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LOVELY -

A

LITTLE

PROBLEM

BRENDA KELSEY

a  
STAR TREK  
fanzine

# LOVELY - A LITTLE PROBLEM

by

Brenda Kelsey

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*The world had changed. And she was not happy with the world for doing so. She could not understand why the changes had happened. She only knew that she did not like them. She was very unhappy.*

*She prowled around the over-bright space, her glances about her swift and nervous. Her claws clicked and rattled against the unyielding surfaces as she tried to climb away from the floor. Her instincts told her that to be on the floor was dangerous, but she could find no way of going upwards. The floor was making her feet hurt with its unending hardness.*

*She squealed, calling her mate in the familiar way which had always brought him to her side, in the time before the changes had happened. He did not come and she wailed her sorrow, the sound echoing back from the vertical walls. She squeezed into the narrow space which she had made her nest and began grooming herself. It was a poor substitute for his tongue and his claws but the movements comforted her and blanked out for a little while the growing realisation that he never would be with her again. She worked carefully over her tail, smoothing the long fine fur into line. When she started on the soft fur of her belly little tufts started to pull loose. She paused, then started to work along her arms and legs, drawing her long claws through the slightly thicker hair, working on the snags and knots and worrying at the way the soft underfur pulled out.*

*Perhaps the new Big Ones were giving her the wrong sort of food? But she could only eat what they gave her, as she had eaten the food that the Other Big Ones, and before them her parents, had given her - unless she went foraging?*

*The idea was suddenly attractive. Never before had she wanted to leave, to get away by herself. She mewed, a sibilant, worried sound and absently began to pluck at the loose belly fur. She had amassed a small ball before she realised what she had been doing. She sat considering it, turning it over with her long fingers as she tried to work out why the fur ball seemed to mean something to her. She felt a growing conviction that there was something very important that she had to do. There was a distant tale, some stirrings of her earliest memories, from the time when she had first been.*

*It was the time of beginning, the time of a vast living greenness that she had played in with her brothers and sisters. The days had been filled with light and scent and happiness and the nights with the closeness of bodies as their parents had spoken the old tales to them. Her memories of that time were dim, indeed she had not thought of that time since she had lived with the Big Ones, and they had given her to her mate and they had played together in the Other Place, the Place that wasn't green and alive but had been somehow alive and dead at the same time with a vast pulse filling the air. It had been a happy place though. There had been many hidden places to search, and frantic chases about the Place, and the Other Big Ones had fed them and even played the Eternal Game with them, in their cumbersome way.*

*She sat and plucked fretfully at the furball, pleating and reshaping it. Maybe if she tried really hard she could recall the words that her parents had spoken. There was little else to do in this Place. As when she had awoken, there were no branches to leap from and to. No hidden places to seek out.*

*Nothing to occupy her in the vast emptiness. Even the pulse that had always sounded and resounded through the alive yet dead Place had gone away.*

*She wished that her mate was still with her so that she could discuss it with him. He had been wise, older than she, and would have known what it was that was troubling her so, but he had not been there with her when she had awakened, nor could she find any trace of his scent about the Place although it still clung to the New Big Ones. But it was growing fainter every day and the New Big Ones left her alone for long stretches of time.*

*She sat hunched in the narrowness, lonely and bitter, playing on and on with the scraps of fur, trying to remember what it was that her distant memories, and her instincts, were trying to tell her to do.*

Kirk sat at the desk in the Station Manager's office and glowered at the tribble in the holding tank. The tribble huddled against the clear wall trying to reach the irate Captain. It trilled lovingly at him, the long golden fur shaking with the intensity of the sound.

"No accounting for taste," commented Nilz Baris acidly.

As Kirk slowly raised his head and opened his mouth to blast a reply Mr. Lurry hastily intervened.

"Yes, it is a good job that they like us. Isn't it? All you have to do is stand still and offer them food and they come, ha-ha, I was going to say, running."

The joke fell very flat but Lurry had expected it to. Better a flat joke than a flattened diplomat. Not that he believed Kirk would actually assault Baris, but he didn't want to tempt him too far. The Captain was still on a hair trigger where his control was concerned - being landed on by tens of thousands of tribbles did little for the ego. And Kirk was tired, but then so was Baris. Life was never simple!

"Shall we get down to business?"

"Of course, Mr. Lurry." Kirk's smile didn't reach his eyes; Baris didn't bother to smile.

"First things first then. How is the tribble situation on Enterprise?"

"Commander Spock says that he has the matter in hand."

"What's he doing?" asked Baris.

"I didn't ask."

"What sort of Captain are you?"

"The sort that doesn't ask fool questions of a Vulcan. Spock is dealing with our little guests."

"Does he need any help?" offered Lurry.

"I don't think so yet, thank you," said Kirk politely, very much in the manner of a well drilled child turning down an unwanted treat.

"As a Space Station we naturally have reserves that we can call on that are not available to a Starship." Lurry paused, looked at the tribble and sighed. "We also have an amazing number of tribbles to clean up."

"Did you find out anything interesting from Jones?"

"After that scare you and Spock threw into him, about picking up all the tribbles, he was only too willing to talk. I arranged for a member of my staff to lend a sympathetic ear, and a bottle, to his plight. Your Vulcan was absolutely correct. Mr. Jones isn't the intrepid explorer venturing down into a predator-filled environment. He doesn't know where the tribbles originate from. He got his first one by accident. It came aboard with some supplies and he didn't want to bother his suppliers with little unimportant details, like infested cargo."

"What?" demanded Baris, outraged by the breach of regulations. "Is the man totally mad? Any supplier who trades in contaminated goods is a menace who has to be stopped immediately, for everyone's sake!"

"He got a bit coy when my people asked him why he didn't hang about and challenge his supplier. They've got the idea that he was leaving in a bit of a hurry, from a Free Trader post. They think there were some mutual misdeeds going on."

Kirk nodded. Free Trader posts tended to be lucrative - if somewhat dangerous - places to visit. Especially if you were less than absolutely honest with the Free Traders running the place. Justice would take whatever form they decided once they caught you, and if they did it was a fair bet that you'd never cheat them, or anyone else, again. There was a good profit to be made in spare spaceship parts too.

"What else?" he prompted.

"It seems he fed it; it ate everything that he gave it, and it had babies. When they had babies he figured out what was going on and simply stopped feeding them. Says that he gave them a handful of grain each every 10 days or so - just to keep them going."

"Hmmm. Just like he said. Pity he didn't tell us about that. How are you getting rid of yours?" asked Kirk, interested in what Lurry was doing so he could compare it with Spock's solution.

Lurry looked embarrassed and scratched at an ear. "I was afraid you were going to ask that. We're using the quadrotriticale on them."

Kirk grimaced sympathetically but nodded again. Baris exploded.

"What? How dare you? That is a valuable Federation resource destined for use as the principle crop for Sherman's Planet."

"Oh, it's valuable all right. It's helping us kill off the tribbles."

"But! But!"

"It was poisoned. Remember? Any crop grown from it will be poisoned too. I had it condemned directly McCoy reported what had happened to it. It would all have to be destroyed anyway. So I'm having squads put down piles of it for the tribbles to eat, and clearing away the ones that have eaten."

"But that will kill them!" protested Baris.

"What did you expect me to do? Have them dumped into a mass converter while they're still alive?" Lurry asked, loudly.

"No. But...!"

"You don't understand, do you? This - " Lurry waved a hand about - "is a

Space Station. The maintenance of the environment and ecology are of paramount importance. We have to manufacture the air that we breathe, the heat, the gravity. Food production is another critical area. I have 927 people resident here, everyone from barkeepers to traders, a whole flock of scientists and support staff, not to mention the Starfleet personnel and your negotiating teams. We can't afford to wait 17.9 years for Cyrano Jones to pick up every tribble. And if we did, what do you think he is going to do with them? All it needs is for one, just one, lonely, lovely little tribble to get off this station and the whole affair will start all over again somewhere else. Can you imagine the scale of the catastrophe if the tribbles get down to Sherman's? Spock's figures on what they could do to a planet are terrifying. I take it that you both have read that report?"

Kirk's smile did reach his eyes. "I've had some glorious nightmares."

Baris looked angry, then exploded into helpless giggles. "You think you had it bad? You should have tried mine!" He laughed helplessly, remembering the dreams. "I just hope I don't have to repeat them in the medical review. I'll get sacked for sure."

"Sacked? You're a career diplomat. They can't sack you for having a few dreams," said Kirk, slightly stunned at the sight of Baris laughing.

"Wanna bet?" and to Kirk's amazement Baris leered at him.

That set Kirk off, and Lurry joined in but watched them both carefully. Baris had been under tremendous pressure. The diplomatic staff had been working without a break for four months trying to secure Sherman's for the Federation, and if there was one creature in the universe more trying on the nerves than a belligerent Klingon, it was undoubtedly a Klingon diplomat. Baris had had to contend with a whole raft of Klingon diplomats, and without realising it, the adroit manipulation of Arne Darvin. The little spy had done a brilliant job of sabotage on the grain, and had set Kirk and Baris at each other's throats immediately. The whole episode could have resulted not only in the loss of Sherman's but in the loss of a good diplomat and a very fine Starship Captain too.

Lurry's own security people had been badly shocked to discover that they'd overlooked a spy for so long. An internal review had uncovered some serious lapses in general procedures, and heads were rolling. Lurry smiled in genuine happiness at the laughing men. At least his long range table thumping had managed to preserve their heads; that and the ammunition supplied by the astonishing report compiled by Spock and McCoy on the implications of the tribbles' bizarre abilities. And the fact that Central Security had cleared Arne Darvin. That neat little bombshell had diverted a lot of the blast from the almost incidental players on the Space Station. Central Security and the Medical Establishment were too busy looking for their own failings and leaks to immediately care much about Kirk and Baris.

Lurry had engineered his arguments so that by the time the leaks had been found, and hopefully plugged, the situation would have been stabilised and the players widely dispersed, the Klingons gone, Sherman's Planet would be firmly in the Federation and K7 would have no tribbles chasing the staff about, begging for food and refuge.

Baris and Kirk were slowly sobering up, Kirk wiping away tears and Baris taking a healthy swig of the previously ignored fruit juice.

*Given time these two could have been friends - pity,* Lurry thought. "Now that you've got that out of your systems..." he said.

He got the full force of the infamous Kirk smile at close range.

"We have got to plot our next moves, and we have to get them right!" he continued.

The grin vanished, the Starship professional was back instantly.

"The regulations state that Enterprise has to be quarantined. An uncontrolled infestation of this nature, organic/non-hazardous, is specifically covered," he stated flatly. "Minimum period is 28 days from the supposed termination of the incident, which is calculated from the completion of the decontamination procedures and a full systems check."

"How are you progressing with that?" There was no hint of taunting in Baris' voice, only genuine concern.

