

FULL

a *STAR TREK*
fanzine

CIRCLE

PAT

MITCHELL

F U L L C I R C L E

by

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FULL CIRCLE

The Enterprise was operating under sealed orders from Starfleet. Even Captain James T. Kirk didn't know the location co-ordinates of their destination. These had been programmed into the computer in the form of a coded message from Starfleet Command. All Kirk knew was that he was to transport twelve scientists from Starbase 14 to the top secret space station which was located 'somewhere near the Klingon border'; a space station code named K-1. The station was strategically located so that any new moves within the Empire would be immediately detected and dealt with accordingly. The Federation couldn't risk its location falling into enemy hands, consequently only four people knew the co-ordinates. Even the computers knew only the co-ordinates, not what those co-ordinates contained.

Kirk hated acting under sealed orders, particularly when they were sealed even to him. It made him feel as if his ship were no longer his own. In frustration he jabbed a button on his command chair arm, and spoke into the intercom.

"Scotty, are those scientists aboard yet?"

"No, sir. They're due within the next ten minutes."

"Let me know the moment they arrive. This hanging around is getting on my nerves."

Chief Engineer Scott grinned. He knew the feeling well. "Aye, sir. I'll let you know."

"Thank you. Kirk out." He turned in his chair to face the science station, and addressed his Vulcan First Officer. "Mr. Spock. Have the co-ordinates been fed into the computer?"

"Yes, sir. We can depart once the scientists arrive."

Kirk left his chair and went to stand by his friend. "Spock," he began, his voice subdued so that only the Vulcan could hear, "isn't there any way we can get at those co-ordinates? I'd feel a lot happier if we knew where we were going."

Spock raised a disapproving eyebrow. "Captain, sealed orders cannot be obtained by taking the computer to pieces." He looked around to make sure no-one else was listening, then added, "Besides, I have tried."

"Spock, I'm surprised at you!" he exclaimed in mock disgust, then he smiled. "It's not only Humans who have a strong sense of curiosity, is it?" He looked round the bridge but everyone suddenly seemed very engrossed in their work. "Well, I guess we'll find out soon enough."

Just then, Scotty called from the transporter room. "I've beamed the scientists and their equipment aboard, Captain. Ensign Rogers is showing them to their quarters now. We're ready to go when you are."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott." He turned to his helmsman. "Take us out of orbit. Warp factor four, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk returned to his chair and snuggled back into it, a satisfied smile lighting up his hazel eyes. At last they were under way. He wondered how long it would take them to reach their destination. Deciding that there was only one way to find out, he turned to Spock.

"Mr. Spock, ask the computer if it's allowed to tell us how long our journey will take."

Spock turned to his computer and fingered several buttons. Finally, he turned to face Kirk. "At our present speed we should arrive in 60.5 days, Captain. That is, assuming as incur no major course changes during that time."

Kirk nodded in acknowledgement and groaned. Sixty days of forced inactivity -- it was going to be one dull mission. This was a starship, not a ferry... Sighing, he turned to his bridge crew.

"Well, I suggest we make the most of the next few weeks. Things could get pretty lively once we reach our destination - wherever that is."

The Klingon commander looked sternly across the desk at his second-in-command. "Do you have the report from our informant at Starfleet Headquarters?"

"Yes, your Excellency. A subspace message was sent to the Enterprise three solar days ago. Their mission is top secret; they are to take a number of scientists to a place called K-1. We believe this to be a new Federation base, possibly a space station. The Enterprise is now in orbit around Starbase 14. We have been unable to discover the co-ordinates of K-1."

"Then the Enterprise must be followed...at a discreet distance, of course. We must know the co-ordinates before they reach K-1. The nature of their mission suggests some kind of defence system. We must determine its nature and effect. You and Captain Krevol will take the Conqueror and discover the location of K-1."

"Yes, your Excellency."

"And Karlov...failure will not be tolerated. I trust you understand the implications of that?"

"Indeed, sir." He saluted briefly and left.

Seven days later, Karlov contacted the Klingon base. "Commander, it may prove impossible to track the Enterprise to K-1. It is executing evasive manoeuvres and its course is erratic. We are forced to follow at maximum sensor range. However," he added quickly, "the Enterprise will come within range of a Federation Colony planet called Eyos Alpha, if it continues within the course deviations it has set. We could force them to the planet and try to get the co-ordinates from Captain Kirk."

"An excellent idea. See that you do not fail. I have been informed that our spy at Starfleet Headquarters has been found and eliminated. There will be no further information from that source. It is now imperative that you get the co-ordinates from the Enterprise."

"I shall do everything in my power to obtain the information you require, your Excellency."

"See that you do."

As Kirk had predicted, it started out as a very dull mission. However, after the first month things began to liven up. It began with a distress call picked up by Uhura, Chief Communications Officer.

"Have you located the source of the call, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked.

"I'm getting a fix on it now, sir... It's from Eyos Alpha."

"That's a colony planet, isn't it?"

"It contains a research complex and, if our records are correct, fifteen Earth scientists and colonists transported there to open up the planet six solar years ago," Spock informed them.

Kirk turned back to Uhura. "Put the signal on audio, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

A burst of static followed, which gradually faded into a distress call. "This is Eyos Alpha. We have a virus outbreak which is destroying our food. We have little food left. If you can hear us, please help... This is Eyos Alpha..."

"Open a hailing frequency, Lieutenant."

"Hailing frequency open, sir."

Kirk addressed the speaker. "This is Captain Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. We have received your call and offer our assistance."

The automatic distress call was replaced by a very weary male voice. "Captain Kirk. Thank God. Can you get here within the next few hours? Our food has gone, destroyed by the virus."

Kirk looked across at Spock. "Two hours, sir."

Kirk addressed the speaker again. "We can be with you in two hours. Can you give us your co-ordinates?"

The co-ordinates were given and plotted into the computer. The Enterprise changed course. Presently, a blue/green planet about half the size of Earth appeared on the viewscreen.

"Looks peaceful enough," Kirk commented. "Mr. Spock, this virus - will it endanger the lives of the landing party?"

"Negative, Captain. It is a plant virus only."

"Very well. It shouldn't take long to evacuate the colonists. We pass close to Emial V on this course, don't we?"

"It is two solar days away, Captain."

"We can leave the colonists there and collect them on our return." He contacted Security. "This is the Captain. Prepare accomodation for the colonists. We will beam them aboard in two hours."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk got up and made his way to the turbolift. "Mr. Spock?"

Spock rose and followed him. They headed for Sickbay and explained the situation to Dr. McCoy.

"Do you want me in the landing party, Jim?" McCoy asked.

"No, Bones. I want you to choose a medical team to beam down. Your job is to set up medical facilities. They are undoubtedly starving and will need a great deal of care."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk turned to Spock. "Collect whatever equipment you think we'll need and meet me in the transporter room in thirty minutes."

"Yes, sir."

"Ready to energise, Captain," Transporter Chief Kyle informed them.

"Tell Scotty to give us two hours before getting worried, Mr. Kyle." Kyle nodded. "Energise."

The warmth of the Enterprise was replaced by the cool winds of Eynos Alpha. Kirk, Spock and the two medics scanned the area. There was no sign of a welcoming committee.

"Could they be dead already, Spock?"

"Unlikely, Captain. They may not have realised we are here."

Two large huts stood to their right. "Split up. You two check the nearest hut, Spock and I will check the other."

"Yes, sir." The medics set off, tricorders and medical bags in hand.

Kirk and Spock headed for the further hut. Spock had been scanning it, and as they approached, he said, "I'm getting strange readings from the hut, Captain. Some readings do not appear to be Human. The Human readings are very faint, sir."

"That's odd."

They had reached the hut door by this time and Kirk pushed it open cautiously with his foot. As it swung back, the sight that met their eyes made Kirk retch involuntarily.

"Oh my God," he whispered.

Mutilated bodies were strewn over the floor or slumped over furniture. Kirk swallowed hard, fighting his rising nausea.

"Spock," he muttered weakly, "what happened?"

"Unknown, Jim."

"They wouldn't inflict this upon themselves, would they? They knew we were coming." He turned away and walked into the sunlight.

"Let's go, Spock. We've arrived too late."

As they were leaving the building, a man staggered into view. He, too, was cut and bleeding. Kirk ran to him just as he collapsed, and cradled the man's head in his arms, gently

smoothing the long hair from the blood-stained face.

"What happened? Who did this to you?" he asked softly.

"A trap. I'm sorry...had no choice... No virus...Klingons wanted you... murdered us... Oh, I'm so sorry...so...sorry..." His head became heavy, and Kirk laid him gently on the ground.

"Very touching, Captain Kirk."

Kirk and Spock spun round to find themselves surrounded by Klingons.

Kirk slowly rose to his feet, revulsion written in his eyes. "Why?"

"We wanted to talk to you. They were in the way."

"But to murder...all those innocent people..."

"Save your pity, Captain."

"Where are my men?"

"Your men? Very foolish...tried to call your ship... We had to stop them."

"Why, you murdering -" Kirk lunged towards the nearest Klingon, but was grabbed and held by two others.

"Now, now, Captain. Anger won't bring them back."

Spock had stepped forward and the Klingon called out, "Hold the Vulcan. We don't need him."

Spock was seized and held firmly; he could only watch as the Klingon leader advanced on Kirk. Unexpectedly, the Klingon lashed out at Kirk, aiming a crushing blow to his stomach. Kirk was unprepared, and doubled over. He was brutally jerked upright by the two guards who held him.

"That is for your anger, Captain." The last word was spat out. "My name is Karlov. Remember it. We want a little information."

"You'll get nothing from me."

A fist connected with his jaw. He tasted blood.

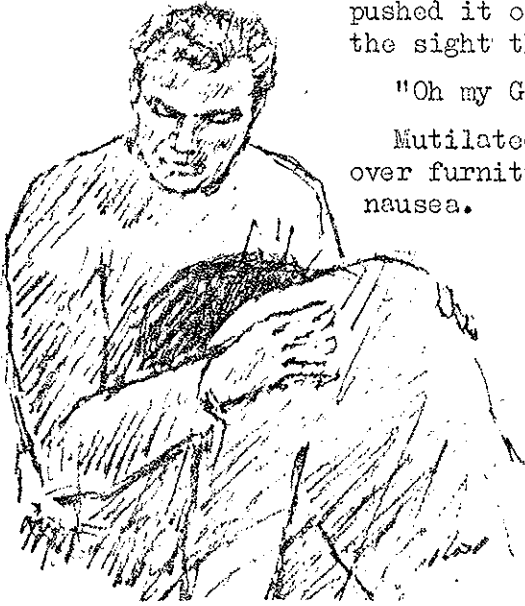
"We want to know the location of your new space station."

"I'm sure you do." Kirk laughed grimly.

"Don't get insolent with me, Kirk. What are the co-ordinates?"

"I don't know," he answered, honestly.

"I find that hard to believe. You are on your way there now."



"Then why not follow us?" Despite the pain in his stomach and jaw, he somehow managed to smile.

"We intend to arrive before the Federation, not after."

"You may not find that so easy to do - without the co-ordinates."

"Precisely, Captain - which is why you are going to give them to us."

"I do not know them."

That was answered with another vicious blow to his stomach. His vision blurred and he staggered forward.

/Jim!/
/

He saw Spock move forward and cried out mentally, hoping Spock would hear.
/Leave me, Spock. Don't move!/
/

An agoniser gun was levelled at his stomach. The Klingon waved it menacingly. "You don't need to be told the agony this would cause, Captain. We want the co-ordinates."

"I...told you...I don't...have...them."

Spock fought against his captors. "He's telling the truth. He doesn't know them!"

The Klingon whirled angrily. "Keep out of this, Vulcan. He'll tell us, sooner or later." Turning back to Kirk, he said, "Do you wish me to use this?"

Kirk couldn't answer for the pain.

"Are you going to tell me what I want to know, or must I use this to loosen your tongue?"

Kirk managed to raise his head and stared levelly at the Klingon. There was a long moment during which neither spoke, then Kirk said, "I have nothing to say."

The Klingon smiled coldly. "Then you leave me no alternative." The agoniser exploded and Kirk fell, writhing in pain.

"JIM!"

With a strength born of fear and anger, Spock escaped his captors and rushed the Klingon. Kirk heard his scream as the agoniser fired again. He saw Spock fall, then, mercifully, blackness engulfed him.

McCoy paced the bridge area behind the command chair, alternately glaring at Scotty, the viewscreen and the floor. Finally he spun round to face Scotty, who had the con.

"Scotty, they've been down there nearly three hours. We've had no word from them. They don't respond to our calls. They must be in trouble."

"Perhaps."

"Are you just going to sit there?"

"They could be engrossed in their work, Doctor. The people down there sounded pretty desperate; it's possible they've struck a problem that's taking longer than expected. They may have put their communicators down and are out of range."

"Do you believe that?"

"You're getting emotional, Leonard."

"And you're beginning to sound like that blasted Vulcan!" He looked down, regretting his words. "I'm sorry, Scotty. I guess you're just as worried as I am."

"Forget it. You're probably right." He swivelled the chair to face Uhura. "Try and contact them again, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

She tried three times, each time getting no reply. "I'm sorry, sir. No response on any channel."

"Right. Dr. McCoy, you, Ensign Roberts and Nurse Chapel had better beam down. See what's keeping them. Wear protective clothing in case the virus has affected them."

"Yes, sir." He smiled. "Thanks, Scotty."

The landing party materialised on the far side of the hut, and spread out to investigate the area. It was McCoy who discovered the massacre in the hut. He emerged looking deathly white. Then he heard Christine's shout. He rounded the hut to find her kneeling beside a writhing Spock, trying desperately to hold him still. She looked up as he approached at a run, fear clearly written across her tear-stained face. "Doctor - help him."

McCoy ran a tricorder over him then quickly injected him with a massive dose of painkiller. Very gradually the thrashing stopped and his face relaxed just a little. McCoy cradled Spock's head in his arms and looked across at Christine, a worried but puzzled expression on his face. He looked down at Spock again and what he saw caused a lump in his throat. There were tears in Spock's eyes.

"Spock...Spock - what happened?"

Spock opened his eyes and the saddest expression McCoy had ever seen crossed the Vulcan's face. He struggled to speak through the pain.

"Jim...is...dead."

His head lolled and he closed his eyes, unconsciousness claiming him at last.

McCoy and Nurse Chapel exchanged horrified glances. Christine bit her lip. McCoy looked down at Spock and rocked him gently. Savagely he whispered, "Find Rogers. Let's get out of here."

A thorough search of the area revealed no trace of Kirk, alive or dead. Reluctantly, the Enterprise had left orbit and continued on its course for K-1.

The crew was shattered by the news. Kirk dead, Spock in a coma... Suddenly the life had gone from the ship.

McCoy and Christine Chapel spent most of their time in Sickbay. They still had no idea what had happened on the planet. Only Spock knew, and he was barely alive. They had realised an agoniser had been used on him, and that meant Klingons. If Klingons were involved, that would also explain the massacre. Romulans used agonisers, but they were not butchers. But why should the Klingons attack the colony? This planet held nothing of value. And where was Kirk? If Kirk was dead as Spock said, where was his body? If he were alive, perhaps the Klingons held him prisoner. Yet Spock said he was dead. McCoy sighed. They really needed to talk to Spock. Days passed.

McCoy looked at the life readings above Spock's bed. They were all nearly normal; physically he was fully recovered, but mentally... He should no longer be in a coma. A sudden thought crossed McCoy's mind, sending a cold shiver down his spine. Suppose Spock had given up the will to live?

He reached over and took Spock's hand in his, squeezing it reassuringly. "Spock. Don't give up now. You'll pull through. We'll all have to manage without him." He couldn't bring himself to use Kirk's name, not yet. "Come on, Spock. Don't give up on us. We need you." Softer, "I need you, Spock. I can't lose both of you."

The door swished open behind him. He turned to see Christine enter the room. She looked across at him, expectantly. He shook his head and shrugged. "No change, Christine. Physically he's fine now. He should have come round... I don't know what else to do."

Christine smiled sadly at him and, walking over, laid a hand on his arm. He looked bone-weary and despondent beyond words. "I'll stay with him, see what I can do. Perhaps we could play tapes to him - music, voices, his family. It might bring him round."

McCoy nodded, defeat and fear written on his face. She squeezed his arm gently. "Don't give up yet, Doctor. He'll pull through. He just needs time... Try to get some rest. I'll stay with him."

He smiled back, understanding her concern. Slowly he left the room.

Turning her attention to Spock, she pulled up a chair and sat down. She hesitated momentarily then took his hand in hers. She knew he avoided her and shunned physical contact with anyone but right now he needed something to link him to reality. Besides, she thought ruefully, if he objects so much, he can just wake up and tell me so! When she spoke, her voice sounded very loud in the quiet room.

"Spock, you must wake up and tell us what happened. It's very important. You're the only one who can tell us what happened on Eynos Alpha. You must wake up!" No response. "Can you hear me, Spock? I wonder what's going on in your mind. You shouldn't be unconscious now, Spock. Why won't you wake up?" Suddenly she became irrationally angry as a thought struck her. "Are you willing yourself to die? Is that it? Has life got no meaning for you now the Captain's gone?" It had hurt to say that. Am I jealous? she thought as she continued. "Are you going to throw it all away, is that it? Do you think we won't miss you too? You have got friends, you know, more than you realise. Did you believe it was only the Captain who loved you and cared about you? What about Dr. McCoy? He can't take much more, Spock. How will he survive when you've both left him? We'll help you, Spock." She was pleading with him now, all her anger gone. "McCoy will help you, and so will I. You won't be so alone; it won't be so bad. Don't leave us, Spock."

Throughout her speech, Spock's face had remained impassive. Could he hear her? Did he want to? Sighing, she tried again.

Four days had gone by since they left Eynos Alpha. Spock had not responded to any of the tapes or to the constant procession of visitors who came daily to talk to him. Day after day he lay there, seemingly oblivious to the care and attention that was being lavished upon him.

Yet deep within his mind he was being haunted by dreams; dreams in which he had to watch helplessly as Kirk suffered. All the time he could hear cries for help, but could do nothing. If only he could wake up and get help! Then, more recently, voices had entered his dreams, soft, soothing voices urging him to wake. He had waited for the one voice he had longed to hear, but that voice never came. Trapped in this eternal nightmare, he struggled to wake...

The next morning, McCoy came to check on him. As usual, the readings showed normal. Gently, he shook Spock's shoulder.

"Wake up, Spock. Please wake up." No response. McCoy sighed wearily and shook his head. "I don't know what else to do, Spock. Perhaps if Jim were here, he'd know. If he were here, I don't suppose you'd still be in a coma..."

He turned away and walked slowly towards his office. Halfway there he heard a moan from the bed. He froze. Then he spun round to find Spock thrashing his arms and groaning. Unknown to McCoy, deep within Spock's mind he had heard a single, agonising scream from Jim Kirk, then emptiness. McCoy ran over to him and took hold of his shoulders, holding him down as best he could.

"Steady, Spock. Wake up - you're safe now. Calm down, steady..." Spock didn't seem to hear him and continued to mutter.

"Jim...got to...help...Jim..."

McCoy winced at the words, but he knew Spock had to be told the truth. "Spock.

Spock." He shook his shoulders, demanding attention. Very gradually Spock became still and his eyes opened and focused on McCoy. "Something...happened...to... Jim."

McCoy shook his head. "Spock. Listen to me. Jim is dead. Try to remember."

The words slowly reached Spock's mind and he closed his eyes against the reality. "No... No... Not Jim... Oh no..."

McCoy reached for his hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Spock."

Tears began to fall from the closed eyelids. McCoy looked on helplessly. "Oh Spock, don't cry. Please don't cry." Dear God, not that. He had only heard Spock cry once before and had never forgotten it. The sound of such unutterable loneliness had torn at his heart until he had found his own eyes misting over. He couldn't bear to go through that again.

Spock whispered, his eyes still closed, "Doctor, please leave me...I shall regain control...presently."

McCoy gratefully obeyed. As he closed the door behind him, Spock turned onto his stomach, hid his face in his arms and let the tears flow.

An hour later, Spock emerged from his private room and went to find McCoy. He found him in his office. Entering quietly, he stood before McCoy's desk, hands clasped behind his back, face impassive. McCoy looked up.

"You feeling better, Spock?" he asked quietly, concern softening his tone. Spock nodded once. "Sit down." McCoy waved a hand towards the chair. Spock studied it thoughtfully for a moment, then declined the offer.

"I would prefer to stand, Doctor." Keep it formal. Don't lose control. Not again.

McCoy nodded in understanding, and sighed. "Are you ready to tell me what happened on the planet?"

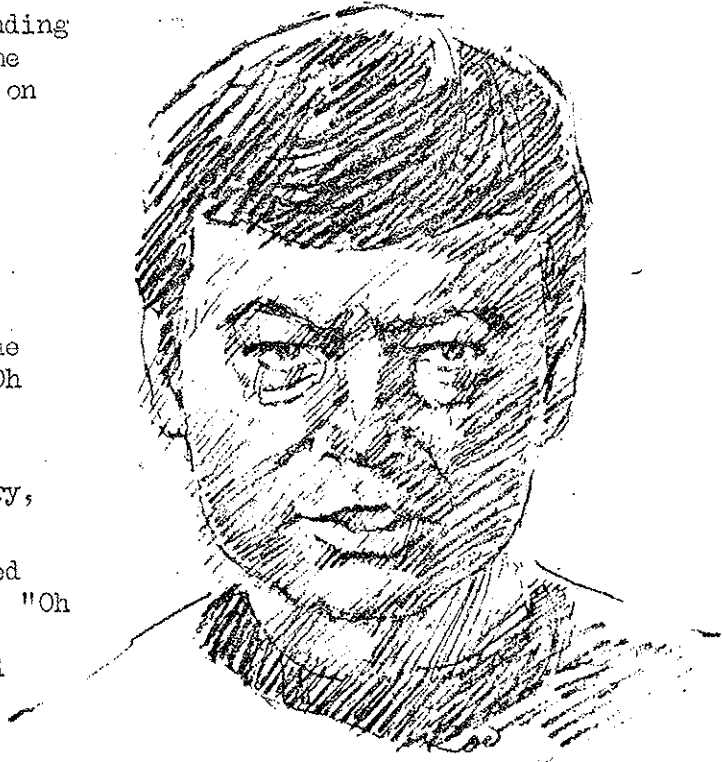
"Yes, Doctor." As ready as I'll ever be. Spock began his account of the false distress signal and the fact that the Klingons must have been waiting in orbit around the far side of the planet, knowing the Enterprise would pass that way. That was a fact that disturbed Spock. How did they know? He could recall every detail that had transpired that day as if it were burned into his memory. He knew he could never forget it, and if he ever came across Karlov again...

McCoy's voice brought him back from his reverie. "But Spock, surely the Captain would be more valuable alive. They thought he had the co-ordinates. Why should they kill him before they got their answer?"

"Jim told them he did not have the co-ordinates. I know he is dead."

"Suppose they took him to their ship after you'd been gunned down. How can you be so sure?"

"I am certain. That is enough, Doctor." Let me go. I cannot talk about it any more.



McCoy got up and walked round to stand by Spock. He deliberately refrained from resting a hand on his arm for he knew Spock would pull away. He looked sadly at the Vulcan, feeling the gulf between them widening.

