

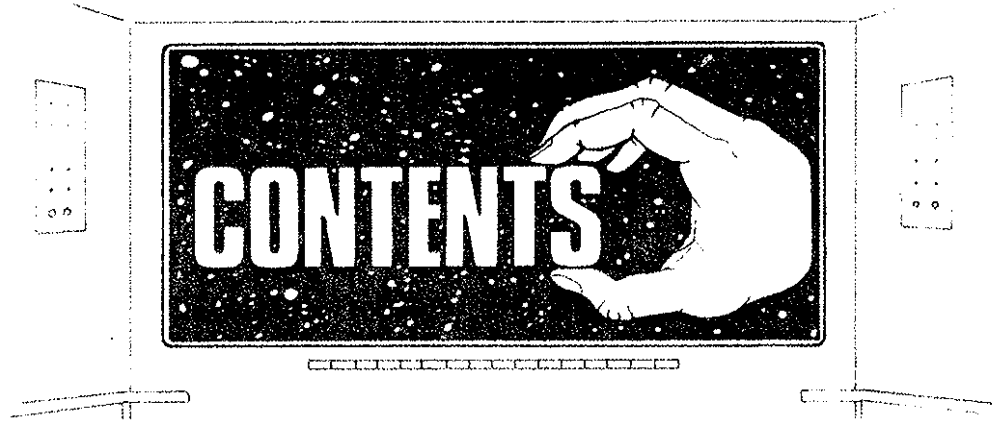


# LOG E N T R A I E S

37

a STAR TREK  
fanzine





The Aerolythian	by Jenny Watson	P 3
Doomsday Machine Prologue	by Ian Pearse	P 16
The Understanding	by Lesley Coles	P 22
Friends in Need	by Ann Preece	P 39
Desperation	by Susan Meek	P 48
Interrogation	by Susan Meek	P 49

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Hello everyone, and welcome to another edition of Log Entries.

As you'll see from the contents page, I'm having to do my own proofreading this time. Nobody should proofread what they've already typed; a mistake that has slipped past once (in particular, a spelling mistake) can easily slip past again. However, we've got little choice in the matter - circumstances have decreed that Valerie and I won't be seeing each other between now and Terracon, and we want the zine ready for Terracon. So... It also means that Valerie is having to proofread the zine she is currently typing out, also for Terracon.

If there are any faults in the duplicating of LE 34 & 35, blame me. Although Janet's name appears as printer, in fact, I'm the culprit. Again, this was due to the way things worked out with the newsletter, our holidays and Janet's work.

Three new writers are featured this time - Ian Pearse, who won the competition in N/L 41 for a story about one of the Starships shown as being wrecked in aired Trek. We've said several times that our policy is to stick with the Enterprise and her crew rather than print stories about other Starships - however, we will print stories about incidents referred to in aired Trek, or short ones featuring characters not of the Enterprise who appeared in aired Trek. For example, in an early Log Entries we printed First Contact by Margaret Draper, a story about Earth's initial contact with the Vulcans; the linking character was a very young T'Pol. Then there are Jenny Watson and Ann Preece. Keep writing, all three of you!

So far there have been no entries for the competition set in LE 30 - granted, there are still 6 - 7 weeks to go (as of my writing this - about a fortnight to go by the time it's on sale). I've only heard of one person who is working on a story for it, too. Come on, you budding writers - your club needs you!

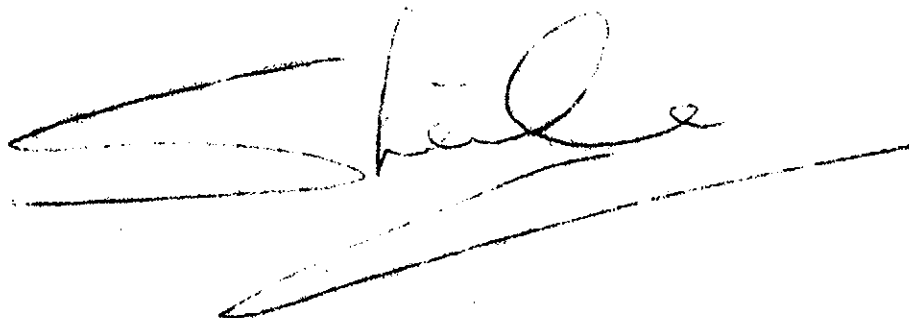
Having said that, I must admit that I've been getting in a fair number of submissions recently, all of a high standard; the only rejections have been stories that were outwith our guidelines. The result is that my current stock of stories is in good shape.

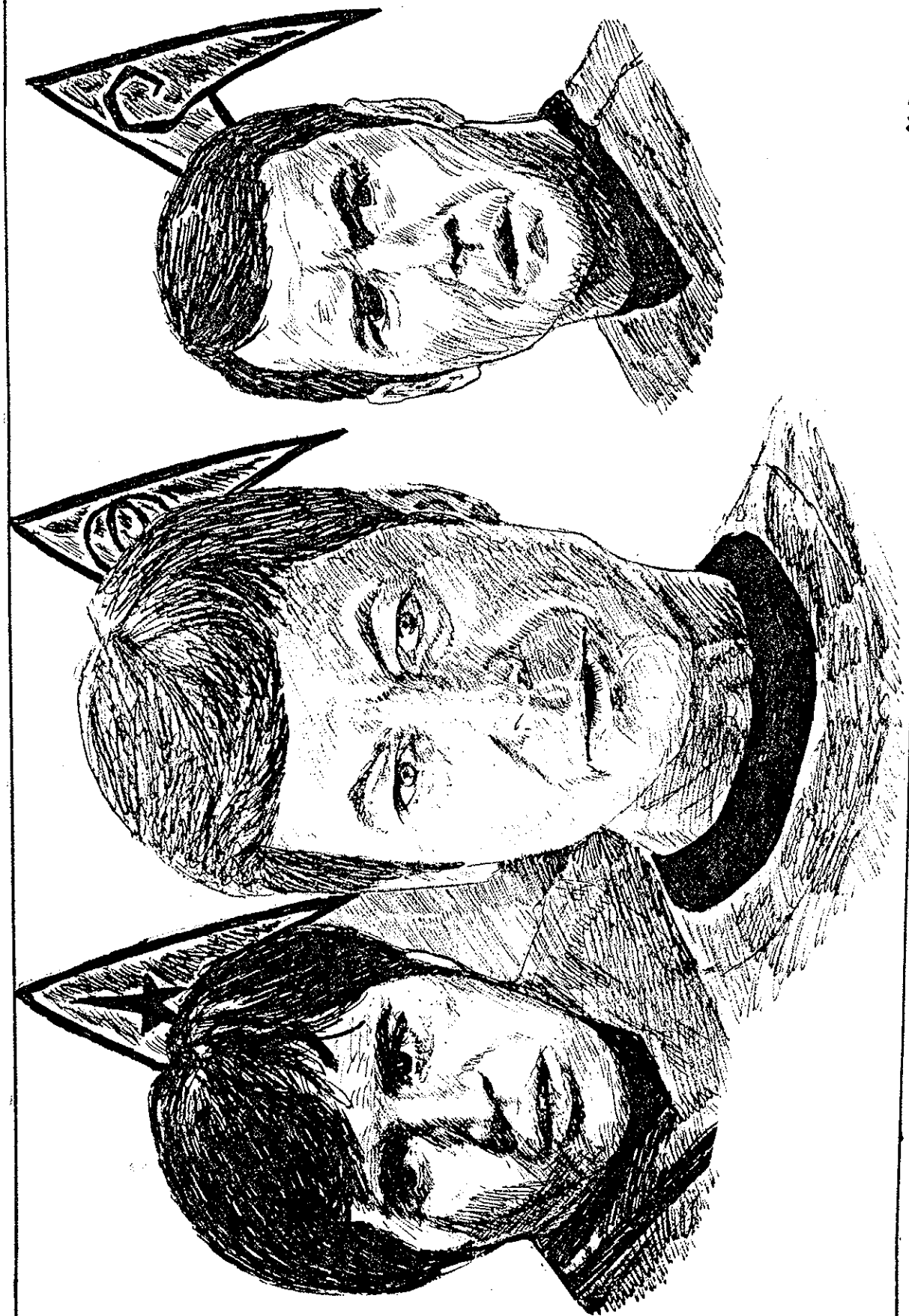
I haven't assigned stories yet for LE 38 - Roo has spent the summer illustrating several short stories for me, and I'll decide which ones are going into LE 38 when I get these back from her. However, I can say categorically that they'll all be good!

Non-members of STAG can obtain information on zines in print, new and forthcoming zines by sending me a SAE (foreign, addressed envelope and 2 International Reply Coupons. It needs two because we only get surface mail delivery for one. Considering what they cost, someone is making money off IRCs.)

Enjoy the zine.

July 1980





M. DELANEY



THE AEROLYTHIAN by Jenny Watson

"Jim! Kim Kirk!"

Kirk swung around to see McCoy waving eagerly at him across the crowd waiting on the dock of the space station. Grinning, Kirk waved back. McCoy tactfully elbowed his way past several people to join Kirk. The two men were obviously pleased to see each other, greeting each other and discussing their separate weeks of shore leave animatedly.

On the shuttle taking them out to the Enterprise, Kirk mentioned that they would be taking on a small party of advanced Federation cadets who were to go with them to the star cluster R.E.D. 553. "I think I'll go and welcome them myself," said Kirk, recalling how shy and intimidated he had felt on his first mission. "Try to make them feel at home. But after lunch," he added, as his stomach reminded him that he had not yet eaten that day. McCoy agreed wholeheartedly. They both made for the canteen as they got on board.

As Kirk entered, still wearing his own clothes, a sudden loud wolf-whistle startled him. McCoy, following behind Kirk in the queue, gave him a puzzled glance and they both looked around in perplexity for the cause of the whistle, although neither could find any obvious provocation.

Then they both became aware of a sound of stifled sniggering. It was coming from a table in the corner - around which sat five young girls dressed in pale green uniforms, all smirking mischievously at Kirk.

Kirk's mouth dropped open in amazement. McCoy burst out laughing. "It looks as if you're being appraised by your new cadets, Jim!" he said between chuckles.

Kirk, caught off his guard, blushed for one second, muttering, "Who, me?" and turned abruptly to concentrate on the food synthesizer.

He eventually regained his cool, however, and seating himself among the delighted cadets, introduced himself as their Captain. He saw the alarm slowly creep over their faces as they realised their mistake. As it was not really their fault, because he was not in uniform, Kirk tried to soften the shock with a mild joke. "You obviously still have something to learn about Starship manners, young ladies. Rule 1: No whistling at the table."

"And no giggling with your mouth full, either," added McCoy with great amusement.

But it was not the last time that Kirk had to amend his expectations of the cadets.

Kirk sat in the command chair, pondering on what Spock had just told him about one of the new cadets. An Aerolythian, he had said. Kirk knew that Aerolythia was a comparatively recently discovered planet, situated at the outer limits of Federation territory, and that the inhabitants were humanoid; originally from Earth, although rumour had it that they had developed certain superior mental powers during the long years they had been out of touch with their home planet.

Spock interrupted his thoughts to say, "Captain, I believe the subject in question is presently to be observed."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," said Kirk, turning unobtrusively to perceive the young uniformed girl who had just walked in. She had in fact brought him a report to inspect in accordance with her newly assigned duties. As he scanned the page, he inquired kindly, "How are you finding life aboard the Enterprise so far, Cadet Draquard?"

Looking up, he saw her startle, rapidly recover, and reply, "Oh! I'm enjoying it very much, sir."

Kirk glanced suspiciously across the room and thought he saw Chekov hurriedly swing back to his post, but he wasn't sure. "Ensign Chekov, get on with your work,"

he growled, just in case.

"Sir!" answered the young Russian indignantly, with a hurt look on his face.

Kirk turned resignedly to the cadet, the report in his hand.

"Thank you, sir," she said politely, and began to walk away. The report left Kirk's hands and sailed into hers. Kirk looked down at his hands and then back at the girl in wordless disbelief. She abruptly stopped, swung round and stared at Kirk, biting her lip. Then she began to giggle at the shock on his face and tried to explain. "I'm so sorry, sir," she gasped. "I forgot where I was; I thought I was still back on my home planet."

It took everyone a while to recover from the surprise of what they had just seen, especially since most of them were not aware of Lienne Draquard's unusual heritage. She promised not to frighten anyone like that again unless it was absolutely necessary. Kirk gently hustled her out of the room, trying to reorganise peace on the bridge.

Then he remembered that he had not had a chance to sign the report before she had removed it in such an unexpected way.

"I'll go, sir!" offered Chekov immediately, and was out of his seat and halfway across the room before Kirk could answer.

"You don't have to run, Ensign - it's not that urgent," said Kirk, puzzled. But Chekov was already out of the door. Kirk's mind was just beginning to fit the pieces together when McCoy entered, and remarked with a grin,

"I see young Chekov has a new girlfriend!"

Kirk leaped out of his chair, only to bump into Lienne Draquard at the turbolift. She looked at him innocently and offered the report, while Chekov slipped casually past and returned to his seat. Kirk glared at her, signed, and pushed her back into the turbolift. Then he turned on Chekov, but before he could say anything Sulu reported the appearance of a large uncharted object on the ship's sensors. Further investigation proved it to be a very small planet. It was enveloped in a thick, swirling atmosphere which prevented the scanning beams from penetrating to the surface. All subspace radio was distorted in its close vicinity.

Kirk pushed the button on the command chair to record the discovery.

Captain's Log. Stardate 3997.2

While on course to star cluster R.E.D. 553, the ship's scanners have registered a mysterious uncharted planet. It is surrounded by a dense atmospheric fog, therefore although investigations have commenced from aboard the Enterprise, there has so far been no result. We are near Klingon borders and are proceeding with maximum care to avoid conflict with their Empire.

Kirk finished his report and then walked over to Spock's computer console to see if any new data had appeared concerning the planet.

Suddenly a great blinding flash of light swelled up, enveloping the Enterprise, and before anyone could react, the ship jolted and began to move out of orbit. Kirk tried to yell an order to Sulu, but he found himself paralysed. His mind reeled, and he fell to the deck, unconscious.

Within seconds, the whole of the Enterprise crew was in a similar state.

Chekov dizzily awoke to find Spock at his place, fighting grimly with the sluggishly responding instruments of the helm. He tried to clear his fuzzy mind and find out what was happening. At that moment he heard a cry from Sulu, who was gazing at the screen after pulling himself slowly to his feet. Kirk was suddenly at Spock's side, trying to help him. Chekov struggled to his feet and peered over the edge of the helm.



"Captain!" he shouted at the sight. "We're right in Klingon territory! That's violating the treaty..."

Kirk glanced at him and said quietly, "I know that, Ensign. That's why we're trying to do something about it."

"There's a Klingon Battlecruiser approaching!" continued Chekov.

Kirk quickly called, "Open ship to ship frequencies, Lt. Uhura," keeping his eyes on the screen.

"Sir!" she affirmed.

Kirk peered at the registration number of the Klingon ship. "Don't know it," he muttered to himself. Returning to the command chair, he told Spock not to attempt any helm manoeuvres for the moment, and raising his voice, he began a message to the Klingons.

He was interrupted. "There is no need to apologise, Kirk. We understand the situation perfectly. Now, after your own quaint custom - do you have any last wishes? Otherwise..." he paused, to delight in picking the appropriate cliché. "Prepare to meet your doom, Captain Kirk."

Kirk grimaced and tried again. "Commander..."

"Kaan. Commander Kaan," supplied the Klingon, grinning.

"Commander Kaan - let me explain." Kirk broke off, realising it was futile - how could he explain what had just happened? He looked to Spock for advice. Spock said softly,

"I think we can risk trying the engines again now; the helm appears to be responding. Since the Klingons seem unwilling to discuss the matter, perhaps a retreat would be the most prudent course of action under the circumstances?"

Kirk slowly nodded. Chekov glanced anxiously at the Captain, and receiving his signal, put the ship into full reverse.

The Klingon Battlecruiser responded immediately by advancing in to the attack. The Enterprise activated her shields just in time and Kirk held his fire and continued to retreat.

However, before long reports of damage were coming in from all departments, and Scotty told Kirk that if no action were taken to retaliate, it really would be time 'to meet their doom'.

Kirk tried again to contact the Klingon Commander, but it was useless. The Enterprise rocked repeatedly under the attack.

It was a difficult decision, but finally Kirk had to give the order to fire. A stream of blue light shot out of the Enterprise and hit the Klingon ship. The battle commenced. Explosion after explosion followed. Kirk merely wanted to protect the Enterprise and therefore fired only to cover their retreat; however, suddenly the Klingon ship ceased fire.

After a moment of silence, Sulu reported, "Klingon ship disabled, sir."

Kirk closed his eyes and wondered how he was going to handle this. Then another impulse shook the Enterprise and the ship became totally immobilised.

"We are again within range of that planet, sir," said Spock. "I believe we may be in the path of a form of energy beam radiating from it; perhaps similar to whatever attacked us earlier and caused the ship to enter the Klingon zone in the first place. It seems to be holding the Klingon Battlecruiser in a like manner."

The only possible solution was to visit the planet's surface and try to contact whoever was controlling the beam. Kirk filled Scotty in on the situation, leaving him with the con and with orders to stand by until further notice. Kirk could not even be sure of what to do himself until he knew more about the circumstances.

"All members of the landing party are to activate life support belts before beaming down. Remember, although there is evidence of the presence of Class M elements, because of scanning difficulties, we can't be entirely sure of the proportions so we have little idea of what it's really like down there."

"I'll beam you down to the largest flat area, Captain, but with that blasted fog blocking our instruments, I don't know if I'll be able to set you down safely."

"Thank you, Scotty. Do your best."

The familiar columns of coloured light began to replace the figures of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Chekov and Cadet Lienne Draquard. Another group followed.

The next second, Kirk felt a freezing, explosive shock and instant terror. Was he experiencing materialisation inside a solid object, he wondered? He struggled wildly, desperately choking on the black coldness. Just as he thought he was about to suffocate, he found that the oxygen his lungs had been screaming for was suddenly available. Retching violently, he shook his head and opened his eyes. Through a red blur, he saw a glimpse of a vast dark watery expanse all around him.

Then Kirk went under again, but this time, knowing a little more about the element in which he had been submerged, he was rapidly able to find a way to ensure that he remained with his head above water.

There was a splashing nearby and Spock surfaced, gasping for breath. Kirk quickly went to his aid, supporting him and giving him time to realise the situation.

"O.K.?" he asked after a moment. Spock nodded.

The others had begun to emerge. Spock and Kirk helped whoever they could reach. Kirk was relieved to see that everybody was present and appeared to be well. There was a pause while they all panted and spluttered. Then someone swore, loudly and emphatically, giving expression to the astonishment, fright and anger they had all felt when they found themselves under water for the first few instants after materialisation.

"What happened to the goddam life support belts?" demanded McCoy furiously, and a burst of giggles preceded another comment.