"Spock coped, as usual. He suggested to Scott that while his people were helping to scour the ship for tribbles, they might use their presence in the nether regions to run a few tests on the ship. Scott asked what sort of tests Spock had in mind, and Spock casually suggested a systems check, to refresh fallible Human memories. A very subtle hint that there might just be the odd crewperson who wasn't able to totally recall every detail of every power conduit and supply circuit." He sighed. "If there's one thing that Scott loves to do it's tinkering."

"Have your crew realised - about the quarantine, I mean?"

"Well, obviously Spock has, but the rest of them will probably think it's Scott in a tizz about the tribbles getting into the machinery. Knowing my people it won't be long before they start adding two and two together but for now I'd rather like to keep it unofficial. I don't want to hand the Klingons a hand-engraved invitation to come in and help themselves while we're off peering up a Jefferies tube. They are bad losers."

"On that I think we can all agree. What are the requirements that govern a quarantine?"

"Boiled down to the essence - the ship in question is isolated. No physical contact allowed between the ship and personnel and any other ship, constructed artifact or planetary mass of any size, shape or description, except by subspace radio. Nothing and nobody comes aboard, and nothing and nobody leaves. No entering any solar system within the orbit of the outmost orbiting body, including cometary paths. Full medicals for every person aboard for possible adverse reactions, and continual monitoring by additional samples of full medicals taken at random and frequently. Full systems check and continual monitoring of ships' fabric for possible adverse affects. In the Regs. the infestation, organic/non-hazardous section, runs for 184 pages, that's without the definitions, appendix, and revisions and updates. The whole thing is 12,624 pages long. Of course if any evidence of physical damage to ship or personnel is discovered, we switch over to the organic/hazardous procedure. We stay in isolation, decontaminate again, full medicals again... and again... and again... "

Baris blinked, frowned, and said hesitantly, "Stay in isolation?"

"That bit was added after we found out the hard way about Ceti Eels. They were thought to be non-hazardous at first. They turned out to be... hazardous. Lost three ships that time."

"How many people?" blurted out Baris.

"Sorry. Classified."

"We are not dealing with Ceti Eels here, gentlemen," interrupted Lurry firmly. "We are dealing with these... fuzzy little nuisances."

The tribble sensed the attention and cooed lovingly but louder. The three men firmly ignored its blandishments.

"So apart from telling you what you mustn't do and where you mustn't go, the Regs. don't specifically state any particular location where you have to stay, or a destination?"

"I have the feeling that you're going to suggest one?" countered Kirk.

"Yes, Captain. I do have a plan. It involves your staff, Mr. Baris. And, of course, bending the word of the Regs. but not, I trust, the spirit or the intent. For all practical purposes K7 is as contaminated as Enterprise and the fact that you gentlemen are here means that we are already interpreting the Regs. in a slightly unrestrictive manner."

"Let's hear it," invited Baris.

"You no longer need the majority of the negotiating staff. The establishment administrators can do all the necessary work to set up the rules for Sherman's."

"They can, they're an able bunch. Raw, but able. They will be operating the rules so they might as well think about what they're going to be. It'll save them blaming me later when they don't work. You're suggesting using Enterprise to transport all of my negotiating staff to a suitably distant planet... for reassignment?" Baris was no fool.

"One that's 28 days minimum away," added Kirk showing that he wasn't either.

"That is the suggestion. How would you feel about a nice little trip to Pilar Majoris?"

Kirk moaned, feelingly. Pilar Majoris was the closest planet to Terran heaven yet discovered. The climate was superb, the scenery spectacular, the social and sports activities were incomparable, it was an unspoiled Eden jealously guarded by the settlers; and there was a waiting list of people who wanted to holiday there. It was rumoured that people put their babies' names on the waiting list so that they'd be able to go and visit there for their retirement trip.

"Nice idea, but you'll never get away with directing a Starship there for a joyride like this, even if you could get the Majorites to agree to have us." Kirk shook his head wearily. It was a very pleasant dream.

"Enterprise is, as usual, vastly overdue for shore leave. The trip will be publicised as a 'thank you' bonus for all concerned in the successful affair of Sherman's Planet. Your staff are also due for leave, Mr. Baris. This way we can all win. It's all been arranged, gentlemen. At the very highest levels."

Baris whistled softly. "We certainly scared the hell out of somebody!"

"Not us." Kirk pointed at the almost hysterical tribble. "They did!"

"And for their efforts they have been classified as a lifeform inimical to intelligent life and civilisation as we know it. My orders are to keep a colony of 20 specimens and destroy all the others on this station." He tossed a computer recording to Kirk. "Your orders are the same. Twenty for McCoy and Spock to play with - the powers that be think that they'll come up with answers faster than any other scientific team and I tend to agree with them; and the removal of the rest of the fuzzy little cuties from Enterprise. That means destroy. The orders also state that directly the number aboard Enterprise exceeds 20 all excess specimens are to be culled. No exceptions. No keeping



the odd one or two as ships' mascot."

"No chance of that!" The words were flat and caused Lurry to smile almost fondly at the blushing Captain.

"Consider my problems. I've got to make sure that no-one sneaks any away from the station. Do you know how many ships are here now? Of course you do. The Klingons are due to leave shortly, and thankfully they are going to take all their diplomats with them. At least we can be fairly sure that they won't be sneaking any tribbles away with them. I've already had them complaining bitterly that the little darlings are in their quarters on K7. For the sake of intergalactic peace we cleared them all out first. Which brings me neatly onto the other little problem. The tribbles' new status is classified until the end of the quarantine period. I know it's a trifle extreme but They Who Must Be Obeyed are exceedingly worried - in fact, terrified - that a plague of them will start if any get away from here. Besides, if we declare them hazardous now we'll all have to stay here for years. And they aren't a hazard... that is, if you don't feed them!"

"Noted and logged. What are you going to do with Jones?"

"We aren't going to let him go if that's what you're asking. His ship is under the strictest guard - he's already tried to sneak aboard three times and my security staff are so mad at him that he's too scared to try again. He's busily employed picking up the tribbles at the moment as per your instructions. My orders are to detain him until the Security Investigative Team arrive and then hand him over to them. He's going to have to do some very fast and convincing talking to get them to believe his tale about getting the tribble in the cargo he got from the Free Trader post. Which means that he's going to have to tell them how he was cheating the Free Traders. Now between the tale of the mutual cheating and the contaminated cargo, the Free Traders will be plenty sore at their outpost manager, and at Mr. Jones, and he'll need protection from their wrath - and he'll only get that if he tells the S.I.T. the absolute truth. I don't think Cyrano Jones has told the absolute truth to anyone, including himself, since he was two months old. It's going to be interesting to monitor. The S.I.T. people tend to have a very narrow sense of humour."

Alarm bells rang in Kirk's tired brain. *Lurry was going to monitor a S.I.T. at work?* He wondered just what else Lurry did for a living, besides being a Station Manager at K7. The quiet, almost anonymous man was smiling sweetly at him and nodding. Damn! What better position for a Federation 'information gatherer'. Think of all the ships that stopped here, and being right at the edge of Klingon controlled space the opportunities were vast. Even those not directly employed in 'gathering' would bring in useful information, rumours, artifacts... animals. What if the tribbles turned out to come from Klingon controlled space? He wondered how badly the abrupt settlement of Sherman's would hurt Lurry's organisation. And he thought that he had problems! He forced his attention back to the meeting, aware that Lurry had deliberately revealed his other work to them. A glance at Baris showed that the Federation Undersecretary had also understood the implications of the quiet statement.

"Well, gentlemen. That seems to be that. If you'll co-ordinate the identity and the transportation of the negotiating staff between you and let me know when you wish to leave orbit?"

It was clearly a dismissal and Kirk and Baris both accepted Lurry's right to order them out of his office. After some very brief farewells they found themselves in the main concourse of the station, eyeing each other warily. Baris gave in first.

"I think that I am shocked beyond surprise. When I consider some of the things that I have said to that man over the last few months!"

"I guess that he expects it, as part of his job, running a Space Station, and all," commented Kirk.

"Quite. Oh, BLAST Darwin and his word games!"

"Don't worry. I'm sure that somebody will, eventually. I wouldn't be too hard on yourself. Nobody spotted him. Not even Lurry!"

A grim-faced man clad in a pair of overalls hurried by. His movements were purposeful and he was avoiding looking at anyone. He was carrying a large net stuffed full of furry balls. Silent furry balls. Baris shivered.

"Nobody except the tribbles. Seems a harsh way to repay a favour."

"Yeah. We'd better find a quiet spot and work out who you're going to give me."

"I would suggest my office, but it hasn't been de-tribbled yet."

"I know a place that I'm reasonably certain will be by now, and it has a small but excellent stock of potables."

"Where? I thought that the tribbles had cleared out every place on the station?"

"They have. But they haven't got to the stock that's locked up in the safe in my cabin."

Settled in Kirk's cabin, they haggled amiably over the number of diplomats that were to be given passage on Enterprise. Mellowed by the quantities of the liquid consumed they soon left the subject and ranged over a wide spectrum of topics, only going back to the real purpose of the meeting out of a sense of duty that could not be completely obliterated by the alcohol.

"S'not fair," said Baris a trifle thickly. "Pilar Majoris is a gem of a place for shore leave. I'd love to go there with you and have a rest."

"Why not stow away?" tempted Kirk wickedly.

"I'd do it. I would; if I could arrange for my wife to join me."

"You're married? You should have told me! She could have joined us for dinner."

"She's not here. She's home, on Earth. Haven't seen her for six months. As soon as I can I am going home."

"That's nice."

"She would have come with me, but we were going to have a baby. He was born 15 days ago. His name is Edgar!"

"A toast! To Edgar!"

They clinked glasses and drank to the new life's health.

"Kirk. You're a good man. You're stubborn, pig-headed and you do have delusions of godhood, but you are a good man. So I'm going to tell you about someone."

The serious tone caught Kirk's straying attention.

"Who?"

"Veronica Kenyon."

Kirk hunted in his memory. "That name is familiar. She's coming to Pilar Majoris with me."

"Yep. You've got to be real careful of her."

"Why? Is she a spy too?"

"No. No. She's... she's... she's beautiful."

"Sounds interesting," said Kirk hopefully.

"Very beautiful."

"Very interesting."

"And very intelligent; and totally ruthless."

"Hmmm."

"And she's married."

"Oh." Kirk's face slid into a disappointed pout.

"Not that that's ever stopped her," continued Baris.

"It stops me, every time. Does...?"

"He knows. Dermot Kenyon's only mistake in life was to fall in love with Veronica. She's, oh, dangerous. She schemes and pushes and makes trouble just to sit back and enjoy the fuss and bother. She'll stay with Dermot for as long as she wants to and then she'll transfer her attentions to someone else. While Dermot was 'on the way up' she was content to stay with him, but there aren't many people who'll take the risk of having him on their staff any more."