"Spock, before all this, we were friends. Perhaps we refused to admit it to each other, but the facts are there. Now Jim's gone, don't build a barrier between us, don't block me out. We still have each other and we can see this through together. You might not need me, Spock, but right now I need you. I can't lose both of you." He paused and looked away as the Vulcan gritted his teeth more firmly together. "Please, Spock. If you know for sure Jim is dead, tell me. I need to know. I can't go on hoping." He could feel the tears stinging the back of his eyes. He turned away from Spock and moved a few paces away. A moment later he felt a hand on his shoulder. He bit his lip, but did not turn around.

"Bones... You have a right to know. Jim and I have linked minds on several occasions. There was a residual link existing between us from those times. That link has now gone."

McCoy nodded. He knew what it had cost Spock to tell him. "Thank you, Spock." He turned to face him then and looked up into the velvet brown eyes. The open expression touched him. For all your Vulcan training, you can't hide the pain, can you, Spock? "You need rest now, Spock. Come and see me tomorrow."

Spock nodded, and noticing McCoy's weary features, added, "We both need rest, Bones, if we are to face another day."

The lump in McCoy's throat stopped him from answering. He watched silently as Spock left the room.

The Enterprise was now only two days from K-1. Spock had logged Kirk's death, but because they were under radio silence - the risk of a message being intercepted was too great - Starfleet did not know of it yet. Spock had taken command after he left Sickbay until Starfleet could be contacted and another Captain assigned. He had considered applying for the Captaincy himself but there seemed little point. As he had often told McCoy, he had no wish to command. In the past, he had taken command knowing Kirk would soon be there to take over. But now...

Spock had not told McCoy that he intended leaving the Enterprise once the new Captain came aboard. He had received word from Vulcan that a research scientist was needed at the Vulcan Science Academy. At the time he had ignored the accompanying application form from his father. But now the prospect seemed surprisingly appealing. The Enterprise held too many memories for him, and for all McCoy had said, Jim Kirk had been the only person who truly understood him. He could never really relax with McCoy - their continual 'feuding' had seen to that - and he couldn't really take a sympathetic McCoy. He didn't need sympathy; he needed a friend. He needed Jim Kirk. He sighed. The Enterprise was no longer home. Vulcan seemed the only logical alternative. He would give it a try anyway. It wouldn't be easy living among Vulcans. Perhaps he would miss McCoy...

"Mr. Spock, sensors have picked up a vessel dead ahead. Range fifty thousand kilometres."

"The space station, Mr. Sulu?"

"Possibly, sir. From its size I would say it was too big to be a ship."

"Maximum magnification on the screen."

The viewscreen came to life, showing an irregular shaped dot dead centre. "That's as far as magnification will take us, sir."

Spock nodded and moved to the science station. He pressed several buttons, waited for a readout, then walked back to the command chair, taking up the position he always had, standing at its right. He rarely sat in it now. He watched the

growing blob for several seconds then contacted Security.

"Security here, sir."

"Have the scientists stand by to beam aboard the space station. We will arrive in one hour."

"Aye, sir."

The bridge crew watched in growing admiration as the full scale of K-1 became apparent. The space station was built like a huge bicycle wheel with a central sphere and numerous spokes radiating from it to contact with the outer rim. The whole structure revolved slowly, light from the stars dancing off its reflective surface.

As the Enterprise drew nearer, it became dwarfed by the structure.

"Assume orbit, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

Again Spock went over to the computer and ran through a specified systems check. "Oxygen level normal, gravity normal, life support systems functioning..." Satisfied that the station was habitable, he turned to Chekov.

"Any sign of Klingon activity, Mr. Chekov?"

Chekov scrutinised his instrument panel and radarscope. "Negative, Mr. Spock."

"Any sign of life within the space station?"

"No, sir."

"Very well. Continue scanning. If you see another vessel let me know immediately. I shall be in the transporter room."

When he reached the transporter room, he found Scotty and the scientists waiting for him. They greeted him formally.

"I have checked the station. Everything is in order. Are you ready to beam aboard?"

They nodded eagerly. Spock walked over to the transporter console and addressed the computer. "Computer."

"WORKING."

"This is Commander Spock. Check voice print."

"VOICE PRINT IDENTIFIED AND CONFIRMED."

"Tie beam-down co-ordinates of K-1 into the transporter console."

"CO-ORDINATES LOCKED IN."

Spock looked up. "Mr. Scott, you have five hours to review the station and ensure the scientists have all they need."

"Thank you, sir." Scotty's enthusiasm was hardly contained as he took his place on the transporter pad with the scientists.

When men and equipment had been installed on K-1, Spock returned to the bridge. He had wanted to see the station for himself, but now he would have to rely on Scotty's report. One senior officer had to remain on the Enterprise at all times during this mission.

He had put the Enterprise on yellow alert in case the Klingons decided to pay a visit, which meant he had to remain on the bridge, much as he longed for the privacy of his own quarters. Being unable to stand by the command chair for five hours, he reluctantly lowered himself into it. How he hated that chair! Every time he sat in it, he was reminded of who should rightfully be there. That chair, more than anything else, was Jim. He was thankful that he would not have to look at it for much longer.

Scott beamed back to the Enterprise with his logged report of K-1. He was

bursting with enthusiasm at the designs inside the station, and had wandered about the complex like a child at a fair.

Spock's sad expression brought him back to reality with a jolt. He'd never seen the Vulcan look so sad. Scotty handed him the tape, which he took absently, his eyes fixed on the view of the station.

"She's a beautiful piece of machinery, Mr. Spock. Very impressive inside, too."

"Indeed, Mr. Scott." He seemed about to add further comment; when he did not, Scotty said,

"Is something wrong, Mr. Spock?"

"No... No. I was merely reflecting. It is a pity Captain Kirk is not here to see it."

Scotty nodded sadly. "Aye, that it is, Spock. A great pity."

The space station was a week behind them when Spock received a reply to his application for research scientist on Vulcan. He had been accepted. The post was his as soon as he could get to Vulcan. The Enterprise was already on course for Starbase 9. He decided to leave then and make his way to Vulcan by passenger and freight ship. Starbase 9 was ten days away. It was going to be a long ten days.

Now he had definite plans for his future, he decided to break the news to McCoy. He was not looking forward to the task, for he knew McCoy would be hurt by his departure. He had come to depend on Spock a lot more since Jim had gone.

He made his way to sickbay.

McCoy was in his office reading the updates on medical technique when Spock entered. He took the form Spock handed him and read it through. It was a request for the medical examination required by the Vulcan Science Academy. McCoy read through several times, the implication in the form chilling him to the bone.

He's leaving. Oh God, he's leaving.

He looked up at Spock. "Why, Spock?"

"I cannot remain on this ship - not now." He couldn't meet McCoy's too-bright gaze and lowered his head.

"You still have a valuable job to do here, Spock."

"I can no longer concentrate on my work. My inattentiveness could result in an accident to a crew member or the ship. I will not be responsible for that."

"Then stay for me. You know I depend on you now, Spock. I've lost Jim - I don't think I could bear to lose you too."

"I have tried, Bones. It is because of you that I am still functioning with the efficiency I am. But I have tried to accept the situation, and I cannot. I must leave."

"What can I say to make you stay?" McCoy asked desperately.

"Nothing. My mind is made up. I must go."



McCoy turned on him angrily. "Are you sure it's your mind that's telling you to go, or your heart? Are you afraid to face up to your feelings, Spock? Did you really believe the Vulcan in you would be enough to stop the pain?"

Spock shifted his position but made no other reaction. He continued to stare fixedly at the floor. "Don't make this harder for me than it already is. Let us not argue. You are right - I am running away, but I have no choice. I cannot remain where there are so many memories."

McCoy sighed. Spock was right, too. He would run himself if only he had somewhere to go. "Very well. I won't make it harder for you, but I'm not going to deny that it will be tough without you. I'm going to miss you, Spock."

"And I you."

"Come and see me in the morning and I'll run your physical then."

Spock nodded once and left. As the door closed behind him, McCoy walked over to his desk and took from the drawer a bottle of brandy and a large glass.

* * * * *

Jim Kirk returned to consciousness very slowly. His first feelings were of a dull ache throughout his body and a numbing sensation in his left arm. He could not feel that arm at all. Fear gripped him as he turned himself over and examined it; still there, just numb. Sighing, he mentally checked his limbs for damage. He seemed unharmed. Gradually he focused his attention on his room. It was surprisingly clean and bright. The only breaks in the bare walls were the steel door, a tiny oval window and an intercom. Cautiously, he lifted his head; it ached abominably. Manoeuvring himself into a sitting position, he threw his legs over the side of the low bed and looked around. There was only the bed in the room. Flexing his arm, he wriggled his fingers experimentally; sensation was returning. He stood and walked over to the window. The stars were not familiar. Where was he? How far had he been taken? Why couldn't he remember what had happened? In fact, the only thing he could remember was his name. He must have amnesia. He groaned. That was all he needed.

Just then his cell door opened and Kirk came face to face with a Klingon. He frowned, but was prevented from speaking by the threat of the agoniser which was aimed unwaveringly at his head. He had no intention of tangling with that.

"Karlov wants to see you." The Klingon indicated the door with the end of the gun. Having little choice, Kirk left the room, closely followed by the Klingon. Outside, two more guards joined them and together they threaded their way along the maze of corridors to Karlov's room. One of the guards knocked on the door, which slid open. Kirk was pushed roughly into the room. The two guards positioned themselves just inside the door. Kirk quickly glanced round the room. Its function appeared to be medical... Finally he looked at the Klingon who was perched nonchalantly on the edge of a desk. The Klingon regarded Kirk closely, an expression of impending triumph written on his evil face.

"We meet again, Captain Kirk. I trust you remember me?"

"No," Kirk answered honestly.

Anger flashed across the Klingon's face, then as realisation dawned, a broad grin replaced it. "You don't remember? How splendid. Then you will not remember your poor First Officer or your beautiful ship. However - " the smile faded " - I trust you will remember the co-ordinates I want."

Kirk only heard three words. 'Poor First Officer'. Suddenly, memory came flooding back. The planet beam-down, the massacre and Spock. Spock was dead. A wave of utter sadness washed over him and he heard himself mumble, "My...First... Officer..." He stood transfixed while the images came back to him. Then he looked at the Klingon, his eyes darkening with anger.

"Karlov!"

Karlov nodded, smiling. Kirk clenched his fists, his voice deadly menacing. "You killed my First Officer. You killed Spock!" And he leaped at Karlov, his hands reaching for the Klingon's throat. "You killed him... You killed him..." he yelled over and over as he fought to squeeze the life from the struggling Klingon.

He did not hear the guard behind him. All he felt was a terrific, blinding pain in his skull as one of the guards brought the butt of his gun down on the Human's head. His limp body was left on the floor as the Klingon guards helped Karlov from the room.

Kirk became aware of two things as he regained consciousness several hours later. He was strapped onto something cold and hard, and his head felt as if it were being attacked by whole armies of sledgehammers. He opened his eyes cautiously and looked around. He was still in Karlov's room. He appeared to be strapped onto some kind of table. To his far left, computer banks whirred and hummed steadily. To his right was a bench containing row upon row of glass bottles filled with chemicals. He swallowed hard and, closing his eyes, he tried to relax. Images of Spock invaded his mind, too painful to bear and he was forced to open his eyes again. The one thing that really hurt was that Spock had died for nothing. Kirk didn't know the co-ordinates; killing Spock couldn't make him remember them. If only he'd taken security guards down in the landing party. The Klingons must have been positioned round the far side of the planet, shielded from their sensors. Spock had said the readings from the hut were not Human. Why hadn't he realised something was wrong? If only they'd called the ship and beamed down reinforcements... If only they'd been more cautious... If only it hadn't been Spock... If only...

Kirk tried desperately to interrupt his own chain of thoughts. He was saved from having to do so by Karlov, who breezed into the room and came to stand over him.

"Awake, I see."

Kirk moistened his lips and looked up at the Klingon. How he loathed the man. The strength of his hate startled Kirk. He had never before had such a desire to kill a man in cold blood, but if Karlov made just one mistake, or relaxed his guard for one moment, Kirk vowed to himself that that moment would be his last.

"How long have I been on your ship?" he asked, fighting to remain calm.

"Five days."

"Have I been unconscious all that time?"

"Either unconscious or delirious." There was anger and impatience in the Klingon's reply, Kirk noted with satisfaction. Obviously he had kept them waiting too long already.

But five days! Kirk could remember nothing between Eynos Alpha and his conversation with Karlov yesterday. Perhaps it was as well, he reflected grimly.

"Time is running out for you, Kirk. We must know the co-ordinates of the space station."

Kirk raised his eyes heavenwards. Not that again. How many times did they need telling? "I've already told you, I don't know them."

"And I told you I don't believe you."

"What you choose to believe does not alter the facts."

"Perhaps a little persuasion will loosen your memory."

"With all the persuasion in the galaxy, I can't tell you what I don't know."

"I think you're lying, Kirk. But we'll soon see." He walked over to the bench and took from it a steel band adorned with wires which were attached to the computer by a long lead. "Are you familiar with the mind-sifter, Captain?"

Kirk paled, instinctive fear showing in his eyes. The last time he had been subjected to the mind-sifter, he had barely escaped with his sanity. His rehabilitation had been long and painful. Spock had helped him through it that time... but now - He wasn't sure he could face it alone.

The band was slowly tightened round his head.

"This device has subtle differences to the old mind-sifter. It is altogether a more...satisfactory means of persuasion. Beyond a certain level, the speech centres of the brain are affected. It ensures complete secrecy for us. If you do not tell us what we want to know, you will not be able to tell anyone else." He smiled sadistically, remembering previous victims. "Yes, a most satisfactory device. Are you ready?"

Karlov attached the wire electrodes around Kirk's forehead and temples, then flicked a switch on the computer. Terror gripped Kirk as he felt the needle-sharp electrodes pierce his skin. He knew he was trembling and fought desperately to control it.

"The co-ordinates, Captain."

"I don't know them."

The tingling sensation increased, becoming painful, like thousands of needles entering his brain. "I said... I don't know them!"

"Then tell me what you do know about the station."

Kirk clamped his teeth together. He felt compelled to answer. The pain increased as he felt the electrodes probing his mind. He clenched his fists. Then he became aware of a sonic beam invading his mind. It became increasingly difficult to think about anything but the information the Klingons so badly wanted. He realised that if the torture grew worse, he would not be able to resist telling them the little he knew. He couldn't block the probes, he didn't have the ability.

The pain intensified and he heard himself cry out and felt his body arching up against the restraints.

"Tell me the information." Karlov's voice pounded in his brain, forcing the information out. To resist was an unbearable agony.

"No... No... I won't...tell...you..."

The sonics increased and Kirk knew he could resist no longer. "K-1 space station...twelve crew...stop Klingon...fleets... Edge of galaxy..."

"Where?"

"I...don't..." He was unable to say more for the pain. Nothing mattered now but trying to hold on to his sanity. His mind screamed out for help.

/Spock! Help me... Spock!/"

He uttered one last terrible scream then silence and blackness closed in.

Karlov, first lieutenant of the Conqueror, stood to attention in his Captain's office. Captain Krevol pointedly ignored the man as he studied a report on his desk. Inwardly, Karlov seethed at the insult, but outwardly he remained calm. Insubordination was a crime punishable by death - and an unpleasant death at that.

Finally Krevol laid the report on his desk and looked enquiringly at Karlov. "Has the interrogation been completed?"

"Yes, your Excellency."

"Well?"

"Kirk was telling the truth. He did not have the co-ordinates."

Krevol beat his fist on the desk. Kirk had been their only hope of locating

K-1 before it was put into action. The Enterprise's erratic course had thrown them off the trail. Krevol had not been too worried. They still had Kirk. The Mindblock, as their new device was called, never failed. The only conclusion was that Kirk did not have the co-ordinates. Perhaps they should have picked up the Vulcan, too... Now what did they do?"

First they had to get rid of Kirk. Krevol looked up at Karlov. "Did you use the Mindblock at full strength?"

"Yes, sir."

"In that case, Kirk is useless to us now. When he regains consciousness, feed him. I know a suitable planet that will take him off our hands."

"Can't I kill him, your Excellency?"

"Killing him would be too final. Don't you see, this is a far worse fate for him than death? The great Captain Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise destined to end his days on some worthless planet, condemned to silence by our own hands." He laughed at the images he had conjured up. "No, Karlov - death would be too good for him."

Karlov saluted and left.

Kirk remained unconscious for over twenty hours. When he finally began to come round he felt sick and disorientated. He eased himself into a sitting position and noted that he was back in his own cell. His ears ached and he reached up to massage them. As he did, he felt a stickiness around them. Puzzled, he lowered his hand and stared at it. It was covered with blood. He looked down at the bed and was not surprised to find the pillow covered in drying blood. Then he noticed a difference about the room; everything was so quiet. He clicked his fingers but did not hear the click. Next he clapped his hands together. Nothing. Cautiously, he spoke.

"Hello?" The sound never reached his ears. "Hey, what's going on?"

Silence. Panicking, he shook his head and began to shout. Within his head, only silence answered him.

"I'm deaf," he said in shocked disbelief. He leaped off the bed and began to shout and hammer on the door. It sickened him to know he was making as much noise as he could, yet could hear none of it.

"What's going on? Do you hear me?" Angry and fearful tears stung the back of his eyes but he refused to succumb to the relief they would bring. After a while he stopped pounding and shouting and returned to the bed. Ignoring the blood staining the pillow, he lay down and tried to calm himself.

Presently the door opened. He was alerted by the movement rather than the sound. Two Klingons entered; one carried a tray of food, the other a jug of water and a bowl. One of them spoke to him. He sat up, trying to lip read.

"What's happened to me?" he asked.

The men exchanged amused glances and laughed. Their silent laughter hit Kirk like a blow. "Why are you laughing? Can you hear me?"

This brought renewed mirth. As they turned to leave, Kirk lip-read a comment that passed between them.

"Poor fool."

Kirk stood rooted to the spot long after the door had closed behind the men. Why had they laughed? Surely even a warped sense of humour would see deafness as being only mildly amusing. It should not have produced such wild hysteria. Unless there was more that he didn't know about. He turned from the door and shook his head. He had enough problems without worrying about the Klingons.

Pouring some of the water into the bowl he began to clean himself up. There

seemed to be a lot of blood around his ears. The sonics must have ruptured his eardrums. At least, he hoped that was what had happened, for that was a temporary condition. If his ears had been subjected to some form of mutilation after he had passed out, it was quite probable he would be permanently deaf. Permanently deaf! The silence was already beginning to play on his nerves. It felt strange and frightening. It made him feel incredibly vulnerable. He longed to hear sounds.

As the hours passed the silence became oppressive. However much he screamed at himself and beat the walls, nothing broke the eternal silence in his mind. The deafness was a torture in itself.

By the third day of his deafness he had resigned himself to the fact that he would never hear again. He just sat now for hours on end, thinking. His thoughts were always the same.

Once they found Spock's body they would probably begin a search for his body, too. They would find it strange that there was no trace of it. But what could they do? They would either believe him to be dead and his body moved or destroyed or they would believe that he had been taken away. But by whom? Did they realise the Klingons had been on the planet? And if they did, where would they start looking? The Klingons had obviously covered their tracks well. He sighed. Whatever happened now, he would never see the Enterprise again. He could never return to the life he knew. Even if he was rescued and did find the Enterprise again, how could he be her Captain? No-one wanted a deaf leader.

Then there was Spock. No amount of wishing and hoping would bring him back. Spock was dead. Fact. Even if he had not seen him fall, he knew he was dead because the link he had had with Spock's mind had gone. No, things would never be the same again.

Face it, James T. This is one situation that won't have a happy ending.

He left the bed and walked over to the window, gazing out at the stars. That was all he had now, the stars. The constellations here were unfamiliar to him, but that didn't lessen the hold they had over him. The stars had always held him in their spell; even since he was a boy he had felt drawn to them. They called to him now, beckoning him away from his prison. He longed to be free, but how could he escape? Where could he go? His deafness was too much of a handicap. Yet he must wait his chance. One day he would be free. Yet that one question came back to haunt him. Where could he go? He'd lost everything he had. His ship, his friends...and Spock. Most of all Spock. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd begged the gods to let them die together so that one would not be left behind to suffer like this. It had almost worked, too, except that some stubborn twist of fate had decided he should survive, even though a part of him had died with Spock that day.

Yet in all of space there must be a home for him somewhere. If only he was not so lost and alone. He would have given anything for a friendly face then.

Silent tears began to fall as he realised the hopelessness of it all. He was so helpless here. Leaning against the window he closed his eyes and wept for his ship and his friends and for Spock.

Kirk lost track of time. Every hour was the same. Sometimes he would wake up to find a tray of food by his bed, but more often than not he would be left to starve. He rarely saw anyone. The silence continued to be oppressive and from time to time he found himself screaming or beating the door. It never brought any Klingons, but it helped release his frustration and stopped him from going insane. There was no way he could escape and as time seemed to stretch into infinity, he began to wonder if he was destined to live out his life alone in the cell with only the stars for company.

Then one morning he awoke with a start and sat bolt upright in bed. He looked around, not daring to believe that he had just heard keys jangling. Unmistakably, the sound of keys turning in the lock. He shook his head to make sure he wasn't

dreaming. Then the door creaked open and four Klingons entered.

"Karlov wants to see you."

Kirk laughed. It was the most wonderful sound he'd ever heard. His deafness had gone, he could hear again. He felt whole again and ready to fight anything, or anyone. The old fighting spirit returned and nothing was going to keep James Kirk down now. He became aware that the Klingons were staring at him as if he had gone mad. Let them stare; this was a great day. With a flourish of his hand he said, "Lead the way."

He froze and felt a chill run through him. His smile vanished and fear gripped him again. The words he had uttered emerged as meaningless gsbble. The Klingons exchanged glances and grinned.

"What have you done to me?"

Again the words came out garbled. The Klingons laughed out loud. Now he realised what the other Klingons had been laughing at. One of the said, "You must have been given the Mindblock. It does that to you." He turned to his companions. "No wonder the Captain wants him out of the way. He's no use to anyone now."

"I'd like to see him try to command the Enterprise now!" That brought gales of laughter.

Fury welled up inside Kirk and he yelled, "Shut up, all of you! Stop it! Stop laughing!"

The Klingons ignored him, their laughter renewed. When they had calmed down they took him from the room and marched him to Karlov's office. Kirk was pushed inside, the four guards remaining by the door.

Kirk stood defiantly before the Klingon, hoping he looked more confident than he felt. What new twist of fate was this? He could think clearly yet anything he said was garbled. So much for his plans for escape. Was he doomed to silence now that his hearing had returned? He wasn't sure which was the worse fate. How could he communicate if he couldn't make himself understood? How could he ever hope to find his way back to Federation space now?

Karlov kicked him to get his attention. He looked up at the face he now hated more than ever.

"I trust your hearing has returned, Captain?"

Kirk nodded. He wasn't going to be an object of anyone else's mirth.

"Splendid. You will no doubt be aware that your speech centres have been affected. This is a permanent condition. You will find that you are unable to speak intelligibly from now on. We have no further use for you. No doubt your precious Starfleet will feel the same. We plan to leave you on Seylina. It is a primitive planet but it should be adequate for your needs. We will be in transporter range in three hours."