"I guess we now have a better idea of what it's really like down here, Captain." It was Cadet Draquard, greatly enjoying the drama of her first mission.

Kirk quickly got down to the more important matter of organising the party to make for what seemed a shoreline in the distance.

They soon reached land and tried to start a fire to dry themselves, meanwhile trying to discover the cause of the life support belts' failure. However, they found that whatever had rendered their belts useless and also affected their tricorders, communicators and phasers. They resorted to rubbing two sticks together to light a fire.

A conference was held later on the beach, to divide up the group into shifts for the search for the planet's inhabitants.

"Remember that the Klingons must also be somewhere on the planet," Kirk told everybody.

McCoy and an assistant remained at the temporary camp set up in a sheltered inland spot, and Chekov and Lienne Draquard were to search the shore, while Kirk and Spock left with a group of men to tackle the mountainous highlands.

Kirk, Spock and their party climbed for two hours in silence, struggling to find footholds, often slipping and falling back along the way. Finally the top was reached, and they paused to rest. Spock stood, to aid the regulation of his breathing; Kirk slumped against a rock, and the others lay exhaustedly in the dust.

After a while, Kirk raised himself slowly to his feet and gave the order to



continue the search. As the rest of the group fanned out to explore the area, Kirk entered a cavern to check it out.

Spock was nearby when he heard a sudden, loud shriek that echoed away into the mist. It was at first unidentifiable, but as he heard it a second time he could tell - thankfully - that it did not issue from Human lips.

Then Kirk burst from the cave. The scream followed him, in the form of a great, ferocious wild animal. It caught Kirk with one paw, and he gasped as the sharp claws raked his back, tearing his shirt. He twisted away, but the tiger-like creature sank vicious teeth into his arm while the flashing paw wounded his face. Kirk's jaw clenched with the pain.

Spock took off his belt and picked up a rock. He hesitated only a moment before swinging the belt with the rock in it 'ahn-woon' fashion. His aim was flawless; the rock hit the animal's head and the beast fell to the ground, heavily stunned.

Kirk walked unsteadily towards his First Officer, who had once more saved his life, opened his mouth to thank him, and pitched forward onto his face.

Lienne and Chekov set out a little later than the other party because Dr. McCoy had insisted on attending to a minor injury Chekov had received by slipping on the rocky beach. After a few miles, they stopped for a moment.

Lienne looked sympathetically at the bruise on his forehead and asked, "Does it hurt badly?"

He grinned wearily at her but said nothing. She reached her hand up to touch his forehead and it seemed to Chekov as if the pain subsided.

"We'd better carry on now," she said. They moved a few paces and suddenly found their way blocked by a Klingon.

"Uh, oh," said Chekov as they turned and saw that they had been silently surrounded.

It was early evening when Spock and Kirk arrived back at the camp. Spock was carrying the unconscious Kirk across his shoulders. McCoy came out of a tent at a run and was examining Kirk even before Spock had put him down. He pumped a stimulant into Kirk's uninjured arm and a pain-killer into the savaged arm. Then he cleaned the blood from Kirk's forehead, and at the sight of the gash, he bit his lip. He glanced up at Spock, demanding to know what had happened.

"We encountered a wild animal in the mountains which attacked the Captain - he had entered a cave which I assume to have been its lair."

"Look," said McCoy, indicating the facial scratches. "I'm afraid that they may have damaged his eyes. They're far too close..."

"Can you do anything?" said Spock, a little too quickly for an emotionless Vulcan.

"I can't assess the damage until he wakes up," replied McCoy quietly. "But the stimulant is already taking effect."

Kirk groaned. His eyelids fluttered open. Then he forced himself up onto one elbow, causing a searing flash of pain that made him wince and lie back down again.

"Jim," called McCoy softly.

Kirk turned his head to the side, and his eyes blinked and then widened. McCoy passed his hand across in front of Kirk's eyes; then back again. There was no response.

"Bones...?" Kirk was asking weakly.

McCoy shook his head sadly at Spock and tried half-heartedly to reassure

Kirk. But Kirk was beginning to come to his senses. He put his hands up to his eyes, and after a moment of silence, said slowly, "Bones...Spock...I can't see. What's the matter?"

McCoy's face contorted with pain as he heard the agonised whisper, "I can't believe... Bones - am I blind?"

It was with a very heavy heart that James T. Kirk handed over the command of the landing party, maybe never again to benefit from the immense beauty of the universe.

Chekov and Lienne were brought to the Klingon camp. Commander Kaan slowly stood as they arrived.

"Two Federation Humans, sir. We found them just beyond that hill. The area was searched but there were no others there."

Kaan's mouth twisted into a grin as he approached Chekov and Lienne. "You will tell me the whereabouts of your Captain Kirk," he said.

Chekov swallowed but kept silent. Lienne glared defiantly at the Klingon.

Kaan was not perturbed. He turned to his First Officer. "If we can get Kirk down on this planet we shall be victorious. With the damage to our ship, it may not be so easy to win the battle in space." He held his hand out to one of the Klingon guards, who passed him a glowing piece of wood from the fire.

Chekov's eyes widened.

"Just because our weapons do not function down here on this planet, it does not mean we are at a loss for ways to persuade you to give us the answers we want," said Kaan, brandishing the fire in front of their faces. "We will begin with you," he went on, looking at Chekov. Lienne snarled and threw herself at Kaan, clawing at his eyes. She was brutally jerked back and restrained by two guards.

Kaan had not flinched, but now a hard glint appeared in his eyes as he leered at Lienne. He tossed the glowing wood to the ground and tilted her chin up roughly. His tongue flicked thoughtfully to the corner of his mouth. He said, "I think I shall interrogate this prisoner privately in my quarters. Take her there."

Chekov's stomach constricted at the words. He glanced at Lienne and she held his gaze unconcernedly, mouthing, "Don't talk!" He looked worried and confused, and she gave him a reassuring grin. Then she turned to scowl at Kaan with undisguised loathing. Kaan was very amused.

The arrival of a messenger drew his attention away from Lienne. She shrugged herself free from the guards and stepped closer to Chekov. The two Klingons moved nearer but did not take hold of her again.

"Lt. Mir reporting, sir," said the messenger. "We have information concerning the Humans. We managed to take one prisoner. He was alone when we found him."

"Who is it?" demanded Kaan.

"No-one of any importance, sir. In any case, the subject died under interrogation."

Chekov and Lienne were aghast at the man's callousness.

"Never mind," said Kaan, eyeing his two prisoners. "The information?"

"Kirk is no longer leader of their party. The Vulcan has taken over command."

Kaan saw from his prisoners' reaction that they had not known. "Why?"

"He was injured. The details are not known, but one thing is certain. Kirk is blind."





Lienne choked.  
Chekov stared  
unbelievably.

Kaan walked away,  
motioning to his  
First Officer to  
follow.

"Let them go," he  
said, once out of  
earshot.

"Let them go?"  
repeated the First  
Officer, shocked.

"After what they  
have just heard,  
where do you think is  
the first place they  
will go?"

The Klingon  
understood. "We will  
follow them?" he asked.

"Yes. Unobtrus-  
ively. One man can do  
the job. Then we can  
finish this quickly,  
now that Kirk is out  
of the way."

"I will arrange it,  
Commander."

"And let them feel  
that they have  
escaped. They may be  
stupid, but they will  
undoubtedly suspect  
our motives if we free  
them too obviously."

"Yes, sir."

A young Klingon eagerly volunteered for the task of tracking Chekov and Lienne. As it began to grow darker, they found themselves unguarded for a moment and immediately set to work loosening each other's fetters. They were soon free of the flimsy bonds.

Once well away from the Klingon camp, they separated. "You find somewhere to hide until morning," said Lienne gently, "in case we are followed. I will go in another direction."

Chekov, dazed and unhappy, obeyed her.

Spock sat by the glowing embers in the middle of the camp, silently watching Kirk, among the sleeping crewmen, until he was satisfied that his Captain had also finally fallen asleep. It had been a very long day for Jim Kirk...

A soft breeze ruffled Kirk's hair as he stood and breathed the fresh Terran air. Around him in the silver light was the living beauty of Earth, his home.

The landscape was perfect; lovely... He sensed the warmth of a presence beside him - Lienne? Kirk knew that something was wrong. He felt a strange sensation of fear, apprehension; a premonition that something worse than anything he had ever experienced was going to happen. But he didn't know what it was that he was anticipating.

As he slowly began to turn in the direction of the moon, the feeling increased and he knew it was centralised there. He began to shake as he felt the moon coming nearer. Suddenly it was there, within his vision; a giant moon that flamed horrifyingly with a red, unnatural fire. The light sky became stained black with blood, and the sea gathered together in one great tidal wave that never broke. Yawning cracks appeared in the shuddering earth and the hills became scorched, silhouetted against the inferno that blazed across the land in an all-destroying flood. A cold sweat broke out on Kirk's forehead as he heard the scream torn from the throats of suffering millions...

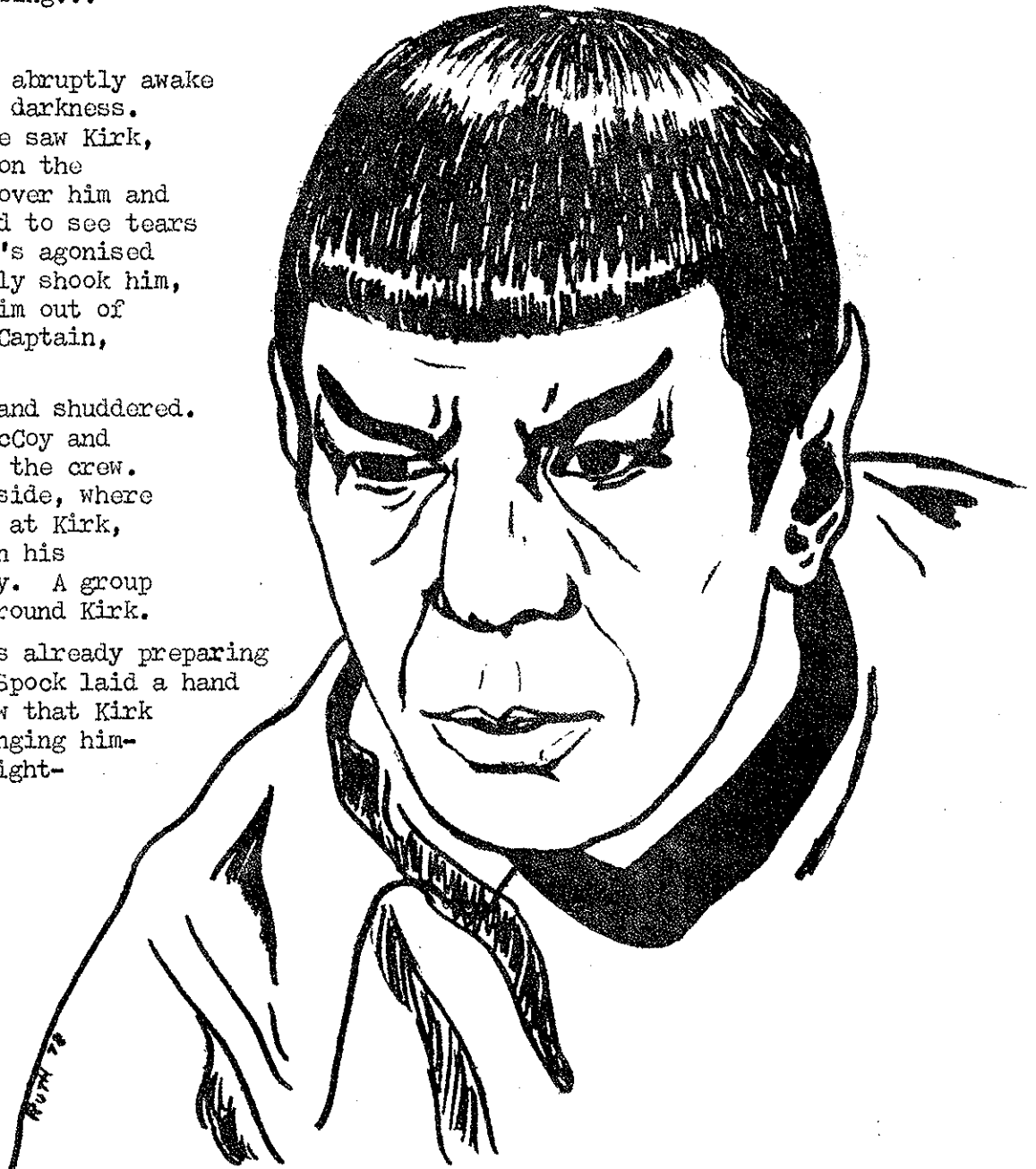
Kirk glanced in despair to his side, where Lienne had been standing. She was no longer there.

He cried out wildly, but there was no answer. He was left, lonely in this alien Earth, to watch in horror while all he knew and loved and lived for was consumed in burning death. An unendurable grief that would last to eternity filled his heart and he dropped to his knees, sobbing...

Spock became abruptly awake and sat up in the darkness. Looking around, he saw Kirk, writhing in pain on the ground. He bent over him and was almost shocked to see tears rolling down Kirk's agonised face. Spock gently shook him, trying to bring him out of it, whispering, "Captain, wake up..."

Kirk moaned and shuddered. His voice awoke McCoy and several others of the crew. McCoy ran to his side, where Spock was staring at Kirk, fighting to retain his Vulcan impassivity. A group began to gather around Kirk.

Dr. McCoy was already preparing a hypo, but when Spock laid a hand on his arm, he saw that Kirk was gradually bringing himself out of the nightmare. McCoy quickly turned to the group of onlookers; one or two of them were near tears.



He gently sent them away and returned his attention to Kirk. He saw the blind eyes still haunted by the memory of the dream.

Then Kirk shook himself awake. Realising the situation, he forced himself to his feet. McCoy and Spock tried to restrain him, but he broke away with such bitter forcefulness that they had to let him go. Then they both followed just behind him, quietly.

Kirk passed the two guards on leaving the camp and they instinctively jumped to attention, but he did not react.

He walked slowly further out into the night, his feet seeming to avoid obstacles as if they could see them. He gulped the cold air deeply, trying to stop the shaking of his limbs. Sweat mixed with the tears on his cheeks and he wiped his eyes awkwardly with his sleeve.

Lienne left Chekov and walked into the forest. After a while, she stopped and waited. Soon a figure appeared from among the trees.

"Lienne?" asked a voice.

"Yes. What happened?"

"Kaan ordered you to be freed and then secretly pursued to your camp. However, that is all taken care of. I volunteered to be your tail." A breeze ruffled the leaves and a streak of moonlight illuminated the features of the young Klingon.

"Good. Now we must follow the beam to its source. I hope we will be able to pursue it accurately enough that it won't take long," said Lienne, her voice betraying a little of her distress.

"Lienne, if we succeed, you will be able to help your Captain," said the Klingon, comfortingly.

She nodded sharply, fighting off dejection. "We will merge our power for extra stability now," she said, and they assumed a pose somewhat like the Vulcan mind meld. After a moment they turned as one towards the distant mountains and set off in that direction.

They had been trying to find where the beam was centred, and who controlled it, for over three hours, when Lienne, becoming more and more agitated, snapped, "We have to find it!"

She ran to the top of the hill. "Please - I know you're there. We need your help!"

There was only an empty silence.

"Lienne, calm down," ventured the Klingon. She turned slowly to him.

"The Captain..." she said miserably. The thought of Kirk spurred her into fury. "At least listen to me!!!"

Again, the stillness of the night.

She began. "One man has already died on this planet. Another - my Captain - has lost his sight and suffers greatly. There will soon be conflict between the two groups of space travellers here. There will be even more bloodshed, suffering, death. You can prevent this. You must! Remove your force field; allow us to return to our ships. While we are trapped here, we have no hope."

The Klingon moved to her side. He hesitated, and then spoke too. "At this very moment, my people are hunting her people. In self defence, her people are planning ways to replace their non-functioning weapons. Hate is increasing; death and destruction are all that can follow, all that can come of your restrictions." He paused, then murmured to Lienne, "This is ridiculous; we don't

even know if it is listening, if it can understand...or even if there is anything to hear us here." He lifted his eyes in hopelessness. Then he frowned and nudged Lienne. She looked up at the sky and gasped. They gazed in amazement as a star dislodged itself and began to soar across the heavens, blazing a vivid blue wake behind it. The strangeness of the sight awed them, but also inspired a little hope. The Klingon put his arm round Lienne.

The alien made contact with them. They were enveloped in a blue, throbbing light and heard in their minds the words - /The aggression was there before I froze your vessels; that was the reason for my actions. I do not want any such contamination in my world. I believe your prediction to be accurate; therefore I will be forced to eliminate your people and their vessels./ Lienne and the Klingon found themselves unable to move as they tried to respond. /But I will spare both of your lives because you are different. You speak of disharmony between your peoples, and yet there is no aggression in either of you towards the other. That is good./

This time, as soon as the alien had finished, they were able to speak. Lienne cried out, "You don't understand - we came here to beg for the release of our fellows, not to secure our own lives. I don't want to live if they die. They are no more evil than we are..."

The young Klingon realised with alarm that her emotional reaction was probably only leading to the alien's deciding to include them as well in the elimination. He interrupted her. "Please consider what I have to say," he told the alien. "If we prevent any further violence, will you release us all? If we prove that love and respect can be demonstrated by our people?"

The alien began again. /I know of love - there is enough proof of that in her words - but why should that be a reason to ignore their aggressiveness?/

Lienne kept silent this time and left it to the Klingon. He answered slowly.

"There have been many differences between our races for a very long time. However, we had come to an agreement; we had a truce, though a delicate one, and it was because of this truce that this conflict arose. It was because their ship entered our territory." He paused. "And that was not their fault," he declared emphatically.

The alien did not reply for many seconds. Finally, they heard, /That is correct. I was the one who caused the ship to move. Perhaps in my attempt to protect myself, I have made matters worse. I did not wish to cause suffering myself, as with your Captain; I only wanted to conceal myself.

I will remove the field of energy if you prove to me that this aggression can be overcome. If not, my original plan will be carried out - inclusive of you both./

Then the blue luminescence disappeared. They stared at each other for a moment and then began to smile. The Klingon took Lienne into his arms and hugged her with relief.

Then they separated and left hurriedly; Lienne to find Kirk, and the Klingon to return to his camp.

Lienne arrived at the forest where their camp was situated. She stopped to regain her breath. She was about to go through into the clearing when she caught sight of Kirk standing staring blindly into the darkness.

She walked up to him. McCoy and Spock, recognising Lienne, exchanged looks; Spock silently beckoned McCoy away, instinctively knowing that Kirk would be safe as long as Lienne was there.

Kirk was still feeling very sensitive about appearing so vulnerable in front of the others. As she approached, he said quietly, "Please leave me alone."



"Captain, could I speak to you, please?"

He recognised the voice and suddenly remembered her unaccountable presence in his delirious dream.