"You did."

"I like Dermot. I respect him. He's a fine man. But the strain on him is showing. He isn't always as nice as he could be; and she's so selfish. I doubt if he'll find another assignment - I had to do an honest report on her, didn't I?"

"Sounds as if the break couldn't happen too soon."

"She made a play for me, you know. Can you believe that? My wife is having a baby, and she offered, and she meant it! She's quite capable of having her own career; she just prefers to stay in the shadows and manipulate people. She plays with people as if they were toys. She is not a nice person."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll do my best to take care that she doesn't play with my people."

They were interrupted by the door chime. "Come!" yelled Kirk.

Spock entered and cast a swiftly appraising look over the pair and the empty bottles.

"There have been enquiries from Mr. Baris' office. Certain matters have arisen that require his attention."

"Ah, the petty joys of a diplomat's life. Good thing we got that list finished."

"True. Very true. Spock. We're going on a little trip. We're going to take some of Mr. Baris' negotiating team to Pilar Majoris and while we're there we're going to have some shore leave!"

"The crew will be pleased to hear that."

"This is a list of the people who are coming with us. Perhaps if you'd escort Mr. Baris to the Transporter and then come back here we can discuss the lodging arrangements."

"Certainly, Captain. Mr. Baris?"

After some long and effusive good-byes the diplomat was only too willing to go with Spock, a circumstance that Spock realised was due to the amount of alcohol that had been consumed rather than any genuine wish for his company. Baris had reached the friendly stage of drunkenness which would have let him try to engage a Tellerite in polite conversation. Spock listened to Baris' burbling all the way to the Transporter Room and answered as necessary, which was not often. The crew collecting the last of the tribbles stood aside to let them pass. In the Transporter Room Spock narrowly avoided having his hand shaken, and quelling the Transporter Tech. with a look after she had started smiling a little too broadly during the voluble farewell, managed to give Baris back to his own staff to cope with.

He returned to Kirk's quarters with a list of things to discuss to find his Captain fast asleep on his bed. A combination of exhaustion, relief and alcohol had laid him out, and as Spock debated whether to attempt to rouse him, he turned on his side and tried to snuggle further into the pillows. Spock carefully removed the sleeping man's boots and covered him with the bed covers. Kirk stirred fitfully, muttered, grabbed at the blanket and relaxed again. As this movement released the computer record which Kirk had been waving about when saying good-bye to Baris Spock rightly concluded that the list of diplomats must be contained in it, picked it up and left, turning on the 'Do NOT disturb' sign as he did so.

After a rapid perusal of the information, Spock called the Bridge and informed Scott, who had the Con, of the new plans. "There will be diplomats to be transported to Pilar Majoris." Even that piece of news did not completely subdue the muffled cheers that had greeted his announcement of their destination. "I have a list of personnel and will detail the accommodation. Please arrange for staff to be available to ready the cabins and to escort the guests as they arrive."

"How soon do we get them?"

"Within the next 12 hours," extemporised Spock. It was a fair estimate given the state of the systems check and the condition of Mr. Baris.

"That doesnae gie us a deal o' time," protested Scott.

"They will have even less."

"Aye. Well. I suppose we'll cope. What did the Captain say about our idea for getting rid o' the tribbles?"

"I had no opportunity to discuss that matter with him."

"We hae tae do something with the little beasties," said Scott hopefully.

Spock considered, then said. "Very well. I agree. Carry out your

intention."

"McCoy wants tae keep a few in Sickbay. He says that he wants tae study them." The irony in the tone was not lost on Spock who had easily succumbed to the tranquillising affects of the tribbles' croon and had done so publicly in the Rec. Room to the crew's vast joy.

"Provided that they are securely contained. I doubt that the Captain would be happy if Doctor McCoy allowed another incident to occur," he said chillingly.

"Understood, and I'll pass the message on. The Klingons are getting ready tae leave. They've done well. Only overstayed their welcome by 18 hours."

"Inform me when Enterprise is clear of free tribbles, Mr. Scott."

"Aye. I'll dae that! Bridge out."

The amusement echoed in Spock's ears as he worked methodically through the list of diplomats. Squeezing 47 people into Enterprise without causing too much disruption to the crew could only be accomplished by letting the diplomatic personnel share unoccupied single cabins, the few guest rooms and part of the Rec. Deck. The result could scarcely be called ideal but Spock was loath to move the crew out of their own quarters or to have them 'double up' in order to free accommodation for the travellers. The crew had been under great strain for an extended period and it would not need much to cause open resentment to flare up. No, better to let the diplomats suffer the minor inconveniences of the temporary sleeping arrangements than the crew, and it would be for only 29.97 days.

The assignments completed, he passed the information to the computer, flagging it for the attention of Scott, Baillie and McCoy who, as Heads of the Engineering, Security and Medical Services departments would be most immediately affected by the arrivals. Then, despite several pressing matters that demanded his presence elsewhere on Enterprise, Spock stayed in his quarters waiting for Scott's call. Something disquieted him about the plan that McCoy and Scott had for the disposal of the tribbles but he could not isolate the reason for his unease. They had been so eager to play the joke. He had hoped that Kirk would be able to see why the plan should not be carried out but Kirk had been asleep, the first proper sleep that he'd had in weeks. Now Spock had made the decision, only time would reveal if he had been correct.

Seven hours later he stood in the Transporter Room to greet the first of the diplomats. Kirk was still fast asleep. He had checked on him several times; on the last visit he had left a portion of McCoy's potent hangover remedy with a short note describing the ship's status. McCoy had been positively cheerful and had not even quibbled when Spock had made his unusual request. The same maniac glee seemed to pervade Enterprise, with the crew's morale higher than it had been for several months. Even the Transporter Tech. refused to be intimidated by Spock's presence and was grinning happily at the control board.

Spock patiently welcomed each group as they came aboard, overseeing the boarding personally to ensure that no tribbles were 'accidentally' given ship room. Upon the discovery of the third tribble in hand luggage thought to have been checked and cleared by the Space Station security detail, he called Baillie to supply guards to search all baggage coming aboard and started to warn each group as they arrived of the possible consequences of tribble smuggling. His stolidly delivered warning that the consequences would involve spending the journey to Pilar Majoris in the brig ("To protect you from dismemberment by the Captain," muttered a security guard) and the entire leave period undertaking the

legal process for the illegal act instead of facing the glories of a Majoris vacation, produced two more tribbles from the luggage before Baillie's men even began to search.

Spock merely raised an eyebrow (a clear indication to the security staff that he wasn't surprised, merely resigned to the inevitable), and called Mr. Lurry. The conversation was short and pointed, consisting of a polite request from Spock for greater effort on the part of Mr. Lurry's security staff in searching for tribbles in the luggage being forwarded to Enterprise, and a series of potent oaths from Lurry.

Spock spoke quietly to Chief Kyle, reminding him that full decontamination procedures should be carried out on all baggage being collected in bulk from K7. Kyle equally quietly assured the First Officer that the exact procedures would be completed as per the regulations and took over the controls from the relieved Tech.

So it was that Kyle was the first crew member to see the Kenyons when they beamed aboard. Dermot Kenyon was a tall, fair-haired man who would have been handsome if his face had not been drawn by worry and fatigue. Veronica Kenyon was neither tired nor worried and so the full impact of her astonishing beauty was felt by Kyle. The son of the pair, a nine year old, had inherited the colouring of his parents. Mother and son contrived to look unruffled, as if were a common occurrence to be called upon to pack up, bag and baggage, and ship out with ten hours' notice.

"Is this weally a Stharship?" lisped the boy loudly.

Baillie, coming in to report to Spock, entered just as he spoke, and was rewarded by a look of blank disbelief on Spock's face which was replaced by the normal calm before he turned to face the Transporter platform.

"Welcome aboard. I am Spock, First and Science Officer. This is Baillie, Head of Security."

"I suppose being only the Chief Negotiator doesn't warrant a Captain to welcome us aboard?" the woman said sharply.

"The Captain has other duties which demand his present attention. He will be, duties permitting, at the reception tomorrow."

"Why do we have to wait until tomorrow for the formal reception? It's normally held when diplomats arrive on board a Starship." The tone was a subtle insult, as if she doubted that Enterprise was worthy of the description, but had yet to see the evidence for herself and so was willing to suspend disbelief until she had.

"The day/night cycle of Enterprise is 6.29 standard hours behind the cycle in which you have been living. It was assumed that the time between your boarding and the reception would be utilised to adjust your cycle and to recover from the exertions of the speed of your departure from Sherman's Planet."

The woman slowly studied Spock, an activity which did much to lessen her immediate appeal in Baillie's eyes, and then dismissed him as unimportant with a shake of her well-groomed head.

"I trust that we have been assigned a cabin?"

Spock took a small measure of polite revenge by saying "A suite has been assigned for the use of your family. Your luggage has been brought aboard and will be taken there directly it has been passed by Security."

"Security? You intend to search my luggage? I've never heard anything so

insulting in my life!"

Dermot Kenyon roused himself and said tiredly. "You know what they're searching for. These people are only doing their job. Please don't be difficult."

"I do not intend to have my personal luggage pawed at by Security guards. If my word is not good enough, that there are no tribbles in it, then you can beam me back to the Space Station."

Spock considered the ultimatum, and said, "Noted and logged. Should any tribbles be found to have been brought aboard then you will be called to account for their presence. If you will follow me."

The woman stiffened, then snatched up the carry-all at her feet and took the child's hand in hers. She marched regally out of the room, the child skipping along beside her. "Can I see the Bwidge, Mama? and the Engine Woom?"

"Of course, my darling. You can see anything you want."

Dermot Kenyon walked across the room as if the effort was too much for him and paused at the door. "Search the baggage, please, gentlemen," and the door closed.

Baillie snorted in amusement. "I'd intended to. You," he indicated a red-shirt, "fall in behind and ensure that they arrive safely at their suite." The guard left promptly. "Fancy talking like that to Spock. The nerve of the woman. She'll be in for a shock when the Captain hears about this."

The guards, industriously demolishing the Kenyon's luggage, nodded agreement which changed to laughter when Kyle quipped, "Not half as big a shock as McCoy's going to get when he hears that lad talking. Heck, the kid was lisping!"

"Perhaps the kid can't help it?" suggested Baillie.

"In that case McCoy is going to have the kid into Sickbay so fast that he'll leave his socks behind. McCoy is pretty well bored at the moment. He's even talking about starting a full medical sweep of all personnel."

That effectively stopped the rummaging and a chorus of, "What?" "Eh?" and assorted protests were issued by the red-shirted men.

"Don't blame me. That's what Christine Chapel told me. It seems that we're going to have to pay for getting shore leave on Pilar Majoris; with blood. McCoy says that he has no intention of sitting about doing nothing until we get there. We're going to provide him with a little amusement on the way."