He nodded to the guards, who dragged Kirk back to his cell. Once alone, Kirk began to assess this new turn of events. He was, in effect, speechless, so he was being released. That at least would be preferable to his present existence. At least he would have fresh air and room to move about, there would be grass and trees. He might even be rescued by a passing spaceship, if they had heard of space travel on Seylina. Whatever Seylina was like, it couldn't be as bad as this.

He walked over to the window and looked out. Almost immediately he felt something was different. Then he realised; he recognised the constellations. He was in neutral space; the Enterprise had been here before... Perhaps she would come again.

No, don't think about that.

A warm feeling of relief slowly entered his mind. He knew where he was. Suddenly space didn't seem so vast and lonely any more. Perhaps the future wouldn't

be so empty after all. For the first time in years, it seemed, Kirk felt happy.

Later that day, he and Karlov beamed down to the planet's surface. They were greeted by a small crowd of natives. They were simply dressed, their houses were wooden huts, there seemed little evidence of technological advancement. Kirk's heart sank. This was indeed a primitive planet.

One man stepped out of the crowd and addressed Karlov. From the way he spoke, it was obvious the Klingons had been here before.

"Greetings, oh Mightly One." Kirk couldn't suppress a smile; definitely a Klingon-influenced society.

Karlov held up his hands and spoke in a deep, solemn voice. "The gods return with a gift for the people of Seylina. This man - " he indicated Kirk, who was still grinning " - is no longer any use to us, but he needs a home."

"We will be honoured to have him stay with us."

"He is very simple-minded." Kirk's smile faded. "And he does not speak your tongue. The gods have seen fit to remove his intelligence, but he can be put to work."

The leader turned sad eyes towards Kirk who, in turn, glared furiously at Karlov. The leader spoke again. "What is his name, oh Great One?"

"You may call him Enola." Kirk stared in amazement at the Klingon, but Karlov ignored him and went on. "The gods leave you now." With that he turned and walked away. The leader watched him go, then turned to Kirk,

"Greetings, Enola. My name is Narven, leader of the people of Seylina. You will be safe with us and need not fear us. Come, follow me."

He led Kirk across the sandy ground to the largest of the wooden huts. Along the way, faces peered cautiously at Kirk, not sure what to make of him. Certainly he must have looked a strange sight. His Starfleet uniform was dirty and torn, his hair had grown and was uncombed and his face sported a rough beard. He neither looked nor felt like a Starship Captain. Sighing, he followed Narven into the hut.

Inside, four women sat on straw mats. Two were preparing food whilst the other two nursed a baby and four puppies. The oldest woman stood up as Kirk entered. She smiled warmly at the stranger.

"We have a guest, my wife. The gods have given us this man who needs our care. He cannot speak our language but he understands our words. His name is Enola." He turned to Kirk. "This is my wife Vianah and my three daughters." He indicated the other women. "This is my eldest daughter, Reannah; Niavah, who is soon to be joined, and my youngest daughter Senoah. The infant is Kalah; his mother is dead."

"I'm sorry to..." Kirk began, forgetting his inability to converse. The women exchanged glances but continued to smile up at Kirk with nothing but friendliness. He was offered a seat and made himself comfortable. One of the women rose and, taking a bowl of fruit from the table, offered it to Kirk.

"You are welcome to our food. Are you hungry?"

"Yes. Thank you," he tried to say. He took the food gratefully and began to eat. At least these people didn't laugh at him. After a while, the women returned to their work and left Kirk to finish his meal in peace.

As night fell, Narven motioned Kirk to step outside the hut. "You are welcome to sleep in our hut, but perhaps, while life here is strange to you, you would prefer to sleep in my son's hut. He was killed several moons ago. Since his wife died, no-one has lived there. Would you prefer to sleep alone?"

Kirk nodded. Narvan smiled and led the way to the vacant hut. It lay on just the other side of a hill from the main village, only a ten minute walk away. Narvan saw to it that Kirk had all he needed, then turned to leave.



As he reached the door, he said, "Should you need anything, we are not far away. I shall return for you when the darkenss has left us."

Kirk thanked him and watched him leave. They he lay down on the straw mattress and gazed out of the window at the twinkling stars, now so familiar to him. The Seylinians might be primitive, but they were very sensitive, caring people. They had accepted him immediately and had adapted to his silence already by phrasing questions so that he need only answer yes or no. He had also noticed that when he tried to speak, any particular word, though it was garbled, always sounded the same. Perhaps in time he would be able to converse with them once they understood what each of his words meant.

There's hope for you yet, James T. he thought.

One thing still puzzled him; why had Karlov called him 'Enola'? Enola. It was such a strange word; he was sure it wasn't Klingon or Seylinian. He repeated the word over and over, then a thought struck him. His words were mixed up now - perhaps 'Enola' was an anagram. Juggling the letters around in his mind, he finally stumbled on the answer.

He laughed out loud, bitterly, as he realised the Klingons had played their final, lasting trick on him, ensuring he would never forget his predicament.

Enola - Alone!

* * * * *

The Enterprise was now only two days from Starbase 9. Starfleet had been informed of the fate of Captain Kirk, and Spock's resignation had been filed. A new Captain had been chosen - Captain William Oliver, formerly of the U.S.S. Carolina which had patrolled the Capellan sector before being retired after many years' service. A replacement First Officer had been harder to find, but Starfleet assured them they were 'working on it'.

Spock had avoided McCoy as much as he could in the past days, being unable to face the sadness in the doctor's eyes. When they had met, they had kept the conversation formal and had discussed only neutral topics. Neither mentioned the impending arrival at Starbase 9.

McCoy was trying hard to adjust to the idea of a life without Spock as well as Kirk, and had tried to keep his fears for the future to himself, but people had begun to notice the change in him. Scotty had made it his business to see McCoy wasn't left alone too often, for which McCoy was grateful. They had known each other before entering Starfleet and Scotty knew McCoy better than the doctor realised. He knew McCoy would need someone to rely on once Spock had gone, and hoped he could fill the space.

If he admitted it, Scotty was going to miss Spock too. Their friendship had grown out of their respect for each other's knowledge in his particular field of work; Scotty admired Spock very much.

It was amazing how much Kirk had affected all their lives. The ship had been a happy one in those days, the crew like a family. Now, everyone seemed to be leaving home.

Scotty didn't blame Spock for deciding to leave. He knew how much Kirk had meant to Spock. Scotty had seen an empathy between them that he had never seen before in anyone. Even if Spock wouldn't admit it, Scotty knew that more than loyalty had bound them together. Scotty sighed. No, he didn't blame Spock at all; losing Kirk was bound to have come as a shock to the laddie.

On the day of his departure, Spock went to look for McCoy. He found him in his office. McCoy looked startled as Spock entered. He couldn't quite meet the Vulcan's gaze.

"Come to say goodbye, Spock?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Goodbye, Spock." He turned away.

"Bones - there's something I want to say before I go. You know I'll be at the Vulcan Science Academy. If ever you should need me, let me know."

"I need you now, Spock."

There was a long silence before Spock said softly, "We have discussed that. If it were at all possible I would stay. I would like to keep in touch. If you leave the Enterprise, will you let me know?"

McCoy nodded.

"Bones...nothing lasts forever."

There was an awkward silence, then McCoy coughed and said, "You'd better go now. Don't keep them waiting. I'm...going to miss you, Spock."

"I will miss you, too. Goodbye, Bones. Live long and prosper."

McCoy opened his mouth to answer but the lump in his throat stopped him. He heard Spock walking towards the door. As he reached it, McCoy spun round, angry at the tears which flowed too freely. "Spock," he called desperately.

Spock turned. McCoy found he still couldn't speak, couldn't say all the things he should have said over the years, things that might have kept Spock on the Enterprise.

Finally he whispered, "Goodbye, Spock."

Spock paused a moment in the doorway, then quietly turned and walked away.

Spock returned to his cabin to pack his few possessions. He quickly packed his clothes then worked his way around the room, collecting the decorations. He dismantled the chess set, blocking the memories it held. Finally he came to his bedside table. He picked up the framed photo and gazed at it in silence. The hazel eyes smiled back at him, all that was left now of the one man he called friend. Gently laying the photo face down on top of his clothes, he fastened the case, and picking up his harp, left the room.

Scotty, Uhura, Chekov and several others were assembled in the transporter room when he arrived. McCoy and Christine Chapel were conspicuous by their absence. He looked round, amazed and touched by the farewell.

"I had not expected this," he mumbled weakly.

"We couldna' let ye leave without sayin' goodbye, Mr. Spock."

"Thank you for being here."

Uhura stepped forward and gave him a small box. "We thought you'd like this as a memento, Mr. Spock. Don't open it until you're on your way to Vulcan."

"Thank you...Uhura."

She smiled. "It won't be the same without you, Spock," she whispered.

"I shall not forget you." He looked from Uhura to the others. "Any of you. Live long and prosper."

Their reply was lost in the transporter beam.

Spock made his way across the starbase to the passenger liners. Seating himself by a window on the liner he closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. He had not realised how hard the parting would be, how much a part of the Enterprise he had become.

He was halfway to Vulcan before he remembered the present Uhura had given him. Opening his case, he took out the box, fingering it for a few moments. Then he lifted the lid. Inside was an exquisitely engraved model of the Enterprise, cast in silver. Gently he took it from the box and examined it. It was beautiful. At the bottom of the box was a card which read, simply, 'Remember us.'

Holding the model in his hand, he turned his face to the window.

Four days later, the Enterprise was on her way to Deneva to deliver medical supplies, when the message came through from Vulcan. Uhura took the computer print-out and read it through. Then she smiled. Turning to her new Captain, she said, "I have a message here from Mr. Spock, sir."

"Read it out, Lieutenant."

Uhura cleared her throat and began to read. "I have arrived on Vulcan. My scientific duties begin tomorrow. Peace to you all. Spock."

* * * * *

Time passed peacefully but slowly on Seylina. Kirk was treated with kindness by all the villagers. No-one seemed to find it at all strange that he did not speak their language. They accepted him for what he was - a living, feeling person who needed a home. He was grateful to them for that, but as time rolled slowly by, he began to feel restless. He tried to busy himself more with daily chores and took to chopping wood for the fires and helped in the building and repair of the huts. He still slept in his own hut, feeling more secure and free when alone. Recently, he had begun to dream about the Enterprise and he feared he might be talking in his sleep. It was far better to sleep alone where no-one could hear his unintelligible mumblings.

As the days stretched into weeks, he gradually became aware that Reanah, Narvan's eldest daughter, was spending more and more time with him. He had always welcomed her company; she was an intelligent girl with long golden hair and shining blue eyes - McCoy's eyes. When she smiled, her whole face seemed to glow with happiness. It suddenly struck him that he had not thought about women since Eynos Alpha. For the first time he began to consider Reanah in a different light. Could she possibly find him attractive? He laughed. It seemed unlikely. If appearances were anything to go by, he was a long-haired, unshaven misfit who spoke strange words. Where was the attraction in that? Yet she did seem to enjoy his company. No. The whole idea was too improbable. Smiling, he turned his attention back to chopping wood.

Around midday he paused to take a rest and, sitting on a log, idly picked up a sliver of wood and began to carve it. The carving began life as a deer, but, Kirk being no expert, it ended up looking more like a four-legged stork. He smiled to himself, amused at his hopeless effort, when he became aware that someone was approaching.

He looked up, squinting against the bright sunshine.

"Reanah."

She smiled and sat beside him. Gently, she removed the carving from his hands and studied it.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.



Kirk laughed. 'Beautiful' was stretching the truth more than a little.

"What is it?"

"It's supposed to be a deer...deer...er..." He looked around for some clue that would help him explain. He pointed to the wood then indicated the deer's movements by moving his fingers along his leg. She looked puzzled for a moment, then nodded in understanding. "Deer?"

"Yes."

She laughed and looked down at the carving. "Oh, I'm sorry, Enola, it's just that...well, it's not quite like our deer, is it?"

"No, you're right there."

After a moment she said, "It's still beautiful, though."

Suddenly she seemed to become embarrassed and pulled at the blades of grass around her. Finally she looked up a far-sighted quality in her eyes. "The gods said they had taken your intelligence away. I do not believe that. You have shown us many things. You are wise. You do not speak like us, but you are not a fool... Have you always spoken this way?"

"No."

She looked very sad then. "Did the gods do this to you?"

Kirk nodded.

"Are you a god, Enola?"

Kirk smiled. He had been called a god once before. That time he had believed it to be true, but now nothing was further from the truth. "No, Reanah, I am very far from being a god."

"Did you live in the sky like the gods do?"

"Yes."

"You must be very sad now that you can no longer fly. Are you sad?"

Kirk was silent for a long time. How could he explain, in simple terms, how he felt? If only he could speak properly. He was happy here, but this was not home. He belonged with the stars, with his ship...

He took her hand in his and began to explain. "I am happy here. Do you understand?"

She nodded. She was familiar with his word for 'happy'. "But my home... home?" She nodded again. "It is in the sky." He pointed upwards.

"I understand... When the gods return I will ask them to take you home."

He looked at her in alarm. "No! No!"

She looked puzzled. He seemed to be searching for the right words. "Will they hurt you again?"

"Yes."

She smiled up at Kirk, her expression one of determination. "When the gods return, Enola, I will help you. I will not let them hurt you again."

Kirk smiled and squeezed her hand. "Thank you, Reanah."

Kirk had been on Seylina for six weeks, and his hopes of rescue were beginning to fade. It was possible he would never leave Seylina. But at least the Klingons had not returned.

Narvan's daughter Niavah was married now. The women were kept busy making blankets and clothing ready for the winter. Narvan's wife took ill and was confined to the hut. It was not a serious illness but it meant she could no longer

look after the baby, Kalah. That task had fallen to Reannah. Kirk fashioned a harness for her so that she could carry Kalah on her back as she worked.

They had been gathering firewood in the forest and now sat on a boulder by the river. Kirk had taken the baby from its harness to give Reannah a rest, and was holding him and teasing him with a piece of grass. Kalah's big brown eyes smiled happily up at Kirk and he gurgled with excitement. As Kirk played with him, memories began to return and his smile faded. He sat gazing at the baby, remembering. If Miramancee had lived, their baby would be almost five years old by now. Why did everyone he loved have to die?

Kalah gurgled happily. Kirk refocused on him and forced a smile. He practically jumped as Reannah touched his arm.

"What has made you so sad, Enola?"

Kirk swallowed and said, "I was nearly a father once."

Reannah didn't understand. Kirk touched the baby, then himself. "I...nearly had...a son."

She smiled happily, only understanding the words 'I' and 'son'. "Where is he?"

"He is dead." He touched the baby, then the ground.

She looked at him in shocked silence, then said, "He is gone?" Kirk nodded. "That's very sad, Enola. Did you have a wife too?" Again he nodded and touched the ground. "Oh, Enola. No wonder you are so sad. That must have been awful."

Kirk stood and gave the baby back to Reannah. "Let's go."

They picked up the firewood and returned to the village.

A week later, Reannah paid a visit to Kirk's hut. She had never been there alone before. He was surprised to find her waiting for him when he returned from a morning's fishing.

"Hello, Reannah."

She smiled at him and followed him into the hut. He poured out two cups of goat's milk and handed one to her.

"Enola... I have thought about your baby for many nights. If you wish it... we can be joined and...I can give you a son." She looked up at him, her blue eyes sparkling. Kirk choked on his milk and took a step back, away from her. How could he explain that he might not be here forever - he was still hoping - and, more importantly, he wasn't ready to love anyone again, not yet. Perhaps he was jinxed, since everyone he loved died. He couldn't do that to her. Slowly he put the cup on the table. Taking her shoulders in his hands he said,

"Reannah. I don't belong here. My home is in the sky. One day I might return to the sky."

She nodded in understanding.

"Also," he continued, "my...woman...who died. It is too soon."

"You are still sad?"

"Yes."

"I understand." She turned away. "Forgive me."

"No, Reannah. Don't be sorry. It is a wonderful thing you suggest, but I'm not ready yet. Too much has happened. I need time to...forget...my other life."

"I do not understand your words but I know you are not angry. Thank you."

"Reannah. You can make me happy just by being my friend."

The smile returned to her face. "I shall always be your friend."

Two months had passed since Kirk's arrival on Seylina. Winter was approaching fast and he had discarded his lightweight tunic for a woven one. The daylight hours were getting shorter and he was kept busy most days chopping wood for his own and Narvan's logpile. Narvan's wife was in good health again so Kirk didn't see much of Kalah. Reanah had never spoken again of a joining; but if winter passed with no sign of rescue, Kirk wondered if he should then ask her to marry him. He did not love her, but he knew he could be happy with her. If he had to spend the rest of his life here, he might as well be happy. Finally, he decided to postpone making a decision until after winter.

Winter came upon the community with lightning speed. In less than a week the temperature had dropped to below freezing. Within a fortnight, the snow lay thickly on the ground. It began to make travelling difficult and Kirk found it hard to plough his way home every night. Eventually he decided to move in with Narvan's family until spring, a decision that pleased the family immensely. He and some of the villagers spent that day moving Kirk's belongings and woodpile into Narvan's property. Kirk spent the long winter hours hunting, chopping wood and dreaming of spring.

* * * * *

Spock was working in his office when a tall, immaculately clad Vulcan knocked and entered. Spock looked up enquiringly.

"Sir, the U.S.S. Surveyor has reported the discovery of a new, colonisable planet. It is in neutral space 23.5 parsecs from the Klingon border. So far, they have made a sensor scan of the planet and found it to be sparsely inhabited by humanoids. Although they have a low level of technical advancement, their culture suggest they have been visited by other races. The Surveyor wishes to make a survey of the planet. I have the report here, sir. They are awaiting your decision."

He placed the file in front of Spock, who picked it up and read it carefully. Finally, he said, "A small landing party would be sufficient; four men. Let this be a preliminary survey. If all goes well, a more detailed study may follow."

"Yes, sir. I will relay your message." Nodding politely, he left the office.

Spock sat quietly for a long time after the communications officer had left. It seemed so long since he had been in space. He had begun to feel stifled on Vulcan. He hadn't realised it before, but space was his only home. After all these years, there were still those who did not accept him here. After living with Humans for so long, he found Vulcans cold and could not relax in their company. He had begun to have second thoughts about staying at the Academy. Lately he had considered giving Starfleet another try. On a different ship, life might not be so bad. He would have his scientific duties to keep him busy. He decided to wait and see if an opportunity arose. He sighed and brought his mind back to the pile of work on his desk.

* * * * *

Seylina was in the grip of winter when rumours began to spread of strange-looking men from the skies. Men who were tall, with slanting eyebrows and pointed ears. Five villages claimed to have seen them.

When Kirk heard the news, his heart missed a beat. Strangers from the skies with pointed ears... Could they possibly be Vulcans? Or Romulans... They must be Vulcans, Kirk prayed. Please, let them be Vulcans.

He explained to Reanah that they might be friends and asked her to find out where they had been seen. Reanah asked around and discovered the location. Together they set off to look for the strangers. They searched for two days without success. Finally, cold and disheartened, they returned to the village.

The next day Narvan burst excitedly into the hut saying the strangers were in

the village. Kirk rushed outside. Practically all the villagers were assembled. In their midst stood four Vulcans. Kirk stared at them in awed disbelief, a wide grin slowly spreading across his face. Vulcans! It was more than he'd ever dared hope for. He gripped Reanah's hand and said, "They are friends. They are Vulcans."

"Will they help you?"

Kirk nodded. "I hope so, Reanah."

Meanwhile Narvan had stepped forward to greet the Vulcans. "Greetings. I am Narvan, leader of the people of Seylina."

One of the Vulcans extended his hand in a Vulcan salute. "Greetings, Narvan. We come in peace. We call ourselves Vulcans. Our land is far away."

"In the skies?"

"Yes."

"Are you gods, like the others?"

"Gods? No, we are mortals like yourselves."

"Yet you can fly?"

"We have...machines, to help us."

Narvan indicated his hut. "Come, eat with us. We have much to talk about."

They entered the hut, most of the villagers crowding in behind. Whilst the food was being prepared, Reanah approached the Vulcans with Kirk at her side. She knelt by the one who had spoken.

"May I speak with you?"

"Certainly."

"My friend, here, also comes from the skies. He was brought to us by the gods who made him speak differently. He says his home is in the sky where he has friends. Can you take him home?"

The Vulcan looked directly at Kirk and scrutinised his face. Kirk winced, he was so like Spock. These past months he had almost forgotten what Vulcans looked like as he had tried to forget his past life and accept the present. Not that he could ever forget Spock.

"What is his name?"

"Enola."

"That is an unusual name. Do you know what his home in the sky is called?"

"No. I am only familiar with words he can explain. He cannot explain to me anything he can not see on Seylina."

The Vulcan turned back to Kirk. "If we took us with you, would you be able to show us your home?" Kirk nodded. "Have you heard of the United Federation of Planets?" Again Kirk nodded. "These gods the people refer to. Do you know who they are?"

"They are..." Sighing, Kirk nodded. This was going to be a long, one-sided conversation. Then he had an idea. Turning to Reanah, he said, "Tell them I will return."

He left the hut and searched outside for a slate and some chalk. If he couldn't say who he was, he would write it down. Why on earth hadn't he thought of that before? Returning to the hut he knelt next to the Vulcan and began to write.

'I am Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise.'

The message was laboriously written; his fingers did not seem to want to write the words. It took him ten minutes to finish the message. At last it was

finished. He held it up - and the sight that met his eyes made his heart sink. The words he had so carefully etched on the slate were nothing but meaningless scribble.

Tears of frustration ran down his cheeks as he made his way over the hill to his own hut. He had been so certain of success. At last help was here, yet he couldn't make himself understood. He couldn't even tell them who he was! All his hoping had been for nothing. Blindly, he fumbled with the door latch and threw himself on the bed.

Some time later there was a knock on his door. Kirk pulled himself off the bed and answered it. Reanah and the Vulcan stood there. Beckoning them in, he closed the door against wind and snow.

Reanah looked sadly at Kirk, understanding his frustration. "Stepel says he may be able to help you."

