty constant at 3 to 5 degrees centigrade.

Kirk had only agreed to take Spock because he had insisted. McCoy had asked to go because he wanted to test a new serum which he hoped would help the blood and body functions at a lower temperature without the brain registering cold, or ill effects such as frost-bite. McCoy insisted he was to be the only guinea pig, and should be allowed to register the results. Kirk had ordered Scotty to take the Enterprise out of orbit if anything strange happened, and on no account was another landing party to be sent down.

The sudden snow storm blinded them. Kirk and Spock had on protective clothing, McCoy had some ready to wear if necessary. They struggled through the tearing, gathering drifts, the wind forever buffeting them backwards.

"Captain, a cave ahead."

There was only an answering yell, followed by a groan. McCoy and Spock peered through the snow. Kirk lay collapsed on the ground, his leg embedded in a hole.

"Jim, are you all right?"

"I would say that was an understatement, Doctor."

Both men bent down to ease Kirk back. McCoy gently examined his leg. Almost immediately a heavy mass of snow built up on their stationary bodies.

"It's pretty bad. The bone has fractured in such a way that any too sudden jolt could cause it to pierce the artery."

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"Well, I'll try my best."

Spock had, meanwhile, been trying to raise the Enterprise; now he announced, "This storm is causing interference. We cannot receive or transmit."

"He's passed out, Spock. You said you saw a cave. We'll have to take shelter."

Together they managed to half drag and half carry Kirk. It took over two hours to cover a ten-minute distance. Spock and Kirk were almost blue and numb with cold, McCoy still felt fine, however. They managed to get to the safety of the cave, and brushed the snow from their clothes.

"We must get help. He's losing a lot of blood, and I'm worried."

"Obviously one of us must go to get the required help. The tricorder readings indicate a large settlement to our right. I suggest I make my way there."

"Now hang on, Spock! You could cause quite a sensation among the populace."

"Doctor, the Captain needs your expert attention in whatever form that may take. I shall endeavour to make myself as unobtrusive as possible. As we cannot keep in touch, I shall just have to contact you when the weather makes it possible to do so." Spock gave one last glance at Kirk, then disappeared into the blinding whiteness.

Spock trudged on, willing himself to continue although he longed to rest for just a moment. His hand, tentatively stretched out, encountered a force field, which was suddenly turned off. It snapped back on behind him, and looking back he could see the snow buffeting against it on the other side. Within, the amber droplet in the sky produced a warm atmosphere. In the distance he saw high, gleaming spired buildings.

As he drew nearer a girl walked out. She froze, then smiled.

"I mean you no harm," he said, holding out empty hands.

She took his left hand and kissed it in greeting, then extended her right hand and Spock repeated the greeting.

"Will you take me to a doctor?"

It was obvious he was making no progress. The girl didn't understand him. Finally she took his arm and led him into the city. It seemed as if there were millions upon millions of oblong buildings. Spock was led to the centre of a square. The steps seemed to be endless, leading into the central building. Each building was exquisitely carved, with weaving patterns upon the face of the walls. Inside, it was airy and cool. It seemed to be deserted, though. The girl led him down a corridor and into a room, which was sparsely furnished. She motioned for him to sit down, and as he did so the chair moulded itself to his shape.

"A translator is working here, so we can talk. My name is Silvi. I am only third grade, so I shall have to get a sixth grade."

"My name is Spock. I am from the USS Enterprise. My Captain is seriously hurt, and needs medical attention."

"Oh, I am sure he will be brought here. I'll tell Zon. Your Captain will be all right." She smiled at him. She was very attractive, wearing very little clothing while still retaining her modesty. "I won't keep you waiting a thrn."

As she left Spock thought for a moment that he saw the girl become a grey-green amorphous monstrosity, then she was gone.

Meanwhile Kirk and McCoy had a small fire going. Kirk was feverish, and his leg had only just stopped bleeding. McCoy had had to use his jacket as a bandage. Kirk kept mumbling and shouting, and McCoy had used the only shot of sedative he had brought with him, but it had had hardly any effect on Kirk.