The guards turned back to their task with a disgruntled air and did not find any tribbles. Baillie nodded absently at the report and added a note to the log to the effect that Mrs. Kenyon had brought aboard one piece of luggage that had not been searched, and the fact that she had pledged the absence of tribbles. That did not mean that her luggage would not be searched - after all the cabin would be available for access during the reception, if not before. He let the matter rest for the moment. Spock had been present; and he had suddenly realised that several Starfleet regulations had already been broken, and that Pilar Majoris was suitably distant enough to warrant a journey time of about 28 days.

And K7 had signalled that the next group of diplomats were ready to beam aboard.

Kirk finally roused, hung over and feeling as if his mouth had been stuffed with last year's supply of dirty socks. He gazed blearily around his quarters and finally saw the small glass on the ledge next to his bed. He squinted at the note that was propped against it. The majority of the words swam about before his unfocused gaze, all except the first line. In large, firm capitals was the terse message 'JIM. DRINK THIS NOW!'. Recognising the handwriting Kirk did so and shuddered as the liquid seemed to dissolve the socks, together with the first three layers of flesh from his mouth, throat and stomach. He eased himself against the pillows waiting for the potion to take effect and closed his eyes, trying to remember just how he had managed to get so drunk.

The memory of the meeting with Lurry and Baris popped his eyes open and he hit the Comm. link switches through sheer reflex.

"Bridge."

"Bridge, Spock here."

The instant answer soothed the first rush of adrenalin. If Spock was on the Bridge then there was nothing that could go wrong. "Ship's status, Mr. Spock?"

"All normal, Captain. The diplomats have arrived and are currently in their assigned quarters. The tribble infestation has been controlled and we are cleared to leave orbit about K7 for Pilar Majoris in 17 minutes."

As the concise report flowed on, Kirk closed his eyes in brief, but heartfelt, thanks to the gods for giving him Spock as his First, then said, "Thank you. I'll be right up."

Twenty-one minutes later he'd given the order to leave orbit and was laughing at the tale of how his senior officers had disposed of all of the tribbles. Inside, the greater part of his colon had disappeared into a frozen lump of ice.

*Oh my stars! They gave the Klingons the tribbles! They gave them all those tribbles and what am I going to tell Lurry? Sorry. I got drunk and didn't oversee my crew, so they played a little joke on Koloth. He'll have my stripes! And theirs!*

"Sir. Something on sensors. Extreme range. Right across our course." Spock had returned to his station as the hilarity rocked the Bridge.

"Slow to sub-light. Sound Yellow Alert. Any further data, Spock?"

"Affirmative. But it is conflicting. I read no energy sources nor metallic substances. The contact seems to consist of inert organic material." Spock sounded very confused, which meant that his voice held just a hint of his puzzlement.

Kirk spared a glance at his response board which showed the crew answering the unexpected alert with their customary zeal. The sight steadied him. "Uhura. Contact K7. I want a direct channel to Mr. Lurry."

"K7 has just hailed us. Mr. Lurry is anxious to talk to you."

The starview disappeared and Lurry, in his office, glared angrily at Kirk.

"What the hell did you do with the tribbles?" he stormed.

"They were transported aboard the Klingon vessel just before it went into



warp."

The image of Lurry shuddered and sank back against the chair. "That is precisely what Captain Koloth has just told me. Along with a comprehensive diatribe on the Federation, the diplomatic services and Enterprise. I can almost find it in me to agree with his comments about you. He said that he was going to leave you a little present."

"We may have found it. Sensors have picked up something. We've slowed to sublight to investigate. Spock, any identification yet?"

Spock had to swallow twice before he could answer. "Positive. Captain Koloth has given us back the tribbles."

"What? Starfield view," snapped Kirk and Lurry vanished. The stars came out again and in the centre of the screen the mysterious object could be seen, a blurred area against the starlight.

"The Klingons have jettisoned the tribbles. They are on a collision course with K7. Impact in 6.47 days."

"Estimate of numbers?"

"Mass approximates to the number beamed aboard the Klingon vessel within tolerances of expected increase." The reply was as automatic as the question.

"Put Mr. Lurry back on, Uhura. Mr. Lurry?"

"I heard. They spaced them." It was both a statement and a question.

"Yes."

"Fortunately for all of us Koloth was in such a blind rage that he's destroyed all the tribbles you put aboard his vessel. That was a damned fool stunt, Kirk, and I hope that you've got an equally good explanation as to why you ordered it?"

"Mr. Lurry. I gave the order." It was Spock, hidden deep behind his super-Vulcan mask. "The Captain has only just been informed, within the last few minutes, of what precisely I did with the tribbles."

"What you did? Hell! It was MY idea!" The loud denial come from McCoy, echoed an instant later by Scott's

"Aye, and mine!"

"We all knew, except Captain Kirk," said Uhura quietly.

Lurry studied the Bridge crew, then nodded. "Explanation noted and logged."

"Can we be sure he's dumped them all?" asked Kirk, drawing a startled glance from Spock.

"He did. The semantics people have collected some very interesting data on Klingon insults from his message. The behavioural scientists said that the last time they saw any Klingon in such a fury, the Empire had lost 3 ships and 2 planets. We can be certain, Kirk. The Klingons do not like tribbles. In fact, they are very nearly as popular as you are."

"I accept full responsibility for this incident," said Kirk stiffly. Spock took a jerky half-step away from his station towards the centre seat.

"Enterprise will receive full credit for the actions of you and your crew. You have got Sherman's Planet safely within the sphere of Federation influence; the Klingon action over the grain, and the tribbles, will affect quite a few wavering fainthearts, and you've made a Klingon Captain the laughing stock of the sector. With any luck at all one of the more level headed administrators in the Imperium will work out the exact parameters of the opportunity that Koloth has thrown away and will arrange for something vastly unpleasant to happen to him. And the sooner the better - he's far too good for us to have him hanging around here for too long," said Lurry. "As it is we still come out a long way ahead. The new grain shipment is due to arrive shortly. Potemkin is escorting it. You can carry on to Pilar Majoris and get that leave in. I've never seen such a ship for missing leave. You go and enjoy it. Heaven knows you've earned it!"

Kirk drew a breath. "Thank you. Would you have any objections if we disposed of the Klingon gift?"

"I would welcome your help. Just don't shoot yourself in the foot. Okay?"

"Sir."

The starfield view came back, the blur was nearer. Kirk looked at it, the sour taste in his mouth not entirely attributable to his hangover, knowing that it was made up of thousands upon thousands of dead tribbles.

"Activate forward phasers, Mr. Chekov. I want every last one destroyed. Every single one."

"Ve vill be in range in 34 seconds, Sair." Chekov sounded subdued.

As well you might, thought Kirk bitterly and swung his chair about. "Spock." He paused, recognising that Spock was badly shocked by what had happened. He joined him at the Science Station speaking gently, quietly. "Do you think you can manage to monitor the phaser sweep?"

"Of course, Captain."

Spock's reports during the multiple blasts were models of concise excellence; but Kirk stayed with him the whole time, silently offering support. Spock misinterpreted his Captain's presence and arrived at the conclusion that Kirk no longer trusted his judgement. Based on his view of the events it was the logical conclusion. That Spock forgot to take into account the fact that Kirk rarely operated on purely logical motivation can only be wondered at; although in his defence it should be remembered that he did have other things on his mind at the time.

"The tribbles are destroyed, Captain," he said at last.

Spock looked at Kirk - or, rather, through him. Kirk in his turn misinterpreted Spock's coldness and instead of staying close, physically and verbally, retreated to allow Spock the time and room that he thought Spock would need to recover his poise. Spock merely accepted the withdrawal as the first and entirely necessary step along the path which would lead inevitably to Kirk asking him to request a transfer from Enterprise. He turned back to the Science Station determined that when Kirk did ask him to request a transfer he would respond with proper dignity and promptness.

Kirk swung back down into the command well. "Cancel Yellow Alert. Resume course to Pilar Majoris, warp factor 2."

"Laid in, sir." said Sulu immediately. He was beginning to wish that he'd kept his alternating shift pattern for a few hours more.

"Then let's go. Mr. Scott, Dr. McCoy, I want a word with you both. Now. Mr. Spock, you have the Con."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk, mindful of appearances, managed to maintain a fulminating silence on the way to his quarters. Once safely inside he allowed his anger full rein and let both men have a verbal broadside which sent Scott pale with anger and McCoy into his most icy Georgian gentleman mode.

"Ah think you're over-reacting a trifle here, Captain-Suh!"

"Am I? Damn it, McCoy! What did you think the Klingons would do with the tribbles? Pat them on where-ever-the-hell their heads ought to be and find them a good home? You saw how Darvin reacted to one. He was a trained and highly experienced agent. He'd survived amongst us undetected for years. And *one tribble* broke him! What do you think the reaction of a bunch of medium average Klingons was going to be with that lot dumped into the engine room? That's the trouble, though. You two just didn't think. You saw what you thought was a huge gag and you went right ahead and played it. And, what's more, you managed to get Spock mixed up in it."

"He agreed tae it," muttered Scott sullenly.

"Of course he agreed to it! He accepts that you two are responsible beings. He accepts your judgement on matters that he knows he can't judge himself. This was A JOKE! He doesn't have a Human sense of humour, he doesn't understand why we think practical jokes are funny, so he went along with what you two said would be tremendous fun."

Scott flushed. "He said he tried tae check it wi' you. He said that ye'd gone tae sleep. He was doubtful but I, well, I pressured him intae saying yes."

Kirk's eyes flicked to the bottle and glasses still on the table awaiting the attention of his new yeoman. "I'd been entertaining Mr. Baris. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was legless drunk. And drunk or sober, I'd have probably agreed with you." Kirk's shoulders sagged. "But Spock did make that decision and now he's got to come to terms with the consequences."

Scott frowned, puzzled, but McCoy nodded. "He's blaming himself for their deaths."

Scott saw the light, recalling how Spock had sounded and reacted on the Bridge. "Aye. It wouldnae matter to him that they were beasties."

"And thanks to us it's going to be all over the ship... No, the Federation! Jim, what can we do?"

Kirk laughed bitterly. "You're asking me? You're the expert, remember? How do you make a Vulcan admit that he's feeling, and feeling something as degradingly shameful as guilt? I've only just got him to admit that he can recognise the existence of humour - not understand it, mind, just admit that he can recognise the fact that it exists. The only thing that I can suggest is that we all give him time and elbow room to let him work it out for himself. If he hasn't calmed down any by the time we're, say, halfway to Pilar Majoris, I'll try to talk with him. Any better suggestions?"

"I can't think of any other way to handle him," admitted McCoy. Kirk's look was eloquent. "But I'll work on it," McCoy assured him.