Thinking she was probably still unaware of his situation he began, "Cadet Draquard, I am no longer in command of the landing party."

She said, "I know, sir," to relieve him of the difficulty of having to explain further.

"Did you achieve anything in your search?" he asked. "Where is Ensign Chekov?"

"Yes, sir, I did achieve something...I hope. Ensign Chekov will be returning to camp in the morning." Then she took his face gently in her hands and softly kissed the wounds on his forehead. They slowly faded, as Chekov's bruise had done when she touched it. Kirk was about to protest, but she said quietly, "Don't worry. Just keep still for a while." Then she silently prayed for success as she embarked on the most important and demanding meld of her life, carefully placing her hands over his eyes. Above her glimmered a sapphire star, unnoticed, but involved in the happening...

Hours passed like minutes, with Lienne and Kirk submerged in the trance-like world of the Aerolythan meld. Finally she drew back, exhausted.

Slowly, Kirk's eyes opened. Lienne watched him carefully. He sat very still, then his face took on the look of a small boy as he lifted his gaze and blinked, almost frightened. After a long pause he turned hesitantly to look at her.

"I don't understand," he said huskily.

"Nor do I, really," she answered gently. "It doesn't matter how it happened; it's enough that it did, isn't it?"

Kirk stared at her. Then he smiled. Lienne was surprised to feel her heart jump in response to that smile. Impulsively, he pulled her into his arms. She laughed, and for a brief instant only she almost wished the impulse had lasted a little longer.

Kirk shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it, then laughed with her, finally giving release to his emotions.

The sun was just rising. Kirk noticed for the first time how pleasant this planet really was. The ground was still pale with frozen dew; the sky was a cold, pure blue and the two merged hazily at the horizon. He sighed and grinned at Lienne. "Shall we go back to camp?" he said.

"First I want to make sure Chekov hasn't got lost," she replied, and took Kirk's communicator from his belt.

"But that doesn't work..." He stared in amazement as she established contact with Chekov, who was just as surprised to hear his communicator bleep at him.

Lienne, Chekov and Kirk walked into camp together. Spock and McCoy were sitting next each other, surrounded by the rest of the crew, some still dozing on a friend's shoulder, some conversing quietly as they waited for the morning. They had been like that for the whole night; McCoy frequently getting up to pace anxiously, Spock remaining silent except for an occasional attempt to reassure the Doctor.

Everyone turned as the three appeared. McCoy was immediately aware that Kirk's actions were those of a man using his eyes. He leaped up, his face a mixture of disbelief and joy. Spock followed rapidly behind him, his own expression not betraying the relief in his own mind. The rest of the crew began to scramble hurriedly to their feet.

McCoy was attempting the impossible by trying to say something intelligible. Spock took refuge in his customary, "Fascinating!"

Everybody, especially Spock, seemed to prefer having Kirk leading the party again.

Kirk himself was having no difficulties in resuming his duties. He was questioning Lienne and Chekov about the Klingons, and how the force field was removed, and was contacting the Enterprise at the same time.

It was at that moment that Lienne's Klingon acquaintance ran into the middle of the clearing and came to an abrupt halt at the sight of several phasers suddenly trained on him. Lienne screeched, "Don't fire!" and enforced her words by rushing up to the Klingon and shielding him with her body. There was a moment of tension while everybody stared at her in perplexity. Chekov lowered his phaser, but he felt very concerned about Lienne.

She glanced pleadingly at Kirk, who took the risk, saying, "O.K., everybody, do what the lady says."

Once every phaser was out of the way, Lienne dragged the Klingon to Kirk and told him, "Captain, this is Lt. Mardon. He helped me last night to find the alien controlling the energy beam; in fact, if it hadn't been for him, we would probably all be dead by now."

Kirk tried to puzzle it out, and failed. "Why?" he asked.

"Why did he help? Well, you see, he may look like a pure Klingon, but he comes from Aerolythia. He's half Aerolythian."

"Half Aerolythian, half Klingon? That's a strange combination," commented McCoy.

"Please, Doctor, that's rather a sore subject for him," said Lienne in an undertone. McCoy hurriedly apologised.

"Why are you working with the Klingon Empire?" Kirk asked.

"I had to see what it was like living with my father's people for a while, after having stayed on Aerolythia all my life," he replied. "I have to keep the details of my...parentage...quiet; the Klingons probably wouldn't accept me if they knew the truth. And sometimes, where Klingon policy conflicts with my own judgement, I have to take the risk of being found out - like now. Commander Kaan has decided to confront you here on the planet, and he will find your camp very soon. I came here to warn you, because..." He stopped suddenly and looked at Lienne.

She nodded. "I sense them approaching too. You'd better get out of here."

Lienne then quickly explained to Kirk the alien's conditions for releasing them. Kirk remembered the crewman they had already lost to the Klingons, but he realised that this time he would have to control his bitterness. The dead were dead, and avenging their deaths would not bring them back; only risk the lives of others in this case. He hailed Scotty, and told him to stand by.

Kirk took only McCoy, Spock and Lienne with him to meet the Klingons, and they went unarmed.

Commander Kaan was delighted. He had thought it would be easy, but never this easy. He decided not to kill them all straight away, and enquired about Kirk's health. Kirk answered him shortly. The Klingon who had brought the report about Kirk's blindness cringed as the Commander turned to glance at him. Kaan returned his attention to the Federation party and began. "I am sorry it should end this way..."

Lienne strode up to him and declared, "We propose a peaceful agreement." He ignored her words, but in amused recognition, pulled her to him and kissed her hard.

Spock had to prevent Kirk and McCoy from responding, but Lienne, once released from Kaan's grip, slapped him across the face so hard that he stumbled backwards. He looked astonished and then began to roar with laughter.

Kirk decided to stop Lienne going too far, and approached Kaan himself, quietly pushing her back to McCoy and Spock.

"Kaan, I want to talk peace with you," he said. Kaan looked at him and

stopped laughing.

"Peace? You were the ones who violated the treaty."

Mardon, who had somehow managed to rejoin the Klingon party without his absence being suspected, stepped forward. "Sir, you are aware that something was at first preventing our electrical equipment from functioning on this planet?" he said. "Well, this force was what caused the Federation ship to pass our boundaries."

"How do you know?" shot back the Commander.

"Because, sir, last night I encountered the inhabitant of this planet who was producing the energy field. With some help, I managed to secure our release from the alien - on one condition. That no violence take place between us and the Humans. Besides, you yourself cannot believe that even a Human would deliberately break the treaty without any reason, and then immediately wish to renew it. It makes little sense.

Kaan glared at him. "What proof can you give me of this meeting?"

"He has no proof, but if you want to live, you'd better believe him," interjected Lienne.

Kaan ignored her remark again and turned to his First Officer. "Is he to be trusted? He is a Klingon - one of my men." He paused and added, "It would not be much of a victory; even if we kill Kirk, the Enterprise is now free to destroy my ship. I do not wish to spend the rest of my days on this planet." He made up his mind. "Kirk, I have decided to forgive your trespass this once." He shook Kirk's hand.

Kirk quietly overlooked the Klingon's patronising air, and hid the memory of his crewman's death behind his grin of acknowledgement.

They were all happy to watch the transporter room of the Enterprise appear around them as they beamed up. Scotty welcomed them with delighted relief. Kirk made a final check around the bridge for the night and on the way back to his cabin he encountered Lienne. He wished her goodnight and was about to continue on his way when he hesitated and said, "Miss Draquard, there's something I'm still not sure about. That night in the camp I dreamed..."

"I know." She smiled. "I was trying to communicate with you telepathically, but your mind was too delirious for me to be successful."

"I see," said Kirk. Then he noticed a figure come around the corner and quickly skid to a stop on catching sight of Kirk. "Goodnight, Miss Draquard," Kirk said helpfully. "I think Ensign Chekov just might have something to say to you." Raising his voice as he walked off, he said, "Handle her carefully, Chekov. She has just officially become part of the crew of the Enterprise. Starfleet just answered my recommendation for her promotion."

He left Lienne dumbfounded with delight.

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KIRK: Hey, Spock, is the library computer repaired yet?

SPOCK: No, Captain; but what is it you wish to know?

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MCCOY: Did you take Sulu's temperature?

CHAPLAIN: No; is it missing?

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CHEKOV: My grandfather was a Pole.

SULU: North or South?

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THE DOOMSDAY MACHINE - PROLOGUE by Ian Pearse

Captain's Log, Stardate 4201.4. We are due to carry out routine medical checks on members of the survey team on planet five of system L-370, On arrival in the system, we discovered that the planets had all been reduced to rubble. We have no explanation as yet, and are investigating.

Commodore Matt Decker, Captain of the USS Constellation, turned to his Science Officer, Tony Masada. "Well, Tony, anything to add?"

Tony scratched his beard, a sign that he was thinking hard. "Only a supernova could cause damage like that, and the sun is okay. No excess radiation, no large meteor showers, no sign of anything that might have done it. Just junk."

Decker paused, digesting the information. Then he moved to the communications officer, Lt. Sue James. "Lieutenant, contact Starfleet. Inform them of the situation, tell them we are conducting a search of the sector."

"Aye, aye, sir." She turned to her console and began composing the message.

"Mr. Ryder."

The navigator looked round.

"Plot a spiral search pattern centred on the sun of this system, increasing by two light years each loop. Execute when ready."

Ryder nodded, not feeling too confident. It was a long time since he'd done such a manoeuvre. "Yes, sir."

"Sir?" Decker reacted to the worry in Lt. James' voice. He moved to stand by her console. "Subspace frequencies are being disrupted by heavy interference. I can't make Starfleet understand our message."

"Set up an automatic transmission, Lieutenant. Have it repeat the message until Starfleet understands our message."

"Yes, sir."

Masada interrupted before Decker could continue. "Sir, long range scan of system L-371 shows it is in the same condition as this one!"

Decker reacted swiftly. "Sound yellow alert. Deflectors up. Masada, try and get a scan of the next system, and see if it's still intact. Helm, ahead warp factor three."

Captain's Log, Stardate 4201.9. Entering system L-372. Sensor sweep reveals the same rubble and debris as the last three systems. Subspace interference is now very high. Contact with Starfleet has been severed. We are proceeding to the next system.

Captain's Log, Stardate 4202.1 Exceptionally heavy subspace interference still prevents our contacting Starfleet to inform them of the destroyed solar systems we have encountered. We are now entering system L-374. Science Officer Masada reports the fourth planet seems to be breaking up. We are going to investigate.

"Sir!" The tone of Masada's voice caused everyone on the bridge to look round in alarm. "Sensors show a large object over the fourth planet. It seems to be...cutting it up!"

"Red Alert! Lt. James, sound Battle Stations." Decker punched his intercom. "Attention all hands! This is the Captain. An unidentified object is attacking the fourth planet of this system. We are going to investigate."



As the call to Battle Stations went out, the bridge crew studied the screen. The elevator doors whooshed open and the relief personnel piled out to take up their positions.

Decker moved to stand behind the helmsman. "Mr. Taylor, alert the phaser crews. Mr. Ryder, plot a course to take us in to five hundred kilometres from the object." He crossed the bridge to the communications console. "Lt. James, open a channel to that object. Try and raise its crew, if it has one." He moved back to his chair and studied the screen. It showed an expanding view of the fourth planet and the object hovering over it. As he watched, a bright blue pencil of light shot from the object and hit the planet. The planet visibly trembled and huge chunks flew off in all directions.

"Anti-proton beam," explained Masada, hunching over his scanner. "The purest I've ever seen! That thing must generate a tremendous amount of power to keep it that way."

Decker grunted an acknowledgement and continued watching the screen. The rubble from the planet was slowly moving towards the object, as if being reeled in. Evidently a tractor beam was in use.

"Mr. Taylor, can we get a better view of that thing?"

"I think so." He increased the magnification. The object seemed to zoom towards the viewers. It was now seen as basically cylindrical, tapering towards one end. The wide, open, end - from which the beam had come - was facing the planet. The rubble could be seen to be going in.

Decker frowned. "Is it...digesting that?"

Masada shrugged. "Could be, though how is beyond me." He turned back to his scanner. After a while, he said, "Whatever that thing is, it's big. Reads as just over 3.2 kilometres long, mass...7253 million metric tonnes."

Someone gave a low whistle. Masada continued. "I cannot get readings of the object's interior - possibly the hull is blocking my scans. I do detect an unusually high energy level."

Lt. James gave up trying to contact the thing. "Sir, no response from the object. Subspace interference incredibly high."

Decker didn't like that one bit.

Taylor broke the ensuing silence. "Now in phaser range."

Decker came to a decision. "Reduce speed. Lock phasers on target - narrow fire angle."

"Phasers locked on, sir. Narrow angle. Range 437 miles."

"Fire phasers!"

The twin beams lanced out, catching the object squarely amidships. "Got him!" yelled Taylor.

Masada turned from his scanner, disbelief on his face. "No effect at all!"

Decker swung round to stare at Masada, unwilling to believe what he had heard. "Close in, Mr. Taylor. Continue firing."

The Constellation closed rapidly on the enormous object, phasers hitting it repeatedly, but to no avail.

"Range 100 kilometres, closing..."

Again and again the Constellation struck, and again and again the beams bounced off.

Decker knew when he was beaten - for the moment, at least. "Cease firing. Take us out to 300 miles." He turned to Masada. "Tony, what if..."

"Sir, look!" Taylor's cry cut across his sentence. He spun round. The object was turning to face them. The open maw now plainly visible was big enough

to swallow ten starships and still leave a gap round the edge...

"Helm, hard about! Get us clear! Engineering, emergency power to the shields - now!" Decker could guess what was coming.

And it did. The blue beam fired again. The Constellation bucked, lights went out, flickered on, and went off again. People tumbled across the deck as the ship rolled. At last the helm change took effect and the image of the object began to slide across and off the screen. The ship steadied, the lights came up.

Smoke drifted from one of the bridge consoles. Sparks flew from another, dying as the cut-offs came into effect. People picked themselves up off the floor and staggered to their chairs, Masada wiping blood from his eye.

Decker surveyed the bridge and turned to Lt. James. "Damage report, as soon as you can."

She nodded weakly. A large bruise was coming up on her temple.

"Helm, what's our position?"

"Heading away from the object, sir. Range, twenty thousand kilometres, course 114 mark 6."

A low mutter became audible as the damage reports began to come in. Decker crossed to Masada. "How about the intruder? What's it doing?"

Masada studied his scanner for a while, then straightened. "It's just carrying on. We don't seem to have damaged it."

Decker swore quietly. All that effort and risk, for nothing.

"Sir, damage reports are now complete." Lt. James had apparently recovered her poise. Decker shot her a questioning glance. "Damage reports from all decks. No casualties, although several crewmen are reported injured. Hull breached, Deck 6, Section 11 - damage party sealing it now. Photon torpedo room reports heavy damage, photon torpedo tubes inoperable. Engineering reports damaged but operational; power levels are down by 39%. The swimming pool is leaking into the deck below."

The last report elicited chuckles and broad grins from the bridge crew.

"That's all, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Continue trying to raise Starfleet."

With the photon torpedos out, the ship's heaviest armament was out. Damn!

"Helm, come about. Head for the object, but slowly - we don't want to attract its attention. Stand by on phasers." He sat back in his chair and opened the intercom. "Engineering, how will our deflectors stand up to another attack?"

"Barely, sir. The generators are badly strained as it is. If we get hit again there's no telling what they'll do."

"Then we'd better get in a position where we can't get hit. Mr. Ryder, plot a course that will bring us in behind the object."

He turned to the science console, then sprinted across to it. "Masada? Are you all right?"

There was no answer.

Masada had slumped across the console, his head bleeding. Decker turned. "Get a medic up here on the double!"

He gently lifted Masada's head off the console. There was a large gash down the side of his head that was bleeding copiously. His shoulder was disfigured, as if it had been put out of joint. Decker carefully leaned him back against his chair.

A call from Ryder reminded him that he had other things to worry about.  
"Course laid in, sir."

"Execute. Warp factor 0.1."

The elevator doors opened and a nurse stepped out. She looked around. Decker called, "Nurse, over here." She quickly joined him and immediately began examining Masada's head and shoulder. "What are the changes that he can carry on working?"

The nurse looked up and said, "Slim, I'm afraid. He's going to need thorough treatment for that arm."

Decker nodded and moved back to his chair. The screen showed the object continuing to reduce the planet to rubble. As he watched, Decker saw the planet explode as the object's beam sliced through its crust to the molten core.

"Slowly, Mr. Taylor - we don't want to alert it to our presence."

The Constellation crept forward, her crew alert for any sudden moves. The nurse moved forward to stand beside Decker's chair. "Mr. Masada will have to go to sickbay for further treatment."

"But I need him here!"

The nurse refused to be intimidated. "I'm sorry, sir, but he's in no fit state to continue working."

Decker knew she was right. Masada needed treatment badly. "Okay, take him down. Let me know when he's fit."

"Yes, sir." One of the guards helped her walk Masada to the elevator.

Decker looked around. "Mr. Taylor, take over the science station."

Taylor quickly vacated his seat, which was taken over by one of the reliefs, who swiftly studied the board. "Range, 900 miles, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Douglas. Take us in to 600 miles, and keep us away from the front end."

The Constellation cautiously closed on the huge object. Either it hadn't detected them, or it wasn't concerned; either way, it didn't react.

"Range 600 miles, sir."

"Fire phasers!"

Again the phaser beams struck. As before, there was no effect.

Taylor turned from the scanner hood. "I don't think we will damage it this way, sir. The thing's outer skin is too dense!"

Decker ignored him. "Parallel course. Continue firing."

The Constellation moved above the object, along its length, raking it with phaser fire. Taylor's voice echoed their frustration. "The phasers are having no effect whatsoever."

It was the helmsman's turn to call out. "Sir, we're getting rather near the front of the thing."

Decker heeded the warning. "Helm, hard about. Come to 316 mark 10. Take us out to 12,000 miles."

As the Constellation began to turn, the object reacted. Turning surprisingly swiftly, its open maw came to bear on the fleeing ship. Decker barely had time to shout, "Brace yourselves!" before the blue beam struck again. This time the Constellation did more than buck. She rolled heavily, at the same time pitching violently backwards. The ship was filled with the sound of screeching metal. On the bridge, people were thrown out of seats and tossed back and forth across the deck.

Panels sparked and exploded and all the lights blacked out. In one of the atmospheric regeneration plants, a piece of heavy machinery tore loose from its mountings and careered across the deck, smashing into the adjacent corridor. As the ship rolled the other way, it hurtled back the way it came, crashed through the wall and out into space. Instantly a gale sprang up as the atmosphere rushed out, continuing until the section was automatically sealed off. Elsewhere, the hull split as overworked metal, strained beyond its design limits, buckled and tore. The beam struck again. Down in Engineering, a technician stared horrified as energy flow gauges swung sharply into the danger zone and then swung back as the cutouts tripped. The main warp controls blew, sending technicians and sparks across the deck. Flames began to billow out, and the fire alarms joined those already ringing in other parts of the ship. Down in the shuttlecraft hangar, one of the ship's shuttlecraft came loose from its moorings and plunged across the bay, crashing into its neighbour before it tore a hole in the bulkhead and tumbled into space. Having knocked the Constellation out of its range, the object ignored it, and moved out into the further reaches of the solar system, where several planets remained untouched. Slowly the Constellation stopped its wild gyrating. Inside, the emergency lighting came on, dimmed, then struggled back to full power.