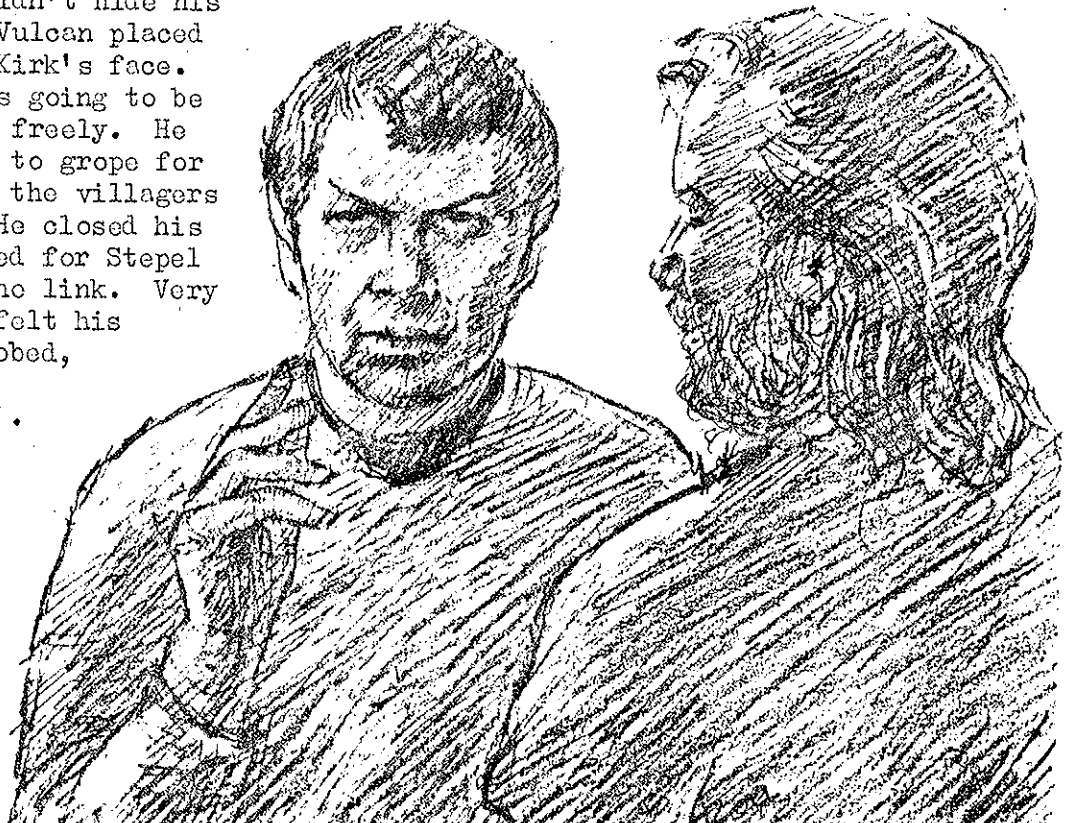
Stepel began to explain. "You did not seem surprised by our appearance. Have you met Vulcans before?" Kirk nodded. "There is a Vulcan technique known as the mind-meld. Are you aware of this?"

Kirk looked up. Suddenly hope returned. Of course, the mind link. But it was a very personal thing, rarely used with strangers. Would Stepel allow him to share a meld?

"Enola. I am willing to share a meld with you for I believe it will help you to explain who you are. I will not hurt you. If your thought patterns are undamaged I will be able to talk with you without the need for speech. Do you understand?" Kirk nodded eagerly. "The meld is a personal experience. I do not do it lightly, but because I feel I can help. You must speak to no-one of what you see." He stopped, suddenly realising the foolishness of his warning in the present circumstances. He was relieved to find Kirk smiling in sympathy. "Do you wish the link, Enola?"

"Yes!"

Kirk couldn't hide his smile as the Vulcan placed his hands on Kirk's face. At last he was going to be able to speak freely. He wouldn't need to grope for words he knew the villagers understood. He closed his eyes and waited for Stepel to initiate the link. Very gradually he felt his mind being probed, then he heard Stepel 'speak'. He sounded surprised.



/You have linked before?/

/Yes. With Spock./ He couldn't stop that thought.

/Spock? Son of Sarek?/

/Yes. We served together./

/What is your name?/

/Captain James Kirk, of the U.S.S. Enterprise./

/You are Captain Kirk? You are believed to be dead./

/I'm not surprised. It was the only conclusion that could have been drawn at the time./

/You have been here all this time?/

/No. I was taken by the Klingons. They used the Mindblock on me. That's why I can't speak properly./

/The Klingons. Are they the gods for these people?/

/Yes. They seem unduly interested in this planet. It must contain something they need./

/We will investigate the possibility. Why do the people call you Enola?/

/That's the name the Klingons gave me. It's an anagram of 'alone'./

/I see./

/Can you take me back to the Federation?/

/Of course...Captain./

Kirk smiled. It had seemed a long time since he'd been called Captain. It felt good, as if he was half way home already.

The link was slowly broken and Kirk opened his eyes. He looked across at Stepel. To anyone else, his face would have been impassive, but Kirk knew Stepel was smiling. The moment passed.

Reannah touched Kirk's arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yes - I'm fine...now."

She turned to Stepel. "Can you help him?"

"Yes. He will return with us to the skies."

"Thank you." She managed a smile but the sadness in her eyes was too clear. She was going to lose him. Now they would never be joined.

The next morning the Vulcans returned from their ship with a 'gift' for Kirk; a universal translator. Kirk was delighted. The villagers couldn't understand the 'miracle box' which let Kirk speak so that they could understand him, but that did not matter. They could see his happiness and that was all that mattered.

It was with mixed feelings that Kirk set off to find Reannah. He was overjoyed at returning to space, yet profoundly saddened at leaving these people who had given him everything when he had needed it most. And Reannah. He realised he was going to miss her very much.

He found her sitting on 'their' boulder by the river, throwing pebbles into the water. She looked up at his approach.

"I've been looking all over for you," he began, sitting down next to her. He took her hand in his. She was trembling. She looked down, unable to meet his eyes.

"I did not want you to see me crying."

"Reannah, we both knew this day might come. It is one of the reasons I could not join with you. It would hurt more if you were my wife, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. You are right. I do want you to be happy. I know your home is far away. But it hurts to know you will leave."

"It hurts me too. But there are many handsome men in your village who could care for you and make you happy."

She nodded reluctantly.

"Will you promise me that when the right man asks you, you will join with him and be happy?"

"I promise."

Impulsively he leaned forward and kissed her very gently. When he withdrew there were tears in her eyes. He stood and took hold of her hand. "Come on. We must return to the village." They walked back in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

All the villagers had turned out to say goodbye to their quiet friend. Kirk found the gesture very touching. Narvan came forward to speak to him.

"Farewell, my friend. You have become part of our village and we shall all be sorry to see you go."

"Narvan, you have done so much for me these past three months. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Repayment is not necessary. We were happy to help you. We shall miss you - but we know you have found your home again. That makes us happy."

"I would be honoured if you would let me visit you if even I come near Seylina again."

"Our village is always open to you. You will be most welcome here any time."

"Thank you. For everything."

Stepel stepped forward. "Are you ready to go, Captain?"

"Yes. I'm ready," he said, almost sadly.

Reannah put her hand on his arm, a puzzled expression on her face. "What is 'Captain'?"

"It is the...er...position I had in my village. 'Captain' means 'leader' - so Narvan would be your Captain."

"You must be very important."

Kirk laughed. He felt far from important now. "I used to be. I expect my... village...will have another Captain now."

Narvan took hold of Kirk's hand. "Wherever you go, may you find happiness."

"Thank you, Narvan. Goodbye." He smiled for a moment at Reannah, then slowly turned and walk across to join the Vulcans.

* * * * *

Spock's opportunity to rejoin Starfleet came much earlier than he'd expected, following his decision to leave Vulcan. He had been offered the post of science officer on board the Explorer, a two-hundred-man scout ship which was currently surveying the Altair region.

It had been a week since the initial report from the U.S.S. Surveyor of the discovered planet. He had hoped the full report would have arrived before he left. However, today was his last day on Vulcan if he was to be at Starbase 17 in time to rendezvous with the Explorer. He put a call through to communications.

"This is Spock. Has the report arrived from the U.S.S. Surveyor?"

"No, sir."

"Thank you. Spock out." Reluctantly, he left the office. He spent an hour at home, packing and saying farewell to his parents, then he caught the shuttle for Starbase 17. Forty-two hours later he had boarded the Explorer and was on his way to Altair.

At about the same time as Spock beamed aboard the Explorer, the report came through from the Surveyor. It took several minutes for the information to be decoded by the computer. Finally the communications officer picked up the typed report and scanned it.

Despite his Vulcan training, his jaw dropped. Turning to his colleague, he said, "Stavak - it's a pity Spock missed this. Do you remember his Human friend, Captain Kirk?"

"Yes."

"It seems he's not dead after all."

* * * * *

The U.S.S. Surveyor left Seylina with Kirk on board. Following his report of Klingon interest in the planet, a team of five Vulcans had remained planetside to investigate.

Kirk now lay on the bed in the guest quarters, reminiscing. He had been out of touch with Starfleet for four months; Where was his beautiful ship? And his friends - Bones, Scotty, the bridge crew... That life seemed like no more than a dream. One of yesterday's dreams, Jim, he thought sadly. Yet even if he could contact her again he could never be her Captain - not with the speech defect, though he could visit her, meet his friends. His stomach turned over as he realised how bitter sweet that reunion would be. He had loved the Enterprise for years, almost as long as he'd known her; she owned him more surely than any woman ever could. Yet she was no longer his. Someone else owned her now. Could he face that? Did he have the strength to feel her touch again, knowing he must let her go to her new Captain? He honestly didn't know.

First things first, Jim, he told himself. Find out if she's all right, who is still on board. Then see if you can face her.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on his door. He turned on the translator and called, "Come."

Stepel entered and paused just inside the door. "May I speak with you, Captain?"

"Of course, Stepel. Please come in."

"Sir, we have been investigating the possibility of reversing your speech impediment."

"Yes?" Kirk's heart missed a beat. Was that really possible?

"We believe a reversal could be possible if certain speech areas are unaffected."

"That's marvellous, Stepel."

"We will require to run tests to determine the extent of the damage." He paused. "Do we have your permission to undertake these tests, sir?"

"Yes, of course. When can we start?"

"The first tests could be run in two point five hours, sir."

"That's fine by me."

Stepel nodded. "I shall return for you and escort you to the medical unit."

"Thank you, Stepel - thank you."

Exactly two hours later Stepel returned and escorted Kirk to the medical unit where he met Dr. Storrel. As with all Vulcans, it was practically impossible to see the man behind the rigid Vulcan mask, yet Kirk could see the gentleness in Storrel's eyes. Here was a man who truly cared for his patients, even if he did not show it openly. A little of Kirk's apprehension subsided.

"Captain Kirk. We have been studying your case and I believe we can find a cure."

"That would be greatly appreciated, sir," Kirk replied through the translator.

"We will need to study your speech patterns on the computer. The fact that the translator can convert your words into recognizable language shows that there is a direct link between the words you wish to utter and the sounds you make. If this is consistent, we may be able to effect a cure by surgery. The technique is complex but can be performed on this vessel."

New hope surged inside Kirk. He knew from his time on Seylina that particular words always came out the same -- he had begun to communicate well with Reanah towards the end. He looked up at Storrel.

"Just tell me what you want me to do."

Storrel took a sheet of paper from his desk and handed it to Kirk, who read it through. While he studied the paper, Storrel explained. "That is a passage which contains every syllable and sound pattern in Human speech. I would like you to read it while we record your voice on the computer. We can then compare the sounds you make with the words in the passage. If they correlate we can begin the brain scans."

"So all I have to do is read this?"

"For the present, yes."

Storrel indicated a chair and Kirk sat, facing one of the laboratory computers. He turned off the translator and began to read self-consciously. He hated the sound of his voice and was thankful when he came to the end of the passage.

"Thank you, Captain. We will let you know the result as soon as we have them through the computer."

Kirk turned the translator back on. "Thank you."

Stepel came to stand beside him. "May I escort you back to your quarters, Captain?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Once back in his room, Kirk turned to Stepel and said, "Stepel, would you do something for me, please?"

"Certainly, Captain, if I can."

"Would you find out about the U.S.S. Enterprise. I would like to know where she is...and how many of my friends are still aboard her."

"I will do that, sir." There was a slight pause before he added, "Do you wish me to contact her, send a message from you?"

"No!" Kirk's voice rose to near panic. "No, not yet," he went on more calmly. "If I can't be cured, it's better that they go on thinking I'm dead. There will be time enough to contact them if Dr. Storrel is able to help me."

"I understand, sir." Stepel left the room and Kirk flung himself down on the bed. How long would he have to wait for the results? The knot of fear that had gripped him earlier now turned to a knot of anticipation. He got up and began to pace the room. Waiting was always the hardest part.

The following morning Kirk was informed that his test had been successful. He was taken back to the medical unit and asked to read four more passages. While

the computer ran through the results, Storrel explained the next step in the test to Kirk.

"We know now that your speech patterns are constant. This means that, in your speech centre, the ganglia were disrupted and rejoined incorrectly, so that images and words flowed across the wrong synapses. We must now scan your brain to see if any peripheral damage has occurred. If there is no damage, corrective surgery can be achieved using microsurgical techniques. Fortunately, most of the research on microsurgery has been done on Humans. You have an Earth scientist, Dr. McCoy, to thank for that."

"McCoy. Dr. Leonard McCoy?"

"Yes. Do you know of him?"

Kirk laughed, his hazel eyes sparkling with remembered affection. "Yes, I know him. He was my chief medical officer on the Enterprise. I didn't know he'd done much about brain surgery, though."

"Most of his research has been undertaken in the last few months. He seems to devote a great deal of time to research now."

Poor Bones. Trying to work yourself too hard in an effort to forget. It must have been hard losing both of us at once.

"Dr. McCoy is a brilliant man," Storrel was saying.

Kirk smiled. "He would be honoured to know he was so highly thought of by Vulcans."

Just then the computer indicated the results of the test. Dr. Storrel studied them silently. It gave Kirk a chance to think. It was good to know that Bones was helping him, even though he wouldn't be aware of it.

Finally Storrel returned and declared the results to be satisfactory. "Only the brain scan test left now, Captain. Do you wish the test now?"

"Yes, sir."

"It will take several minutes to recalibrate the instruments for you."

Kirk watched Storrel work, his mind returning to the times McCoy had protested about recalibrating his equipment for Spock. He was thankful that Vulcans were not notorious grumblers. Presently the Vulcan announced that the scanners were ready. Kirk lay on the couch and waited patiently as the electrodes were fixed to the left-hand side of his head. Then Dr. Storrel prepared a hypo. "It will be necessary to render you unconscious for the first part of the scan. This will make you sleep for approximately ten point five minutes. You will feel no pain."

Kirk nodded gingerly, mindful of the electrodes. His last conscious thought was of McCoy, even now his friend and helper.

It seemed no time at all before he regained consciousness. He smiled up at Dr. Storrel. "That didn't take long."

"Nine point seven minutes. The second scan requires you to read the original passage while linked to the computer. Would you sit up, please?"

Kirk obeyed, and re-read the passage. When he had finished, he handed the paper back to the doctor and, turning on the translator, asked, "How soon before you know whether surgery will be possible?"

"We should know within four hours. Then we shall require two days to prepare. You understand that this is a very delicate area on which to operate. We must be prepared mentally and physically for the operation."

"I understand."

"I will inform you in four hours if we are to go ahead. Then all you need do is wait. I believe you will find that the hardest part."

"Yes. I certainly will."

Kirk spent the next four hours pacing his room and trying to combat the overwhelming fear that something might go wrong. After what seemed like an eternity, his door buzzer heralded the arrival of Dr. Storrel. Kirk operated the door release and Storrel entered.

"Good news, Captain. We can operate."

Kirk collapsed on the bed with a sigh of relief and a huge grin on his face. "I don't know what to say, Doctor. 'Thanks' doesn't seem enough."

"It is my duty to help. Your thanks are not necessary, Captain."

"You sound like my... Someone I used to know." Kirk studied his hands, the smile wiped from his face by the memory of Spock. He shook himself mentally and looked up. "But that was a long time ago." An eternity, Spock.

"Captain, do you wish me to explain the operation to you? I believe you should be aware of what is involved."

"Yes, I would appreciate that, sir." Kirk indicated a chair across from the bed. Storrel seated himself and began the explanation.

"As I said earlier, when the Mindblock was used, the synaptic bonds were disrupted and reformed incorrectly; however, they were not damaged. There is a microsurgical technique which involves severing the bonds by laser beam and allowing them to rejoin naturally."

Kirk nodded his understanding. Storrel continued. "Between the time of the operation and the time of the rejoining, you will be unable to speak, although your thought processes will be unimpaired. We believe this period will last between ten and fifteen days. After that, normal speech should resume. When it returns, it will be necessary for you to read aloud as much as possible in order to strengthen the synaptic bonds."

"How often has this operation been carried out on Humans?"

"We have read of twelve such cases."

"What is the success rate?"

"Of the twelve cases, nine were successful. There were complications in the other cases. In your case, we estimate an 87% chance of success."

"I've gambled on worse odds than those, Doctor."

Storrel rose and walked towards the door, where he turned and regarded Kirk for a moment. He was certainly a brave and determined man. His reputation in Starfleet was not exaggerated. "I will leave now, Captain. There is much to be done. We will speak in two days time."

"Thank you for all you have done, Doctor."

Storrel allowed his features to soften into a half smile and left.

Later that day, Stepel called on Kirk. "Captain, I have the information you asked for concerning the Enterprise." He handed Kirk the folder and left quietly. Kirk's hands were trembling as he opened the folder, knowing he held his past - and possibly his future - in his hands.

'U.S.S. Enterprise currently surveying the Arcturian quadrant. Present assignment - mineralogical survey of Alpha Bootis III, an uninhabited M-type planet...'

Kirk relaxed slightly; his ship was still safe. He skipped over the technical data and turned to the next page.

'Crew as of Stardate 6323.6:
Captain - William B. Oliver, formerly of the U.S.S. Carolina. Assigned Enterprise Stardate 6106.9.'

A month after I went missing, Kirk mused. He continued reading.

'First Officer:- Commandar Dane Richards, formerly of survey ship Capstan. Science officer experience 14 years. Assigned Enterprise Stardate 6117.3.'

Kirk ran his eye down the list, noting that McCoy, Scotty and the rest of 'his' bridge crew were all still aboard. He lay back on the bed and gazed up at the ceiling.

I wonder what Captain Oliver is like. I hope he's treating her well. Scotty will see to that, though. It must be strange for them having a new Captain and First Officer. I wonder if they ever think of me now. How is Bones coping? He relied on us so much. Perhaps Scotty has taken our place for him now. I hope he's happy.

Kirk sighed. He laid the file down on the bed and got up. Walking over to the window, he gazed out at the stars.

On the day of the operation, Kirk was taken down to the medical unit where Dr. Storrel greeted him warmly. "Captain, are you prepared for the operation?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Would you put on this surgical gown, please, and lie on the operating couch."

While Kirk was dressing, he said, "If the operation fails, what can I expect?"

"There are two possible lines of failure. Either the nerve endings will rejoin in the wrong synaptic bonds or they will not rejoin at all. In the first instance, you will speak as you do now; in the latter, you will not be able to speak at all."

Kirk nodded gravely. He wasn't sure which possibility he feared the more. He slowly lowered himself onto the bed. Dr. Storrel stood by him, hypo in hand.

"We shall do everything in our power to achieve success. Do not worry, I believe the chances of success are high." With that he injected the tranquilliser and watched as Kirk's eyes closed and he slipped into a deep sleep. Then he turned to his assistant. "Take him through to the operating theatre."

He followed them through and sealed the doors. Then he switched on the sterilising beam that would kill any bacteria in the room. He wheeled the laser over to Kirk's head and positioned it over the left side of his brain. Placing the data tape into the computer, he linked up the laser and announced his readiness. The laser was switched on. A low hum filled the room as the surgeon began the delicate twelve-hour operation.

Kirk regained consciousness slowly, becoming aware first of the pain in his head. He tried to raise his hand to touch the painful area but found he didn't have the strength. Instead, he groaned. Then he heard voices. They seemed very distant.

"He's coming round, Doctor."

"I'll be with you in a moment, Stepel."

Kirk opened his eyes. The room was darkened and a shadow danced in front of his eyes, finally settling into the form of a dark-haired Vulcan. In his drugged state of mind, only one person fitted that description.

"Spock?" he mouthed. No sound emerged.

"I am Stepel. Do not try to speak. You will not be able to speak yet."

Dr. Storrel approached the bed. "Does your head ache, Captain?"

Kirk nodded slightly.

"I will prepare a pain-killer."

When he returned with the hypo, Kirk had fallen asleep.

For two days Kirk drifted in and out of consciousness, hardly aware of the passage of time. On the third day he woke to find himself in the main medical unit, no longer in the darkened room. Seeing that he was conscious, Dr. Storrel came to stand by the bed.

"Good morning, Captain. Do not try to speak, just listen. Yesterday we performed another brain scan. It appears the ganglia are reforming into their correct pattern. We shall know for certain once your voice returns. Until then, you will need these." He lifted a note pad and stylus into Kirk's range of vision. Kirk smiled.

"I agree, Captain, it's a little archaic, but at the moment it will be your only means of communication."

An assistant came over with a tray of food. Kirk suddenly realised he was incredibly hungry.

"May I help you to sit up?"

Kirk nodded. It felt good to be vertical - he felt as if he'd been lying down for weeks. The tray was positioned over the bed and he was left alone to eat his breakfast.

Later that day, Dr. Storrel informed Kirk that he could return to his quarters if he preferred. There was little point in staying in sickbay since there was nothing more that anyone could do - it was simply a matter of time now. Kirk agreed and asked if he could read the Starfleet Logs in his room. It had been over four months since his supposed death and he was most definitely out of touch with events.

Dr. Storrel arranged for a computer terminal to be installed in his room. Within four hours, Kirk was back in his quarters.

"Do not read too much at first, Captain. You are still not fully recovered. If you need anything, press this buzzer and I will come directly."

Kirk mouthed the words 'Thank you', then switched on the library computer.

Dr. Storrel had been right, the reading did tire him easily. It didn't help that Kirk wasn't technically minded - he had depended a lot on his heads of department keeping him up to date - and much of the research he could only half digest. After a week, he had only covered the first couple of months after his 'death'. He was pleased to see that K-1 had been manned successfully. He came across McCoy's research paper into brain surgery and was pleased he'd read it after the operation and not before. He hadn't fully realised the delicacy of the operation and the risks involved in using laser microsurgery on the brain. If he recovered he certainly had a lot to be thankful for.

On the eighth day after his operation he came across a research paper that shook him to his soul. It wasn't the nature of the paper that shook him but the author and the date of publication.

'The Effects of Sigma Radiation on Copper-based Life Forms - by Spock of Vulcan, Stardate 6167.2'

Two months after his supposed death!

Kirk sat in stunned silence for what seemed like an eternity, trying to accept the implications of the report. Then suddenly his stomach turned over and he knew he was going to be sick. He only just made it to the bathroom. He emerged a few minutes later, trembling all over, his face deathly white. Weakly, he sank onto the bed, trying to still his shaking hands.

If Spock wrote this, then he couldn't be dead. Spock wasn't dead. Quickly grabbing the note pad and stylus, grateful that his writing at least was back to normal, he wrote, "Please verify publication date and author of this research paper. Then could you find out where Spock of Vulcan is now, please."

Cursing his muteness, he pressed the call button by his bed and waited for

Dr. Storrel to arrive. The doctor arrived four minutes later and found a shaking Kirk in a state of shock. He immediately gave him a tranquilliser and waited until the colour returned to his face before he asked what was wrong. Numbly, Kirk handed over the prepared note.

Dr. Storrel read it. "Certainly, Captain. Though I fail to see what has caused this state of shock."

Kirk rapidly scribbled, "He was my First Officer - and my friend. I thought he was dead."

Dr. Storrel nodded, remembering the reports of Spock's accident of four months ago. He had later read of Spock's appointment on Vulcan. Obviously Kirk didn't know this. "Captain, I am truly sorry you heard the news this way. I had no idea you believed Spock to be dead. He was injured on Eynos Alpha... That is where you were reported killed. Was this at the same time as Spock's injury?"

Kirk wrote, "Yes. We were attacked by Klingons. I saw Spock fall after the Klingons shot him. I was sure he was dead. I was taken prisoner after that."

"Spock did not die. Shortly after the incident he left Starfleet and took a research post on Vulcan. He may still be there. I will consult the records. Will you be all right if I leave you alone?"

Kirk nodded and Dr. Storrel left.