"While you are, you two can help me host the 'Welcome aboard' party for the diplomats. In full dress uniform. I don't want Spock bothered by them. Anything else, gentlemen?"

"No."

"No, Sair."

"Carry on then, and when you apologise to Spock, do it in private."

The two men left hurriedly and parted immediately. Kirk slumped into a heap on the bed wishing that he'd never seen a tribble, or a Klingon, or a bottle of spirituous liquor. His head ached, and his stomach announced its severe displeasure at the recent over-indulgence. Worse than either was the heartsick feeling that he'd let Spock down. Spock had trusted him enough to venture out from behind the exquisite Vulcan facade, to the extent that he'd actually assayed a joke while they were on K7. 'Can't believe his ears' indeed! Some instinct had warned Spock that the joke that Scott and McCoy had wanted to play was dangerous in some way, and so he'd turned to Kirk to ask for help and guidance, only to find that Kirk was drunk and incapable of acting as his conscience in the matter. So here they were. Spock feeling guilty and ashamed and Kirk, his all-too-frail Human conscience, with a guilty conscience of his own. And a hell of a hangover despite McCoy's potion.

He raised his head from his hands and peered blearily around his untidy quarters. Frowning, he looked at the chrono. His latest yeoman, one Charlotte Trebert, was exceedingly late. Not only hadn't the debris of his session with Baris not been cleared away but his normal daily delivery of ship's reports had yet to be delivered.

Gritting his teeth, and telling his head that it could not fall off his neck and roll into a corner and die, he went looking for his tardy yeoman. He found her deep in conversation with a civilian female. Trebert, a tiny female of Chinese descent, jumped guiltily and stammered a largely incomprehensible apology when she realised who had called her name. The civilian was made of much sterner stuff.

"Captain. This is an unexpected, but most delightful, pleasure."

Kirk turned his aching head to look at the woman. A detached part of his brain recorded the glory of blonde hair, azure blue eyes, perfect complexion and shapely figure, whilst the engaged part kept right on complaining about the monumental hangover. Only Starfleet's attempts to drill diplomacy into Kirk kept him from ignoring the woman.

"I don't believe we've met?"

"Veronica Kenyon," came the cooed reply. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, Captain." The last word held the clear promise of many magical moments to come. Veronica, having accessed the publicly available records on all the senior officers, had decided that the much decorated and feted James T. Kirk could make a dull trip very interesting for her. He might even turn out to be fun. Unfortunately she was not aware of Kirk's fragile condition, and as the depredations of the bottle were scarcely visible, had no way of knowing that what she took to be a cool appraising glance was no more than an automatic response to her greeting.

"Ah, yes. One of our passengers. Welcome aboard. I'm sorry to be abrupt but I am on duty. And so is Yeoman Trebert."

"Yeoman Trebert has been kind enough to show me around your beautiful Starship." Veronica had been able to read between the lines of the public reports quite accurately. The caress in the husky voice brought a tinge of red to Charlotte's cheeks. The yeoman could read the signs as well as she thought her Captain could and knew that she had to disappear at the earliest opportunity.

Kirk didn't notice the tone, or the invitation. "Yes, very kind of her. Unfortunately I can't spare her from any more of her duties." Kirk half turned. "Yeoman, the daily reports?"

"Oh, yes, Sir!"

"And the little matter of the domestic arrangements?"

"Yes, of course. There is one little problem which I think - "

"It can wait, dear," interrupted Veronica firmly. Kirk glanced at her. "Something that Charlotte was going to do for me, but there's no hurry for it. It can wait."

"I'm glad to hear it, if it means that my yeoman can get on with her assigned tasks."

"Sir?"

"I'm sure that the Captain knows best what he wants you to do, dear," said Veronica firmly. "Our little chat can wait."

Trebert looked from one to the other and totally misinterpreted the situation. After all, the gossip that she had heard about the ship was mainly based on the Captain's supposed predilection for curvaceous blondes (including, it was whispered, her own predecessor!). "Yes, of course. I'll go and get those reports."

She backed away down the corridor and as Veronica turned a blinding smile on Kirk, turned and fled.

"Thank you for being so understanding. I apologise for interrupting you but certain tasks have to be done regularly and if they aren't, well, they just pile up."

"Naturally I understand that you must be very busy?"

The suggestion that she expected to come, that Kirk wasn't too busy to partake of a light snack, followed by a personally conducted tour of his ship, never came. Kirk took up what was the obvious opening in quite another fashion.

"Very true. And so I have to excuse myself for now. I'll see you at the Reception?" Kirk smiled. "Until then, Mrs. Kenyon."

Kirk managed to turn away without falling over and decided that he wasn't in any condition to return to the Bridge. Despite the teasing that he fully expected he instead went to Sickbay to plead for help. He found himself fielded by a strangely subdued McCoy before his stammered explanation was even halfway through and was escorted straight back to his own quarters and his own bed with a firm injunction to sleep off the rest of his hangover. A quick injection ensured that he obeyed the injunction and later, when Trebert arrived with the daily reports, she was more than a little surprised to find him alone in the bed and sleeping soundly. Kirk didn't so much as stir as she tidied the empty bottles away and the matter that she wanted to raise with him was left unresolved.

When Kirk awoke it was to find that McCoy was paying him a rare house call to check him over and update him on the events which had occurred during his enforced rest, which included the Reception.

"The diplomats are a pretty good bunch, considering that they're

diplomats. They were getting sick of trying to negotiate with the Klingons and the general opinion is that you and the tribbles did them all a big favour." McCoy waved various medical instruments over Kirk's supine body and grunted as they dutifully recorded that the long sleep had at least blunted the exhaustion which had threatened Kirk's health.

"How's Spock?" asked Kirk bluntly.

"Silent. He's... Hell, Jim, I've never seen him like this. There's such an air of grief and desolation about him. I've tried talking to him but he just won't let me near him. Not that I can blame him for that! My last idea wasn't so terrific." McCoy sat down on the edge on the bed. "Jim, I don't know what to do. I think that this time we've pushed him too far." Fear that this was indeed so made McCoy blurt out his worry.

"Too far?"

"He's had to make so many allowances for us. Tolerate behaviour that on Vulcan would not only be regarded as illogical but also totally obscene, and that on a daily - no, *hourly*, basis. A never ending bombardment of alienness. I think that he's given up. Made a logical decision that the 18 years of trying to fit in with our disturbed behaviour have been a gigantic and total waste of his time. Jim, I think that he's going to ship out!"

Kirk gulped air. "Damn! That bad?"

"Yeah. Scotty and I apologised, privately. It was as if... Jim, have you ever spoken to someone about something and known that they have absolutely no idea what you are saying? That's what it was like. He didn't understand us. I guess he recognised the Human custom and our need to ask for forgiveness, but he didn't understand why, and what's more important, he made no attempt to understand."

"Oh. That does sound bad."

"And then he requested that Scotty and I host that dad-blamed Reception. Said something about it being more appropriate that we should undertake the duty as you were not able to attend. We could hardly say no, so we did. There were a few comments, that you weren't there," amplified McCoy when Kirk looked puzzled. "You said that you would be to one of the wives, Veronica Kenyon."

"Kenyon. Kenyon? Hmm, I think I remember. Tall, blonde?"

McCoy nodded.

"She was talking to Trebert. To tell the truth my head was so bad I don't think I could recognise her."

"That'll be a first," said McCoy dryly. "The lady is very noticeable."

"But married."

"And has a child. Who lisps."

"Lisps?"

"Yeth. Lithpth. Jim, I've already had him into Sickbay and I checked that kid out 16 ways through Sunday. There is absolutely no medical reason why he lisps, he just does. I'd surely like to find out why!"

"You'll have your chance. We've got at least 28 days before we get shore leave."

"Yeah, that's another thing I want to talk to you about. Spock's got us going at Warp 2. At this rate... 28 days? Are we in quarantine?"

"Uncontrolled infestation of non-hazardous life-forms. You get to run as many medicals as you want on all of the crew, and the passengers."

McCoy chuckled and then laughed. "I'd already set up some random tests. Damned strange what your subconscious can see!"

"Let's just hope that Spock's subconscious will see some sense."

"Do you think it's wise, to leave him alone to stew?"

"No. But what else can we do? We have to respect his right of privacy. And he isn't going anywhere that we aren't going for the next 28 days at least. If I can't out-stubborn him by the time we get to Pilar Majoris I don't deserve to have the centre seat."

McCoy nodded reluctant agreement. "Is there anything that I can do?"

"Yeah. You can get the hell out of here so that I can dress and go tell Scotty about the quarantine, which is a secret by the way. Need to know only, Starfleet orders. The tribbles are regarded as a potential threat to the Federation."

"Wonderful! Oh, joy! And we gave them all to the Klingons!" said McCoy, finally understanding the meaning of Lurry's puzzling references to thrown away opportunities.

"Who gave them all back!" pointed out Kirk, poking McCoy in the ribs and forcing him off the bed.

"How are you going to explain the Warp 2 to the crew? They'll want an explanation, especially with Pilar Majoris waiting."

"You can feed the fabled waiting list into the rumour mill, and the fact that the Majorites limit the number of off-worlders allowed at any one time. We just have to wait for a slot."

"Some will guess," warned McCoy as he left.

"I should certainly hope so!" exclaimed Kirk indignantly.

The senior officers, in particular the Bridge crew, all worked out, at rates various to their seniority and experience, that Enterprise was in quarantine. They were also in the most favoured position to notice that there was a considerable distance, metaphorically speaking, between the Engineer, the Doctor, the First Officer and the Captain.

At first they attributed the apparent coolness to the quarantine, and the need to run the stringent decontamination procedures which would have left little free time to Spock, McCoy and Scott. Then Veronica Kenyon, bored and angry at the rebuffs meted out to her by the four male senior officers of Enterprise, also noticed the distance between them. True to her nature she took delight in starting a variety of rumours. These ranged by turns from the obscene to the ridiculous, but such was the nature of Veronica Kenyon's skill with words and people that all were repeated, and none were attributed to her.

The rumours soon reached McCoy's ears, the Sickbay being populated by an ever-changing stream of crewpersons all being given an extremely vigorous and thorough 'once over' by the medical staff, who thought it wise to repeat what

they had been told to their Chief themselves rather than let him overhear the rumours, an event that they regarded as inevitable given the current circumstances.

McCoy listened to the various tales with distant calm, nodded wisely and then proceeded to demolish the lot with a few well chosen sentences which he urged his followers to repeat to the tale bearers; his followers heard and obeyed. The inference was plain and the writing clear on the wall. McCoy did not approve of the content of the sudden spate of tall tales, no matter how humorously told, and they had been given the task of ending the flow. They set about the task of putting the rumour mill into reverse.

McCoy sat in his office, muttering dark oaths to the bulkheads and grimly finished his shift, knowing that if he followed his instincts and went hunting for the other people singled out for prominent treatment in the rumour mill, all his good work on rumour dispelling would be in vain.