On the bridge, chaos reigned. Half of the consoles were damaged beyond recognition; one was burning, sending clouds of smoke into the air. Bodies were sprawled everywhere. Eventually, one of them began to stir. Decker sat upright, rubbing his head and surveying the damage. The bridge was clearly a write-off. His ears caught the high-pitched whistle that meant a slow leak.

Other bodies began to move as he stood up. He moved around the bridge, shaking the sprawling figures. When he came across Taylor, he stopped. The young helmsman's head lay on the deck, twisted at a strange angle to the rest of his body. Decker realised that he had a broken neck.

Decker continued round the bridge, assisting people to their feet and checking the damage. At last the survivors were standing up, or being held up. Decker addressed them.

"We must evacuate the bridge. I intend to go to the emergency bridge and run the ship from there. I want two people to come with me."

James and Ryder stepped forward. Decker nodded. "As for the rest of you, those who need it go to sickbay. The others try to find out what our damage status is, and report back to me. Let's go."

They all got into the elevator, which was, miraculously, still working, and headed down. After dropping off the injured, Decker, James and Ryder continued on to the emergency bridge. On entering, they could see that things were in fairly good shape. They went to various consoles and began the power-up sequence. Decker tried the intercom.

"This is the Captain speaking. Anyone who can hear me, report your status to the emergency bridge. I repeat, anyone who can hear me, report your status."

As the damage reports came in, Decker began to appreciate the state of the Constellation. The warp drive was useless. Decks 1 through 6 were mostly uninhabitable; the remainder of the primary hull wasn't much better off. The sensors were badly damaged, as were the phasers, but still operational at much reduced range. Life support systems were damaged but working, though for how much longer was anyone's guess. Casualties were remarkably light. Navigation systems were only just working, and helm controls were pretty unreliable, though both were under repair. So was the impulse drive. Transporters were partially disabled, communications not much better. The hull had been breached in a dozen places and seriously weakened in a dozen more. The warp nacelles were dead - apparently the anti-matter was no longer active. There was no sign, as far as the damaged sensors could tell, of the cause of the trouble. Decker hoped it had gone on to the next system. If it hadn't, there was nothing they could do about it.

He came to a difficult decision, and opened the intercom. "This is the Captain speaking. Our ship is seriously damaged and will not support us for much



longer. The third planet of this system is undamaged and has a breathable atmosphere. The object we were pursuing has moved away. I intend to attempt to call Starfleet and then beam us down to the third planet. The ship will stay in a high orbit, in case it explodes, and will act as a distress beacon. Begin Abandon Ship procedure. Captain out."

He slumped back into his chair. This was it. He was about to lose his command. But what else could he do? He'd tried everything he could think of...

His thoughts were interrupted by Ryder's quiet voice. "Sir, we have limited subspace capability."

Decker looked up, trying to disguise the look of utter defeat on his face. "Record a distress signal. Broadcast it on all frequencies, and set it to repeat at short intervals. Then get down the transporter room. That goes for both of you."

Ryder opened his mouth to protest, but Decker cut him off. "That's an order, Mister."

Ryder nodded grimly. "Yes, sir."

As Ryder and James left, Decker began to plot a course for the third planet and engaged the impulse drive. The Constellation limped forward to her last orbit.

Two hours later, Decker was the last person left aboard. He wandered along the empty corridors, making a final check to see that everyone had beamed down. He was saddened at the thought that the ship he had commanded for so long would now be totally deserted. He looked about for one last time, tears in his eyes, and headed for the transporter room. As he set the controls, he hoped that he could have another crack at the thing that had brought his ship and crew to this. He walked towards the pad. Suddenly the ship rocked. Decker froze, horrified, then turned and headed for the emergency bridge at a fast run. Behind him, the transporter patiently activated itself and beamed an empty cylinder of air down to the planet's surface. The ship lurched again, and flames blossomed out from the console as the hard-pressed circuits finally gave up the ghost.

On the emergency bridge, the screen revealed the approaching object. Decker glanced at the communications panel. It was still sending the pre-recorded message. The ship's disaster beacon had also been triggered. It didn't matter. Turning to the phaser controls, Decker locked them on target with trembling fingers. The object now turned to face the planet, a manoeuvre that also brought it to bear on the Constellation. A wild gleam filled Decker's eyes as he hit the firing button.

"I've got you now!"

The firing systems, already overloaded, failed. The phasers fired, and locked, firing constantly. Decker watched in horror as the energy levels dropped to zero. The phasers cut out, and the circuits reset themselves. The blue beam lanced out again, the outer edge catching the Constellation. The ship lurched and shuddered; most of the remaining circuits gave out under the strain, and Decker was flung backwards into a chair. In his semi-conscious state, he imagined he could hear the screams of his men on the planet below, begging him for help as the planet began to break up. Finally, mercifully, Decker blacked out.

The Constellation, its orbit lock broken, drifted away from the holocaust unmolested, almost lifeless, its beacon patiently sending its final communication.

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STOREKEEPER: That new uniform fits you like a glove.

KIRK: Can't you find me one that fits like a uniform?

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THE UNDERSTANDING by L.M.Coles

A faint snore filtered through the background hum of air-conditioning and life support, to loiter at the edge of his senses.

He ignored the intrusion.

Switching schematics briskly, he selected a more promising area for his attention, and proceeded to study and then commit to memory those facts which offered potential.

The conference on Babel III had proved to be both interesting and beneficial. Indeed, even the good Doctor had found the seven days enlightening in some respects - although Spock somehow felt McCoy's benefits differed vastly from his own, in that they came in the form of pretty girls and long-lost drinking partners. It would be most interesting to read the Doctor's report upon their return to the Enterprise...

A further snore drifted across the cabin, followed by a muffled grunt and general fidgeting of limbs. Spock released his mind from the viewer and turned to follow the distraction. The cause of the disturbance lay precariously perched on a lounge...arms loosely folded...legs sprawling...and head oddly angled as it perched dangerously at the chair's edge.

How these Humans managed to rest in such ridiculous positions never failed to amaze him. Indeed, this whole attitude of bodily abuse was totally beyond him.

It was almost ritualistic from beginning to end. Firstly, the consumption of vast quantities of alcohol in order to achieve a state of euphoria, followed by a condition which could only be described as total collapse in the most convenient of areas - the latter being where the body was subjected to unnecessary contortions in an attempt to 'sleep off' the effects the alcohol was originally intended for! Totally illogical. He would never understand it.

It was to this final stage of behaviour that Spock was now a witness - and he realised only too well the next sequence of events...headaches...irritability...and an even shorter than usual temper. So, in an attempt to try and eliminate at least one further complication in the return to normality, Spock decided to accept any consequences and act.

"Dr. McCoy?" He shook a protruding shoulder and received a grunt for his pains. He tried again - a little harder.

"Dr. McCoy...if you continue to lie in this position your sterno-mastoid will become over-extended, resulting in discomfort to yourself."

An arm swept dangerously near to his head as it careered upwards in an erratic fashion. "Owww! My neck's twisted!"

"I believe, Doctor, I have just stated that," came the Vulcan's flat statement.

Massaging the painful spot, the doctor sent a menacing glare in Spock's general direction. "Humph...damn know-all! What the hell d'ya wake me for anyway? Someone poisoned the plomeek soup?" The shout brought its own retribution. "Ahhh...my aching head..." He shifted cautiously, lowering his voice to a steady mumble. "Damn stupid seating arrangement aboard this ship...can't even get a decent sleep in peace..." He tried to unkink his back and flinched. "Why didn't you order us a proper cabin, Spock? One with BEDS, for instance?? We're not all like you, ya know! Some of us actually like to SLEEP...not close down circuits for half an hour!"

Spock sighed and lifted his eyes wearily. "Dr. McCoy. In the first place, the seating aboard this vessel is perfectly adequate for humanoids - if used correctly. And secondly, if you and the Captain had not insisted upon attending that 'party' last evening, we would not have had to resort to this cargo transporter in order to rendezvous with the Enterprise 6.72 days from now.

As for my 'closing down' of circuits', surely my frequent, supposedly medical

examinations have familiarised you sufficiently with my cerebral structure by now, for you to realise..."

"All right...all right...you've made your point..." McCoy cradled his head gingerly. "Please, Spock, just let me die in peace... Go chat up some computer or annoy Jim..." Two bloodshot eyes peered around carefully. "...Hey? Where is Jim anyway? I thought he was here sleeping..."

"The Captain felt in need of a little exercise."

"EXERCISE!" exclaimed McCoy, his head almost exploding. "I thought he'd had enough of that last night! Did you see that well-put-together biologist he was dancing with...what was her name...Judy? Yes, Judy something-or-other..." McCoy paused, a sly look appearing on his face. "Course, you wouldn't have noticed her if she'd come in naked!"

Spock chose to ignore the remark.

McCoy shrugged casually at his minor defeat, and leaned back, his eyes sparkling with male appreciation. Somehow, his headache was instantly dismissed as he recalled the heavenly vision. "Ummmm...now she can teach me a thing or two about biology...any - time - she - wants..."

Spock arched an eyebrow dramatically and was about to comment on this apparent Human obsession with the opposite sex, when the door burst open, spilling forth a very irate - and hung-over - James T. Kirk.

"Spock! I want this ship reported! Struck off! Decommissioned!"

"Something wrong, Captain?" asked Spock calmly as one area of the deck came under assault from stomping boots.

"Wrong? WRONG? NOOOOO, nothing's wrong! Whatever made you think there was something wrong?" The assault increased. "I can't get a decent meal! Can't take a shower! I can't even go to the john without those morons breathing down my neck!" His anger rose another notch. "And do you know what they class me as? What they've actually got me down as? In black and white?"

Spock opened his mouth to reply.

"Don't answer that!" The pointed finger held its own warning. "I'll tell you what they call me...Unauthorized - excess - baggage. ME! A Starship Commander! EXCESS BAGGAGE! I'll show them who's unauthorized..."

McCoy, who was beginning to see the funny side of the whole affair, eased himself up slowly, and began to cross the cabin to join his friend. "Never mind, Jim...worse things happen at sea - or so they tell me. Here - let me give you something for your hangover and - "

"Hangover! Hangover! Who said I had a hangover?"

McCoy eased back seeing the dangerous glint in his friend's eye.

"OHOOH yes...and whilst we're on the subject of drinking," Kirk began deliberately, "it's all your fault we're aboard this...this wreck in the first place!"

"MY fault!" came the exclamation. "How in hell's name can it be my fault? You're the one who insisted on going to that party; and if little Miss Blue-eyes hadn't given you that 'come on over to my place' look, we wouldn't be - "

"There's no need to bring Judy into this! She has nothing to do with it!"

"Humph! In a pig's eye!" snorted McCoy, and walked over to where his baggage lay to collect his medical pouch. "Spock? You seen the medikit anywhere?" He rummaged unsystematically.

"Unfortunately, no, Doctor, as it appears you both require sedating if I am to continue my work uninterrupted."

Kirk did a double take, then looked across at the dumbfounded face of McCoy. His expression was so priceless that Kirk could not help but burst out laughing. Walking across the deck, he reached his companion and slapped him playfully on the

back. "C'mon, Bones, let's find those magic pills of yours and leave this..." His sentence died prematurely as the cabin lighting dimmed noticeably.

"What was that?" questioned McCoy.

Kirk, instantly alert, watched as his Vulcan friend raised his head and frowned. "Spock? Lithium crystals?"

"Possible, Captain. However, Lithium power reduction is usually compensated for within a short while."

"Deflector shields?"

"More probable, sir. Cargo vessels have the capability of defence, but not as a primary function. Power to ship's life support would therefore be most vulnerable if under attack."

The Human took this last statement as his signal to act. He had simply been waiting for Spock's confirmation before making his move. "Let's go take a look. I don't like the idea of our being termed 'vulnerable'." He made for the door, indicating that the Vulcan should follow. As he passed the nearby desk, the ship's stability shifted violently under the effects of the unknown danger. Caught off balance, Kirk reached for a handhold - missed - and fell heavily against the desk, slamming his head off the sharp-angled viewer.

Spock, nearer the door, managed to retain his feet at the expense of a bruised shoulder, and quickly crossed the deck to the crumpled figure. The Captain was out cold; a nasty laceration tracking upwards above his left ear. Already, his hair was sticky with blood as it pumped out steadily from the cut, making it difficult to determine its severity.

Aware that McCoy had not yet appeared on the scene, Spock peered into the dimness in time to see the Surgeon rising dazed and disorientated from behind a lounge.

"Are you uninjured, Doctor?" The urgency within the words jolted McCoy, setting off alarm bells in his fuzzy brain.

"Yes...I think so. Why? What's wrong?" He shook his head to clear the last of the foginess and stumbled out.

"The Captain has..."

Reaching them before Spock had the chance to finish, McCoy pushed the Vulcan aside roughly and knelt down. "Let me see..." He checked the unconscious form quickly, and efficiently, mentally ticking off his findings. He glanced up, his voice firm. "Fetch the medikit, Spock, I want to make sure there's no fracture here."

"Doctor, as I have already stated, I do not know where the medikit is. It is usually your responsibility." He eyed McCoy stoically.

"Dammit, Spock, I gave it to you last night! You must have it!" The accusation shouted into the stillness.

"Doctor, I am not in the habit of lying..." He paused before finishing quietly "...Especially where the Captain's life is concerned."

McCoy swallowed painfully. "Spock...I...I'm sorry. I know you wouldn't deliberately..." His words were interrupted.

"May I suggest you tend the Captain to the best of your ability in the circumstances, whilst I investigate the present crisis." The Vulcan stood, his lean frame hovering for a few seconds before he moved towards the door. As the aperture slid open, McCoy called out softly.

"Spock." The black silken head turned. "Watch yourself." Dark eyes softened and then he was gone.

The slow heavy breathing of an unconscious man punctuated the stillness with



the predictability of a ticking clock. McCoy checked his patient for the umpteenth time, and for the umpteenth time sat back on his heels and waited.

Where in God's name was Spock? He'd been gone for hours! And what was happening? Apart from one slight jolt and a further reduction in lighting, the ship was beginning to sound - and feel - like the proverbial tomb.

He had thought to take a look himself, but then decided it would be foolish and irresponsible to leave Jim. Besides, he was in enough trouble over the missing medikit without adding to their problems.

A change in the sound of respiration pulled McCoy away from his indecisiveness and guilt. Kirk was beginning to come round, and with the return to consciousness came all the anxieties of treating a head injury without medical aids.

"Jim? Jim, can you hear me?"

Kirk moaned softly, and stirred. McCoy held him steadily, talking to him all the time. "Try and lie still, Jim...if you move around too much or try to sit up you'll feel sick and giddy..." The fidgeting eased somewhat as the Captain opened his eyes warily.

"Bones?" He blinked and lifted a hand to his head. "What...what happened? My head feels about to explode..." He struggled to sit up. "OOohh." The cabin somersaulted, along with his stomach. "I think I'll lie down..."

"I told you to do that in the first place! But oh, no! You've always got to try and do the impossible." He softened his tone, regretting he'd jumped so at his friend's stubbornness. "Now lie still and take deep breaths...it'll stop you feeling sick." He waited a few minutes. "How d'ya feel now?"

"Not so bad...at least the room's stopped spinning..." Kirk gazed slowly around. "Where's Spock?"

McCoy looked worriedly at the door. "Wish I knew. He's been gone too long for my liking..."

Sensing the concern immediately spurred Kirk into action. "Help me up! Exactly how long's he been gone?" The words came fast and firm, but his actions were anything but as the cabin revolved once again. McCoy, his mind momentarily distracted by thinking of Spock, displayed anger and concern as he turned back.

"Jim! For God's sake lie still! You could have a serious head injury there! I won't have you charging around the place damaging yourself further! Now lie down and..."

"Bones! He could be in trouble...hurt...anything." Kirk continued to struggle against the restraining hands.

"Dammit, Jim! Don't you think I haven't thought of all those things myself?" The verbal explosion shook Kirk back into the world of reality, from what had been a hysterical reaction from his aching head. McCoy turned away, ashamed of his anger.

"I...I'm sorry, Bones. I just wasn't thinking straight..." He reached out to touch the tense arm. "Bones?" The warm blue eyes turned back to meet his.

"Yeah, I know...and I'm sorry too - I didn't mean to go off at you like that. Guess I've just got a soft spot for certain First Officers as well as Starship Captains."

"Guess so, Bones." Kirk gave a half smile which turned into a wince as pain shot through his skull. Immediately, McCoy the Doctor came into play, as he eased his patient into a more comfortable position.

"Is the pain really bad, Jim? Here, let me take another look at that cut..."

"No, no." Kirk fended off the caring hands. "It's all right, honestly." He closed his eyes and tried to think.

The minutes passed uncounted, with only the eerie dimness to keep them company.

Kirk shifted restlessly, alerting McCoy. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm all right..." More seconds drifted away. "Bones...?"

"Umm?"

"If I promised to lie here quietly, and not move under any circumstances... would you go and see if you can find Spock?"

"Jim, I can't leave you! What if something happens?"

"Nothing'll happen, Bones...not if I stay right here... Now come on - please say you'll go."

McCoy fidgeted with indecision. Spock could be in real trouble by now...it had been a long time. But what of Jim? He did appear to be stable...but stable enough to be left? What to do? He met the anxious gaze of his friend for the briefest of moments.

"All right, I'll go." He held up his hand to stop the inevitable flood of words. "But you must stay right here, Jim. Even if it seems I'm gone a long time - is that clear?"

"Yeah, I promise. Now get going - you're wasting time."

McCoy stood up to leave. "Bones - be careful, won't you? Don't take any changes and..."

"Yes, I know - don't pick up any strange women on the way. You sound just like my old Mother! Well, I'm a big boy now, and I can take care of myself." He smiled warmly, the rugged features softening in the dim light. "I'll try not to be too long... Don't move about too much." Cautiously he looked out into the deserted corridor, gave one final wave and disappeared.

A tongue of fire was licking deep into his lungs, burning out the wisps of air which fought so hard to keep him alive. His chest felt raw and dry as it heaved to draw in the few precious molecules of oxygen that danced within the all-consuming inferno.

He must be dying!

But if this were true, he so wanted it to be over soon... He had never imagined death to be such an agonising journey. Where was the peace, the calm, the gentlenesssss.....

Then he saw the darkness...reaching out for him...offering the relief and solitude of absolute oblivion...an end to his suffering... He longed to enter... it would be so easy now...one final effort and then he could let go the ties which held him to this mortal life...give in to the creeping paralysis and be freeee... let go...freeeee..let goooo....