Kirk sat in stunned silence. Oh, Spock. Was it so bad you had to leave the Enterprise? Poor McCoy. He hardly remembered to breathe while he waited for Storrel's return. If Spock was alive...

His door buzzer sounded and the doctor entered. "I have the information on Spock, Captain. He is alive and currently working as Science Officer on the Explorer. This is a 200-man scout ship which is exploring the Altair region."

'Thank you,' he mouthed. Storrel left to attend to other patients.

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief and leaped to his feet, a sudden rush of emotion overwhelming him. Then he started to laugh soundlessly in un-suppressed joy. Spock was alive! Suddenly life became worth living again. He bounded over to the window, still laughing. The stars were blurred by the tears of joy that ran down his face, yet even they seemed to shine brighter than before. He could almost feel their welcome now. Blinking away the tears he searched for Altair but couldn't find it. Not that it mattered, for he knew he could find it in the future, when he left the Surveyor.

Oh, Spock. I don't know how to get to Altair but I'll find a way. We'll be together again soon, Spock, I promise you!

The next day Kirk decided to write to Spock. He was half-way through the letter when he suddenly put the stylus down and erased the message from the computer.

Spock undoubtedly thought Kirk was dead. Getting a letter directly from him would be too much of a shock. He decided to write to Amanda. She would know how to break the news to him. That being decided, he began a new letter.

"My Lady Amanda..."

* * * * *

Amanda was preparing dinner when the letter arrived. She studied it curiously before opening it. People seldom sent written letters nowadays. Tapes were more frequently used. Who would send her a written letter? This was from the U.S.S. Surveyor. She knew that was a Vulcan ship but was sure she didn't know anyone aboard. Yet someone obviously knew her.

Her curiosity getting the better of her, she decided to let the dinner look after itself for a minute, dried her hands and sat down. It was a computer print-out, the only way of sending written correspondence from ship to planet.

The letter began, "My Lady Amanda. You'd better sit down before you read this, if you are not doing so already. This may come as a shock. This is James Kirk."

Amanda put the letter down and got herself a glass of water. James Kirk had been dead over four months. How could this be? She continued.

"I expect you will believe I am dead. As you can see, that is not the case. I was taken captive by the Klingons and later left on a planet where I lived for three months before being rescued by the U.S.S. Surveyor. While I was in Klingon hands I was tortured and consequently am unable to speak - hence the written letter. However, I have had corrective surgery and hope to be vocal again soon. The reason I am writing to you is that I'm not sure whether or not Spock knows I'm alive. I only discovered that he is not dead yesterday. I don't know how to tell him so I was hoping you would do that for me. I hope this letter hasn't been too much of a shock for you. I can imagine the effect of receiving a letter from someone you thought dead. If you do contact Spock, please would you let me know so that I can write to him directly. Give my regards to Ambassador Sarek. Yours, Jim Kirk."



Amanda put the letter down and laughed. Jim Kirk! They had said nothing could keep him down and now it seemed to be true.

Just then her husband walked in. She jumped up and ran to him, letter in hand. "Sarek - "

"Amanda - "

They spoke simultaneously. It was then that she noticed the wide grin on his face. She laughed again. He knew.

"You've heard, Sarek? About Jim Kirk?"

"Yes, Amanda. It was on the video this afternoon."

"Isn't it wonderful?" She flung her arms round his neck and hugged him.

Sarek feigned a gasp. "Is it so wonderful you must squeeze me to death for it?" She looked up at him, but he was smiling. "Yes, my wife. It is excellent news."

She released him and handed him the letter. "Oh Sarek, just wait till Spock hears about this. He'll be so happy again!"

* * * * *

It took two weeks for Amanda's tape to reach Spock on the Explorer. The ensign from communications brought the tape through to Spock who was poring over the library computer in the science lab. Spock was a highly respected member of the Explorer crew already, but, as on the Enterprise, his fellow crew members found him a little daunting. The ensign coughed nervously to attract Spock's attention. When the Vulcan looked up, the young man said, "Sir, this tape has just arrived for you."

Spock took it absently and placed it on top of a pile of research papers. "Thank you, Ensign."

The officer hesitated, then said, "Excuse me, sir, but it is marked 'Urgent'. Perhaps you should view it now."

Spock looked up then picked up the tape. "Perhaps I should. Thank you."

He left the Science lab and headed for his quarters. Locking the door behind him, he lay down on the bed and inserted the tape into the computer terminal.

"Dearest Spock." Spock winced. "I hope you are sitting down because this is going to be a shock." Spock sat up and glared at the tape. Now what? Knowing how his mother over-exaggerated, he didn't expect the shock to be quite as bad as it turned out to be.

"Now, Spock, you remember the accident you had on Eynos Alpha." As if he could forget - and 'accident' was not what he would have called it. "You were not the only survivor. Your friend Jim Kirk wasn't killed either..."

Spock's heart missed a double beat. The rest of the tape ran on unheard. "Jim Kirk wasn't killed either." Wasn't killed...

Jim's alive. After all this time. But why didn't he contact me before now? He shook his head and replayed the tape.

"...Jim wrote to me today and told me what had happened. He thought you were dead until just a few days ago..." She went on to explain the details of Kirk's letter, and ended by suggesting Spock come back to Vulcan to meet Kirk.

Spock played the tape three times before all the facts sank in, each time revelling over the words "Jim Kirk wasn't killed either..."

Suddenly life seemed to have a purpose again. He could reach Vulcan within a week.

Leaving his cabin, he went to find the Captain of the Explorer, Captain Evans. He explained the situation and asked for three weeks' leave. He had really been on the Explorer too short a time to be due any leave, but Evans knew that when he resigned from the Enterprise he had been due many weeks' leave; and seeing the sparkle in the Vulcan's eyes, Evans realised just how important this proposed trip to Vulcan was. The Explorer had finished charting the Alpha Bootis system and was headed towards the Eridani sector anyway. If he dropped Spock off at Starbase 17, he would be able to make his way to Vulcan on his own. It would save him at least three days travelling time.

"Yes, Spock, I'll give you three weeks' leave. We'll arrive at Starbase 17 in two days. You'd be quicker making your own way from there."

"Thank you, Captain."

"And Spock," Evans called after the retreating Vulcan, "enjoy yourself. It's good to see you looking so happy."

Despite himself Spock smiled in return. "I will, sir."

* * * * *

Two weeks after Kirk's operation, his voice slowly began to return. It was surprisingly hard to speak at first, almost as if he had forgotten how to form the words. Dr. Storrel said it was because the newly-formed pathways across the synapses had to be used frequently before the words would sound normal, and he would be able to speak at the correct speed. He was given vast quantities of book tapes to read aloud, to encourage his voice. With his usual determination he read aloud in his quarters for hours on end. After five days his voice was back to normal; the operation had been a complete success. It felt so good to speak normally, without aids, for the first time in four months; he was so thrilled with his voice that he began to suspect he was turning into a chatterbox, he couldn't get over how great it was to speak again.

Good job Vulcans are long-suffering, he thought.

To show he was now recovered he decided to send a tape to Amanda and another to Spock. His tape to Amanda simply said he was now fully recovered and would be

transferring from the Surveyor to a cargo ship, the Endeavour, which would pass within transporter range of Vulcan in two weeks. His tape to Spock was a little more chatty although he left out many of the details of his past months since Eyos Alpha.

The tape began, "Spock. You don't know how good it feels for me to say your name and not feel empty inside. These last few months, when I thought you were dead, have been the worst months of my life. I must admit it was a great shock finding out you had not died on Eyos Alpha. I was certain you had. I found out by reading your essay on sigma radiation. It must have been a very good paper as I didn't understand a word of it. I should be arriving on Vulcan in two weeks' time - even that seems an eternity away. I can't wait to see you again. Goodbye till then, Spock. Take care of yourself. Yours, Jim Kirk."

He took the two tapes to the communications officer and arranged for them to be sent to Vulcan. Then he went to find Dr. Storrel and Stepel. He only had three days before they met the Endeavour, and it was time he thanked them for all their help.

* * * * *

The journey from Starbase 17 to Vulcan took Spock five days. His parents were at the beamdown point when he arrived. This time it was a happy reunion. Amanda did most of the talking on the way home. She made them a cool drink as soon as they arrived home then told Spock that Kirk was coming to Vulcan on the Endeavour and would arrive in four days' time. After the drink she handed Spock the tape Kirk had sent. She handed it over lovingly, as if it were a treasured possession. She knew that, for Spock, it would be. This would be the first time he had heard Jim's voice since Eyos Alpha.

"Jim sent you this," was all she said. Spock looked up at her, his eyes shining. She smiled back, pleased to see that his emotions were nearer the surface now. The last time he was home he had been so distant she felt she would never reach him again.

"Thank you, mother," he whispered. Rising gracefully from the armchair, he went to his room. He sat and fingered the tape for several minutes before inserting it in the terminal. He wasn't sure he was ready to hear Jim's voice yet. Finally he pushed the play button. While the tape played he was transfixed, letting the voice wash over him - a voice he had not expected to hear again. When the tape finished, he realised he'd been so intent on the sound of Jim's voice that he hadn't heard a word he'd said. He played the tape through again.

"...these past few months have been the worst months of my life..."

So it was bad for you, Jim, too. It will soon be over. We will be together again.

* * * * *

It was harder than Kirk had imagined, saying goodbye to Dr. Storrel and to Stepel. They had become good friends over the month that Kirk had been in the Surveyor. He thanked them and wished them a safe voyage, then let the transporter beam carry him across to the Endeavour.

As he rematerialised he was greeted by the Endeavour's Captain, Jack Farrel, who shook his hand warmly and exclaimed, "Well, well, Captain Kirk. It's not often we are honoured wi' a Captain as 'cargo'."

Kirk laughed. "Don't let it worry you. I haven't had a ship of my own for some months. I'm only a Captain by name at the moment."

"I'll show ye tae yer quarters, then ye can look round ma auld ship. She's no' as flashy as yer Starships, but she's all mine." His voice oozed with pride. Kirk couldn't help thinking that he would have made an ideal pirate if he'd lived in the nineteenth century. He sounded just like Kirk imagined a pirate would.

"I know the feeling, Captain," he said.

Farrel scratched his bearded chin. "Noo, then - there's gonna be too many cap'ns around here. Ye'd better call me Jack."

"In that case, my name's Jim."

"Right y'are, Jim. Now follow me."

Kirk chuckled at the enthusiasm of the man. After living with Vulcans for a month, he'd forgotten just how 'animated' Humans could be.

His quarters were small, but clean. As with all cargo ships, cargo came first, passengers second and crew last of all. "This will be fine, Jack," Kirk thanked the man.

"Dinner is around 1900 hours. We all eat together."

"Thanks."

Jack scuttled away, leaving Kirk to unpack - not that he had many belongings now; two Vulcan tunics kindly donated by Stepel, underwear, toiletries and Amanda's tape which he had decided to keep. Once unpacked, he decided to explore the ship. It wasn't very big, as cargo ships went. The bulk of the ship was taken up with cargo holds. Crew and passenger quarters flanked each side. The cargo was mineral ore, unrefined dilithium crystals and a large cylinder marked 'Highly Inflammable' in a variety of languages. Under the writing was a code marking which Kirk could not decipher. He could only guess at the contents. Leaving the hold, he found the recreation room. Entering, he found three occupants, a young woman aged around 36 and two children aged about 7 or 8.

He smiled. "Hello. I'm Jim Kirk. May I join you?"

The woman smiled up at him. "Certainly. I'm Lea and these are my children, Beth and Ryan." The children greeted Kirk shyly then returned to their game. "Where are you headed, Jim?"

"Vulcan."

"Really? That's strange. Are you on business there?"

"No, I have friends there."

"Vulcan friends?"

"Yes. Do you find that strange, Lea?"

"Well...yes. I suppose I shouldn't, but I do."

"Have you ever met a Vulcan?"

"No. Not to speak to."

Kirk smiled. "Then that explains it. Humans have a very strange idea of what Vulcans are like. They are really very good people to have as friends. My best friend is a Vulcan."

"Really?"

"Where are you headed, Lea?"

She looked at the children, then whispered, "Anywhers... We've...left home."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. I'm not. It's a long story... But we're better out of it. The children have suffered enough. We're heading for Starbase 27; after that, we'll see what turns up."

"Is there anything I could do to help?"

"No. This is something we must work out for ourselves."

Just then the dinner bell chimed. Ryan and Beth ran to their mother's side as she stood up. "Come on, Jim, I'll show you the canteen."

The dinner was plain but nutritious. It was also the first meat Kirk had eaten in a month, so, to him, it tasted delicious. After the meal, Lea put the children to bed then returned to the rec room with Kirk. She found him easy to talk to and was thankful for the chance of adult company. She wondered if he realised they were the only passengers on board. Probably not. Kirk seemed a little introverted. When she commented on it, he said, "That's what comes of living with Vulcans, Lea."

"You've lived with them?"

"Yes. It's a long story. but if you want, I'll tell you." She nodded eagerly and listened in wonder as he told of his life since leaving the Enterprise. He carefully avoided the Klingon details but told her the rest of it. It was good to be able to talk about it; he had not done so on the Surveyor. They had only asked for details of the Mindblock - the rest of his life was considered his own affair.

When he concluded, she said, "So now you're going to meet Spock?"

"Yes." He couldn't keep the excitement from his eyes. She was silent a moment, then said, wistfully,

"I envy you, Jim."

Kirk looked startled. How could she possibly envy him the last few months he had endured? "In what way?"

"You have someone to go to, someone who cares for you. For you, it is like going home. For us... We have no home now."

She looked so sad and defeated, he reached across and took her hand. "Don't be sad. You'll find a home soon, I'm sure. Possibly sooner than I do. You see, even when I meet Spock I'll only be half way home. My home is on a Starship that's many light years from here. Even if I find her again, I may not be able to stay."

"I don't understand. If you are her Captain..."

"I used to be her Captain. She has another now, so I've lost her."

"If you can't have her back, what will you do?"

"I don't know. I'll have to find another home, I guess."

"So we're both in the same boat."

"It looks that way."

Suddenly Kirk felt very tired. He yawned then smiled apologetically. "Well, I guess that means I'd better call it a day." He stood up. "I'll see you tomorrow, Lea - and don't worry; things will work out O.K."

"Goodnight, Jim."

For the next two days Kirk settled into the easy routine of life on a cargo ship. There was little to do, so he spent most of his time in the rec room with Lea, Ryan and Beth. From the hints she occasionally dropped in conversation, he was able to piece together the events leading up to her 'escape' from her husband. She had been right, she was better off on her own. He was surprised how easily he got on with Beth and Ryan, who he discovered were twins aged seven. They were very sensible for their age and very quiet, which was hardly surprising considering what they had gone through before leaving Epsilon Lyrae. By the end of the second day, he felt as if he had known them for years.

They were only three days from Vulcan when the explosion happened. The first Kirk knew of it was an ominous rumbling from the bow of the ship. He went to investigate and found crew members frantically trying to douse the flames and cool the reactor shields with coolant. Jack Farrel was yelling orders but Kirk knew it was in vain. The ship was doomed.

"Jack, get out of there!" he yelled. "It's going to blow!"

"No! My ship! I can't leave her!"

Kirk grabbed the Captain by the arm and dragged him out of the engine room. "Come on, Jack. Leave her!"

"No, Jim. Would you leave yours?" Jack yelled above the increasing drone of overloaded engines.

"Jack!"

Kirk tried to force him towards the shuttles but Farrel was stronger than Kirk and had a dying ship on his side. With a sudden twist of his arm, Farrel was free. He crashed his body against Kirk, pinning him to a bulkhead. Kirk sank to the floor, dazed.

"Sorry, Jim," he muttered as he plunged back into the engine room and began to use the coolant spray again.

Kirk shook his head to clear it and rose groggily to his feet. He peered into the engine room in time to see the first shield blow. Farrel was caught directly in the blast, his body was hurled across the room where he connected with the bulkhead. He slid to the floor, obviously dead.

"Jack," Kirk muttered brokenly. It was such a waste.

A second explosion threw Kirk against the corridor wall. Dragging himself to his feet he stumbled towards the rec room. Lea met him and gasped in horror as she saw the smoke-filled corridor and the flames licking the walls.

"Jim!" She rushed towards him but he pushed her back.

"Get the kids and go to the shuttle. I'll follow." She seemed paralysed with fear. "Lea, MOVE!"

She ran on ahead. Another explosion caught Kirk and he fell awkwardly, a sickening pain shooting from his leg. Cursing, he struggled once again to his feet. The pain from his ankle nearly caused him to pass out but he knew he must continue. When he reached the hangar bay he could hardly see the shuttle for the smoke. He could just see Lea helping the children into the shuttle. He made his way towards her. At the entrance she turned just in time to see a beam break loose and come crashing down directly above where he stood.

"JIM!" she screamed. He looked up as the beam hit him, pinning him to the floor. As blackness overcame him, his last thought was, I'm not going to make it. Spock, I'm sorry. I won't be with you after all.

* * * * *

It is a sad fact that bad news always travels faster than good. It had taken two weeks for Kirk's original letter to reach Amanda on Vulcan. It took only two days for news of the explosion to reach the same place.

Spock was out walking when the daily bulletin reached his house. Sarek was the first to pick up the paper. The headlines caught his eye immediately. He turned to Amanda. "My wife, attend."

She put down her book and crossed the room. "What is it, Sarek?"

He handed her the print-out. Amanda read it through and clutched Sarek's arm. "Oh Sarek, what can we tell Spock? He'll be heartbroken."

"He must be told the truth. Are you certain this is the same cargo ship Kirk was travelling on?"

"Yes. It's in the letter. The Endeavour... Only two days away from home..."

Just then Spock entered. He realised immediately that something was wrong. His mother looked ill. He quickly crossed the room. "Is something wrong, mother?"

Sarek spoke. Amanda was unable to meet Spock's eyes. "Yes, Spock. Wasn't Jim Kirk travelling on the Endeavour?"

"Yes, sir."



"Then you'd better read this." He handed the print-out to his son. Spock felt his legs weakening as he read the headline.

'Cargo ship destroyed. The cargo ship Endeavour was destroyed by an explosion two days ago. No survivors have been found. The cargo...'

He let the paper slip from his fingers and looked across at his mother. "No... It can't be true."

"Spock - " She took a step forward.

"Will you excuse me?" he heard himself ask. Without waiting for a reply he left the room and stumbled blindly to his bedroom. He sank onto the bed and gazed unseeing at his hands.

No survivors. No survivors... Oh, Jim!

He was so near safety. The irony of it. Why had Spock been told Jim was alive? He would have been better off not knowing. But to know he was alive, to feel the joy at that knowledge - only to lose him again. He had allowed himself to hope and anticipate their reunion, knowing Jim was alive. He had believed the

loneliness of the past few months to be over. He had hoped too much. These past few days he had lived for the day Jim would walk through the front door. He had longed for it, dreamed of it, had even let his Vulcan control slip away in the anticipation. He realised now that he no longer had control over the pain and emptiness he felt inside. He felt numb, unable to believe what had happened. He reached blindly for Jim's tape, remembering the closing words. 'I can't wait to see you again.'

Now, with only two days to go, Jim had been taken from him again.

Not again, Jim. I can't go through it all again.

He started as he felt a hand on his shoulder. Amanda sat beside him, tears in her eyes. She looked at her son. There were no tears in his eyes, just pain and emptiness. The same look she had seen the day I-chaya died. As a boy, the sehlat had been his whole life. Now Kirk was his life. Why was fate so cruel to rob him of those he loved? What had her son done to deserve all this pain?

"I'm sorry, Spock. I'm so sorry."

Spock turned pain-dulled eyes to her. "Why, mother? Why?"

She put her arms round him and held him.

* * * * *

Beth sat up and shook the dizziness from her head. She looked round the shuttle, amazed that it was still in one piece. Across the floor she saw her brother who was moaning softly. She crawled over to him and shook him gently. "Ryan. Wake up, Ryan."

Ryan opened his eyes and blinked up at her. "Are you all right, Beth?"

"Yes. I ache a lot but I'm O.K. Can you sit up?"

He tried and found it wasn't as painful as he'd expected. "Where's mummy?"

Beth looked round and found her lying by Kirk. "She's over there with Jim."

They made their way across to her. Beth checked her mother, Ryan checked Kirk.

"I think he's dead, Beth. There's a lot of blood," he whispered. "How's mum?"

"She's waking up."

Slowly Lea opened her eyes. Beth and Ryan threw themselves on her and hugged her. She smiled, thankful they were both unharmed. "It's O.K., children. It's all over now."

Then she noticed Kirk. He looked awful. There was a pool of blood by his head and one leg was caked with dried blood. She prayed hard she'd got him from under the beam in time.

"Let me see to Jim, you two," she said, easing them off her. Crawling over to where Kirk lay, she checked his pulse. It was faint but still there. Breathing a sigh of relief, she said, "Beth, honey, see if you can find a medical kit anywhere. Ryan, find the radio and see if it works." She thanked the gods that they had spent much of their lives on shuttles and knew the layout. Beth brought the kit over.

"Let's hope he's not as hurt as he looks," she muttered, beginning to clean him up. Ryan didn't know whether or not the radio worked but he and Beth took it in turns to call for help, all the same.

Kirk didn't stir that day or half the next. When he finally came round his vision was blurred and his leg ached. Then he felt someone take hold of his hand. He opened his eyes.

"Jim?"

"Lea, is that you?"

"Yes. Oh, I'm so glad you're alive!"

"Where are we?"

"In the shuttle. Remember the explosion?"

"Oh yes." Suddenly it all came back to him. "Jack's dead."

"I know. I think everyone is, except us. They were caught when the ship went up."

"It blew up?"

"Yes."

"Where are we now?"

"I don't know. I don't recognise the stars, and the radio's out, I think."

"How are the children?"

"Fine. How's your leg?"

"It aches. I think it's broken."

"I've put it in splints but I didn't know what else to do." Her voice shook.

He reached out and touched her hand. "It's all right, Lea. At least we're alive. Can you help me up?"

She stood and helped him to his feet. Dizziness overwhelmed him for a moment and he hung onto her until he felt better. Then she helped him into the pilot's chair. He looked out of the viewscreen and laughed. The Eridani system was dead ahead.

"We're near Vulcan. We must have been thrown a good way. Looks like you're going to meet a Vulcan after all."

"How long will it take us to get there?"

"That depends on whether I can get the engine going." He flicked the ignition switch. Nothing happened. On his third attempt, the engines fired. Beth and Ryan cheered. Lea flung her arms around Kirk's neck and hugged him. Kirk grinned. "Well, here goes. We should be on Vulcan in a couple of days."

It wasn't the easiest of flights. It didn't help that Kirk's leg ached unbearably at times and his vision was blurred most of the time due to concussion. Finally they achieved orbit then Kirk took them down. They crash landed as near to ShiKahr hospital as he dared go. Lea helped him to the hospital where his leg was X-rayed and found to be broken in two places. His leg was laser healed and a medi-cast put on it to protect the newly knitted bone. He was taken to a side ward where Lea and the children came to see him.

"It's broken," he said, unnecessarily.

"I guessed it would be. Would you like me to tell Spock you're safe?"

"Yes, please." He didn't know whether Spock had heard news of the explosion. He wouldn't let him think he was dead again. The sooner he knew Kirk was here, the better. He gave Lea directions to Sarek's house and said, "Tell him I'm O.K. and I'll be out tomorrow. I'll see him then."