Already drifts were gathering at the mouth of the cave. McCoy thought

he heard a noise, the sound of people moving nearer. He hailed them, and an answer came back.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy were soon reunited. Kirk was attended to by a skilled surgeon, and within minutes he was sitting up.

A man, tall and impressive, stood watching them. He spoke slowly in a clipped English accent.

"I am Vil. This is the planet Magore. We welcome you. What is your purpose here?"

Kirk explained about the sudden appearance of Magore, and their worry as to how it had occurred.

"In that case, unfortunately, we must assume you are potential aggressors and a threat to our security. We must place you under arrest. The Council must have time to discuss this."

Kirk tried to interrupt, but already Vil had gone. "Damn, what now, I wonder?" he murmured.

They soon found out. Two men entered, each carrying a small box-like contraption. They were stony-faced and emotionless. They surrounded each man with a faintly humming force field, then led them into the corridor.

Already the idea of escape had begun to formulate in Kirk's mind. The corridor was empty, and at a nod from Kirk the three men jumped the guards. Immediately their fields glowed red and an ultrasonic wave passed through them. They crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

When they awoke they found themselves in a small cell. The floor was heavily padded, presumably meant for sleeping, for the room was completely empty.

A young voice said, "Please, gentlemen, enter."

Part of the wall slid silently open and dubiously they stepped forward. Three seats were facing them. The walls of the room were completely white, and a bright glare momentarily stunned their eyes.

"Please sit down."

Hesitantly they did so, and immediately the lights went out. They knew they were strapped down, and yet they felt as if they were floating in a black abyss. They lost all their senses. It seemed that hours passed, and a blind terror began to seize their minds and souls.

Spock had heard of this method of interrogation only once before. He had even seen a victim. So completely shattered and lost was he that he babbled every piece of information that his captors required. His mind had gone - he was incapable even of standing or moving.

Spock realised the great necessity to believe that he could feel something, anything. A frightening doubt grew in his mind for Kirk and McCoy. Maybe they could hold on for a little while, but he knew that their minds - perhaps even his - would collapse under the pressure.

Kirk had tried calling out, but his voice had seemed to melt away. Then suddenly the lights came on.

"Now, gentlemen, that was only to give you an idea of what can happen, an idea of at least one method of... persuasion... we will use. Of course, you could always cooperate. All we wish to know is what weapons you have, they layout of your ship, including weak and strong points, and the size of your crew. The information is merely for our own protection."

Nothing was said.

"Very well." McCoy and Spock were released. "Kindly go back to your cell."

The door slid shut behind them. Screams and groans soon rose from the room they had left. McCoy couldn't stand hearing Kirk in so much pain. He jumped up.

"For God's sake, stop it! Leave him alone! Take me - I know more than he does!"

Nothing happened.

Spock tried to find an opening, a door control of some kind, but without success. Although the two men still had their phasers, a test proved they had been drained of power.

"McCoy," said Spock, "there is nothing we can do." He laid his hand on the Human's shoulder.

The door opened and a body was pushed in and allowed to crumple to the floor. Beneath all the lacerations and bruises Kirk was pure white. He was convulsing and raving.

"What have they done to him?" gasped McCoy.

Spock, concerned for Kirk's mental state, tried to reach for a mind link, but broke away, subdued. For a moment he said nothing.

"Spock, what is it?"

"I could not reach him. He has retreated deep down into his mind. He may be sane within his subconscious, but even I cannot reach that. At the moment there is nothing I can do. I am helpless."

The door opened again, and two men reached for Kirk. Spock barred their way, and McCoy joined him.

"No! He's no good to you now. Leave him - take me."

"Doctor, you cannot withstand that sort of pressure. It is obvious that I must go. Lead on."

McCoy began to object, but a voice overruled them both.

"Both of you, please enter."

A door opened to their left.

"What about Captain Kirk?" demanded McCoy.

"He will be looked after."

"But..."

"Please."

The voice was final. The two guards moved in behind them. They entered into a dimly-lit room. Peering forward they could just make out a group of beings arranged behind a semi-circular table.

"Two of you will be allowed to leave. However, the Council's price is that one of you shall stay. We need to experiment. We have never had a Human mind before, nor seen such emotions."