With a jolt of agony his lungs were forced to expand as hot, moist air drove fiercely downwards. He felt the pressure of something covering his lips and then the white-hot agony returned, driving air deep into his tortured airways.

He was about to protest when his horizon shifted and he felt himself hauled unwillingly to his feet. Unstable knees buckled and the surroundings spun crazily about his head. He tried to yell out, but all that escaped was a muffled groan as his body slid over the firmness of muscle and bone.

Then he was moving...but so was the darkness, sweeping over him like a black shadow...smothering him tenderly as it beckoned and called to him...let go... let go.....

Something wet, something warm and wet trickled into his mouth, seeping down into his parched throat. He attempted to swallow, miscalculated and coughed painfully as the liquid tried to enter his lungs. The pain revived him somewhat, causing two weary eyes to open.

The sun was blazing overhead and yet something was blocking the light. His eyelids fell back... it was too much of an effort to stay awake.

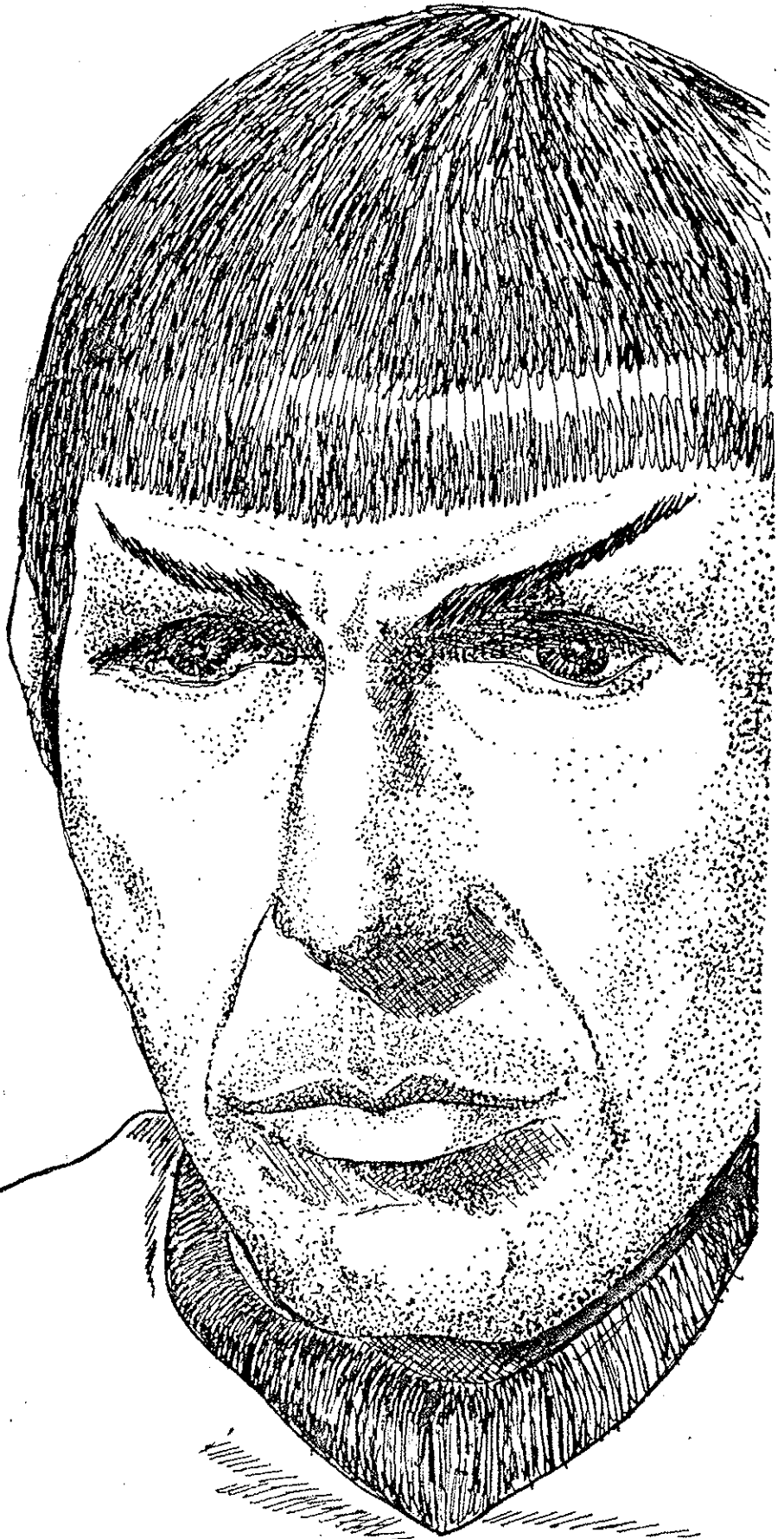
The liquid came again...slowly, carefully. This time he managed to get it down the right way, and found himself thirsting for more. A voice called - distant but familiar. Only he couldn't be bothered to listen... it was all too much of an effort when all he wanted to do was sleep...finish his drink and sleep...

"McCoy! Leonard! Can you hear me, Leonard?" The insistant voice grew loud once more, accompanied this time by a gentle shaking. Concentrating really hard, McCoy opened his eyes to the light and kept them open.

"S...Spock?" A dark shape dissolved before re-focusing into a recognisable figure.

"Doctor...how are you feeling?"

"Like I've been roasted alongside the Thanksgiving Day turkey..." McCoy shifted cautiously, trying to ease himself into an upright position.



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A muffled explosion off to the right drew his attention. "What...what was that?" he murmured absently, so ill was he feeling. Spock glanced away in the direction of the sound.

"Unfortunately, THAT was the difference between our leaving here in the near future - or perhaps not at all..."

"...Eh? Spock, what are you going on about; I'm in no mood for guessing games of riddles...in fact, I'm feeling bloody lousy." The mumbling came to an abrupt halt. "Spock! We're not aboard ship! And...and...where's Jim?" Alarm sprang into his now wide awake features as he searched the area frantically. Drawn as if by magnetism, he watched the billowing clouds of smoke stream up towards the sky. Another explosion ripped through the scene, sending tongues of flame thirty...forty feet into the air.

"My God! He's...he's not in that! Spock!" He grabbed the Vulcan roughly. "SPOCK! Tell me he's not in there! TELL ME!"

A sharp sound of flesh on flesh broke the nightmare as McCoy felt rather than saw the blow which returned him from the brink of hysteria.

"McCoy!" The Vulcan's stern expression forced order into the panic raging through his mind. "No-one is in the wreckage - least of all, Jim."

Releasing his hold on Spock's tunic, the Human closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh. Having recovered more control, he was immediately ashamed at his outburst. With bowed head, he murmured a sheepish apology. "Forgive me, Spock... for a minute there I seemed to lose my head. It won't happen again." He looked up slowly. "...And...thank you for saving my life."

"Logic requires no thanks, Doctor," came the even reply as Spock stood to survey their new environment. "I have told you this on repeated occasions, and yet you continue with this emotionalism. Now, as you obviously have no recollection of the events leading up to our arrival here, I shall endeavour to explain. The same cold eyes gazed down at McCoy. Evidently the subject of thanks was closed, whether McCoy liked it or not. Resigning himself to the situation, he nodded, and said. "All right, Spock, you win..." McCoy licked his lips, feeling the cracked, sore skin rough on his tongue. "Is there any more water, I'm as dry as a bone?"

Spock handed him a battered mug holding a few mouthfuls of stale water. "Is this all that there is?" he asked in dismay.

"For the present, Doctor. Perhaps we shall be fortunate and encounter reasonable supplies away from this area." The Vulcan lifted his head to sniff the air. "But first, how much do you remember of what happened aboard ship?"

McCoy sipped the precious liquid before speaking. "Not much, really. I do remember leaving Jim to go and look for you. I'd only gone a short distance when I thought I heard voices. There was a secondary corridor off to the right, so I went down it to try and get nearer. But it didn't lead anywhere, so I had to come back out." He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't remember anything after that." He felt his head gingerly. "But if this bump's anything to go by, someone must have been waiting for me."

Spock nodded curtly before taking up the next sequence of events. "Unfortunately, Doctor, your investigations brought you into contact with one of the hi-jackers...much the same way as I myself was captured. Apparently, our unassuming cargo transporter was carrying a highly valued stock of uncut Dilithium crystals for the Federation."

McCoy gave a low whistle.

"Regrettably, security was breached and the vessel boarded, resulting in our capture, along with those crew members who survived."

"You mean some of them have been killed? But why? And how?" Horrified that Human life had been taken, McCoy waited anxiously for an answer.

The dark alien eyes focused into the distance before Spock replied in a bitter tone. "Shortly after their arrival, the criminals proceeded to de-pressurise whole decks." He turned to face McCoy. "Only the bridge and lower deck remained habitable... Ten of us survived, including the Captain."

McCoy felt sick. That meant that over thirty people had died. Died one of the most horrible and terrifying deaths known to Man. He swallowed hard before speaking again. "H...how did we get away...and...and...where's Jim?"

"Following your capture, a search was conducted during which the Captain was discovered. With the transfer of the cargo to their own craft complete, it was decided that Captain Kirk be taken with them and used as a hostage at some later date. The transporter was programmed with a self-destruct sequence - and we were left to die.

I was able to escape the bindings which held me, and so free the others. There was no time to attempt to disengage the computer, therefore we boarded two small escape craft. Unfortunately, they were both ill-equipped - our vessel being perhaps marginally the superior in operational readiness. We survived entry into this planet's atmosphere..."

"Do you mean to tell me that...that we're the only survivors? Nobody else made it at all?"

"That is correct, Doctor. The sister craft was destroyed upon re-entry... and all the survivors of the crew had decided to travel together. There was nothing I..." Spock caught himself before the admission escaped fully. But McCoy failed to catch the near-concession of guilt, so distraught was he at the unnecessary loss of life.

"God help them...no-one deserves to die like that..." A few moments passed before he spoke again. "Jim's still alive, then."

Spock eyed him carefully. They both knew Starfleet's views on officers held to ransom. No-one was expendable - and that included Captain James T. Kirk.

A silence grew to encompass the two figures. With the Vulcan's noncommittal, McCoy felt his temper surging to a dangerous level. Surely Spock hadn't simply written Kirk off...assumed his death as a natural turn of events. His feelings lashed out.

"Dammit, Spock! Enough people have died around here already. I won't believe he's dead until I have proof!" He slammed his fist into the dry earth, emphasising his stubbornness.

"Anger will not help, Doctor. In fact, it merely complicates matters, since..."

But McCoy was not to be out-voiced on this one. "Don't start with all that logic mumbo-jumbo. I'm not interested! YOU can believe what the hell you like, I still have faith in good old Human feelings - and I know he's alive! Now, how the devil do we get out of this godforsaken hole?" Rather unsteadily, he clambered to his feet and gazed around. "The sooner we're away from here, the sooner we find Jim."

McCoy stopped to wipe away the sweat, trickling down his face and blurring his vision. The back of Spock's tunic wavered strangely in front of him. How long had they been walking? Must be a good few hours by now.

The jungle pressed in about them on all sides. It was a weird place, not like forested areas they had encountered on other planets. Apart from the trees, which appeared to grow twenty or thirty metres straight up into the air, the only other main vegetation was an odd-looking vine entwining itself amongst the stark trunks. The place was so still and quiet it made their presence seem somehow intrusive. It just didn't feel right. McCoy opened his mouth to call out to Spock; but then thought better of it. Spock was in no mood for any more 'feelings'.

About to move off and catch up with the striding Vulcan, McCoy felt his right leg begin to tingle as if stung by something. He glanced down in time to see part of the strange vine sliding away from his trousers and boot. Annoyed, he kicked at the retreating plant, rubbed his leg and hurried after Spock.

He knew they had a long way to travel, Spock having mentioned something about automatic climatic monitoring stations lying 200 kilometres north. Perhaps if they reached there he would be able to adapt a few circuits and relay a distress call. Apparently he knew this star system's location, having had time before crash landing to check their position. Most of what he'd said had gone over McCoy's head - the latter being more interested in the fate of their friend than the scientific data of the planet. And yet, if he really thought about it, this encyclopedic Spock was typical of the Vulcan when he was trying to be his most logical and hiding his concern.

Of course, one of their main problems was food and water. They had but a handful of emergency food supplies which Spock had rescued from the crashed life craft. With a surface temperature range of 90-100°F during the day, falling to near freezing at night, they were going to need nourishment and fluids to sustain them. With still no visible water areas in their immediate vicinity, and the last of their supply gone, things were beginning to look a little desperate. And now they had to travel through this damned jungle...jungle...jungle...

"Doctor?"

"Umm?" McCoy looked up, startled. Spock was watching him strangely and had hold of his arm. "What's the matter?"

"I was about to ask you that same question. You seemed...distracted in some way."

"Was I?" McCoy shook his head as if to clear it. "I...I was just thinking - that's all." He glanced around to discover they had reached the other side of the jungle, and were in a scrubland leading towards a low range of mountains perhaps fifteen to twenty kilometres distant. "I can see we're out of that ramb- ling no-man's-land. Are we calling it a day and making camp or..." A wave of nausea swept over him and he found himself clutching wildly at Spock lest he fall. "S...sorry, Spock - I...I didn't mean to grab you like that...I...I just felt faint for a moment. I'm all right now." He gave a half-hearted smile, then looked away with the beginnings of a frown. "...We don't have to stay here, do we? There's still plenty of daylight around...and I'm not feeling tired if you're not." The words sounded almost like a plea, causing a flicker of concern within Spock. McCoy was not normally eager to express himself this way. In fact, the whole journey through the jungle had been 'abnormal' as far as the Doctor was concerned. Not once had Spock heard him complain with his usual sarcasm.

Perhaps it was simply reaction from the crash - McCoy's brush with death was not to be taken lightly; a few seconds longer and Spock was sure his companion would have died. This uncharacteristic behaviour was possibly a warning sign...a signal to alert him to delayed shock. He would observe his Human friend closely over the next few hours and so be prepared. For the present, he would allow McCoy the benefit of the doubt, and agree to his wishes.

"Very well, Doctor, if you feel able, we shall continue for a while longer. With the ground easier, it is possible we may find ourselves within reach of the mountains before nightfall. Perhaps we shall be fortunate in finding sturdy shelter and water..."

"Yes, yes." McCoy nodded eagerly and seemed almost to sigh with relief that Spock had agreed. "C'mon, then - there's no time to waste." Stepping out briskly, the Human set a fast pace, almost leaving the Vulcan behind.

Two hours passed before Spock called another halt. This time McCoy was even more agitated at having their journey interrupted. He was continually looking back over the way they had come, as if watching for something - or someone.



"Doctor? Is there something troubling you?" ventured Spock.

"What?" McCoy looked troubled - hunted, almost.

"Is there something wrong? Something I..."

"NO! No...it's nothing. Are we going on?" McCoy glanced back nervously once more. "We shouldn't stay here...should keep going...get as much distance between us and...and..."

"And what, Doctor?" prompted Spock, his curiosity somehow overshadowed by a growing sense of unease. McCoy turned back, shaking his head in uncertainty.

"I...I don't know. I...doon..." He scrubbed at his face with trembling hands. "God, I feel tired...so tired..."

Spock stepped nearer as the weary hands slipped down. McCoy gazed across at him with a mixture of fear and sadness before he spoke again. "Spock? Spock... I'm sorry for all the...trouble I've...I've caused you... I'm nothing but a... a..." The end was lost as he slid gently into the outstretched arms waiting for him.

With infinite care, Spock eased the unconscious body of his friend onto the ground, cradling the drooping head against his shoulder. Positioning McCoy's arms and legs carefully, the Vulcan soon became aware of a burning fever consuming the limp Human. All too quickly the heat was penetrating through his tunic, alerting his keen senses.

Urgently he checked other vital signs, only to confirm his initial suspicions. McCoy was ill - very ill - and they were in the middle of nowhere!

Sighing deeply, he settled McCoy and they stood, to survey their surroundings. Towards the region he had designated 'east' lay an area of rock formations, with hardy scrub-like vegetation. The terrain appeared passable, with even the possibility of shelter, fuel for a small fire - and, dared he hope, water?

His decision made, Spock bent to life the unconscious form into strong arms. With the sunlight fading steadily, casting long shadows before them, the Vulcan set off, carrying his companion to possibly the only refuge in this stark, alien landscape.

Sounds of tinder-dry wood crackled wildly in the stillness of the night. A particularly defiant branch snapped loudly, protesting its untimely death before sending a torch of sparks high into the air.

Spock sat quietly on a small outcrop of rock, his fingers steeped in a familiar pose; his eyes fixed on the dancing flames of the fire. Away from the small, yet somehow comforting light, everything was bathed in the inky blackness of almost absolute dark. For here there was no moon to share the vigil of night; no reflecting sphere to remind one that the light was not gone forever. They were totally alone in the hours of darkness.

The Vulcan shuddered as he felt the temperature drop a few more degrees. He checked the meagre pile of wood to his right, then cast one or two sturdy branches onto the fire, which spluttered in gratitude.

Another sound reached his ears - McCoy was becoming restless once more. He moved silently and knelt by the uneasy form, laying his hand on the still-burning flesh. Although the touch was light, it awakened the distressed Human, who gazed up at him with fear clearly displayed.

"Spock...Spock...I feel so sick..." The over-bright eyes widened, then snapped shut as a spasm of pain wrenched at his insides. He retched painfully and curled up on his side trying to ease the agony which felt like a thousand knives tearing into his guts. "And...I'm...I'm...so...c...cold..."

Spock moved closer, grasping the trembling shoulders in a firm but gentle hold. "Come, my friend." He tried to unwind the taut body. "We shall stay warm

together."

But even as he lifted McCoy and endeavoured to settle him, the Doctor protested fiercely. "No, Spock! No... It may be in...infectious...I cannot...I..." The words weakened as he warmth and strength of the Vulcan seeping into him. A solitary sob escaped into the night, only to be muffled as Spock held him tighter.

"Sshhh. You must rest now. Rest and sleep. I am here...I shall never leave you...never...leave..." The words echoed and drifted until he could fight no longer and sank into the velvety blackness of sleep.

McCoy was dreaming. Yet this was a dream he wished would end soon. In the beginning he had been sick; really sick. Spock was there had had tried to help, but it was no use, he was sure he was going to die.

Then she had come. A woman more beautiful than he could even have imagined in his wildest of fantasies. She stood before them, her eyes twin pools of swirling green, her lips full and firm as they smiled from features so perfect that they almost looked carved.

Then she had spoken. A lilting, haunting voice which sang out in the night was caught by the wind and carried off only to return as a softened whisper... urging, begging him to listen.

She was speaking to Spock, telling him to go - to leave. "You will leave this one now. He needs you no longer, for he has passed to the higher levels."