She leaned over the bed and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "I'll be back," she promised. She collected the children and set off.

* * * * *

Since news of the Endeavour's destruction had reached Spock, he had not spoken at all and had become so withdrawn that no-one had been able to get through to him. He walked about in a daze, oblivious to everything. He had not eaten or slept at all.

On the day Kirk arrived on Vulcan, Spock went into the desert to meditate. Ironically, his journey took him through the hospital grounds where he actually passed Lea, Beth and Ryan.

Lea and her children arrived at Sarek's house half an hour later. Preparing herself for her first encounter with a Vulcan, she rang the bell. Amanda answered the door and Lea was so surprised, she couldn't speak. Trust Jim to forget to mention that Amanda was Human! she thought. It showed, though, how unimportant Jim considered race.

"Can I help you?" Amanda asked.

"Lady Amanda?"

Amanda nodded.

"Forgive me. I expected you to be Vulcan. I have a message from Jim Kirk."

Amanda gripped the door frame. "Jim Kirk is dead."

"No, he's not. We escaped in a shuttle. He's in the hospital with a broken leg. I've come to tell Spock he's O.K."

Amanda smiled in relief. She might have known! "Please come in. I'll get you a drink."

Lea and the children followed her in and sat down. Amanda handed out the drinks and seated herself opposite Lea.

"My name's Lea, by the way. This is Beth, and this, Ryan - my children. We were travelling with Jim on the Endeavour. We managed to escape in the shuttle when the ship exploded and drifted for a couple of days before Jim recovered consciousness and brought us here."

"The bulletin said there were no survivors."

"That's probably because we were thrown a long way and so weren't part of the wreckage. Jim was concerned about Spock, in case he should hear the news and be upset."

"We heard the news two days ago. Spock...is upset. He's gone into the desert today, but he'll be back by nightfall. He'll be so pleased to hear Jim is safe!" There was a short silence then Amanda said, "Do you have a place to stay?"

"No." Lea suddenly realised she had a problem; all her belongings had been lost with the Endeavour. She had no money.

"Then you must stay here."

"Oh, we couldn't put you to any trouble," pride said.

"Nonsense. This is a large house and we have plenty of space. Besides, it's not often we gave Human visitors. It will be pleasant for me."

"In that case... Thank you. We would be very grateful." Tomorrow she could see about contacting her bank and arranging credit to take them on to Starbase 27; tonight she could relax.

"That's settled then."

"You are very kind, Lady Amanda."

"Nonsense. And please, just call me Amanda."

That evening, Sarek arrived. The guests found him intriguing and not half as cold as they had expected him to be. He welcomed his unexpected guests warmly and asked after Jim's health, once he'd heard the news.

As darkness fell, Lea put the children to bed. When she returned, she noticed that Amanda kept glancing anxiously towards the door. When midnight arrived, Amanda said, "Sarek, Spock should have returned hours ago."

"He will return when he is ready."

"Perhaps he's had an accident."

"Why must you assume his lateness is indicative of that?"

Just then there was a knock on the door. No-one called unexpectedly after nightfall on Vulcan; Amanda rose and stood by Sarek, who opened the door.

"Ambassador Sarek, Lady Amanda. Forgive the intrusion. There has been an accident involving your son."

"How badly is he hurt?"

"It does not seem too serious. The doctor is with him now."

"How did it happen?"

"He walked in front of an aircar, sir. He seemed very preoccupied and did not see it."

"Where is he?"

"At my house. I can take you there now. It is not far."

Lea came to the doorway. "I'll stay here. You go."

They followed the messenger and arrived at his house several minutes later. They were guided to the room where Spock lay. He was unconscious. The doctor was just packing away his instruments. Amanda moved to sit by him while Sarek questioned the physician.

"What are his injuries?"

"He has slight concussion, nothing more. He escaped lightly. However - " Amanda looked up anxiously. " - he should have regained consciousness by now. I fail to understand why he has not. It is as if he does not wish to recover."

"Can he be moved?" Amanda asked.

"Yes. I have a stretcher if you wish to take him home."

Amanda helped the doctor, then turned to Sarek. "Please go and bring Jim from the hospital. He will be able to help."

Sarek nodded and left.

Spock was moved to his own house where Amanda sat at his bedside waiting for Sarek to return. Presently she heard the door downstairs. Rushing down, she came face to face with Jim Kirk. He hadn't changed much in appearance in spite of all she knew he had suffered, but his eyes were haunted. He looked really frightened. He stood shakily, balancing himself on crutches, one leg encased in the healing cast.

She smiled reassuringly. "Jim. It's good to see you. I just wish the circumstances could be happier."

"Amanda. I'll do whatever I can to help."

She cast a dubious eye over his medicast. "Can you manage the stairs?"

A hint of the old determination came into his eyes. "I've waited long enough to be here. I'm not going to let a flight of stairs stop me now."

She preceded him up the stairs. His ascent took him a full five minutes; every step was agony but he covered his pain well. Amanda placed a chair by the bed and he sank into it gratefully. "Let me know if his condition gets worse."

"Of course. Thank you for bringing me here."

She smiled and left, closing the door behind her. Kirk turned to face Spock. In the dimness of the room his features looked relaxed yet he seemed to have aged noticeably in the months since they'd been apart.

Kirk smiled warmly. "Spock," he whispered softly.

He was here at last after an eternity of waiting. Easing himself off the chair, he perched on the side of the bed. He reached out tentatively to touch Spock's face.

"I thought I'd lost you," he whispered.

Spock showed no response. Kirk touched his shoulder gently.

"Spock, wake up. It's me, Jim. Wake up!"

The Vulcan remained impassive.

"Spock, listen to me. I'm not dead. Look at me!"

He wasn't sure whether Spock could hear him or not but he knew that, somehow, he had to get through to him and show him he wasn't dead. As he considered his next move, he brushed a hand over Spock's forehead and down his cheek. As he did so, an idea struck him. He placed both his hands on the Vulcan's face in the meld position and whispered, "I don't know if this will work or not, but I have to make you see that I'm not dead. So if you can hear me, you'd better help me get through!"

He cleared his mind and concentrating very hard, called, /Spock!/
 No response.

/Spock, listen to me. Wake up!/
 Still no response. Annoyed and disappointed at his failure, he said aloud,

"This isn't working. If only I knew what to do, Spock."

/Jim?/
 Kirk nearly leaped off the bed at the sudden voice in his mind. He gazed

down at the Vulcan, his eyes warm with affection. /Yes, Spock, it's me./

/Jim is dead./
 Kirk could feel the crushing grief through the link. It threatened to over-

whelm him in its intensity. He bit his lips and tried to reason with the Vulcan.

/Spock. I'm not dead. I didn't die on the Endeavour. We escaped./
 Spock threw his head to one side, trying to

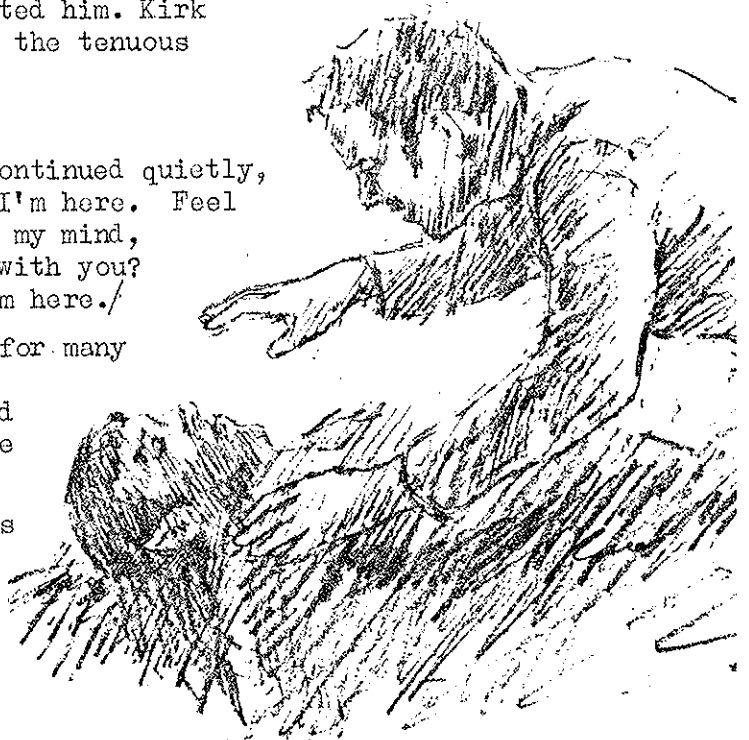
rid his mind of the voice which haunted him. Kirk hung on desperately, afraid to break the tenuous link.

/No. Jim is dead!/
 /SPOCK!/ Kirk 'shouted', then continued quietly,

/You're wrong, Spock. I am alive. I'm here. Feel my mind. Touch me. Concentrate on my mind, Spock. Can't you see that I'm here with you? Don't suffer like this any more. I'm here./

No words came through the link for many minutes but Kirk could feel that his mind was being probed. Spock reached up to rest his fingers on Kirk's face and he felt the link strengthen.

Then, suddenly, Spock opened his eyes and looked up at Kirk. His eyes were full of wonder as if he could not believe what his mind told him. They gazed at each other for what seemed like an eternity before Spock removed his hand from Kirk's face and whispered, "Jim?"



"Yes, Spock. I'm here."

The Vulcan smiled, and his eyes sparkled with joy. "Jim... Oh Jim!"

His Vulcan control gone now, he reached up to touch Kirk's face again. Impulsively, Kirk leaned forward and gathered the Vulcan in his arms, holding him tightly and feeling his own loneliness slowly disappearing.

"It's all over, Spock. I'm safe."

"I thought you were dead."

"I know. I thought you were too."

Slowly Kirk extricated himself from Spock's arms and sat up. "Well," he murmured, "this isn't quite how I imagined our reunion would be."

Suddenly a twinge of pain shot up his leg, causing him to wince. Spock's eyes widened in anxiety. "What is it, Jim? Are you in pain?"

"I broke my leg escaping from the Endeavour. It hurts on occasion."

"Is the pain bad? I can help..."

Kirk smiled. "It's O.K. It doesn't hurt too much. Besides - " he thumped Spock's shoulder, " - you're the one who should be getting the sympathy. How's your head?"

"A little sore. The pain will go."

"What's the idea of walking in front of an aircar anyway, Spock?"

Spock was silent for a moment, as if trying to decide on a plausible answer. Finally, he said, "I was preoccupied."

"That's not like you, Spock."

"I... Jim, I'd rather not discuss it."

"Very well." Kirk got the distinct impression there was more to the accident than Spock had revealed and decided to let the matter rest for the moment. He eased himself off the bed and reached for the crutches.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to inform your worried parents that you have recovered. And I'm going to let you get some rest. You look as if you haven't slept in days."

"Will you be here in the morning?"

"You just try and keep me away... Goodnight, Spock."

"Goodnight, Jim...and thanks for coming back."

At the doorway, Kirk grinned then slowly left the room, closing the door behind him.

During the next morning, Lea announced that she could get transport that day for Starbase 27. She said goodbye to Sarek and Amanda then turned to Kirk.

"I hope you find your home, Jim."

"I hope you find yours. I'm sure you will. Thank you for rescuing me... I don't think I've said that, have I?"

She laughed briefly to cover her sadness at leaving him. He had been the kindest person she had met in a long time. "I can't remember, Jim."

Kirk knelt and hugged Beth and Ryan. "Take care, you two, and look after your mom."

"We will, Jim," they chorussed.

He straightened again, and, balancing his weight on one crutch, placed his

free hand on Lea's shoulder. "Take care of yourself, Lea. I won't forget you."

"Nor I you, Jim. Goodbye." She leaned forward and kissed him softly.

"Goodbye, Lea."

Taking the children's hands, she turned away. Before they were out of earshot, Ryan whispered, "Mun, when we find a new dad, I hope he'll be like Jim."

"So do I, Ryan... So do I."

Kirk hobbled into the garden and eased himself into one of the chairs. He looked round at the flowers and fountains, remembering the times he had thought he would never see this life again. He had always enjoyed this garden; it was so peaceful and conducive to thought.

He had been there nearly an hour when he heard someone approaching. He looked round to find Spock looking down at him.

Kirk smiled. "Morning, Spock. How do you feel?"

"I am recovered, Jim. How is your leg?"

"Not too bad. Come and sit down."

Spock took a seat opposite Kirk and they sat in thoughtful silence for several minutes, content to be together again and enjoying the quiet solitude of the garden. It was Spock who spoke first.

"We have much to talk about, Jim, Do you want to tell me of your life since Eyos Alpha?"

Kirk nodded and cast his mind back. "On Eyos Alpha..." Was that only five months ago? "When we were ambushed, I thought they'd killed you. They took me to their ship and continued to ask me about K-1. There was very little I could tell them, of course, but they seemed convinced that I knew the co-ordinates. Finally they used a Mindblock on me. Have you heard of it, Spock?" Spock nodded. "They used it to its full potential and my speech centres were affected."

"You couldn't speak?"

"Not properly. That was the worst part. For months I couldn't communicate. I couldn't explain who I was or where I'd come from. It was awful. The Klingons left me on Seylina, where the people looked after me. They were very good to me, all things considered. I was there three months before the Vulcans on the Surveyor found me. They operated on me and reversed the Mindblock. It was marvellous, being able to communicate again. Then I came across your research paper and realised you were not dead. Once I realised you were alive I planned to find you. Your mother said you would be on Vulcan so I transferred to the Endeavour, which unfortunately blew up. We managed to escape, though."

"We?"

"Lea, her children and I."

Spock looked puzzled and Kirk remembered that Spock hadn't met them. "They were the only other passengers on board. It's thanks to Lea that I'm here now. She freed me from a beam that had fallen on me. That's how I broke my leg. We escaped in a shuttle...and here I am," he finished with a flourish.

Spock nodded pensively. "An eventful existence."

"A bit too eventful at times, Spock. Now it's your turn."

Spock studied his feet as he spoke. "The Klingons used the agoniser gun on me. The next thing I remember is waking up in sickbay. Apparently I was in a coma for several days. I assumed command of the Enterprise, and took the scientists to K-1. Then I left Starfleet and..."

"Why did you leave, Spock? Didn't you want the Enterprise?"

"I couldn't take her, Jim. She's your ship, and..." He lapsed into silence.

Kirk whispered, "Did it hurt so much, Spock?"

Spock nodded, realising Kirk was not referring to any physical pain. "Too much, Jim. I wanted to stay on for Dr. McCoy, but I could not."

"How is Bones?"

"I believe he is still on the Enterprise. I do not know the state of his health."

Kirk nodded in understanding. "Go on, Spock."

"I returned to Vulcan and spent some time at the science academy, but I found it hard to work with Vulcans."

"I guess we humanised you too much. Bones would be pleased to hear that."

"On the Enterprise, you cared. That was the difference. I felt wanted there. So I decided to return to Starfleet. I am currently Science Officer on the Explorer."

"Do you like it there?"

"I am accepted. It is a preferable alternative."

"Did you get my tape?"

"Yes. When I realised you were alive... If I'd known earlier, I would have searched for you."

"I doubt you'd have found me."

"I wouldn't have stopped looking, Jim."

Kirk reached over and touched his arm briefly. "Thank you."

Spock returned to the study of his feet as he continued. "I returned to Vulcan. Then we heard of the explosion on the Endeavour. Jim, I had gone through your death once. I couldn't do it again... Yesterday, when I was hit by the air-car... That was no accident."

"Spock, don't say that!" Kirk was horrified.

"It's true, Jim. It is fortunate the car was travelling slowly."

"We must put the past behind us, Spock. Think of the future."

"I must return to the Endeavour in seven days."

"We must find a ship where we can serve together. We're a team, Spock. We could have that again."

"I would look forward to that."

"Good. Then we must plan ahead." Their eyes met and they smiled in anticipation.

During the next week they spent long hours discussing the past and planning the future. Kirk contacted the Enterprise and discovered she would be at Starbase 27 in eight days' time. The Enterprise had heard now of Kirk's rescue but hadn't known where he was. Since Spock had to rendezvous with the Endeavour at Starbase 27, Kirk decided to travel with him and visit the Enterprise. He also contacted Starfleet and arranged a short command rehabilitation course while at the Starbase. If he passed that, they would see about getting him a ship. That being settled, Kirk and Spock spent their remaining time together walking around Shikahr and its environs.

All too soon the day arrived when they had to leave Vulcan. The journey to Starbase 27 took two days, which meant Spock had only four hours on the base before he had to catch his shuttle. Perhaps it was for the best. Neither relished long goodbyes.

Kirk went with him to the shuttle bay to say goodbye. "Take care of yourself, Spock."

"And you too, Jim."

"I don't know when I'll see you again. Just make sure I do - no heroics, do you hear?"

"Yes, Jim. Keep in touch."

"I will."

"And Jim - when you see Dr. McCoy...tell him... Just say he's not forgotten."

"I will. You'd better go now. 'Bye, Spock."

"Goodbye, Jim." Without a backward glance Spock walked through the door on his way to the shuttle. Kirk watched him go, then turned and walked away. He was determined to keep himself busy and not dwell on the worry of finding Spock only to lose him again. He had a day before the Enterprise arrived; after checking in to a hotel, he went in search of a medical centre - he was required to have a full medical before starting his course.

The medical took three hours, at the end of which he was pronounced physically fit. The cast had been removed from his leg before leaving Vulcan. When he left the medical centre he felt drained, so he returned to his room for a shower and something to eat. After eating, he made his way to the observation deck. He had always found peace on the Enterprise's observation deck and hoped he would find it here. He was not disappointed; the stars twinkled back at him as compellingly as always. What was it about them that gave him such a sense of utter peace? Gazing out at the stars, he offered them a silent promise.

I'll be with you soon.

The next day Kirk was in his room reading when there was a knock on the door. Thinking it was the orderly, he did not get up, but simply called, "Come!" glancing up to see what was wanted.

The door opened and Dr. Leonard McCoy entered. Kirk shot off the bed and stared dumbfounded at his friend. "Bones!"

"Jim." McCoy crossed the room and stood in front of Kirk, a delighted grin on his face. "When we heard you were alive... Oh Jim!" McCoy threw his arms around Kirk and hugged him fiercely, oblivious to the tears that flowed freely down his cheeks. They stood holding each other for several minutes before McCoy released Kirk and stood with him at arm's length.

"I hadn't intended the tears," he muttered sheepishly, still grinning.

"Nor me," Kirk admitted, sniffing and wiping away his own tears. "But what are you doing here so soon? You weren't due in till this afternoon."

"We got in early. I couldn't wait any longer to see you. Five months is long enough."

Kirk laughed. "Come on. Sit down - we've a lot of catching up to do."

McCoy took a seat. Kirk poured two brandies and, handing one to McCoy, said, "How's it been, Bones?"

"Rough, especially after Spock left. It was quite a while before I got over losing both of you."

"Spock told me he'd wanted to stay on but couldn't."

"I know. I accused him of running away, but I'd have gone too if I'd anywhere to go. You know, I never thought I'd admit it, but I've really missed that Vulcan."

"He had to get back to the Explorer but he said he's not forgotten you."

"Yeah. Your 'death' hit him pretty hard, Jim. I thought he'd go to pieces at first but he managed to control it... It can't have been easy for him, either. Tell me, what happened after the Klingons took you?"

Kirk related the tale, including how he had come across McCoy's research paper on brain surgery and the way he was respected by the Vulcans. McCoy seemed genuinely surprised at that.

"Well, Jim, I'm glad I could help you there. That Mindblock sounds a pretty lethal weapon."

"Believe me, Bones, I've no wish to tangle with one again."

"Reannah sounds like a lovely girl."

Kirk smiled reflectively, remembering his time on Seylina. "She was, Bones."

"Did you love her, Jim?"

"No, I don't think so. I guess I could have done if I'd resigned myself to spending the rest of my life there. Yet, somehow I knew I'd be rescued."

They sat in thoughtful silence for a moment, then Kirk said, "What's Captain Oliver like?"

McCoy laughed. He'd wondered when Kirk would get round to that. "After his job, Jim?"

"I'd be a liar to say no, but I wouldn't do anything to jeopardise his career. I can wait. What's he like?"

"He's a first class captain, Jim...but he's not you; it's not the same."

"Thanks, Bones."

"Are you coming to see her?"

McCoy saw the twinkle in Kirk's eyes as he anticipated the visit, then suddenly doubt clouded their brightness.

"What is it, Jim?"

"I don't know if I could see her, knowing I can't have her."

McCoy thought for a moment before he said, "You should see her, Jim. It would do you good. You can do it, Jim - I know you can."

"O.K., Bones. Can we go now?"

"Sure."

They got up and headed for the transporter room. McCoy had trouble keeping up with Kirk. Finally they were on the transporter pads. Kirk gave the order to energize.

The moment his senses returned, Kirk could feel the aura of his ship. He looked around the transporter room and beamed at Kyle, who belatedly recognised the man in blue cords and a check shirt.

"Captain Kirk?"

"Yes, Kyle. It's nice to see you again."

"It's good to have you back, sir."

"I'm only visiting, Kyle."

The transporter chief nodded. Kirk and McCoy left the transporter room and made their way slowly along the corridor. Kirk stopped continually to touch the walls and fixtures.

/Hello, Baby. It's been a long time, hasn't it? Is he treating you properly? You look beautiful!/
/

He was greeted by all the crew members they passed who had been on board prior to his 'death'. Eventually he reached the bridge. Kirk took a deep breath before he activated the bridge doors. The sight that met his eyes was almost too beautiful to bear. This was home - his only home. How could he leave her?

The rest of his thoughts were lost as the bridge crew rushed up to greet him. He was vaguely aware of being kissed by Uhura and having his back thumped and his hand shaken by Scotty, Sulu and Chekov.

"Well," he finally managed to say, "this is quite a welcome." He became aware that two people were staring at him as if he were insane. Stepping forward, he introduced himself. "I'm Captain James Kirk."

The greying man rose from the command chair and came forward to greet him. "Captain Kirk. It's a great honour to meet you. I've heard a lot about you - all good, I might add."

"Thank you, sir."

"May I introduce my First Officer, Commander Dane Richards."

Kirk shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Commander." He walked over to the command chair and stroked it wistfully.

"Help yourself," Oliver said, indicating the chair. Kirk took a step back.

"No. That's one luxury I'm not allowing myself." If I sit there, it would take a photon torpedo to get me to give it back.

The bridge crew laughed, understanding Kirk's reluctance. They knew him well.

"Captain, there are some belongings of yours in the storage hold. We haven't been close enough to Earth to get them to your mother. They're all yours if you want to collect them."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

McCoy followed him from the bridge into stores, where Kirk found the container and flopped down on the floor, his legs to either side of the box. He grunted as he read the label.

'Captain James T. Kirk, deceased.'

McCoy watched him as he rooted through the box. He was like a child with a sack of Christmas presents. His exploration was interrupted by laughs and exclamations of "Look at that!" "I'd forgotten about that." Finally, only one small packet remained. He opened it. Inside was a Vulcan IDIC and his pay book. He fingered the IDIC, recalling the time Spock had given it to him. Slowly he put it round his neck. Then he picked up the pay book and scrutinised the last entry. He grunted and threw an indignant glance at McCoy.

"They've stopped paying me, can you believe that? Six months with no pay!"

McCoy laughed. "I guess they figured that, where you'd gone, you wouldn't need it."