"I volunteer myself."

"You're not Human, Spock, so you can't. I shall stay."

A voice, obviously amazed, said, "You are each willing to give your life for the other. Even your Captain would not betray his crew."

"This is strange," said another.

"Such loyalty I have never met before in this galaxy."

An authoritative voice echoed, "They must all return. Theirs is an important part in destiny. We must not prevent it."

The room grew dark, and suddenly a blinding crash threw their minds into confusion.

They were back in the snow-bound cave on the hillside. McCoy was already bending over Kirk when Spock sat up.

"How is he?"

"He'll be unconscious for another hour or so, but I think he'll be all right."

"The storm is clearing, Doctor. We should soon be able to contact the Enterprise. It seems that your serum worked well - I presume you will record your results?"

"What? Oh, yes. Strange you should mention that - I'd forgotten it. I shall have to test it a little more, I think, before anything official. Spock... what happened?"

"I do not know. But Doctor... my tricorder records no life-forms on this planet." The two men looked at each other.

"What was it they said about destiny?" murmured McCoy. Then he shrugged, and turned back to Kirk's strangely smiling face.

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UNTITLED POEM by Lorraine Goodison.

(Written after reading 'A Death In Time'.)

Searching...
Looking, hoping, asking in vain.
Equations and probability all
Adding up to the same answer.
You are lost.
I touch your blood,
I sense your life...
Where are you?

I do not know this feeling
Which churns my heart
With thorns of pain, but
Even as I suppress
Forbidden emotion,
The Human within me
Rebels.

I would die for you -
You know that.
Words cannot convey
The bond between us.
If you are dead
Then I am too,
Although my heart still beats.

A woman is speaking.
I hear the words with
Human gladness.
I run to your side.
I am here.
Let me take the pain,
And make us as one
On the oceans of life.

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LET ME HELP by Margaret Sibbald

Captain James T. Kirk and his First Officer Mr. Spock came off duty together. The turbolift deposited them on Deck Five, and as they walked the short distance to their quarters Spock said, "Have you anything planned for this evening, Captain?"

"I thought I'd catch up on some paperwork," Kirk answered. "What about you, Spock? ... More studying, no doubt," he said with a grin as they both came to a halt outside his quarters.

"Yes, there is a science journal I should read," Spock admitted.

Kirk smiled affectionately at his First Officer. "You never stop cramming details into that head of yours, do you?" he teased.

Spock looked perplexed. "Captain, it is my duty to learn everything I possibly c..."

"All right," Kirk interrupted gently. "I'll see you in the morning. G'night, Spock."

Spock raised a puzzled eyebrow. "Goodnight, Captain."

As the door of his quarters closed behind him, Kirk's shoulders sagged and the smile faded from his lips. It was a relief to be able to drop the burden of performance. Alone in his quarters he didn't have to pretend that living without Edith was as easy as he made it seem. The crew, of course, knew nothing of what had happened on his journey into the Time Portal with Spock, when they had gone to search for the half-crazed McCoy. It was McCoy's kindly concern and Spock's ever-watchful eye that had been constant threats to his composure during the last two weeks. Here, away from both of them, he could let the loneliness and desperation surface.

Wearily, he walked over to his desk and sank down in the chair. He pulled a pile of papers that awaited his attention over in front of him. He flicked through them listlessly... then pushed them away again. They meant nothing. There wasn't a spark of interest left in him for his work ... or for his ship.

He buried his face in his hands, despair flooding over him. Two weeks wasn't long enough to dim memories... to dull the terrible sound of shrieking brakes and Edith screaming, or to stop the whole horrific scene from replaying, relentlessly, over and over again in his head... yet it felt like a lifetime since he had held her close; felt the softness of her hair against his face; smelled her perfume. His hunger and longing for her had increased steadily since her death. There were times when he felt he couldn't live another day without her. Every nerve in his body was a tight knot of pain and his heart felt it might burst any minute with pent-up emotion. He wanted to put his head down and cry... but he knew he must not. He was sure that if he cried he would disintegrate completely; any spirit, any character and backbone he had would just melt like wax and run away. Besides, he thought, Starship Captains are on call twenty-four hours a day, and it wouldn't do to be found in such an emotional state. He tried to imagine Spock's reaction to such a happening... Spock, who disliked emotional scenes of any kind intensely, would be mortified with embarrassment.