He continued to sit in his office for two hours after his shift had finished before he allowed himself to amble, at a markedly slow pace, in the direction of the Rec. Room. As he had hoped his delayed arrival brought him into contact with a certain engineer of Scottish persuasion who was sitting alone staring morosely at an innocent cup of brown liquid that McCoy guessed was cold tea.

McCoy slipped into the chair opposite and said, "Wishing it was something a wee bit stronger?"

Scott jerked, startled. "Och, Leonard! I didnae see ye come in."

"Parsecs away in a wee brown dream," teased McCoy with a levity that he was not feeling.

Scott's fervent, "Ah wish Ah was," raised an eyebrow and McCoy's interest.

"I, ah, take it that you've heard the rumours?" he said casually.

Scott peered at him. "Rumours? Whit rumours?"

"You haven't?"

"No! Whit rumours?"

McCoy, like the personnel of the Engineering Department, decided on discretion. Scott, figuring largely in some of the tales, would not take kindly to the telling. "Later for them. What's the problem?"

Scott leaned forward. "Leonard. Ye know that Ah'm no' one tae go looking for trouble."

A swift mental review Scott's behaviour on shore leaves, and the most recent of the fraught periods spent away from the calming influence of his 'bairns', had McCoy gravely agreeing with his earnest friend who was plainly in need of the reassurance.

"Well, Ah think Ah hae found some trouble."

"Trouble?" questioned McCoy.

"TROUBLE," confirmed Scott.

"What sort of trouble?" inquired McCoy.

Glancing round to ensure that no-one could overhear him he beckoned McCoy



towards him. "We may no' hae got rid of all the tribbles," he whispered.

McCoy leaned back in his chair, as if Scott had attempted to bite him, then leaned forwards to hiss through clenched teeth. "That is not funny, Scotty!"

"Ah'm nae laughing! Can ye see me laughing?"

"Oh s\*\*\*!" exclaimed McCoy as quietly as he could, resting his elbows on the table and letting his head be supported by his hands.

"How do Ah tell Himself? He's no' in the best of moods now. Not wi' those diplomats on board, and Spock acting up like he is!"

"Don't I know it. He's had a permanent headache since K7. Have you got any evidence that we've got... troubles?"

"Oh aye, Ah've got that right enough," said Scott sourly.

McCoy sought for inspiration then said, "Okay, let's go try it out on Spock first."

"He hasnae forgiven us for the last time yet."

"He never blamed us. He's blaming himself for letting us play the joke, and getting all those tribbles killed. And these rumours aren't helping any."

"Rumours? That's the second time ye've said that. Whit rumours?"

"I'll give you the full blow-by-blow rundown later. Right now we've got ship's business to attend to. And it's got to be either Spock or the Captain."

"Aye. Well. It's the middle of the Captain's night. Do you know where Spock would be now?"

"In his quarters. He's been hiding in there a lot lately."

"Then I'll see ye later, Leonard."

McCoy got up with him.

"There's nae need."

"I helped you persuade him last time. The least I can do is sit in on this this time, and besides, if it is... trouble..., I'll have to hear about it sooner or later. And the sooner the better!"

Standing outside the door of Spock's quarters a short time later, McCoy was reminded of the feeling which had often assailed him when he was waiting to see the Principal of the Medical College. He knew that he had a clear conscience, it was just a matter of convincing his stomach of that fact.

"Come," announced the voice and McCoy walked into Spock's quarters, with Scott half a step behind him.

Spock's face got even stonier when he realised the identity of his visitors. "Gentlemen?"

McCoy smiled sadly. Spock looked dreadful. It was truly amazing that something which no Vulcan would admit to, a guilty conscience, could cause so much anguish.

"This is ship's business, Spock. We wanted your opinion before we disturbed Jim."

"Very well. Be seated." Spock waited while they did so and was suddenly disturbed by the realisation that his recent behaviour was upsetting them. He had not thought that they would be affected by his withdrawal as he had only considered the matter in terms of himself and his Captain. The idea that his preparations for departure could be damaging to his fellow officers was most disquieting.

Scott licked his lips nervously and began. "It's about the tribbles." At the arched brow he hurried on. "We may no' hae got rid of all the wee things."

All too aware of the stringent efforts made by the crew to clear Enterprise of the tribbles, Spock spoke bluntly. "What evidence do you have to support this statement?"

"I was doing a wee wander. Looking in the dark corners for slackness - och, ye know the sort o' thing. Ah found food. No' much, but it was there where it had no right tae be. Mostly vegetables, but some fruit. It had been deliberately put out. Ah dinnae know by who, yet, but Ah intend tae know."

"So by inference there are still tribbles loose on Enterprise," said Spock.

"That's the way it seems tae be!"

"And somebody is feeding them!" exclaimed McCoy.

"If it's one o' my staff Ah'll want rid of him, her or them."

"Whoever has had knowledge of this infestation, if it is one, and has failed to report it, will be transferred, at the very least. The Captain's views on free livestock have been amply voiced since our departure from K7." It was a measure of his remaining control that Spock could speak of the events which had so disturbed him so equably.

"If it is one?" questioned McCoy, picking up the phrase.

Spock's cheeks greened slightly. "I believe there is a type of humour called a 'practical joke'. To see the Captain's reaction to the prospect of yet more tribbles loose on Enterprise might appeal to some people." His tone conveyed an unspoken apology that recognised the unfortunate reference, and the reason for the uneasy movements that his visitors made when faced with a harsh reminder of their own joke.

"Only if they have their death wish under firm control," said McCoy grimly. "And if so I want to talk to them."

"Or this may have been arranged specifically to provoke our reaction," continued Spock remorselessly.

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted McCoy.

"See the senior officers go crawling into the nether regions..." Scott's voice held a dangerous note, and no accent. "That could well appeal to some to risk the chance."

"If that is so then I intend to gratify their wishes. In which area did you find the food, Mr. Scott?"

"The crawl spaces behind the storage areas on the lower decks. You'll be aware of the complex of access ways and bracing that there is about the holds there. It'll be easier if Ah show you. The food's placed well inside the

network, and it's no' easy to describe the exact placing, even with diagrams."

"Agreed. When do you suggest?"

"Now! The sooner we find out one way or the other, the sooner we can count this over," said Scott decisively.

"In ten minutes in the Main Engine Control Room," suggested McCoy. "That'll give us all a chance to change into fatigues. Well, don't look so surprised! I have a professional stake in this. If it's livestock we have loose down there I have to find out what it is in case it's a potential hazard, and if it isn't livestock, but Mr. Spock's impractical joker, I have to identify the crew responsible and lock them up before the Captain has a chance to strangle the idiots!"

"Hazard?" echoed Scott.

"Indeed. It may not be tribbles," said Spock rising to his feet.

"But what else could it be?"

"That is what we have to find out."

Scott stalked into the Main Engine Control Room, visibly daring any of his staff to make any comment to him. Scott was heavily muscled and inclined to look portly even though there was not an extra gramme of fat anywhere on his person. The red one-piece fatigues of the Engineering Department served only to emphasise his thick waistline, and that, combined with the possibility that his staff were playing a trick on him, had served to raise his temper close to boiling point. His staff noted all the danger signals and kept out of his way; and intrigued by the unscheduled off-shift presence waited to see what would happen next.

They were rewarded with the appearance of McCoy, dressed in Science blue fatigues. The second skinniest man on Enterprise grinned at his friend.

"Don't look so sour, Scotty," he suggested. "The plates will buckle."

"Och. How can ye stay sae slender? Ye eat twice as much as I!"

"Simple. I have a very inefficient metabolism." He paused, shaking his head as Spock, also clad in Science blue, joined them. "And he simply doesn't eat! When did you last eat, Spock?"

"Yesterday," came the prompt reply.

"Impossible! If you'd eaten anything it would show. There'd be a bulge where it was waiting to be digested. When we've finished here you're coming down to Sickbay and you're going to eat a full meal, even if I have to stand over you with a club until you do. I get it in the neck from Jim every time he thinks you're getting too thin, which is currently every day."

"He has not mentioned this to me," said Spock.

"Well he wouldn't, would he?" rejoined McCoy cryptically, a move which left Spock confused as to his meaning.

As Scotty had been moving through the Control Room, and McCoy and Spock had been absently following him during the course of their argument, the staff on duty did not get to hear the remainder of the discussion, a cause of some regret as the verbal tiffs between the two were famed in Enterprise legend and

had been missed of late. The exchange was noted and discussed with much relish, showing as it did that at least some of the rumours currently flying around were patently false. A more interesting subject for discussion was what the senior officers were doing in the Engine Department, off-shift and wearing fatigues.

The crew who had listened so avidly to the argument would have been even more interested in some of the unrepeatable comments McCoy was muttering a short while later. Crawling on hands and knees down narrow, cold and unlit access ducts, whilst attempting to carry a hand light and a tricorder, was not, in McCoy's view, fun. He let Scott and Spock know it until Scott's sharply uttered, "Stop yer whittering. Coming wi' us was yer ain idea!" effectively silenced him.

Eight minutes of crawling, enlivened by the occasional yelp and oath from the Human contingent, brought the three to a junction large enough to enable them to crouch side by side. Illuminated in the light of the three hand lamps, in the centre of the junction, was a disposable plate on which was neatly piled a choice selection of raw fruits and vegetables.

McCoy and Spock aimed tricorders at the evidence and checked the resulting readings.

"This is what you found, Scotty?" asked McCoy.

"No. There was no plate before. That stuff looks fresher than the last time I was in here. Someone's been down here in the last two, two and a half hours."

"Readings indicate that the fruit is less than four hours old in its present state."

"Agreed. Where do we look now?"

"Take your pick," offered Scott. "There are seven tunnels - sorry, six if you don't count the one we came in by."

McCoy sighed and rubbed his knees. "I'll take this one." He gestured to the hole on his right.

"I suggest a time limit to our search," stated Spock.

"Ten minutes," said Scott, "and we meet back here."

Spock nodded once and rose smoothly from sight up a near vertical shaft. Scott nudged McCoy. "Dinnae look sae sour," he chided. "If you're no' back in half an hour Ah'll send in the search parties."

Chuckling, Scott slid away before McCoy could reply, so, muttering evilly, McCoy went his chosen way. As he had found on the way in, the tricorder was proving to be a source of unexpected torment; the strap which allowed it to be easily carried at hip level when the carrier was on all fours, had proved to be a total waste of time when the carrier was on all fours. It was just long enough so that the tricorder dragged along the deck jabbing at thighs and knees with corners which, though blunted, were painful. Shortening the strap was an equal disaster with the tricorder now performing against chest and ribs, the height of the crawlway being just enough to allow the box to snag on the deck and jam upwards trapping McCoy neatly between bulkhead above and a tricorder which always seemed to be aimed directly at his solar plexus. In self defence McCoy held the box in one hand, the light in the other and took all of his weight on his forearms. Twelve profanity filled minutes later he returned to the junction, his knees, arms, elbows and hands sore and bruised from the constant scuffing against hard, bare metal. He eased himself painfully into a sitting position and looked at the other two who were waiting patiently for him.