Kirk threw the pay book at him and laughed. "Come on, let's get these things back to the Starbase."

For the next few days while the Enterprise was having an overhaul, Kirk and McCoy spent most of their time together, either on the Enterprise or on the Starbase. At the end of the week, the Enterprise left orbit. Kirk watched her go from the observation deck. She was a beautiful sight.

It was a very thoughtful and determined Kirk who reported the next day for the Command Rehabilitation Course. The course lasted four days, and put him through a simulation of every manoeuvre and emergency in the book. Kirk was surprised at how easy he found it - so much of it was pure instinct to him. At the end of it he passed with flying colours and was given a certificate to prove he had not lost his Starship potential. Armed with that, he went to find Commodore Lopez.

When he left the office some hours later, he wasn't sure whether to be pleased or angry. He had known what he'd wanted, but what he actually got had been something else entirely. He should be grateful there was a captaincy immediately

available...but a medical supply ship?

Still, he mused, it could be interesting - and useful if I get sick! A bit like being knocked down by an ambulance.

The next day he checked out of his hotel and strolled over to the hangar bay. "Where do I find the Salvation?" He winced at the name. The officer checked the clip board and pointed to his right.

"Bay three. She's not due out till tomorrow."

"That's O.K. I'm in no hurry." He walked briskly along to Bay three, thankful that he would soon be in action again and feel useful. He felt as if he could tackle anything.

He beamed across to the ship and introduced himself to as many of the crew as he could find. The full ship's complement was only thirty, so it looked like being a cosy ride for the next few months. The post was only temporary while the Captain was on a six-month refresher course.

One of the nurses was a friend of Christine Chapel's and, while their relationship remained platonic, it was, nonetheless, enjoyable. Whilst on the Salvation, Kirk received two tapes - one from Spock, the other from McCoy.

McCoy's tape was chatty and full of incidents from life on the Enterprise. Kirk had to stop the tape continually as he laughed so much at McCoy's easy-going monologue.

Spock's tape, on the other hand, was short and precise, but no less welcome. It began, 'It was good to receive your tape, Jim. I am pleased that you find the work on the Salvation interesting. We continue to map new regions of space and are currently in the sector beyond the Capellan region. The work is routine but sufficiently interesting to occupy much of my time. The crew is tolerant, but the members keep to themselves. It is not like the Enterprise. Those days are long gone. It seems as if it will be a long time before we meet again. Look after yourself. Spock.'

Kirk had replied to both tapes immediately.

At the end of the first month he received orders to report to Starbase 15, a relatively new base established near the Klingon border. Commodore Barrett greeted him warmly and offered him a seat.

"Captain Kirk. How is life on the Salvation?"

"Enjoyable, sir, and interesting."

"Good. However, I want you to transfer to a Starship and take over as her Captain. The Salvation has been given a new Captain. The U.S.S. Potempkin is due here in two days' time. Her Captain is retiring; we want you to assume command. Does that appeal to you, Captain?" he asked, knowing how much Kirk wanted a Starship - he knew what his answer would be. He was not disappointed.

"It appeals very much, sir. I'd be honoured to take over."

"That's settled, then. The post is yours from stardate 6805.2."

"Thank you, sir." Kirk hardly felt his feet touch the floor as he left Barrett's office. His own Starship! He made his way to the library computer room and spent the next two days studying the Potempkin's recent assignments and present crew list. He remembered one or two names from the times the Enterprise and the Potempkin had been in joint manoeuvres or had come into brief contact.

Finally satisfied that he was 'up to date' on his new posting, he spent the final hours enjoying the facilities offered on the Starbase. He decided to spend an hour viewing the stars before retiring for the night. As he entered the viewing dome he noticed someone was already there. They exchanged smiles and continued to gaze out at the panorama. Presently, Kirk sighed.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"Wonderful, yes." The man looked towards Kirk and seemed to recognise him.
 "Excuse me, sir, are you Captain Kirk?"

Kirk studied the man's face. "Yes, I am. Should I know you?"

"No, sir. I recognised you from the pictures in your obituary - Sorry, sir, I hope I've not brought back bad memories for you."

"No, that's all right. It's in the past now."

"You must have had a rough time, sir?"

"It wasn't too good for a while. Things have improved now, though."

"That's good, sir." The young man turned to leave. As he began to walk away he paused and turned back. "Sorry to hear about the Enterprise, sir."

Kirk's stomach turned over and a shiver ran down his spine. "What do you mean?"

"Haven't you heard? There was an explosion in one of the nacelles."

"No," Kirk breathed, too shocked to say more.

"It's in today's bulletin, sir."

"Thanks. I'll read it." He left the observation deck, fear gripping his stomach. His ship - had she been destroyed? What about his friends? Bones, Scotty, Uhura, ... What a waste. Quickening his pace, he reached the library and programmed the selector for the bulletin. The news was on the first page.

'U.S.S. Enterprise out of action 6792.6'

The U.S.S. Enterprise was towed to Starbase 16 for extensive repairs following an explosion in one of her nacelles which was destroyed in the blast. There were a number of casualties, most seriously injured being Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott (engineering), Lt. William P. Chambers (engineering) and Lt. Sulu (helmsman). The death toll was miraculously low, due entirely to the efforts of Mr. Scott and Commander Roberts. Those listed as dead include Commander Dane Richards (First Officer), Lt. Peter Nelson (engineering) Lt. Philip Monrow (security) and Lt. Meryl McArthur (security). Next of kin have been notified.'

Kirk sat in stunned silence letting the report sink in. Four dead... Scotty and Sulu injured. He looked at the date - three days ago. Slowly he got up and returned to his own room. When he reached it, he found a tape waiting for him. He picked it up and poured himself a large drink. While he sipped it, he fingered the tape. Finally he inserted it into the computer. It was from McCoy.

'Hi, Jim. This is Bones. I figured I'd better send this so's you'd get it before you had the heart attack. The Enterprise had a bit of trouble yesterday. One of the reactors blew in the nacelles. The damage is bad, but it can be repaired. Do you hear me, Jim - it can be repaired. Pity 'bout the First Officer, he was a good man. Scotty took the worst of it. He and Roberts tried to seal off the nacelle before the whole thing blew. They managed to contain most of the explosion but we had to jettison the nacelle before the anti-matter pod went up. Only just made it, too. Of course, with only one nacelle we couldn't move her so we had to be towed to Starbase 16.

'As I said, Scotty got the worst of it, burns mostly, but fortunately it missed his face so he's still as bony as ever. He'll have to have skin grafts but he'll make a complete recovery. Sulu got electrical burns when his console shorted. He'll be fine when the blisters heal. Anyway, Jim, you mustn't worry. Everything's under control and we'll be flying again before long. We're having a brand new nacelle which should take about a month to install. Take care of yourself. Finish your drink and don't worry. Yours, Bones.'

Kirk looked at the drink in his hand and smiled. "Thanks, Bones." Finishing his drink, he undressed and got into bed. With the help of the brandy, he fell asleep.

* * * * *

The day Kirk was to become Captain of the U.S.S. Potempkin finally arrived. He made his way to the transporter room, dressed in his Captain's uniform. He hadn't worn it in over six months - his uniform for the Salvation had been a blue coverall. Wearing his uniform again, he felt as if he was reliving the day he'd joined the Enterprise. He felt special and excited.

Stepping onto the transporter pad, he smoothed his shirt, flicked the lock of hair from his forehead and called, "Energise."

"Energising Captain."

He materialised on the Potempkin and gazed around at the eager, expectant faces of the welcoming committee. The whistle sounded.

"Welcome aboard, Captain Kirk. It is an honour to have you as our Captain."

"Thank you, Commander Norton. I shall endeavour to be worthy of that honour."

His new First Officer introduced the rest of the assembled crew then took him to his quarters. As Kirk unburdened himself of his luggage, Norton said, "If you wish, sir, I shall return in an hour to show you round the ship."

"Thank you."

Norton slipped quietly from the room. Kirk wandered around, touching the walls and furniture, getting the feel of the room. It was so like his own cabin on the Enterprise, yet in some ways it was so different. His Enterprise quarters had been his sanctuary; he had felt the security in their walls. This room had yet to become that. He began to unpack.

Within the hour, Joseph Norton returned and Kirk accompanied him round the ship. He knew his way around, since the layout was identical to that of the Enterprise, but again the decor and fitments made it different. The tour ended on the bridge. Following his introduction to the bridge crew, he allowed himself the luxury of sitting in the command chair. After so long away it felt good to return to his former status. The bridge layout was only subtly different to that of the Enterprise.

"Status report, Mr. Norton."

Norton came to stand by Kirk's chair and handed him the day's reports. "All systems operational, sir. We have orders to proceed along the Klingon border to K-1. The journey will take approximately six weeks. Our mission is to survey Klingon activity along the border. Once at K-1 we have orders to run a systems check and deliver supplies and replacements."

"I see. So I'll get to K-1 after all," he mused aloud.

"Sir?"

Kirk looked up at his First Officer. "I was on my way to K-1 when I was taken by the Klingons. The Enterprise took the original scientists there. I was captured before we reached K-1, so I've never seen it."

"Few people have, sir. I believe it's a very beautiful place."

Just then the helmsman interrupted their conversation. "Engineering reports the warp engines ready. We can leave orbit whenever you give the word, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Hellier. Leave orbit, ahead warp factor 2. Course, 270 mark 4."

"Aye, sir."

While helmsman and wavigstor worked at the controls, Kirk watched the dwindling sight of Starbase 27 on the viewscreen. For six months he had dreamed of his own Starship, and now he had one again. It wasn't the Enterprise but it was the next best thing.

Kirk's first week on the Potempkin turned out to be very routine and undemanding. There was no sign of Klingons anywhere along their stretch of the border.

It did, however, give him the chance to settle into being a Starship Captain again and he had time to get to know his crew. They were, without exception, loyal and hardworking. Their previous Captain had done a good job. Morale was high.

For Kirk, the highlight of that first week was a tape from Spock, which arrived three days into the mission. Kirk took the tape through to his quarters and played it.

'Jim. No doubt you will have heard of the explosion on board the Enterprise, resulting in the deaths of four crewmembers, including the First Officer. Although their deaths are a regrettable waste of valuable lives, it has provided me with the opportunity we spoke of on Vulcan. I have been offered the post of First Officer/Science Officer on the Enterprise. I have accepted the position. By the time you get this tape I will be back on the Enterprise. I will ensure her safety for you. No harm shall come to her while I have the power to protect her. Let us hope our travels bring us close enough to meet in the near future. It pleased me to hear of your posting to the Potempkin. Take care of yourself, Jim. Yours, Spock.'

Kirk sat in thoughtful silence. When the tape ended some quality in Spock's voice disturbed him. He played the tape again and found the cause of his worry. Spock was being over-protective about the Enterprise. He knew how much Kirk loved the ship, but didn't he realise that he was more important to Kirk than the Enterprise? If he had visions of killing himself to protect her, then Kirk would have to tell him she wasn't worth it. Much as Kirk dreaded the destruction of his ship, if he had to choose between Spock and the Enterprise, he knew where his priorities lay. Inserting a fresh tape into the recorder, he began his reply.

'Hello, Spock. It was good to hear from you. I'm really pleased you have regained your former position on the Enterprise. Let me know how our friends are keeping - Bones, Scotty and Uhura. There is one thing, Spock. If the Enterprise is in any danger, protect her by all means, but don't risk your life for her. She can be replaced, you cannot. I've lost you once, I can't lose you again. There are two things I value more than anything else in this world. One is the Enterprise, the other is your friendship. If I had to choose between them, I would choose you. Don't throw your life away on the ship, Spock.' He paused and sighed. 'That's all I wanted to say. Take care. Yours, Jim.'

He took the tape from the recorder and got up to take it through to communications, but paused as he reached the door. He stood silently for a moment, then thumped the wall and muttered, "Hell, I can't send this." It's too near what I really want to say.

Sighing, he erased the message and began again. 'Hello, Spock. Thanks for letting me know about your posting to the Enterprise. It must feel good to be home again. How's Bones and Scotty? I know the ship will be in good hands with you aboard, but don't take any unnecessary risks. You're more important to me than the ship. I, too, hope we can meet again soon. Take care of yourself. Yours, Jim Kirk.'

He sent the message through to communications then returned to the bridge. "Status, Mr. Norton."

"All quiet, sir."

"It's strange that we've detected no Klingon activity, don't you think, Commander?"

"Yes, sir. Perhaps they're waiting until we are further from our reinforcements at the Starbase."

"Possibly. Let's hope not."

Four days later they got their answer in the form of a message from Starfleet H.Q. Kirk had the message relayed through the viewscreen.

"Commodore Barrett," Kirk acknowledged.

Barrett smiled in return. "Captain Kirk. We have received an urgent message from K-1. Their sensors have detected a fleet of five Klingon warships heading their way. Although they have sufficient weaponry to combat this force, they feel reinforcements may be following the initial fleet. If K-1 sustains damage they may not be able to combat further attacks. They have requested help. Two starships are near enough to offer assistance. Yours is one; the other is the Enterprise - repairs have been expedited for this." Kirk's eyes widened. "You are to proceed at maximum warp to K-1 where you will contact the base and the Enterprise to discuss battle tactics. The Klingon fleet will arrive in five days at its present speed. That does not give you much time."

"We'll be there, sir."

Starfleet is relying on you and the Enterprise. Good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

Communications ceased and Kirk turned to the navigator. "At warp nine, how long will it take to get to K-1?"

The navigator had already anticipated the question. He answered immediately. "We will reach K-1 one day ahead of the Klingons, sir."

"Good. Execute and maintain."

"Aye, sir."

They were still two days from K-1 when the distress signal was picked up. "The Klingons have increased speed and a further fleet of five ships is only one day behind the leaders. At their present speed, the Klingons will arrive one day before you can arrive. The Enterprise is already here. She will protect our left flank. When you arrive, position yourself at the right."

Kirk turned to the helmsman. "How long can we maintain warp 10?"

"Only six to seven hours, sir."

"Then let's have it. Increase to warp 10."

"Aye, sir."

The following day they came within communications range of the Enterprise. Kirk called her. Captain Oliver looked tired and weary. He greeted Kirk with considerable relief in his voice. "Captain Kirk, thank god. We've managed to destroy four of the first fleet and are holding off the fifth now. K-1 has sustained some damage. The second wave is only hours away. How soon can you be here?"

"Within nineteen hours. What's your status?"

"We've one deflector shield out, phasers at 70% power. We can hold them off as long as they attack singly. Fortunately, their main target is K-1."

"Just hang on. We'll be there as soon as we can." Kirk broke off communications, mentally cursing the slowness of his ship and the vastness of space. All they could do was sit and wait it out while the Enterprise was under attack. If anything happened to his ship...

The hours dragged slowly by and Kirk began to pace the bridge. "How much longer?" he asked for the thousandth time.

"Four hours, sir."

Finally, they were at extreme sensor range. "Switch to main screen and full magnification," Kirk ordered.

The viewscreen flickered, to show the huge wheel of K-1 surrounded by six Klingon ships. The Enterprise hung to the left of the screen. Periodically,

flashes of light indicated that a battle was in progress.

As they neared the scene, Kirk could see the destruction that had already taken place. The beautiful symmetry of K-1 was marred by three broken spokes and numerous indentations to the outer rim. Fortunately, her immense size had saved her from total destruction. Had she been smaller, the damage would undoubtedly have been considerably greater.

Kirk sent a short signal to K-1 and the Enterprise. "Potempkin in range and engaging in battle." To reinforce her message, she fired a photon torpedo at the nearest Klingon ship, which vanished in a brilliant flash. Two Klingon ships broke off their attack of K-1 and headed for the Potempkin.

"Deflector shields up. Prepare main phaser banks."

"Phasers armed and ready, sir."

"Lock onto target."

"Locked on, sir."

"Fire at will."

It took three prolonged bursts of phaser power to destroy the first Klingon ship, by which time the second ship was practically on top of them. The Potempkin shook as the Klingon guns were brought to bear.

"Lock on and fire!" Kirk yelled amid the sound of circuits shorting and status reports being relayed over the intercom. There was only time for one shot before the Klingon ship overshot them. The shot winged them but did not slow them down.

"They're heading into Federation territory, sir," Norton informed Kirk.

"We'll go after them. About turn, 180°. Follow their course." He turned to Lt. Phobes, communications officer. "Inform the Enterprise and K-1 we are going in pursuit. They should be able to handle the remaining three ships."

"Aye, sir," she replied, the message already on its way.

The Potempkin found no problem keeping pace with the Klingon ship. "Keep sensors locked on. I want to know the moment they alter what they're doing." Just what was this ship doing, anyway, running on into Federation territory?

There was something familiar about the markings on the Klingon vessel. Kirk was sure he'd seen them someplace before. He got up and walked over to the library computer station. "Mr. Norton, can you get an identification of that ship?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have its identification in a moment." Turning to the computer, he fed in the relevant data. Seconds later the identification appeared and Kirk nodded in satisfaction. The vessel was indeed familiar.

"Programme the details into the computer and see if we have a crew list for it. I've met that ship before."

Kirk waited as Norton translated the printout. "The Conqueror, Captain Krevol, First Lieutenant Karlov second - "

"Thank you. That's all I needed to know." He returned to his chair. Even now the name stirred violent emotions in Kirk's mind. Hatred, fear and the lust for revenge. He had suffered enough at Karlov's hands; it was about time the tables were turned. He could feel the sweat standing out on his brow as he ordered Phobes to open a channel to the Conqueror. She eyed him strangely, as if he had suddenly gone mad. What on earth could he possibly want to say to Klingons they were going to try to blast out of existence as soon as they were within range? She shrugged and informed him that the channel was open.

"Conqueror, this is the U.S.S. Potempkin."

The viewscreen flickered and solidified into the features of Krevol, Karlov

at his shoulder. Both jaws dropped at the sight of Kirk.

Kirk smiled, enjoying their astonishment. "Karlov, we meet again."

"Captain Kirk... We thought..."

"I am well aware of what you thought. Did you really assume that I would be silenced so easily?"

"But the Mindblock cannot be reversed!"

"I think you have enough evidence in front of your eyes to disprove that theory."

"But..."

"You realise you are in Federation territory. You will surrender or be destroyed."

"We will never surrender."

"Very well. You have made your choice."

Much as Kirk's hatred would have been satisfied with meting out a slow death, he could not kill in cold blood or watch a fellow being - even a Klingon - suffer at his hands. "You have twenty standard minutes to reach your own territory. If you fail to comply, you will be destroyed."

The Klingons replied by ceasing transmission and turning their ship further into Federation territory.

"There's our answer," Kirk muttered. "Lock photon torpedoes to the centre section."

"Locked on, sir."

"Fire!"

As the Klingon ship erupted in its death throes, Kirk closed his eyes. All those men. God, he hated war. When would it all end?

"Turn us around, Mr. Rogers. Return to K-1, warp 9."

By the time they reached K-1 the battle was over. There were no Klingon ships to be seen and the Enterprise was in

close orbit of the station.

"Contact the Enterprise, Lieutenant."

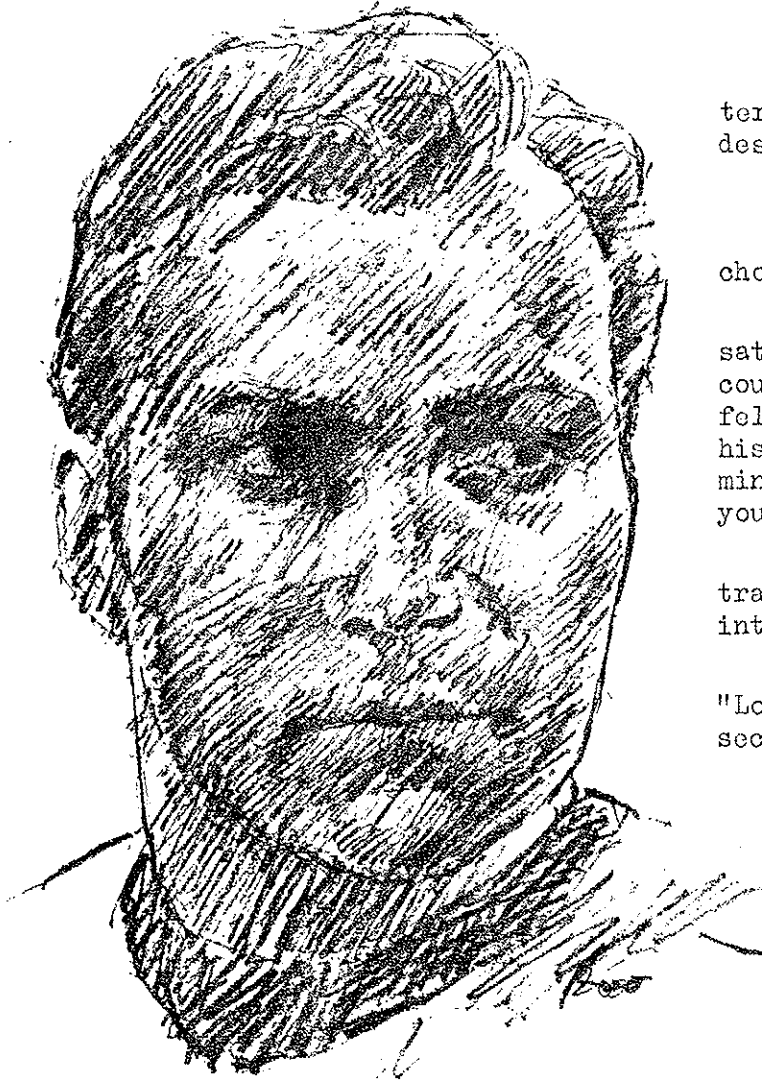
"Frequency open, sir."

Sulu's face appeared on the screen. He grinned at Kirk.

"Mr. Sulu. Is Captain Oliver there?"

"No, sir. All senior officers are on K-1. There is a meeting. I am to inform you, you are expected."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu. We'll be there." He closed down communication and headed for the turbo lift. "Assume standard orbit, Mr. Hellier. Mr. Norton, we're expected on K-1." Norton left his post and followed Kirk into the lift. They travelled in silence for a while, then Norton said,



"Sir, may I ask you a question about the Klingons?" Kirk nodded. "Was it Krevol and Karlov who used the Mindblock on you, sir?"

"Yes."

"That must have been...very painful."

"It was mostly mental, Mr. Norton. It's not an experience I would care to repeat."

"No, sir." The lift doors opened, and Kirk and Norton walked briskly down the corridor to the transporter room. Chief Medical Officer Villiers joined them on the transporter pads.

"Energise."

On K-1 they were met by one of the scientists who escorted them to the meeting room. Captain Oliver, Spock, Scotty and McCoy were already there and greeted Kirk and his officers warmly. Two of the K-1 staff joined them and the meeting began.

"Captain Oliver, status report and casualty report, please."

"Two deflector shields out of action, a third one buckled. Phasers down to 50% capacity but recharging. Repairs should be complete within three days. Fourteen injured, none seriously. No deaths."

"Captain Kirk?"

"One deflector shield buckled. Secondary damage to right nacelle. Some bridge circuitry out of action. Repairs should be complete within two days. One death in engineering; ten injured, one of them seriously."

The Chief Scientist nodded his thanks to both Captains. "It would seem we have sustained the most damage. Three of our labs were destroyed and there is damage to the main wheel. Three scientists have been killed. I would prefer not to name them until next of kin have been informed."