Kirk's attempt at shaking himself mentally failed miserably. It didn't help that he was a Starship Captain... or what his First Officer might think of him. He still felt lost, lonely, and desperately unhappy.

Time passed unheeded, the paperwork forgotten as he sat there lost in his aching grief.

Suddenly he was jerked back to painful reality by the insistent sound of his door buzzer. He straightened up in his chair, tried to put a commanding expression on his face, and strove to keep his voice steady as he

shouted, "Come in!"

The door slid open and the subject of his earlier thoughts stepped inside.

"Spock." He managed to make his voice sound reasonably bright. "What can I do for you?" he asked as his First Officer halted beside his desk, hands clasped behind his back. Spock appeared to be his usual calm, imperturbable self... but in his depressed state of mind Kirk failed to notice a slight hesitancy, almost an awkwardness, in the Vulcan's manner... as if he wasn't at all sure whether his decision to present himself in his Captain's quarters was the right one.

"You seemed fatigued when we came off duty, Captain," Spock said quietly. "It occurred to me that you might like some help with the paperwork."

Kirk glanced at the untouched work, then at the chronometer, and was shocked to find two hours had gone by since he had first sat down at the desk. He looked up at Spock's tall figure. "What about the science journal?" he asked.

"I have read all that is necessary," Spock assured him.

"In that case, sit down and help yourself," Kirk invited. "There's plenty of it."

Obediently Spock sat down at the end of the desk and they worked in silence for five or ten minutes. Spock seemed intent on his work, but Kirk was constantly aware of the dark eyes watching him.

It must be obvious to Spock that I haven't even started this blasted paperwork, he thought guiltily, obvious that I haven't been doing anything except sitting here indulging in self-pity.

As if on cue, Spock said, "You seem distressed, Captain."

Kirk glanced up at him, forcing a smile, then looked back down at his work as he said, "No, I'm fine, Spock."

He thought he heard Spock taking a deep breath.

"I doubt very much if that is true, Captain," Spock said calmly. "I would say that you have been extremely distressed since Miss Keeler's death."

Kirk jerked, pain engulfing him again. He hadn't expected Spock to bring up the subject of Edith... and he found that even the mention of her name brought everything he had felt for her rushing to his throat.

When he looked up, Spock saw such naked pain in his eyes it was almost more than he could bear.

"Your distress has not gone unnoticed, Captain... despite your attempts to cover it," Spock said, kindness and concern in his deep voice.

Kirk sighed tiredly. It was pointless trying to fool someone like Spock. "It shows that much, huh?"

"Perhaps only to me," Spock said quietly. "I am more sensitive to the feelings of others around me."

"I let her die, Spock," Kirk said in an agonised voice. "I let her walk in front of that truck. I could have..."

"You are torturing yourself needlessly," Spock interrupted in a firm but gentle voice. "You cannot continue to blame yourself for something over which you had no choice. You could not have sacrificed millions of lives for one woman... no matter how much you loved her. It is over now," he went on softly. "You must stop blaming yourself. Nothing destroys a man quicker than guilt. If you go on tormenting yourself the way you have been doing for the last two weeks, it will not be long before you become

unable to command the Enterprise."

"Yes, you're right, of course... you always are," Kirk said, and found his voice shaking uncontrollably. "I had to let her die... I..." His voice cracked and to his horror he felt tears stinging his eyes. He rose abruptly from the desk, turning his back to Spock. He walked over to the mesh divider that separated his sleeping quarters from the living area and leaned against it.

"Go on, Spock - get out of here before I start bawling like a wet-nosed five year old," he said shakily.

"Captain, I am not insensitive to Human grief. Any expression of what you are feeling will certainly not reduce you to the level of... 'a wet-nosed five year old' in my eyes. In fact, I can assure you it will not change my opinion of you in any way."