"We heard you coming," said Scott with sweet innocence, "so we decided tae wait."

Massaging knees with equally sore hands McCoy growled, "You find anything?"

"More food," said Scott. "Looked like some kind of store."

"Spock?"

"A food store, and - " He held up a small transparent bag containing several oval shapes.

"Snap." said McCoy and produced another sample bag. "Have you seen enough or do we do the other tunnels?"

"I suggest that we evaluate the evidence that we have collected before we disturb the other passageways."

"Fine by me," announced Scott thankfully and shuffled down the way that they had come in by. McCoy gallantly made an 'after you' gesture for Spock to precede him down the crawlway and winced his way as silently as he could on the long way out.

When they reached the access hatch McCoy slowly straightened up, trying to unkink his back, neck and legs. Scott was engaged in doing the same while Spock sat against a console and watched their antics. When mobility had again been restored to the Humans, Spock rose to his feet without any sign of discomfort.

"C'mon," said McCoy wearily. "Let's go see what other traces the tricorders showed up. Couldn't see much of the display with the hand light."

"I will join you shortly," said Spock.

McCoy planted himself firmly in front of Spock. "You will come along with us to Sickbay and I'll do something for your bruises." When Spock started to protest, McCoy simply overrode the objections. "Spock, I know that I have bruises, I know that Scotty has bruises; there is no way in the galaxy that you could have avoided getting bruises. In case you didn't notice, the deck is hard. And there is that little matter of a meal?"

Scotty grinned. "Little use arguing. You know that he'll get his ain way by fair means or foul."

"It seems that I have little choice."

"None," announced McCoy and went over the mental checklist of tests that he intended to run on the unique biology as soon as he got it on the medical couch.

The arrival of the three in Sickbay caused a major stir and it was with some difficulty that McCoy finally managed to eject Christine Chapel from the treatment room.

Scott's bruising proved to be irritating but minor and while he was availing himself of the Sickbay facilities McCoy turned his attention to Spock. Scott, clad once more in uniform, returned to discover that war had broken out in his absence.

"But you said that you had eaten yesterday!"

"That is correct."

"Well where's the food? The scanners say that your stomach and colon are as empty of ingested matter as space."

Scott chortled, drawing the furious blue stare in his direction. "Leonard! Have ye no' learned yet that you cannae argue wi' a logician? He knows how tae use words as a tool, the same way that you know that Feinberger! You have tae learn tae ask the right questions, no' just yell at him."

Spock watched with sombre indifference as McCoy tried to work through the idea. Scott decided to be helpful.

"How much did ye eat yesterday, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

"Sufficient for my needs," came the dignified reply.

"Specifically, how much?"

"An apple," replied Spock patiently.

"What else?"

"Nothing else."

"What?" stormed McCoy as Scott broke up completely at the expression of disbelief on McCoy's face. "An apple a day, eh, Spock?" He giggled. "It's been working, too!"

"Pardon?" asked Spock.

"Leave it, Scotty. Make yourself useful. Go and get us something to eat, and take it into my office. Get double helpings of something for this skinny fool. The brandy's in the normal place." He waited the heartbeat for Scott to react then continued smoothly, "Next to the whisky."

McCoy treated the scratches and bruises on Spock in utter silence, handing him a fresh uniform when he had finished before turning his medical knowledge on his own injuries. Spock was tucking into a large dish of succulent smelling vegetables when he entered his office. The rich scents immediately made his mouth water and he made rapid inroads into his own dishes, barely noticing that Scott had chosen vegetarian meals for them all. The conversation was sparse, and confined to requests for the condiments and offers of more liquid refreshments.

Scott finished first and enlivened the air with a spirited relating of the attempts of the Medical Staff, championed by Christine Chapel, to find out what the senior officers had been doing, and the extent of their injuries. McCoy shook his head at her conduct, knowing that it was in part inspired by her proprietary attachment to Spock, but equally well knowing that the woman was sincerely concerned about all the crew; she just had difficulty in letting them know this in a manner that they could accept. Her usual persona was a mixture of school marm, spinster aunt and mother hen. One day, McCoy knew, Christine would learn how to show that concern without irritating the people she was trying to help; until then he'd just have to soften its effects as best he could.

Finally replete, and nursing a brandy, McCoy started fiddling with the till then ignored tricorders. Spock, expecting more attacks over his lack of appetite and withdrawn attitude, was slightly surprised that McCoy did not resume the offensive. He realised now that his behaviour could not bear close examination, and the efforts of Nurse Chapel gave McCoy an excellent 'jumping off' point from which to launch an attack. Instead Scott shoved all the dishes back onto the tray and parked the whole thing on a convenient shelf when McCoy suggested,

"Business?"

McCoy played back the short recording that he had made in the access ways. He gave a verbal commentary which was as brief as the recording.

"I found the food pile first. As you can see it contains slightly longer lasting vegetables, and nuts still in the shell. No trace of any perishable foods. A little further on was another store. And here a toilet drop, call it what you will. I took a few stools for samples but left it undisturbed."

Spock's recording showed a similar layout, but on a vertical alignment, with food tucked into little nooks and crannies and the toilet drop spread around the circumference of the shaft on a convenient, if extremely narrow, shelf where the shaft bulged, and then narrowed.

Scott had found a food store. "Well, that was no' very enlightening!"

"Quite the contrary, we can make some deductions from this evidence," said Spock.

"We can?"

"Certainly," put in McCoy. "For a start, the evidence clearly shows that whatever it or they are that are lurking in the bowels of our ship, it or they are definitely not tribbles."

"How can ye be sae certain?"

"Two reasons. One, food stores. Tribbles do not store food. They eat it. If we had tribbles down there, there would not be food stores. The two are mutually exclusive, or rather inclusive. There'd be lots of little hungry tribbles, but... "

"Definitely no food. Ah can see that. And the other reason?"

Scott eyed the sample bag with distaste. "Dae ye mind? Ah've jist eaten!"

"What's in the bag, Scotty?"

"Dung!"

"He didn't notice either," said McCoy sadly to Spock.

Spock nodded. "I have noted that Humans as a species are often lamentably unobservant of their surroundings."

Scott bristled, but his reaction stopped in confusion as McCoy rejoined, "Don't crow too loud. It took you a while to notice."

"I had other concerns," said Spock loftily.

"Such as?"

"Mr. Lurry. Cyrano Jones. Nilz Baris. Captain Koloth. The Klingon crew. A Captain with a constant headache." Spock recited the list.

"We get the point."

"Crewmen and officers involved in bar room brawls."

"We get the point," said McCoy more loudly.

"You might, but Ah dinnae?"

"Okay. Humour me. How many tribbles did we have on board?"

"I didnae have time tae count them."

"Hundreds of thousands?" prompted McCoy.

"Aye, easily that."

"But we cleaned them off the ship," and continued hurriedly before he got any reply. "Did we clean up anything else?"

"No. There was nothing else tae clean up."

"So there we were, on a ship that was roiling with hundreds of thousands of tribbles, all merrily eating everything they could reach, and we didn't get one pile of dung to clean up after them, thank the moon and stars," he ended fervently.

This idea was entirely novel to Scott whose eyes got rounder and rounder as it sank in. "Ye're right. They didnae... not at all!"

"If they had done we could have grown potatoes in the corridors but, bless 'em, the ONLY thing that a tribble ever produces is more tribbles!"

"Total conversion of all ingested matter," commented Spock.

"Which is how I managed to persuade Jim to let me keep a small colony on board. Think of how useful they could be."

"Waste disposal," muttered Scott. "Land clearance."

"If we could ever counter the side effects. Spock noticed, I didn't," confessed McCoy. "I was too busy trying to figure out HOW! But you get the general idea. Our visitor is not a tribble."

"Which provides us with a totally different set of problems, gentlemen." Spock steepled his fingers. "We have at least one relatively small creature, which is vegetarian in diet, is capable of travel up and down vertical shafts as well as along horizontal passages, and is territorial in nature. The last is a deduction based on the observed behaviour of many species. The placing of dung heaps is usual as a marker of claimed territorial boundaries."

"Also the planet of origin has seasonal food variations. The food stores would indicate a season of famine, like winter on Earth, or high summer on Vulcan," said McCoy.

"And it was tame enough to be concealed and smuggled aboard, yet retained enough independence to escape and run free."

"It would hae tae be smuggled aboard," agreed Scott. "And there were nae signs of anything down there when we left K7. Ah was down there mysel' then, as part of the total systems check. So that seems tae indicate our diplomats."

"Or members of the crew," countered Spock. "It is extremely unlikely that the repeated presence of a diplomat in the storage areas would not have been noted and reported to you by now."

"Or both. So what do we do now?" asked McCoy, tacitly deferring control to Spock.

"If you could analyse the... samples, Doctor?"

"Bacteriological check. Internal parasites. Skin or hair particles. See



if they are from the same... intestine."

"Exactly so. Mr. Scott, if you would talk to Mr. Baillie? I know that his people would have been particularly thorough, but there may have been something that he noticed, that was not of any significance at the time."

"Consider it done. And yourself?"

"I shall attempt to isolate from the food processors information about our provider of trouble provender. I strongly doubt that a creature, no matter how tame, would have been able to learn the techniques of operation for a food processor. Besides myself there are very few persons aboard who would specifically request raw fruits and vegetables on a regular basis. Any person who has done so regularly since we left K7... "

"Has been in on feeding the livestock. But we were seen going into the access ways, and the way that rumours fly about on this ship...!"

The way that Spock could no longer meet his eyes told McCoy that the Vulcan was fully aware of the more outrageous rumours abounding. "Then I suggest alacrity, gentlemen, although I doubt that any attempts would be made to interfere with the computer."

"Anyone soft-hearted enough tae harbour livestock after what this ship has just been through is capable of anything!" averred Scott.

"I would also prefer to have answers ready for the Captain. He does seem to have his own methods of hearing rumours, and when he hears of our excursion... "

"He'll arrive like the leading edge of an ion storm," finished McCoy, *fuelled by the other rumours*, he added to himself.

Scott drained his drink. "Ah'll be getting started now. Ah'm on duty in four hours, but that should be enough time tae rouse Baillie from his pit and hae a wee chat wi' him."

"Back here in three hours?" suggested McCoy. "So that we can pool our knowledge before the storm breaks."

"Agreed." Spock left, moving rapidly, and cleared Sickbay before he could be intercepted.

Scott lingered. "Rumours? I noticed the way that Spock reacted. Mon, he REACTED! And ye mentioned rumours in the Rec. Room?"