Kirk, who had been watching Oliver at the time, noticed him pale visibly at the news. He tried to remember the names of the scientists they had carried to K-1, but could not.

The meeting continued for a further forty minutes. As the members filed out of the room, Kirk noticed that Captain Oliver had been called to one side of the room. He was prevented from further observation by a thump on the back. Turning, he found McCoy and Spock at his side.

"Bones, it's good to see you. You too, Spock." He smiled at the Vulcan.

"It is good to see you, Captain," Spock replied formally, though his eyes betrayed the warmth his voice could not convey.

"Now then, Jim," McCoy was saying, "why don't we all find a nice quiet corner and have a chat?"

"Sounds like a good idea, Bones. You coming, Spock?"

"Yes, I will join you."

"Good."

They found a deserted rec room and sat down. Kirk coaxed a dispenser into producing drinks and brought them over, and the conversation soon warmed up. It was the first time the three of them had been together in six months and they were determined to make the most of the opportunity. However, after an hour, McCoy was called away - one of the injured on the Enterprise had suffered a relapse.

"Duty calls," he muttered, rising. "See you later."

Kirk nodded and watched him go. "He seems happy enough, Spock."

"These past months have taken their toll on him but he is recovering well."

"I think they've taken a toll of all of us."

"Indeed." Spock took the merest sip of his drink and studied his hands as he asked, "Are you happy, Jim?"

Kirk was caught off guard. "Happy? You've never asked me that before."

"I don't believe I have ever needed to."

Kirk nodded, understanding. "Yes, Spock, I'm happy. I'll admit I could be happier - would be, too, if we were together again - but life's pretty good at the moment."

Spock nodded.

"And you, Spock. Are you happy?"

"I have only known true happiness on rare occasions. But I am content to be where I am."

"I'm glad to hear it, Spock."

Just then Kirk's communicator beeped. He spoke briefly with his First Officer then stood up. "I must go now. Shall I see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be here."

"Good. 'Bye, Spock."

"Jim."

Kirk rose and left the rec room.

On his way to the transporter room, he decided to stop off at the observation deck for a moment. As he entered the room he realised someone else was there. He was just turning to leave when he recognised the figure as Captain Oliver. The man looked pale and his eyes were sad. Recalling the scene in the briefing room, Kirk approached him. "Is something wrong, William?"

Oliver looked across at Kirk. There were tears on his cheeks. "Those scientists who were killed today... One of them was my son."

"I'm sorry. Truly I am."

Oliver nodded and turned away to gaze out at the stars. "He was only twenty-nine, had everything to live for. He had such potential, Jim..." He lapsed into silence.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Oliver nodded again. "He was caught in one of the labs that was destroyed," He turned to face Kirk, his eyes reflecting the loss he felt. "There isn't even a body, Jim."

Kirk rested a hand on his arm. "It would have been quick. He wouldn't have known."

Oliver nodded. After a moment, he said, "I'd better get back to the ship."

"Will you be all right? Mr. Spock is still here..."

"I'll be all right... Thank you, Jim." They left the observation deck, Oliver returning to his ship, Kirk to his.

Most of the following day was taken up with reports, repairs and discussions on possible future attacks. Kirk managed to see Spock and McCoy for an hour during the day, and they had arranged to meet that evening.

As Kirk was preparing to meet his friends, he received a call from Captain Oliver.

"Captain, can you beam over? I'd like a word with you."

"Of course. I'm on my way."

Ten minutes later he arrived outside Oliver's door. It seemed strange buzzing on the door that used to be his. The door slid open and he entered, looking round to see what changes had been made in his absence. Apart from Oliver's personal touches, nothing had changed.

"Reminiscing, Jim?"

"Yes. It seems a long time..."

"Sit down. I want to tell you something." Kirk took a seat and waited for Oliver to begin. "After I returned to the ship last night, I decided I'd better get down to some serious thinking. I was up most of the night... When my son decided to go into space, it broke my wife's heart. She'd lost me to space, then she had to face losing her son too. I only see her a couple of times a year, if I'm lucky. It's not enough. In six months I have to decide whether or not to opt for early retirement. My son's death has decided that for me. I'm going to retire and go home. I owe it to my wife...and my son."

"I understand."

"I spoke to Starfleet HQ early this morning. They have approved my decision. There's a tape for you, too."

Kirk took it, puzzled. "You can listen to it in private, if you wish," Oliver went on.

"No. It's all right." He inserted the tape into the computer. Commodore Barrett appeared on the viewer.

"Captain Kirk. You will by now have heard of Captain Oliver's plans for retirement. You realise this leaves the Enterprise without a Captain. I would like to offer you that position. You..."

The rest of the tape ran on unheeded.

'I would like to offer you that position...' He was being given the Enterprise! He gazed across at Oliver, unable to believe this was really happening. Oliver smiled, reading the absolute joy in Kirk's eyes. They sat in silence for a moment, then Kirk said, "William, you're giving her to me?"

"It was their choice, Jim. I simply put your name forward."

Kirk opened and closed his mouth several times but could not find the words to express how he felt. Finally, he whispered, "Thank you!"

"Don't thank me, Jim. Thank Starfleet."

A sudden thought struck Kirk and his smile faded. "What about you, William?"

"You'd better rerun the tape - and listen to it this time."

Kirk grinned and did as he was told. "...You are the logical choice for captaincy since you have been her Captain before. Captain Oliver will assume command of the Potempkin and return her to Starbase 27. You will have command of the Enterprise as soon as her repairs are complete. Congratulations, Captain Kirk. Starfleet out."

"William..."

"Jim, I couldn't give her to anyone else. She's in your blood, isn't she?"

"Yes." You do understand, don't you?

Kirk sat in stunned silence trying to take in what had happened. He was to be Captain of the Enterprise again. He was being given the one thing he had never dreamed he could have again. Not only that, he would be with Spock again... and Bones and his crew. He was going home.

"Hey, Jim - instead of sitting there grinning like an idiot, why don't you go and find your friends - tell them the good news."

Kirk nodded and stood up. At the cabin door he turned. "William, if there's anything I can do for you..."

"Sure, Jim. Now go on. I've some packing to do."

Kirk practically skipped down to K-1. He found McCoy and Spock talking quietly at one of the tables in the rec room. Despite his bubbling enthusiasm to tell them the news, he paused a moment to watch them. McCoy seemed like his old self again now. Strange how he and Spock could argue constantly yet still remain good friends. Of course, he knew the arguments were just a facade to hide their real affection for each other. Kirk knew McCoy was emotionally insecure, a legacy of his life prior to Starfleet. It must have cut him up when Spock left.

From where he stood, unobserved, he could see more of Spock's face than McCoy's. Whilst in conversation McCoy reached out and touched Spock's arm briefly. Kirk was pleased that Spock did not withdraw, but rather welcomed the contact and responded with a softening of his features; his way of smiling in public. So, the suffering of the last few months had not been all in vain; his two friends were closer now. He walked over to them and sat down.

"Well, Jim," McCoy drawled. "You look like the cat that got the canary. What's happened?"

"I'm getting the Enterprise back. Captain Oliver has decided to retire early. he's taking the Potempkin back to Starbase 27, I'm transferring to the Enterprise."

McCoy thumped him on the arm and laughed. He suddenly seemed a lot younger. "That's great, Jim, really great. We'll all be together again. It'll be like old times."

"I know." Kirk turned to Spock and smiled, his eyes communicating his joy at the prospect of the end of their separation. "I'm coming home, Spock."

Spock did not reply in words but his eyes held Kirk's and the message in them was clearly readable. /We shall be together again./

The contact went unnoticed by McCoy, who said, "Well, don't just sit there, Spock. Welcome him home."

Spock's eyes never left Kirk's as he said softly, "I believe I've just done that, Doctor."

* * * * *

Two days later, Kirk and Captain Oliver said their farewells before boarding their ships. Oliver grasped Kirk's hand and grinned. "Well, Jim, she's all yours now. Take care of her."

"You needn't worry about that, William. I'm not giving her up again if I can help it."

Oliver nodded.

"Enjoy your retirement, William. You've deserved it."

"You know, the more I think about it, the more I believe I will. Being planet-side seems like paradise after what we've been through this past week."

Kirk's reply was cut short by the insistent bleeping of his communicator. "Kirk here."

"Sulu, Captain. We are ready to leave orbit, sir."

"I'll be along directly. Kirk out."

"Looks like your paradise is getting lonely without you, Jim."

Kirk grinned briefly then became serious. "William, I'll never forget what you've done for me. I think you know how much the ship and her crew mean to me."

"They're a good crew. I'm glad you realise that."

"They're the best, William."

"Well, I mustn't keep you any longer. Look after yourself."

"And you. Goodbye." William Oliver watched Kirk disappear as he beamed up to his ship, and smiled to himself. There was one happy man! He turned his thoughts to his own future and an image of his wife came to mind.

Only six months now, Angela, then I promise I'll never leave you again.

Kirk materialised in the transporter room of the Enterprise and looked around, not quite believing that this time he was here to stay.

"Welcome back, Captain." The transporter chief gave him a smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Kyle."

As he made his way to the bridge, it seemed as if every member of the crew had made a point of being somewhere along the route he took. By the time he reached his destination he was feeling positively overwhelmed by the reception.

As soon as he stepped onto the bridge, everyone present rose to greet him. He exchanged pleasantries with each member then, gracefully, eased himself into the command chair. His fingers caressed the arms as a blind person would greet an old friend. He sat in silence, letting the feel of it all wash over him. He felt so good now, so happy, so safe. The whole ship seemed to embrace him; he could feel the welcome she offered.

Hello, Baby. I'm home, he told her.

Gradually he became aware that Spock was standing by his side, just as he'd always done...and probably always would.

"Spock," he acknowledged, his voice thick with emotion.

"Captain."

It felt so good to hear him say that. Kirk suddenly realised that it was the first time Spock had called him 'Captain' since Eynos Alpha.

"Yes, Mr. Spock, what is it?"

"Our next assignment, sir. We are to proceed to the Sigma Novae system where it appears there is some disagreement over mining rights."

"A diplomatic mission?" Kirk's heart sank a little. He looked up at Spock with a 'why me?' expression. Spock caught the look and his eyes smiled in understanding. He knew how much Kirk hated diplomatic missions.

"We shall arrive in three days at warp 4, sir," he responded.

"Well, let's get it over with. Then we can get down to some real work. Lay in course, Mr. Chekov. Ahead warp factor 4, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

As his watch progressed, Kirk noticed that, when his relief crew members arrived, his own bridge crew practically ran from the bridge. The longer he stayed on the bridge, the more noticeable it became. Something was definitely going on. When his watch ended, he decided to try and find out - after he'd had a shower. He had not been to his cabin since beaming aboard the Enterprise. When the doors slid open, instead of finding a neat, tidy room, he was confronted with streamers and balloons festooned from walls and ceiling. On his bed he noticed an envelope. Working his way between the decorations he crossed to the bed and picked up the envelope and studied the writing. It looked like Uhura's. Opening it, he found a card inside. He read it several times and finally burst out laughing.



'You are invited to a 'Welcome back, Captain Kirk' party in rec room 3 this evening. Please be there.'

Two hours later he stood outside rec room 3 and took a deep breath. Uhura's parties were notorious for their unpredictability. Finally he decided to brave the unknown and entered. He was immediately greeted by thundrous applause and cheering. Thankful that the red lighting hid his embarrassment, he made his way across the room to where Uhura stood.

"Captain, thanks for turning up." She grinned mischievously, knowing he wouldn't have missed it for the world.

"I could hardly miss my own party, Uhura."

"No, sir."

He looked around the crowded room in amazement. It seemed as if practically all the ship's complement was there. "How many people did you invite?"

"Everyone, Captain. We've arranged short work shifts so that everyone has a chance to attend."

"You've arranged..."

"Well, sir, you wouldn't want anyone to miss the fun, now would you? This is a special occasion."

Just then someone handed him a drink. He took it and sipped. At first it appeared mild, then suddenly it hit him. He opened his eyes wide as the liquid burned a trail of fire down his throat.

"What...is...this?" he managed to gasp.

"Scotty made it specially. It's punch."

"It lives up to its name."

As the party progressed, he acquired a taste for the punch, and with it, a numbing of his senses. Around midnight he vaguely remembered being helped back to his quarters but had no idea of who had put him to bed. Perhaps it was just as well.

It took him three days to shake off the hangover and a further six days to drag the punch recipe from a very reluctant chief engineer.

Two weeks after returning to the Enterprise, Starfleet gave him a mission he viewed with mixed feelings. He had realised the mission was rather unusual when Spock had brought the Starfleet tape to his cabin, rather than having it broadcast over the bridge speaker as was the usual procedure.

"Captain, due to the nature of the assignment I thought you might prefer to hear the details here. I was not sure of your reaction." He handed the tape to Kirk, who studied him questioningly, but the Vulcan's features were inscrutable. Kirk fed the tape into the computer.

'Captain Kirk, although you are some distance from the planet Gamma Centauri we felt you would appreciate the opportunity to visit, since you spent some time there not too long ago. Gamma Centauri may be more familiar to you by its local name, Seylina.' Kirk stiffened but said nothing. 'As you know, five Vulcan scientists were left on Seylina after your departure. Their survey is now complete. Your mission is to collect them and take them to Starbase 16. We trust your return visit will be a pleasant one. Starfleet out.'

Kirk removed the tape and looked up at the Vulcan. There was apprehension in his eyes.

"Jim, if you would prefer not to be included in the landing party..."

"No, Spock," Kirk said slowly. "It's not that. I would like to go back. It's just that...well...I was a different person then. It was a different life-time. I wasn't a Captain then, just a...nobody they adopted. I had no past, no future. It's different now. It's never the same, Spock, when you try to relive memories. They've probably forgotten me anyway. If I go back now..."

"Nothing remains constant, Jim. You have changed, it is true. Yet they will remember you as you were. For a time, you were a part of them. They will not have forgotten you. They will welcome you again as they did then. It matters not to them that you have a title now -- to them you will still be the person you were when you left them."

"You're right, Spock. And I would like to see them again." He smiled reminiscently. "Perhaps Reanah's married by now."

"Reanah?"

"Didn't I tell you about her? She was the girl who...that...well, she was a rather special friend."

"I understand."

Kirk nodded. Reanah. That lifetime seemed so far away now.

"How soon can we reach Seylina, Spock?"

"At warp 5, we will arrive in five point six days."

"Inform Mr. Sulu. Warp 5."

"Yes, sir."

"We are in standard orbit around Seylina, Captain," Sulu informed him. When Kirk's usual reply was not forthcoming, Sulu turned to find Kirk deep in thought, one arm resting on his command chair.

"Captain?"

Kirk jumped at Sulu's call. "Yes, Mr. Sulu?"

"We are in orbit around Scylina, sir."

"Thank you." He hesitated. "Sorry, Sulu - I was preoccupied."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk rose from his chair, speaking as he made his way to the turbolift. "Mr. Spock, come with me, please. Mr. Sulu, you have the con." As the lift doors closed behind them, Kirk went on. "I'd like you to accompany me, Spock. Two reasons - firstly, there are Vulcans down there and I feel it would be courteous for you to come down. Secondly - I'd like you to meet my friends there."

"I would be pleased to accompany you, Captain."

Kirk smiled. "I think you'll find them interesting people. They find no difficulty in accepting the idea of life on other planets, even though their own way of life is little in advance of the tribal village system."

By now they had reached the transporter room. "Mr. Kyle, do you have the co-ordinated of the settlement?"

"Yes, sir."

"Set us down just outside the village."

As they entered the village, the first person they met was Narven, the leader. He saw the men approaching and strode out to greet them. As he got closer he recognised Kirk, even though he was now clean shaven and in uniform.

"Enola?"

"Yes, Narven, it's me."

Narven took Kirk's hand. "Enola, it is good to see you."

"And you." He looked across at Spock. "This is my friend Spock."

"Welcome, Spock."

Spock nodded in acknowledgement. "I am honoured to be here."

"Narven, we have returned to take the Vulcans back to their people."

Narven nodded, his eyes growing sad. "They are good people and have taught us many things. When the gods - the Klingons - returned they tried to destroy our homes, but the Vulcans saved us."

"What happened?"

"It seems our village is built on rocks which contain..." He searched for the word. "Di... Di..."

"Dilithium?"

"Yes. Dilithium. The gods say this dilithium is worth a lot of money."

They would have destroyed our homes to reach the dilithium. The Vulcans sent them away. We are safe now."

"I am pleased... How is your family, Narven?"

"They are well. You must meet Reanah before you leave. She speaks of you often. She is joined now, and is with child."

Kirk swallowed. "I should like to see her."

"She lives in the hut you once used. Would you like to see her now?"

"We should tell the Vulcans we are here, first."

"Very well, I shall take you to them." He led the way to the far side of the village, where one hut stood alone. Knocking on the door, he awaited their answer, then entered.

"Gentlemen, you have visitors." He turned to Kirk. "I will wait for you in the village."

"Thank you." Turning his attention to the Vulcans, he said, "I am Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise. This is my First Officer, Mr. Spock. We have orders from Starfleet to return you to Starbase 16."

"We can be ready within the hour, Captain."

"There's no rush. We will return later in the day... If you will excuse us?"

"Certainly, Captain. We shall prepare for your return."

They left the hut and went to find Narven. Together, they walked over the hill to the hut Kirk remembered so well. As they approached the door, Reanah emerged. Kirk stopped. She was more beautiful than she remembered. The thick golden curls lay about her shoulders, her eyes sparkled with happiness.

"Your friend has returned, Reanah, as he said he would." Narven turned to Kirk. "I will return to the village. I wish to speak with the Vulcans before they leave."

Kirk nodded then turned back to Reanah. "Reanah."

"Enola, is it really you?"

"Yes. I said I would return."

"It is good to see you."

"Your father told me you had joined and were expecting a baby."

"It is what you told me to do, Enola."

"I am pleased you did. Are you happy?"

"Yes, very happy."

As he looked at her he caught her expression. The message in her eyes was clearly readable. /The baby could have been yours./

Suddenly all the days they had spent together came back to him; the walks, the hunting trips, the long talks by the river. Then he remembered his ship and Spock. He knew he had made the right decision in leaving Seylina. He realised he had forgotten all about Spock. He looked across at his friend and smiled apologetically.

"Reanah, this is my friend Spock." His eyes shone with pride and affection.

"I am pleased to meet you, Spock."

"And I you, Reanah. Jim... Enola...has spoken of you often."

She smiled across at Spock. "And I of him!" She turned to Kirk. "Enola, before you left you said you must find your home and your woman. Have you found them?"

"Yes, Reanah, I have found them." He smiled across at Spock.

Reanah caught the look and also smiled up at Spock. "Enola wanted very much to find his woman. I am glad he has found you, Spock."

Spock stiffened and threw Kirk a look of complete incomprehension. Kirk laughed.

Now that's going to take some explaining.

Just then a toddler came from the house and attached himself immediately to Reanah's free hand. He looked up at Kirk, who recognised him by his eyes.

"Is this Kalah?" he asked incredulously, remembering the baby he had looked after, so long ago now it seemed.

"Yes, he came to live with us after our joining."

Kirk threw his most charming smile at Kalah, who shrank a little behind Reanah.

"Where is your husband, Reanah?"

"He is hunting. He will not return until darkness comes."

"I shall be gone by then. I would have liked to meet him."

"I shall tell him you were here. He will remember you."

Reluctantly, Kirk realised time was passing and they must return to the ship.

"Will you return again, Enola?"

"I do not know. My people travel many miles and we are not often near Seylina. I will visit if we are close again."

"It is all I ask. Goodbye, Enola."



"Goodbye, Reannah. Take care of yourself." Their eyes met one last time then Kirk turned and walked away, Spock slightly behind him.

As they approached the village, Kirk said, "She's still very beautiful."

"Indeed, Captain."

Kirk smiled across at him. "Come on, let's get the Vulcans then return to the ship."

An hour later they were back on the Enterprise, the Vulcans installed in the guest quarters. Kirk and Spock returned to the bridge.

"Lt. Uhura, inform Starfleet we have the scientists and are heading for Starbase 16. Mr. Sulu, lay in course and execute."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk watched Seylina slowly fade on the viewscreen. Somehow he knew he would not return. Possibly it was better that way. The past is best left in the past.

That evening Kirk and Spock sat over a game of chess in Kirk's quarters. Kirk appeared to be winning, which was unusual. Either he was playing exceptionally brilliant moves or Spock was preoccupied. Kirk suspected the latter - Spock had been very subdued since Reannah's remark on Seylina.

"Something on your mind, Spock?"

"Yes, Jim. On Seylina, Reannah said she was pleased you had found your woman - meaning me. I am at a loss to understand her words."

Kirk laughed, the chess game temporarily forgotten. "That's a long story, Spock. You see, when I was on Seylina, I could not communicate. Even after three months there were very few words I could make her understand. It was hard to explain anything that was abstract. She wanted us to be 'joined' - married - so that we could have a son. I said I couldn't because Seylina was not my home and also...well...I told her about Miramanee and the baby I nearly had." He looked down at his hands.

"Does it still hurt to think of her, Jim?"

"Yes. Not as much as it did once, but enough to know I'm not ready for marriage yet. I don't know whether I'll ever be... Anyway, Reannah didn't understand the word I used for 'wife', so I called Miramanee my woman. To Reannah, 'woman' didn't translate as 'female' but rather as 'someone special'." He reached across the table and laid his hand on Spock's arm. "That's what she meant when she called you my 'woman'. She meant that to me, you are someone special. I guess it's taken these past few months to show me just how important and special you are to me, Spock."

"As you are special to me, Jim," Spock answered slowly, his eyes locking with Kirk's. Kirk felt himself relaxing under the warm gaze in the brown eyes. Although they had been back on the Enterprise three weeks now, Kirk still had not got over having Spock around again. He felt, now, that every moment they spent together was special, for these were moments he had not believed he would know again.

"We belong together, Spock. Whatever the future holds, I know we can face it together."

"Our lives have come full circle. Let us hope the wheel does not turn again too soon."

Kirk smiled and withdrew his hand from Spock's arm. Casting an eye over the chess game, he played the move he had been planning from the start. "Checkmate," he grinned triumphantly.

Spock feigned surprise then toppled his king in acknowledgement of defeat.

"I suspect you have been planning that move for seven months, Jim."

Kirk laughed. "Just as long as I don't have to wait another seven months before I beat you again."

Spock's eyes softened in amusement. It felt so good to be back on the Enterprise with Jim. He now knew where he truly belonged.

As he put the chess pieces away, he smiled to himself.

It was good to be home.

* * * * *

HEART AND SOUL

Were you both so much a part of me
That I had begun to take you for granted?
My ship - she holds my heart
In her metal embrace
Possessive as any woman
She owns me completely, yet
I am her willing slave.

And you, Spock.
You have always been there
By my side
Sharing my pain and my joy
With eyes only I could read.
A constant, reassuring presence;
More than a friend or brother -
More a companion for my soul.
Did I ever believe I could lose you?
I think not.
How can one lose one's soul?

Yet I lost you both.

In the whole of my life
I have never known such loneliness
As then,
When my heart and soul
Were taken from me.

It has been a long search
But I have found you again.
Now each moment we share
Is more precious than gold
For I know what it is like to lose you.

Now I am whole again.
Whatever the world has to offer
I know we can face it
Together.

You are with me again:
My ship, who owns my heart,
And Spock
Who is my soul.