Spock answered, yet McCoy was unable to hear what he said. He soon understood, though, as he watched the Vulcan collect their scanty supplies and prepare to move off.

In desperation McCoy shouted out. "Spock? Spock! What do you think you're doing? You're not leaving me here, for God's sake!" But his cries were to no avail; the First Officer was already stepping out across the barren landscape towards the mountains - and possible rescue. "Spock! Answer me, damn you! SSPOOOOCK!" The name sang out hollowly as it followed the vanishing figure.

McCoy woke with a start, the memory of Spock's departure so vivid that he shuddered coldly. With mounting anxiety his eyes searched - the ashes of the fire were cooling as the first rays of sun peeked between the far-off craggy peaks of a high mountain range.

Of Spock there was no sign.

McCoy felt his heart begin to pick up speed. Surely it wasn't true? It must have been a dream! It must! Almost in a state of panic, he sprang to his feet and began a frenzied search. There must be something, anything that would give him a clue as to the Vulcan's whereabouts.

"Spock! SPOCK! Where the devil are you? SPO---" As he rushed round a clump of rocks, he came face to face with the woman in his dream.

"You!"

She smiled warmly at him. McCoy drew back, his suspicions aroused. "What have you done with Spock? Where is he?" He fought to keep order in his chaotic thoughts as he shouted at her again. "Answer me! Where is he?"

She reached out to touch him and he stepped back defensively. "Don't touch me!" McCoy tensed, feeling uneasy and a little afraid. There was something about this woman...something... He spoke again. "I don't know who you are, and I don't particularly want to know, either. All that interests me is my friend. Where is he?"

The woman smiled, her eyes lighting up as the sun emerged fully from behind a distant summit. "Come. There is much to be done in the hours remaining. We cannot waste time in this place." Once more she moved towards him, this time clasping his arm firmly. "You are with me, now - the one you call 'friend' has

left you to me. I am to take care of you, and..." A disturbing gleam stole across the sparkling eyes. "He was very trusting, your 'friend'..." The Human felt a cold chill spiral down his spine as he stiffened again. "But come - we must go!"

Tugging at his arm she urged McCoy away from the rocks and back towards the dreaded jungle. In desperation he tried to wrench himself free, shouting as he went, "I'm not going anywhere with you until I see Spock! What did you do to him to make him leave? He's my friend, he wouldn't just go! And if you think that - aaagghhhh!" Agony ripped through his body - white-hot fire, burning, scalding, tearing him apart. Even as his head snapped back and he cried out, he felt his legs begin to crumble and saw the earth rush up to meet him. His last conscious thought was of cool hands lingering on his face and that haunting whisper searching inot his mind... "But you are mine now...and we shall have such fun together ...together...togetherrrrr...."

He opened his eyes to the image of towering trees reaching high into empty skies. Sunlight flitered down, sending ripplies of prismatic colour into the surrounding air as it penetrated far into the dank and dusty atmosphere.

McCoy shifted cautiously, turning his head from side to side. All about him, the weird vines were growing and creeping, covering the whole area in a blanket of matted greens and yellows. He moved to sit up, only to find himself securely held by the entwining vegetation. With all his strength, he fought to free himself from the growing captivity; but it was all to no avail. He was well and truly trapped.

Into his limited field of vision came the woman, her face still bearing that same supercilious smile he remembered from before. Her words were simple, yet held within them a sinister meaning. "Come - it is time..."

He watched in silence as she lay down beside him and allowed the vines to slither and slide over her body, entwining themselves about her with the same infinite care he imagined had secured himself. The process was mesmerising, yet somehow obscene in its whole approach. Within moments it was complete.

The woman spoke. "Now we are one, together - and together we shall remain, for it is the way...and the way is good..." With these last words she extended her head back and let out an ecstatic moan.

The vines shuddered as if in response to the alien's mood; then they were moving...growing...gripping tightly at his arms and legs, reaching across his chest and pressing hard into his rib cage. McCoy tried to yell out...struggle...scream...anything to free himself from this nightmare - but the vine held him fast. And slowly...so slowly...the breath was squeezed from his tortured lungs as the green and yellow wall of death smothered him into submission.

Sunlight burst into existence. He felt the rush of cold air as he tore upwards into the blueness of the sky, leaving behind the dull browns and greens of earth-bound structures. There was a strange feeling surrounding him...a sort of detached weightless feeling...

All around he could see with crystal clarity. See further than he ever imagined was possible. Instinctively he looked down, checking his mode of transport. Nothing. There was nothing! Not even a body! He had no body... Emptiness was all around him.

Panic swept through him like a tidal wave, almost drowning him in the chaos of insanity. The shock was so great his mind reacted in the only way possible. Folding inwards, it fled from the intangible stimuli bombarding every nerve ending, and hid deep inside itself.

Whimpering in his lonely corner, isolated from the incomprehensible reality, he heard her, gently coaxing him to come out. "This should not be, my oneness... it is to enjoy the freedom of oneness that I brought you here. Come - together we shall explore the gift on oneness..."

Slowly he emerged, out into the vastness of space...space, where he was swept along at break-neck speeds. Skimming across upper atmospheric layers as if he were a flattened stone hurled onto still waters, he felt the friction...the speed, the excitement...the thrill.

Then they were diving, deep into the clouds, bursting outwards from the other side into the sunlight and heading for the earth at fantastic speeds. His fear rose as the ground rushed up to meet them.

"Do not be afraid...the oneness will protect. See?" Even as she spoke, the angle of approach was changing, levelling out. Soon they were passing no more than a few metres above the treetops, their speed causing the branches to bend and sway.

It was incredible. A whole new world and existence - and he was part of it!

The journey continued, with McCoy unable to relate any of it to time or space. In this state, time was immeasurable, an unknown quantity holding no meaning for him.

Without warning, they began to slow their speed and started to drift over low foothills leading to the mountain slopes. In the distance McCoy could just make out a solitary figure striding forth with a defiance that could only be Vulcan.

"Spock!" The name fell away into empty air.

He heard the woman laugh maliciously. "So, we are to meet with this 'friend' of yours once more." For a few seconds they flew higher into the atmosphere as if checking their position. Then they were back, hovering near the Vulcan. "He is clever, this companion of yours. This is not the way I planned it..."

"What?" exclaimed McCoy.

"Look! See how he is circling. He is searching for you! Yes! That's it. He is returning to try and trick me." The voice was almost hysterical by now. "Oh, the excitement! Come, we must join him in this adventure."

"Wait! Listen to me, you can't - " But McCoy's words were lost in the rush of wind as he was whisked high into the sky. Soon they were in amongst the clouds...fluffy, soft, and with a whiteness too pure to describe. As they approached the centre, McCoy could see the swirling particles of water vapour spinning crazily in their battle for survival. Soon more came to join them and the whole cloud became a turbulent arena of frenzied activity. The whiteness dulled with the heaviness of increasing droplets - and the light grew dark and ominous.

A wind sprang into being, forcing the clouds into towers of anger which swept down towards the barren lowlands and the lonely Vulcan. McCoy could feel the air around him begin to charge itself, its power building - and then he knew what she meant to do.

"No! Wait! Don't do this to him. You have me...isn't that what you wanted?" His words were drowned in a peal of thunder, followed by her hideous laugh.

"Yes, I have you. But this is such fun. See..."

McCoy looked down.

The storm clouds were directly over Spock, and he was trapped, caught right in the middle of open ground. Already the wind was tearing at him, buffeting him like a cork in an open sea. For a split second he lost his balance and almost fell to the ground; but then he was up and running towards a clump of bushes.

He had but a few strides more to go when a vicious bolt of lightning hurtled from the sky and lunged into the heart of the bush. Immediately the whole area was ablaze as tongues of fire lashed out to lick at the defenceless Vulcan. He flung up his arms instinctively, and McCoy watched helplessly as a powerful spark caught at the blue tunic and set it aflame.

"STOP! Stop, damn you! You're killing him!" McCoy cried out in horror as

he saw Spock rolling on the ground trying to smother the flames.

"Do not concern yourself so, my oneness. There is still much time with which to play...see, even now he is surviving..." All around the cloud was breaking, sending out its millions upon millions of water droplets to cover the burning figure.

The Doctor watched as rain poured down onto the sunbaked earth. Harder and harder it fell as it tumbled relentlessly from the sky. Spock, he could see, was on his hands and knees - free from fire, but beaten down to the ground and soaked to the skin by the torrential rain.

In the distance, McCoy was suddenly aware of another sound. One similar to the thunder, yet not quite... Fear clutched at his heart. He shifted his vision to the nearby mountains, searching through the veil of darkness and rain.

Then he saw it. A wall of water, ten, fifteen metres high - and advancing rapidly in their direction.

"A flash flood! You've created a flash flood! And it's heading straight for him!"

All he received for his anger was another peal of laughter from the woman and a sudden drop in altitude as they dived nearer the exposed Vulcan.

As they swept in towards him, McCoy yelled out in desperation. "SPOCK! GET TO THE HIGH GROUND! SPOOOOCK!" Lost in another peal of thunder, the words fell hopelessly into the air.

Drifting past, McCoy could see by Spock's expression that he was aware of his vulnerability. Climbing clumsily to his feet, he was endeavouring to run from the approaching deluge. But it was a losing battle. The wall of water surged forward at irreversable speed, destroying everything which dared to lie in its path. Soon it was so close to Spock that McCoy could see there was no possible escape.

As the first waves crashed down on the helpless figure, McCoy turned away and screamed in anguish, "Nnooo! I beg you! Please don't do this to him... pleccaaaassee..."

Within seconds the worst was over, leaving behind the deathly hush and stillness of a terrain transformed by the might of nature. McCoy was grief-stricken. A part of him had died in those few agonising moments, and now he wished that the remaining part could die also. The woman was talking to him, but he didn't want to listen. All he wanted was to be left alone...

Then she was pulling out his mind, urging him to look; look when he wished to forget - forget and die.

"See! He fights to live! Look, my oneness."

Keenly he searched the foaming river beneath them; and then he saw Spock. Caught between the limbs of a tree-trunk wedged alongside two boulders.

"He's alive!"

"Oh, the excitement, my oneness. Come quickly, there is more fun to be had."

"No. Please. No more. I can't stand to see any more of this suffering." McCoy was almost crying as they descended and drew near the half-drowned Vulcan. Floating overhead, he saw Spock coughing painfully as water trickled out from the corners of his mouth. There was a nasty abrasion on his right cheek, oozing green blood, and his eyes looked dull and glazed.

Suddenly, McCoy heard a voice shouting from an area of dry earth. "Spock! Spock! Hang on, I'm coming to get you! Just hang on!"

In amazement, McCoy followed the sound of the all-too-familiar voice, in time to see himself clambering across tree-trunks and rocks to reach the stranded Vulcan.

"What the... This can't be... In God's name, what are you doing?"

The woman laughed, leeringly. "Watch carefully, my oneness. See how he thinks it is you come to rescue him..."

By now, the earthbound McCoy had almost reached Spock; as firm hands grasped the battered frame, McCoy could see Spock's eyes smile gratefully at his rescuer. Carefully, the two made their way back to a newly-created bank, Spock half collapsing as they finally emerged onto dry land.

Then the nightmare returned. Before his very eyes, McCoy could see Spock watching as his apparent friend and rescuer shimmered and began to mutate into some hideous creature too grotesque for words. Lulled into a false sense of security, the Vulcan was obviously caught off-guard as he tried to scramble backwards. But he was too slow and the creature had anticipated well. With a powerful swipe, it sent Spock sprawling headlong into the mud.

Vivid bands of green bubbled out through the tears in his tunic as the monster's claws ripped into the sensitive flesh. Spock cried out in pain, his face contorting as nerve endings carried their message of agony.

McCoy screamed too, unable to control himself any longer. Another cry left Spock, echoing round the Human's head, forcing him to cover his assaulted ears.

"No...noooo... Please...no more..."

"McCoy!" Help me! You must help me! Bones! BONES!!!"

"I can't, Spock! I ca - SPOCK! NOOOOOOOOOO!"

McCoy was hanging on for dear life, clutching desperately to...he knew not what. Yet it felt soft and warm...reassuring... Should he open his eyes? No. He would see that again...that horror and agony...

Fear stormed in once more, causing him to cling closer to the softness. In the distance, he heard a low whimpering sound; when it didn't go away, he tried to isolate it, only to discover that it was himself he was hearing.

He tried to stop, but found it almost impossible, so deep was his hurt and sorrow. The nightmare returned; his sobs growing louder as the images reared again in his mind. He cried out in fear. "Spock! No...please don't die... please... I can't help you... I can't..."

Then there was a gentle touch to his head and a voice he knew so well reached out to him. "Hush now, Bones... It is over, and we have won. Together we have won..." He felt strong arms tightening their embrace, felt the warmth of a living body seeping into his coldness...and above all, he felt safe. Opening his eyes, he gazed up into the gentle brown ones that watched over him concernedly.

"Spock? Spock, is it...it is really you?" he whispered.

The features softened in the failing light. "Yes, my friend; and you are safe once more."

McCoy felt his eyes fill, then spill over as he buried his head in the soft tunic, twisting his hand into the blue fabric as he clung desperately to the firmness and reality that was his friend - Spock...

The moment was broken as a familiar hum filled the air, together with the sparkle of a million atoms surging into life. Spock watched as the landing party of four materialised some ten metres from their position. When all were safely down, he let out a rather uncharacteristic cry as the leader of the group stepped forward.

"JIM! But how...?" He caught himself as he saw two security guards taking in the scene before them. Before he had time to say anything further, there was a flash of gold, and his Captain was kneeling beside them, gently wiping the



sweat-soaked hair from McCoy's eyes.

"We...we are both all right, Jim - only...very...very tired..."

Kirk's features melted into the affectionate smile Spock knew so well, and he felt the gentle squeeze of the Human's hand on his shoulder which spoke volumes. "Let's get you both back home, then...Scotty?" He looked up at the anxious engineer, who was hovering over the trio like a mother hen.

"Captain?"

"Call in and ask for a medical team to be standing by. Security can transport up now, and we'll follow shortly."

"Right away, sir." The Scot moved off to complete his orders, leaving the three friends alone.

As Kirk turned back, Spock was endeavouring to stand, still holding on tightly to the now-sleeping McCoy.

"Here, let me help you..." Kirk started to take McCoy from the weary Vulcan, but immediately Spock began to release him to Kirk, the Doctor grew restless and began to panic and cry out. Alarmed, the Human frowned. "Spock? Are you sure he's all right? He's so..."

Carefully re-positioning McCoy in his arms, Spock reassured his anxious friend. "Do not be concerned, Jim - he will recover; and I can manage him still..." He paused as an expression of pain creased his drawn features. "He has been through a lot...a living nightmare where all avenues led to death..." The hold on the now quietened figure tightened protectively. "My death."

"Oh God, no." Kirk cringed as he thought of the agony both his companions must have suffered. He watched Spock's face closely before speaking again. "I'm sorry, Spock...it must have been hell for you, too. He is kind of special to both of us - isn't he?"

The Vulcan closed his eyes tightly and took a deep breath before replying softly, "Yes, Jim. Something special..."

Aboard the Enterprise, in the peace and quiet of sickbay, Kirk was perched on the corner of a desk normally reserved for his Chief Medical Officer.

"Things happened so fast, Spock, it's difficult to say how, or in what order they did occur. I could have been aboard that vessel for no more than twenty-four hours when all hell seemed to be let loose!" He gave one of his boyish grins which lit up his whole face. "When Scotty sets out to do something, he certainly doesn't wait around...especially when he has the chance to put those precious engines of his through their paces!"

Anyway, to cut a long story short, the hi-jackers didn't plan for a run-in with a Federation Starship - particularly one with a personal stake involved. So, here I am." Kirk paused to rub his head. "Plus or minus a few extra cuts and bruises." The mood changed as he leaned across to clasp his friend's shoulder as if reassuring himself of the Vulcan's reality. "But you two were the ones I was worried about. I thought I might have lost you both at one time... If that other life craft hadn't managed to send out a signal beacon just before re-entry, we might never have found you... Poor devils, they must have known they were going to die, yet still they tried..." His eyes locked with Spock's. "I owe them a great deal." For the briefest of moments, the pressure of his grip increased. Then - "Do you feel up to talking about what happened down there? Or would you rather rest - you look all in to me..."

"No, Jim; it is quite all right...and...and I think it best I talk with you now before McCoy wakes." Spock saw Kirk's puzzled expression. "Do not misunderstand me, Jim, there is nothing I wish kept secret from the Doctor; it is simply that I feel he would want it this way." Kirk nodded silently.

"As you know, we crash-landed on a planet offering almost no means of rescue.

Unfortunately, McCoy was weakened considerably by the fire and fumes aboard the wrecked craft. So much so, that whilst endeavouring to reach a relatively safe location, he was inadvertently attacked by some local vegetation that he would otherwise have been able to avoid.

The plant must have contained some highly unstable toxic substance, which, coupled with his already rising fever, resulted in a delirium so powerful I could hardly control him. Without the medikit I was helpless, yet I kept him as warm and comfortable as I could. As the toxin raged within his body I could see he was slipping further and further from the real world and identifying totally with this hallucinatory existence.

As time passed, he was convinced I had left him...left him alone..." The Vulcan faltered. "Somehow, it was almost as if he was fighting with himself - testing his own belief in me within himself. Then he appeared to go into severe shock, and I sensed his mind shrink deep within itself. When I feared the worst and thought him surely about to die, he re-emerged, but completely under the control of the poison invading his body." Spock gazed out of the office door at the still figure lying peacefully on the sickbay bed.

"It was then I decided to meld with him. I could not let him die, Jim... not after we have grown so much - I had to try!"

"I know, Spock, I know..." came the consoling words. The Vulcan let out a deep sigh before continuing.

"I cannot say how long we remained linked; all I remember is that I was drawn into the drama of seeing myself facing death time after time. We were both trapped in his mind.

It was... It was as if a part of him didn't want to accept that he cares for me as he does. Each time I tried to reach him, I was blocked by this image of my dying - and each time I could feel his life slipping.

It was almost over when I decided to try one last possibility. If somehow I could project myself back at him and call on his help, then perhaps I could control him enough to draw us both back to reality. I calculated the risk of both our lives being lost as..." Spock paused, his eyes softening into a knowing smile as he glanced at Kirk. "The exact figures are of no consequence, Jim. In fact, it appears I may even have been in error."

Kirk's face broke into an enormous grin, and for a moment he was speechless. "Spock... Spock, I..." But still the words escaped him; there were just none for this occasion. Impulsively, he leaned across and hugged his friend, feeling unashamed as the sensation of warm tears filling his eyes and spilling over flooded his senses.

The embrace ended as sounds of a slumberer about to awaken entered the stillness of the moment. Both men turned towards their companion in time to see him stretch languidly and begin to open sleep heavy eyes.

"Come on," urged Kirk, tugging the Vulcan's arm. "I was with him the first time he came to - this time I'm sure it's you he'll want to see..."