Kirk didn't answer... he couldn't. Sobs were forming in heaves in his chest; wrenching spasms warped his mouth but made no sound, and the membranes of his eyes and nose throbbed until he felt they were raw. He wound his arms tightly around his middle, trying to stop the sensation of falling apart inside.

"Jim..." The deep, understanding voice was close; Spock was right behind him. "Let me help..."

'Let me help'... Edith's words... He closed his eyes, unbearable pain tearing through him. "Oh Spock... Spock..." he moaned.

"I am here." Spock said softly. Then Kirk felt strong hands on his shoulders turning him round, powerful arms encircling him, pulling him close, and then there was firm pressure at the back of his head until his face was resting against the blue-clad shoulder. The warm hand stroked his hair gently, willing his rigid body to relax.

"Weep," Spock said very softly. "Then you will feel better."

For a few moments Kirk held himself rigid, resisting what was happening. He didn't want to make a prize fool of himself in front of his First Officer. He felt himself grow cold... the bitter taste of foul panic filled his mouth... he wanted to struggle out of the strong arms...

"Relax," Spock said softly. "There is nothing to fear."

The gentleness and understanding in Spock's voice curbed Kirk's rising panic and his fears quickly fled. What little strength he had left just seemed to drain out of him and he sagged against the comforting solidness of Spock's chest, unable to resist any longer. The tears he had held back for so long spilled over... and as hard, gulping sobs came ripping up from his chest, shaking his body convulsively, he instinctively put his arms around Spock and clung to him.

For a long time Spock held his Captain close.

When the violent storm of grief was finally over, the whole length of Kirk's body was trembling against Spock's spare frame. Gently, Spock scooped him up and carried him to the bed.

Within a few minutes he had him undressed and beneath the coverlet. He then went into the adjoining bathroom, returning with a bowl of cool water and a cloth.

He sat down on the bed beside Kirk and for a moment just studied his face... the closed eyes, their long lashes still wet... the tear-stained cheeks. Spock felt his heart contract painfully. He had never heard Jim Kirk cry before, and it was not an experience he wished to repeat.

He bathed Kirk's face, holding the cool cloth over the closed eyes for a few seconds. When he took it away the hazel eyes opened and looked up at him.

"Sorry, Spock...I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Hush now... all is well," Spock murmured. "You did not embarrass me." He brushed the stray lock of hair from Kirk's forehead. "How do you feel now, Jim?"

"Like I've been beaten up by experts," Kirk said, his whole body aching with exhaustion.

Dark Vulcan eyes surveyed him anxiously. "Would you like me to call Dr. McCoy?"

"No... I'm just tired," Kirk reassured him.

"Then you must rest," Spock said quietly. "Try not to distress yourself anymore. In time the memories will fade... you will forget."

"Yes, I know," Kirk said. He covered one of Spock's hands with his own, suddenly grateful for the warmth and security the Vulcan's unwavering loyalty and devotion gave him. For the first time in two weeks a relaxed smile lit his face. "I still have you, Spock."

"Yes," Spock said softly. "Miss Keeler was correct. I will always be at your side."

Kirk grinned, trying as he always did to lighten the situation. "Don't you find the prospect of being stuck for life with an emotional, illogical Human rather daunting, Spock?"

"Not at all, Captain," Spock said confidently as he rose from the bed, returning once more to formality. "Illogical and irrational as your emotions may be... they are part of you. I am quite prepared to accept them," he finished matter-of-factly.

Kirk laughed softly, delighted with Spock's complete acceptance of him. A grin still on his face, he slid down beneath the warm bedcover, his heavy eyes beginning to close. "Spock," he murmured, his voice sleepy and furred with a gentleness the Vulcan had never heard before. "Sometimes I don't know what I'd do without you."

A sudden, illogical surge of happiness swelled inside Spock. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, threatening to betray him, but Kirk didn't see it. He was fast asleep.

Before leaving for his own quarters to finish the paperwork, Spock permitted himself the luxury of watching his sleeping Captain for a few moments. As he watched, a look of wonderment crept over his face as he reflected on how much he had experienced in one short evening.

Human tears, Human laughter... and the depth of Human love.

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