Reaching the side of the couch, Spock leaned over and waited, an anxious expression dominating his face. Dreamily, two eyes of sparkling blue revealed themselves; blinked; then refocused with just the barest hint of an old familiar glint. The silence broke.

"What the devil are you staring at, Spock? Dammit! Haven't you ever seen somebody wake up before?"

Spock jerked upright, and, with slow deliberation, turned towards his commanding officer and friend.

"You were saying, Captain?"

But Kirk was saying nothing. Everything had already been said, and they were together again.

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FRIENDS IN NEED by Ann Preece

The day began like any other day. The Enterprise was in orbit around Adelta IV, the largest planet in the solar system filling the present quadrant of space and which was, until now, unexplored and uncharted. The mist-shrouded planet seemed to fill the bridge viewscreen, deceptively peaceful, apparently lifeless, seemingly innocent. Ship's sensors had failed to register any intelligent life-form readings, although the atmosphere was conducive to Human life. However, Starfleet requirements were such that routine checks had to be made as a matter of course. It was with this in mind that Kirk selected a landing party comprising Spock, Sulu, biologist Doug Ramsey, and two security guards, with orders to carry out the necessary checks and be ready to leave within four hours. Kirk settled back in his command chair to wait, his eyes taking in the efficient activities of his crew as they went about their allotted tasks. The mission was purely routine; nothing could go wrong - or could it?

The first hint that something was amiss came when the landing party failed to make contact at the pre-arranged hour. Kirk was about to ask Uhura to try to make contact with Mr. Spock when the Bantu woman turned to face her Captain, an anxious frown creasing her usually beautiful features.

"Captain, I am receiving a distress call from the planet's surface. It's so faint, I can hardly hear it. Just a minute..."

At her words, Kirk had visibly stiffened. Why did he suddenly experience a cold, gnawing feeling at the base of his stomach? Impatiently, he watched as Uhura's hands flew over her console. She turned to face him again, her voice faltering as she said, "Sir! The landing party has been attacked! While attempting to save the others, Mr. Spock..." Her voice broke. Struggling to gain control, she continued hesitantly. "Captain...Mr. Spock is badly hurt. If we don't get them out of there immediately..."

Uhura lifted compassionate eyes to Kirk's pain-ravaged face. For a second he was incapable of movement; he felt numb, paralysed. Spock...his friend... He stared with unseeing eyes at the swirling, ever-changing images on the viewscreen, with eyes that were almost blinded by unshed tears.

"Spock..." It was only a whisper. Somewhere down there, on that desolate, god-forsaken planet, his friend lay injured, perhaps dying. Spock - the friend who meant more to him than life itself; Spock - whose friendship did not have to be expressed in mere words. Spock - who was always there when needed, now desperately needed his help.

"Please god, don't let me be too late," he muttered through tight lips.

Struggling to control his mounting anxiety, Kirk hit the intercom switch on the arm of his command chair. "Scotty! Stand by to beam up the landing party. Dr. McCoy, I want a medical team in Transporter Room I as of five minutes ago!"

He had left his chair and was on his way to the elevator all in one swift movement, pausing only long enough to say, "You have the con, Lieutenant," as he passed Uhura's station. Then he was gone.

Scotty was already manipulating controls when Kirk entered the transporter room at a run. The two men locked gazes in a look which did not require words to explain it. With an almost imperceptible nod, Scott turned once more to his console - he knew what was required of him.

With the air charged with mounting tension, Kirk paced back and forth before the transporter platform, his eyes never straying from the Chief Engineer as he engaged the control levers.

The hum of the transporter filled the room; five figures shimmered into view, faded, then solidified to reveal the landing party. Spock, alive but barely conscious, was supported on either side by Sulu and Ramsey. Swaying slightly,

he tried to focus his gaze on the one person he knew would be there to help him - Jim Kirk. Summoning what strength remained in his beaten and broken body he staggered towards Kirk, a cry of complete and utter anguish escaping, uncontrolled, from bruised lips.

"Jim!"

The despair contained in that one cry tore at Kirk's heart. He stumbled blindly forward, arms outstretched, to catch his friend before he could collapse at his feet. "It's all right, Spock...You're safe now...Everything's going to be all right...I promise...Everything's going to be all right..." Kirk's voice broke on a sob.

"Jim."

The voice from behind was quiet, controlled. "Jim." This time a reassuring hand was placed on his shoulder, and Kirk turned to meet the blue, concerned eyes of Leonard McCoy, the ship's Chief Medical Officer. "He can't hear you, Jim. He must have fought to remain conscious just long enough to know that he had made it back to the ship. Let me take him."

Kirk nodded numbly, although it was with some reluctance that he surrendered his precious burden into the strong but gentle arms of the doctor and his efficient medical team. The limp form of his First Officer and friend was carefully laid on the awaiting trolley, and McCoy hurriedly set to work, carrying out a preliminary scan to ascertain the extent of Spock's injuries. His face was serious as he took note of the readings. Adjusting several dials and switches, the doctor moved the scanner once more over the inert form, starting from the head and moving slowly down towards the feet. The second set of readings only served to confirm his worst fears. He bit his lip. Kirk, watching McCoy's face intently for any change in expression, could hardly fail to notice the gesture.

"Bones..." he whispered.

"I don't know, Jim...I just don't know. The injuries are far more extensive than I at first imagined, and with his internal set-up... It's bad, Jim. Very bad."

"You mean there's nothing you can do?" It was a cry from the heart, and McCoy knew it.

"Now I didn't say that. Just give me a little more time. Once we get Spock to sickbay I'll be able to carry out more tests..." McCoy's voice trailed off. Kirk wasn't listening. Instead, his gaze was fixed on his friend as Dr. M'Benga and Nurse Chapel wheeled the trolley out of the transporter room.

"Jim!" The tone of voice was commanding, cutting through Kirk's thoughts like a knife.

The Captain turned to face the doctor. McCoy's eyes softened as he read the look of total loss and misery on his friend's face. But while he could feel compassion, could sympathise with the Captain, could understand what Kirk was going through inside, he had to find some way of stopping Kirk wallowing in self-recrimination. McCoy gripped Kirk's shoulders hard.

"Jim, listen to me! You've got to snap out of this. There are over 430 people on this ship, and they are all depending on you. Spock is alive - just - but nevertheless, he is alive. He's going to need your help, perhaps more than he's ever needed it before, if he's going to see this through. You can't help him while you're in this state. Hope, Jim. It's only a little word - but it's all we've got. Hold on to that. For Spock's sake."

Slowly, McCoy's words began to penetrate Kirk's thoughts. The glazed look left his face. "Bones!"

He buried his face in his hands, and the tears which he had held in check were allowed to flow freely.

McCoy held him close. "I know, Jim, I know. He means a lot to me, too."

Gradually the tears began to subside as McCoy's words reached Kirk. Bones was right, of course; he couldn't go on like this - he was no help to anyone in this state, least of all Spock. He made a visible effort to pull himself together, and the qualities which had made him such an excellent Starship Captain rose to the surface.

There were duties to attend to. Starfleet Command would require a complete report on the events of the last hour, but Kirk felt that that was one report which could wait until later, much later. Once this nightmare was over...

Distressing as the thought was, Kirk knew that sooner or later he would have to study Sulu's report on the landing party's experience, and discover just what had happened to turn a routine mission into a nightmare. Then, and only then, could he return to sickbay and the one person who needed him the most at this time - Spock, the loyal friend, who was always there when he, Kirk, had needed his help.

The two men parted company at the door to sickbay, each to attend to his own duties - McCoy to Spock's bedside, and Kirk to his own quarters, a blessed haven of peace and solitude, where he could study Sulu's report undisturbed. He felt a faint twinge of guilt - he knew he should see Sulu personally, but he couldn't face the prospect of seeing anyone else, not just yet. He couldn't face the compassionate glances, the sudden silences as soon as he made an appearance on the bridge, the understanding nods and quiet whispers. He appreciated his crew's concern for Spock, and for himself, and he would face them, but in his own time. He hoped they would understand.

Kirk hurried past Spock's quarters - he couldn't bring himself even to glance at the closed door, knowing that the room beyond was empty, awaiting the return of its owner - and let himself swiftly into his own cabin.

The door swished closed behind him, and for a moment he rested his burning head against the cool metal before crossing to the desk to pick up the tape which Yeoman Rand must have brought in while he was still with Dr. McCoy. He slipped the cassette into the visual monitor, and adjusted the viewer. The words danced before his eyes. The moment he had been dreading had come - he could put it off no longer. With great reluctance, he began to read.

The survey of Adelta IV had passed without incident, and the landing party was preparing to leave when a terrifying, blood-curdling growl from behind froze each man where he stood. They turned to face a creature which bore some resemblance to the gorilla-like beings of Old Earth, with its long hair, thick-set body and squat, ugly features. But there all similarity ended. This creature was far taller than the average man. Its strong, powerful arms, which looked strong enough to break a Human in half, ended in sharp, vicious claws, and the massive mouth, from which came the blood-chilling growls, contained two rows of pointed, evil-looking teeth - no one was left in any doubt as to what use they could be put.

The attack was rapid and unprovoked. The creature obviously thought the landing party was encroaching on its territory. With a cry of rage, and before the stunned crew of the Enterprise could make any move to protect themselves, the monstrous creature had rendered one of the security guards unconscious with a single blow of its powerful arm. The second guard, who had moved to help his colleague, was smashed to the ground for his trouble, and the creature turned its attention towards Sulu.

Spock, who had been separated from the others when the creature made its appearance, assessed the situation immediately, and calling to his men to take cover, attempted to distract the creature's attention from its present prey. Without any thought for his own safety, he managed to position himself between the creature and Sulu, to give the helmsman sufficient time to seek refuge behind a nearby rock.

The crew watched, paralysed, as Spock darted hither and thither before the creature, always tantalisingly out of its reach. If he could lead the creature away from the rest of the party there was a chance he could lose it in the surr-

ounding maze of rocks, and then double back to join the others.

By this time, Sulu had recovered his nerve sufficiently to take aim with his phaser, and was on the point of firing when the creature made a swift lunge at the darting Spock - for all its bulk it moved very quickly. Spock turned sharply - too sharply; he tripped and fell, striking his head against a rock. As he lay dazed, the creature uttered a triumphant growl, seized the unconscious body and threw it into the air. Spock crashed to the ground, landing heavily. With a swift movement, the frenzied creature had picked up a boulder and begun to strike unmercifully at the prone body.

Meanwhile, Sulu had moved stealthily away from his hiding place until he was so positioned that, when he fired his phaser, the creature would not hit Spock. As the creature raised its arm to deliver another crushing blow, Sulu steadied his trembling arm, took aim and fired. The creature crumpled to the ground, too stunned to attack again - for the time being.

Immediately, Sulu relayed his distress call to the Enterprise - they needed help as quickly as possible before the creature regained consciousness and realised it wasn't badly hurt.

The attack had lasted for less than five minutes - it had seemed an eternity. Spock had regained consciousness long enough to reach the safety of the ship.

Kirk switched off the monitor and buried his face in his hands. So, there it was. Once again Spock had placed the safety of his friends before his own personal safety; once again, his selfless actions had saved the lives of other crew members. How many times in the past had Spock been prepared to sacrifice his own life in order to protect him, Kirk? He slammed his hand down hard on the desk. For that unselfish action his friend now lay unconscious, close to death. And it all seemed so meaningless, without purpose, such a waste of a fine life. Starfleet would call it an 'unfortunate accident' which happened 'during the course of duty'. God, Kirk thought, it would do some of those bureaucrats good to get out in space once in a while. Maybe then they'd change their minds. But... This train of thought was getting him nowhere.

His anger subsiding, Kirk leaned over and pressed the intercom button. Immediately, Uhura's face appeared on the visual monitor.

"Uhura, is Mr. Sulu there?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Put him on visual, please."

Uhura's features were replaced by those of Sulu. "Mr. Sulu, take us out of orbit and lay in a course for Starbase 8."

Sulu busied himself at his controls. "Course computed and laid in, sir."

"Good. How long will it take us to reach Starbase 8?"

The helmsman checked the instrument readings. "At our present speed, 5.3 days, sir."

"Very well. Lt. Uhura, if I am needed I shall be in sickbay; but I don't want to be disturbed unless it is absolutely necessary."

"I understand, sir." Kirk knew he could rely on Uhura. The screen went dark.

Kirk got to his feet. He had attended to his duties. Now, at last, he was free to go to the friend who needed him. Nothing short of a Red Alert would drag him away from Spock's bedside this time.

An anxious McCoy met Kirk at the door to sickbay. Seeing the worried frown on the Doctor's face, Kirk's own barely controlled anxieties rushed to the surface.



"Bones, what is it; What's wrong? Spock..."

McCoy interrupted him, "What's our present course?"

Kirk was surprised by the question. "We're heading towards Starbase 8. Why?"

Again McCoy failed to answer Kirk's question. "How long will it take to get there?" he demanded.

"Sulu estimated at least five days, perhaps more. What's all this about?"

McCoy refused to meet Kirk's gaze. Instead he turned away, muttering to himself, "Too late! Too late! By then it'll be too damned late!"

Kirk could take no more of this. Roughly he turned McCoy round to face him. "For God's sake, Bones, what is it you can't - or won't - tell me?" A cold fear suddenly gripped his heart. "It's Spock, isn't it. What's happened? Damn you, Bones, tell me! That's an order!"

The brutal words shook McCoy out of his reverie. He raised tired eyes to his Captain's face and in a dull voice answered, "If we don't get Spock to a Starbase hospital within two days, three at the outside, then we'll be too late. He's slipping, Jim, slipping fast, and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

Now Kirk understood McCoy's attitude. Spock - his friend - would be dead within three days if... No! He couldn't let it happen; he wouldn't let it happen. There must be something they could do. He voiced his thoughts aloud.

"Isn't there anything at all you can do?" He felt like a drowning man, desperately clutching at straws. "The Vulcan healing trance..."

Wearily, McCoy shook his head. "The attack happened too quickly, Jim. He used ~~up~~ what energy he had left in order to remain conscious until he was brought back here. Thus, he didn't have the strength he needed to initiate the healing trance." McCoy turned away, adding, "If he comes through this, he'll have to do it on his own."

"No, Bones."

McCoy stiffened, and turned slowly, half expecting another outburst of near hysteria. But none came. Kirk's face was quiet, controlled.

"What do you mean - no?"

"Just that. Spock is going to see this through, but he won't have to do it alone. I shall be with him. Somehow, don't ask me how, I'm going to see that he lives. I will not stand by and watch him die!" And with that, he turned on his heel and walked into sickbay.

Kirk walked silently to Spock's bedside. Nurse Chapel was there, holding Spock's hand in a very unprofessional way.

"Nurse Chapel."

She started at the sound of Kirk's voice, and, replacing Spock's hand on the bed, tried to hide her confusion and anxiety behind a mask of cool professionalism. Only the faint trembling of her hands betrayed her true feelings.

"It's all right, Nurse - I'll stay with him now."

Christine nodded - she couldn't trust herself to speak - and moved towards the door. She was halted by Kirk saying, "Oh - and Nurse - thank you."

Two words. But they meant that he knew, and understood. Quietly, she left the two friends together.

And so the lonely vigil began. For two days the lonely figure of the Captain could be seen haunting sickbay, not leaving Spock's side for an instant, unless it was absolutely necessary. And then only for short periods when McCoy ordered him to eat or rest. The Doctor was clearly worried about Kirk - the strain was beginning to take its toll, and the last thing McCoy wanted was another patient

on his hands.

Kirk did not welcome the periods of enforced rest. Not that he could sleep much, anyway. Ever since Spock had been brought back on board, his rest periods had been troubled by dreams - and always the same dream. He could see Spock in the distance, but he was always too far away. No matter how hard Kirk tried to reach him, there was always something holding him back, some invisible force restraining him. Spock needed him - he was calling for his help - and he couldn't go to him! Kirk struggled wildly, but it was a futile gesture; he shouted his friend's name - "Spock! Spock!" and awoke to the sound of his own voice ringing in his ears.

Freeing himself from the sheet in which he had become entangled, he wearily dragged himself from the bed, showered, dressed and made his way back to sickbay.

There was still no change. The readings on the monitor above Spock's head were low, dangerously low. Spock lay unmoving, his face ashen, just the faint rise and fall of his chest being the only indication that he still possessed a tenuous hold on life. Kirk sat down in his chair at the side of the bed and, leaning over, hesitantly took Spock's hand in his own. Perhaps the physical contact would help him transfer some of his own strength, and will to live, to Spock. Then he settled back to wait...and hope...and think.

And Kirk had plenty of time to think during the long, dark hours which followed, while he waited for a sign, any sign, that Spock was going to regain consciousness. Memories flashed before his eyes - the new worlds they had visited; the adventures they had shared; the numerous occasions they had saved each other's life. Kirk could barely remember a time when Spock had not been by his side, always there to provide help and support with a soft word, a subtle gesture. Over the years their friendship had grown, and with it, loyalty and trust. A bond had developed between the two men which did not have to be expressed in words. Mutual respect had become mutual understanding.

The life of a Starship Captain is often a lonely one; no man know this better than Kirk - and being an outsider himself, Spock knew this, could understand the loneliness. There was nothing one would not do for the other; Kirk knew that Spock would follow him to hell and back, if necessary, with no questions asked; and Spock knew that if ever he was in any danger, Jim Kirk would always be there to help.

Looking at the still form, Kirk could not imagine a future without Spock. Now that he was in danger of losing the one person who mattered so much to him, Kirk began to realise just how much he had come to depend on the Vulcan. If Spock died, Kirk did not know if he could carry on as efficiently the work they had started together. He knew that with Spock's death, a part of himself would die.

"Give me a sign, Spock - just one small sign that you haven't given up," he murmured through half closed lips. But there was no sign; the familiar features remained impassive.

Kirk was growing desperate. There must be something he could do, yet he felt so helpless and inadequate. Spock needed his help, and somehow Kirk had to find a way of providing that help.

There was one chance. Often in the past, the Vulcan had mind-melded with Kirk, and this had helped to deepen the bond which already existed between them. If Kirk could, somehow, reach into Spock's subconscious, there was a chance, just a slim chance, that he might trigger off some response. It was worth trying - anything was better than just sitting waiting...hoping...praying...

Slowly, Kirk raised Spock's hand and gently laid it against his own face, as Spock had done so many times in the past in order to initiate the mind-link. Then he used his own strength to will Spock to live, trying to communicate his own fight for survival lest Spock slip away from him forever. Slowly Kirk began to talk. There was a slim hope that the sound of his voice would strike a chord deep

within Spock's memory. He talked until he was almost hoarse, recounting incidents and events from the past - to no avail. The ashen face was still...there was no flicker of movement.

Kirk felt his eyes closing involuntarily...he was tired, so dreadfully tired. But he had to have one more try. If only he could succeed, if only he could break through that barrier into Spock's subconscious; if only... So many 'if onlys'.

Kirk tightened his grip on Spock's hand and almost shouted, "Damn you, Spock, fight! Where's that stubborn Vulcan will of yours? You can't give up - I won't let you. I can't sit by and watch the best First Officer in Starfleet give up the will to live. Nor can I sit by and watch the best friend a man could have, one whom I'd be proud to call brother, slip away from me. I need you, Spock; I need you alive and at my side, not just a long-remembered memory. I want to help you, but I don't know how. All I know is that I need you... I need you, Spock..."

Tired out, drained of emotion, Kirk fell into a fitful sleep, the words "I need you" dying on his lips.

Kirk awoke to someone shaking his shoulder urgently, and a familiar voice calling his name.

"Jim!"

He felt stiff and cramped. His right hand, still resting on Spock's felt drained of blood. He tried to move it, to start the circulation, but as he did so, Spock's grip tightened - the long, lean fingers refused to let him go!

Hope rising, Kirk looked to McCoy for confirmation and saw the once-worried face now creased with smiled. McCoy nodded. "You've done it, Jim. Take a look at the monitor."

Kirk looked. He couldn't believe what he saw. The readings, which until a short while ago, had been so very low, were now normal - normal for a Vulcan, that is.

"But how?" he managed to stammer.

"I don't know, Jim. You must have done something to give Spock the strength he needed to fight for his life - faith, need, love - call it what you will. Your own strength of purpose has carried you through this, and that inner strength communicated itself to Spock at a time when he needed your help the most. He was counting on you, Jim, even though he probably didn't realise it at the time - and you came through; you didn't fail him. You didn't give up."

Overjoyed, Kirk wanted to laugh and cry at one and the same time, as realisation dawned; Spock was going to live. He felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Now, at last, after the long, dark days, there was light at the end of the tunnel. Suddenly the future did not seem so grim and hopeless. Tomorrow. He could say the word with confidence and renewed hope. So many tomorrows filled with friendship, companionship and understanding.

He glanced at Spock's face - colour was returning. Slowly, it was true, but nevertheless it was returning. Spock seemed at peace, as though he had just fallen into a deep sleep. Kirk sat back, relief flooding through him, and allowed himself to relax for the first time in hours.

He looked at McCoy. "He will be all right now, won't he, Bones?" He couldn't quite believe that the miracle for which he had prayed for so long had really happened, and he still needed reassurance from McCoy.

The Doctor smiled. "Yes, he'll be fine. He just needs more rest; but when he wakes up, he'll be as good as new. You wait and see. It won't be the first time his 'superior' Vulcan physiology has got the better of me." McCoy laughed, the first laugh Kirk had heard in hours, days. Then he sobered, eyeing Kirk anxiously. "Speaking of rest - isn't it time you got some sleep yourself? You've hardly slept at all since this started."

Kirk looked at the peacefully sleeping form of his friend. "I'd rather stay here, Bones, if it's all the same to you."

"No, it's not all the same to me. Spock's out of danger. You know that he's going to be all right, and that there's nothing more you can do at the moment. It's high time you started thinking of yourself now. I don't want you cracking up."

"But Bones - "

"Jim, you may be the Captain of this Starship, but in sickbay I give the orders. Now, off to bed with you - this instant!"

Reluctantly, Kirk got to his feet, stretched, and moved slowly towards the door. He stopped. "Promise me you'll call if..."

"Out!"

"All right - all right - I'm going - I'm going - " Grinning, Kirk escaped before McCoy became really angry.

The Doctor watched the retreating form of his Captain and chuckled quietly to himself. One of these days, he thought, those two friends of mine will be the death of me. They're both as stubborn as old mules. But for all that, I wouldn't change them for the universe.

The persistent bleeping of the intercom aroused Kirk from his thoughts. He leaned over and pressed the appropriate switch. "Kirk here."

"Sickbay, Jim." McCoy's voice penetrated the quietness. "I think it's time you..."

"I'll be right there." Kirk leaped from the bed, showered, hurried into his clothes and was on his way in no time at all.

He paused for a moment outside the door to sickbay to collect his thoughts, still his rapidly beating heart. Then, from within came the sound of the familiar well-loved voice he had thought never to hear again.

"But Doctor, I can assure you I am perfectly well now, and I insist that I be allowed to return to my duties and - "

McCoy's voice cut in, firm, insistent. "If anyone does any insisting around here it will be me. You'll return to duty when I pronounce you fit, and not a moment before. You need at least another three days in bed."

"But Doctor - "

McCoy raised his hands in the air, a gesture of total exasperation. "What's the matter with everyone around here? No-one listens to a word I say." He turned at a sound behind him. "Oh, Jim - thank goodness. Maybe you can knock some sense into that thick head of his..."

During the exchange Kirk had slipped silently into the room. Now he stood just inside the door, his gaze firmly fixed on the friend whom, hours before, he thought he might lose forever.

McCoy had fallen silent. His gaze switched from Kirk to Spock then back again. He cleared his throat. "Yes - well, if you two will excuse me, I've got some work to catch up on...and I guess you two have a lot to talk about. I'll see you both later." On the way out he paused at Kirk's side. "Fifteen minutes, Jim, no more. He's still not as strong as he would have us believe and I don't want him overdoing it at this stage." Kirk nodded mutely. Before leaving, McCoy looked across at Spock. "It's good to have you back, Spock - it really is." Then he was gone. The entire incident had upset him far more than he was prepared to admit.

Once again, the two friends were left alone. Now that the moment for which Kirk had been praying for so long had finally come, he felt hesitant, unsure of

himself. There was a lump in his throat which no amount of swallowing could remove. He couldn't trust himself to speak. He stood for a long moment, unable to move.

Spock made the first move. Slowly, he held out his hand. "Jim."

Just that - nothing more; but it was more than enough for Kiri. Silently, he moved to his friend's side and clasped the proffered hand warmly in his own. "Welcome back, Spock." His voice, almost breaking, sounded strange to his ears.

Dark eyes filled with warmth locked with the hazel eyes and a look of complete understanding passed between them.

"Thank you, Jim."

"For what?"

"For bringing me back; for giving me the strength I needed to fight; for being there when I needed your help. It would have been so easy to give up, to stop fighting. You gave me the will to live. I sensed...no. I felt you...trying to communicate your strength to me. It was your need, Jim which gave me the strength to fight back.

Kirk was visibly stunned. "So I did reach you - I had no way of knowing. All I knew for sure was that you were slowly slipping away from me and that I had to do something to bring you back. There was only a slight chance that I'd be able to reach you - thank God that I did."

Kirk paused. There was so much to say, to explain. Was now the time? "Spock... Your friendship has come to mean more to me than words can express. When I realised what could happen...I knew that if you died...then a part of me would die with you. I remembered what Edith Keeler said, that your place would always be by my side, and until now I've always taken that fact for granted. I've known that I could always count on your loyalty and support, whatever the situation - that has been tested so many times in the past. But this time... This time it was different. When you were brought back here and I saw what had happened to you, when I realised that this time there was a distinct possibility that you might die, I couldn't face it. So I summoned every ounce of strength I could muster and somehow, don't ask me how, I willed you to live. I hardly dared to hope that I'd succeed."

Spock's grip tightened on Kirk's hand. "It did work, Jim, and for that I thank you." A smile fluttered about his lips. "Thank you... It seems such an inadequate way to say what I really mean. But I cannot express myself in words as easily as you...too many years of hiding my emotions, suppressing my Human side, always appearing to be cool and logical... All this cannot be changed overnight. But I think you know how I feel, and what I am trying to say. It is obvious that the bond between us is far greater than either of us ever imagined, and for that I will always be grateful. I could not begin to suspect the depth of your feelings - I could not know for sure - now, I think I do know."

Spock fell silent. Both men sat, enjoying the companionship which came so readily and easily to them both.

This time it was Kirk who broke the silence. "There's an old Earth saying which..." He stopped as Spock's eyebrows began to rise. Was there just a hint of amusement on the familiar features? "I know - you're always teasing me about my 'old' sayings, but I think this one is rather appropriate for the occasion. 'A friend in need...'"

"...is a friend indeed'," finished Spock. "Yes, Jim. I, too, have heard that saying, and it is one that has indeed been put to the test over the past few days."

"Well, I, for one, don't want to put it to the test again; at least, not for a very long time." Kirk glanced anxiously at his friend's face. Spock was beginning to look tired, drawn; the strain was beginning to show, although Spock was trying hard to conceal it. Bones was right; he still needed rest, and much as Kirk wanted to stay, it was Spock's welfare that mattered the most at this time.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. "It's time I left and let you get some sleep. Bones was right, you know - you're not as strong as you'd have us believe. Your system has taken one hell of a shock and you're going to need time to get over it. Much as I want you back on the bridge - and at my side - I don't want you rushing things. Listen to what Bones has to say, Spock - he's as concerned about you, in his own way, as I am." He paused, and continued thoughtfully. "We'll talk some more tomorrow. We've our whole future in front of us, and it's filled with tomorrows. I think we can afford to give up a little of our time now, don't you?"

Spock nodded, and settled back on his pillows as Kirk prepared to leave.

"Jim." The voice was soft, quiet, with just a hint of emotion. "There's just one more thing..."

Kirk paused in the doorway. "Yes?"

"Thank you for being here...and for being you."

Kirk turned and fled before he could make a complete and utter fool of himself.

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DESPERATION by Susan Meek

He can feel their eyes on his back,  
The heat of the gaze as palpable  
As that of the fire  
That will soon consume them all  
In its hot embrace.

He is a creature of restraint.  
He does not sweat, he does not panic.  
He knows that all life must end sometime  
And that accepting the inevitable  
Is the logical course of action.  
And yet...

Though his own life is not important,  
There are those others...  
Humans...  
They are his first command;  
His responsibility.  
But logic has failed him.  
It offers no other alternatives...

Except perhaps...

His hand reaches out,  
But falters.  
The battle of the dual heritage  
Had never been waged so strongly inside his heart -  
Whether to risk all in a last desperate gamble,  
Or to accept death with stoic dignity.

Yet still he can feel them,  
Watching, waiting, hoping beyond hope.  
Through their Captain, they have learned to expect  
The miracle escape, the last-minute snatch  
From the hand of death.

Suddenly his image is there,  
Strong and clear;  
Then, in the instant between one heartbeat and the next  
Logic fuses with deepest instinct;  
A moment of intuition is born.

The switch is thrown.

+++++



INTERROGATION by Susan Meek

"This way, Vulcan."

As Spock was pushed roughly through a doorway by one of the Klingon guards, his instinctive response was to struggle or to hit out. He quickly smothered it; even though, with his strength, he could easily have dealt with both of them, it would be pointless. The aim of this deception was to prove that he was Spock, Vulcan trader, passive and harmless to the Klingons; not the First Officer of the Enterprise.

With what little time he had, he had been trying to prepare his mind for what was to come. Several months ago, when the Enterprise had called at Starbase 4, there had been rumours of the Klingons possessing some new kind of interrogation device; stories of one of the Fleet's top intelligence operatives, returned from a Klingon-occupied planet...mindless, babbling like a child.

Spock knew that this was not going to be easy. His command training would help, but he suspected that he would be forced to draw on every ounce of his Vulcan abilities to see him through.

"In here." They had arrived at an office, smaller than Kor's; like his, without adornment, functional only. "Inquisitor Kerval, the Commander wishes this man interrogated."

The Klingon who regarded Spock from the other side of his desk was typically swarthy and bearded. But there was a glitter of ruthlessness in his eyes, like the glint of cold steel, that was not present even in Kor's.

"A Vulcan..." Kerval smiled a cold smile at him. "Now what would you be doing here, my Vulcan friend? Spying for the Federation?"

Spock looked at the opposite wall. "The reasons for my presence here have already been explained to Commander Kor."

"He said he was a merchant," the Lieutenant offered, laughing.

"Really?" Kerval smiled his loathsome smile. "Well, we shall see, we shall see." He rose and came round the desk towards him. "I have heard much about Vulcan strength, mental discipline..." He put one hand on Spock's shoulder, seemed to be feeling the strength in the muscles beneath the thin cloth. Held tightly between the two guards, the Vulcan could do nothing. "It would be entertaining to test those limits." The voice was velvet-smooth, the hand moving down Spock's body almost like a caress. "An interesting change from the sheep we have to deal with on this backwater planet."

Without warning, Kerval drove an iron-hard fist into Spock's abdomen. Involuntarily, the Vulcan gasped, but he did not allow any flicker of pain to appear in his eyes, or expression cross his face.

"So. Perhaps there is some truth in the stories. Almost a pity that the mind-sifter dispenses with the need to use the..." Kerval grinned "...old methods." He turned to the guards. "Bring him."

The room they entered was bare but for the chair at the far end and the control panel set into the wall beside it. The chair had an attachable helmet which obviously would be swung down on the victim's head; various electrodes, straps to hold the victim in place. It seemed pretty much the standard equipment that he had encountered for such purposes on other occasions. One could not, however, judge by appearances...

As Spock was strapped in, he offered no resistance. Kerval's manner became distinctly businesslike.

"All that is required is that you tell the truth, Vulcan. Otherwise it will be to your detriment. We always get the truth - one way or another." He turned to the Lieutenant, whose hand was poised on a dial. "Begin."

The sensations were, at first, only a discomfort, like a tingling irritation

on the surface of his mind. Spock had already withdrawn his true thoughts behind a mental screen; what he revealed would be what he wanted the Klingons to see.

The questions began. "What is your name, and your purpose here?"

"I am Spock. I am a trader, dealing in Kovas and trillium."

"Indeed. Do you think you will make a good turn-over on Organia, Spock?"

"The prospects do not appear optimistic, since the arrival of your Fleet."

Kerval laughed. "So you do not like the Empire's presence on Organia?"

"It would be both pointless and illogical to pretend enthusiasm for your presence here. I am a national of a Federation planet caught in a situation where warfare could break out at any minute. Your presence here is disrupting the trade contracts I had hoped to negotiate. However, I can see no alternative but to accept the situation.

"Oh? You don't intend to...do anything about it?"

"Do anything?" Spock hoped his expression was sufficiently blank.

"Resistance. Inciting the natives with revolutionary ideas. You are clearly no fool, Merchant Spock; you know the kind of thing I mean."

"Such action would not be logical. The Klingon force here is too large. Any such local resistance would be crushed immediately. Also, I am a Vulcan. We live by the ways of peace. I have no wish to be involved in any kind of military operation that could lead to violence."

Kerval smiled, and said smoothly, "Fine principles. Fine, weak-kneed, cowardly Federation principles. But every animal, no matter how passive, can turn dangerous when its livelihood is threatened. And your livelihood is being threatened, Mr. Spock."

"True. But there is little I can do about the matter. Any resistance against such overwhelming odds would be totally illogical."

"A prudent viewpoint, Mr. Spock. Very wise. And how very convenient for you, a Federation national, to be on Organia just as we arrive." He nodded to the Lieutenant. "Force two."

Spock felt as though tendrils of fire were creeping through his mind. It took all his control to keep his face blank. Kerval was shouting now. "How did you get here? Where is your transport?"

"I was deposited here by a Vulcan ship in which I hold joint shares with a group of other merchants. I had hoped to conduct some business here, and be picked up by them at a later date. With the Klingon occupation of this sector, that will not now be possible."

"No! I can see that business has taken a turn for the worse." The Klingon's laughter was hearty - and malicious. It stopped and Kerval continued, sotto voce, "Now, just tell us about your side-line of spying for the Federation..."

The questions continued, endlessly, it seemed. Sometimes the same thing, over and over again; about himself, his business, his attitude to the Klingons; sometimes the occasional unexpected query, designed to confuse him. There was no let up, either in that or the force inside his mind, which Kerval had relentlessly turned up to Force three.

Spock was given good reason to be grateful for his childhood decision to choose the Vulcan way. Only his early training and life-long practise of mental control helped him to hang on to his sanity. By now a Human would have been babbling his inmost secrets. Pain had become his whole existence as the mind-sifter's ravaging force pounded against his mental barriers. So far he had been able to maintain the facade, but for how much longer?

Kerval came over and stood in front of him; looked with amusement at the sweat standing out on Spock's forehead. "Not particularly pleasant, is it, our little machine? It can literally rip a man's mind apart; destroy his sanity.

You wouldn't like to have that fine logical mind of yours taken apart simply because you are hiding something from me, would you, Spock?" The voice was dangerously soft.

"I have nothing to conceal from you." The calm front was becoming more and more difficult to maintain.

"I am not quite convinced of that. Force four, Lieutenant. Now tell me again..."

It was agony. Beyond anything he had ever known. Wave on wave of force that came crashing in, threatening to break in upon the tight kernel in his mind where his true personality lay curled in upon itself. From this strange vantage point it seemed that part of him watched with an odd detachment the Vulcan merchant called Spock who told Kerval about his business, his home on Vulcan, his fears of losing business, of being unable to support his family honourably in his chosen profession... Another part of him was fighting a desperate battle.

He was a Vulcan; able to control. He must not succumb to this.

His mind was fire; a hot, engulfing flame that demanded truth...

He was a Starfleet officer. He had a duty...

Kerval's voice was an instrument of torture in itself; one minute harsh and demanding, the next, coaxing, enticing with offers of release in exchange for the truth. The truth... It would be so very easy...

No! He was a Starfleet officer...and he owed a duty to his Captain. Jim... Kirk's image sprang into his mind; hazel eyes regarding him with open, expectant trust. If he revealed his true identity, Jim also would be captured. He too might be subjected to this. And that, Spock knew, despite everything, must not, could not be allowed.

The pressure was becoming intolerable...but he held the image of Kirk in his mind, clung to it, almost, as he struggled to keep his mental shields from buckling. And it seemed to him that it was this that was the thing, when all else had gone, that kept his resolve not to succumb. But if this kept up, not even that would be enough. He would taste insanity. Death would be preferable...

And then, without warning, the pressure ceased. He was being unstrapped by the guards, and, as if from a great distance, heard Kerval's voice. "Enough. No man who is lying could resist that pressure. You may take him back to the Commander."

As he stood, swaying a little with reaction, he felt the Inquisitor's gaze on him, still vaguely suspicious. But for Kerval to admit that he might not have got the full truth out of Spock would have been to admit that the Klingons' prestigious new device was fallible. And Kerval had no wish to do that, because it would also reflect upon him...

"Farewell, Spock of Vulcan. Do not give us any cause to have dealings with you again."

"I can assure you, Inquisitor, I have no wish to do that."

The guards took him out. He was almost grateful to be held between them; his limbs felt weak as jelly; his stomach churned with nausea. But he did not allow any weakness to show; he did not intend to allow the Klingons any further ammunition against them.

This was over; but there was worse to come. He and Kirk were Starfleet officers, honour-bound to disrupt the Klingon occupation as much as possible, no matter what the odds were against them.

By the time they arrived back at the Commander's office, his features were schooled once more into impassivity. He must appear to be strong, calm. Kirk would need him and his strength.

Whatever Kirk needed...he would be there to give.

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