McCoy sighed. "Someone, or a group of someones, has got a foul mind and loose mouth. There's been a lot of talk lately. About us, Spock, Jim! I've been trying to put a stop to it quietly but no luck. It's developed to the stage where my people reported the rumours to me officially. I was going to talk to you about it, that's why I was in the Rec. Room, then you told me about our little trouble."

Scott thought back over the previous few days. Rumours, starring him, would explain the huddled groups and muffled laughter, the sudden silences, and why his people had been more than usually attentive to their work of late.

"I guess they'll have tae wait their turn, until after we get this sorted." He left, scowling so fiercely that none of the medical staff approached him.

Sitting in his office McCoy ran weary hands through his hair, wincing slightly as the swollen tissue and damaged muscles protested at even that minor

exertion. "Don't worry, Scotty. We're going to have plenty of time to find out who's behind that, too!" He got up to face his staff and startled them all, even Nurse Chapel, into silence, by issuing some imperious decrees relating to a perceived slippage of standards in their behaviour, particularly in relation to their behaviour towards senior officers. He used the resulting breathing space to analyse the samples that he and Spock had collected, and rehearse some arguments that he was going to have to have with Spock concerning the fate of the tribbles.

As it turned out they did not have as much time to work on the problem as they had anticipated. Jim Kirk, edgy and unable to sleep due to multiple worries, foremost of which was Spock, wandered into the Gym to try to exercise himself to sleep. Spock had been uncommonly distant in his dealings while on duty, and notable in his total absence whilst off-duty. The time he had arbitrarily allotted to Spock in the aftermath of the tribble debacle, to work through and resolve his problem alone, had now expired. Kirk was busily engaged in trying to figure out an approach that would be open enough not to make Spock feel compelled to speak to him, but would also be tight enough to trap Spock until he did. That problem was yet another reason to explain his sleepless state.

The diplomats were bidding fair to becoming an outright nuisance with a series of demands and complaints that in themselves were totally reasonable, but which cumulatively were anything but. One after another the diplomats, or their wives, had approached him privately, not wishing to be intrusive, or to be officially recorded as having done so, but each had laid at his door small requests for arbitration of imagined or real complaints, or for the granting of privileges. It was some time in the middle of his workout that he realised that the only diplomats who hadn't bothered him were Dermot Kenyon and his wife Veronica. For some reason this fact disturbed him. He had the distinct feeling that there was something that he'd been told about the pair, something that was both important and had a direct bearing on his present problems. The conversation that he overheard whilst in the showers afterwards ensured that he forgot all about the Kenyons.

"Scotty, Bones and Spock? In fatigues and playing hide-and-go-seek in the access tunnels around the lower holds? What the devil are they up to?"

He dressed again and went to wake up his Science Officer, determined that that elusive person would have not chance to avoid a long chat this time. He found Spock wide awake and plugging away at his computer terminal.

"Want to tell me about the latest craze?"

"Craze, Captain?"

"Hmm. This sudden urge which drives my senior officers to wear fatigues and crawl about in access ways when by rights they should be tucked up, in their OWN beds, and fast asleep?"

Spock's eyebrows levitated towards his fringe.

"You thought that I wouldn't hear about this latest thing?"

"Of course not. It is merely that the speed with which you have heard about it is somewhat faster than I had anticipated."

"And you'd also like to know who told me about the other rumours? Personally I'd prefer to find out who has been starting them off."

"Quite. If you would care to be seated." Spock smoothly produced a bottle

and a glass from a cupboard and poured a generous measure out for Kirk, who eyed the offering suspiciously.

"What's this in aid of?"

"I have observed that this technique is quite effective when Doctor McCoy employs it."

"He only does this when he has really bad news to tell me. You have really bad news to tell me?"

"Regrettably I have."

Wondering just what Spock could have found Kirk sat, swallowed a portion of the drink and mentally braced himself. "Okay; shoot!"

"We have livestock loose in the access ways on the lower storage decks."

"Oh no! Not tribbles?"

"No, Captain. Definitely not tribbles."

"Well, what is it?"

"Unknown at the present time. We have been attempting to identify it, or them, how 'they' arrived aboard, and who has been feeding them."

"Feeding? Tell me about it." As important as it was to him to reach Spock and try to understand the reasoning that had impelled the Vulcan to place himself in isolation, this new potential threat to the ship had to take priority. At least it had Spock talking to him, which was a considerable gain.

Spock spoke concisely and rapidly for another glassful, detailing the events which Kirk wished to know about.

"Mr. Scott and Dr. McCoy wanted to be totally certain that we did in fact have livestock aboard before we informed you. It could, after all, be just another development of the current spate of rumours."

"So did you, I know you too well. So the options were an impractical joker or a genuine infestation. And the indications support this being a genuine infestation. Oh joy!" He used McCoy's latest exclamation without sarcasm. "All this and the diplomats too! What more could a Starship Captain need to complete his lot?"

"You wish me to offer a selection...?"

"No!" replied Kirk emphatically. "My imagination is too good as it is. I would welcome suggestions about what we do next, though."

"I have arranged to meet Mr. Scott and Dr. McCoy in twenty minutes time to 'pool' our knowledge. Let us hear what they have discovered before we decide on a plan of action."

Kirk smiled broadly at the astonished expression on the faces of the Engineer and Doctor when he walked into McCoy's office behind Spock. "I understand that I'm a bit early but I'm sure that you won't mind if I sit in on this council of war? Bones, you want to start?"

"Yeah, well, as far as I can tell there is only one trouble down there. It

seems to be a healthy little thing, no evidence of internal parasites, and only the sorts of bacteria normally found in... dung. Couldn't get enough skin or hair for a positive I.D., but I'd say it's about the size and weight of a Terran domestic feline, and more agile."

"Cats can vary quite a lot. The ones we had on our farm when I was growing up there could take on the local mutts in a straight fight, and win."

"Best I can do for now. Sorry."

"S'okay. Scotty, what did you find out from Chief Baillie?"

Scott shot a worried glance at Spock then sighed. "They checked everything and everyone that came aboard at K7; with one exception. Veronica Kenyon had a big carryall with her. It wasn't searched when she came aboard."

"Why not? The Regs. state... "

"I allowed it," interrupted Spock his gaze firmly locked onto his hands.

With McCoy glaring warnings at him Kirk firmly tiptoed into the verbal minefield that spread out between him and his friend.

"If you'd detail why? Please?"

"Mrs. Kenyon was disposed to be... argumentative about having her baggage searched. She seemed to regard it as a personal insult and, in my opinion, would have disrupted the arrival of the remainder of the diplomats."

"Baillie was a little more descriptive," said Scott when it became clear that Spock was not going to continue. "He said that the lady came aboard looking for a fight, and was doing her best to have one. She'd have been quite happy to foul up the beam-up. With the short notice that the diplomats had it wouldn't have gone down well if we'd have kept them hanging about on K7 while we sorted her out. She did give her word that there were no tribbles in her luggage, Baillie logged the pledge. He also logged that Dermot Kenyon gave him permission to search the baggage. Baillie had the yeoman assigned to settle the Kenyons in give the bag the once over - that would have been an hour or so later, just before she took them on the orientation tour. She said that the bag just had clothes in it."

"Which yeoman was that?"

"Your new one, Trebert. The security team did a complete sweep of all the diplomats' quarters while we were at the Reception. They said the place was clear. No other problems aside from complaints about the short warning. The crew turned up empty too."

"Under the circumstances, I agree with your decision, Spock. I'd have been loath to inconvenience the diplomats further too. At least you had some warning, even if I did pass out drunk before I could pass the full message on to you. The state Baris was in I'm surprised that he managed."

McCoy coughed discreetly. "I'm reliably informed that the diplomats only found out by the sheerest chance. Baris' aides were putting him to bed after he folded on them and one had a bad attack of curiosity concerning the tape that he had clenched in one fist."

Kirk coughed, clearing his throat. "So we can't pin this down to any one person, unless the livestock was in Veronica Kenyon's bag and got loose between coming aboard and Yeoman Trebert's quick search."

Spock gathered himself together and contradicted his Captain. "If the

livestock had been in the bag, Mrs. Kenyon would have had to release it soon after coming aboard. There would have been little air in the bag to sustain the creature. The creature could have been shut in one of the bedrooms when Yeoman Trebert made her search of the luggage, and escaped in the time between then and the Reception, if indeed that is how the creature come aboard."

Kirk thought about the alternative then nodded. "Quite right. Thank you, Spock. But we still don't have any real proof who got it aboard. How about feeding it? Any luck there, Spock?"

A small crease marred Spock's forehead. "None whatsoever. Since we departed K7 there has been an unwarranted number of people requesting raw fruit and vegetables from the processors. To date 207 persons have done so."

"They can't all be feeding the damned thing!" exploded Kirk.

"The rumours! One of the early rumours. There was a tale going around. Er... the poisoned grain." McCoy struggled to recall it. "Got it. The rumour was that some of the poisoned grain had been used to top up the raw ingredients for the food processor banks. You know that we were just about cleaned out by the tribbles. The basis for a lot of the reconstructed food is grain, cereals, pulses. But raw vegetables and fruits are reconstructed from the stored originals rather than from bulk ingredients. That would account for the run on the stuff that couldn't have been made with contaminated grain." Then he thoughtfully added, "That indicates to me that someone gave a lot of thought about covering their tracks. Sneaky."

"When did the rumour start, Bones?"

"That one reached me... oh, about 5 days after we left K7. Incidentally the fact that I was running full medicals on all crew was held to be confirmation of the rumour."

Kirk nodded. "Spock, when did the requests start?"

Spock tilted his head. "The first are recorded before we left K7, and rise in frequency to a peak some 9 days later. They tail away to approximately 60 persons still making requests."

"Some people will believe almost anything," said McCoy, then could have bit his tongue as Spock glanced away. Scott hacked at his leg. "Sorry, Spock."

"You have done nothing for which you need to apologise to me," said Spock, leaving McCoy with the impression that had they been alone Spock would have been apologising to him.

"Whatever. That is a clear indication to me that whoever is feeding tales into the rumour mill is also bound up in our little livestock problem. It also tells me that some of the crew are in on this. Scotty, have a go at your people. I want the names of everyone they've seen down around the lower hull who wouldn't normally be there."

"That'll tell everyone involved that we're on tae them."

"I intend to let everyone know, Scotty, and I intend to find out everyone involved in this mess, even if I have to sit them one by one under a truth verifier and question them myself."

The Comm. link on McCoy's desk sounded the tone for the CMO's call, immediately followed by M'Benga's voice. "Doctor McCoy?"

"Here. What is it?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt your conference, sir, but we've an injury out here that I'd like you to take a look at."

"Sir?" mouthed Kirk.

"I'll be right out." He closed the Comm. link before explaining in an embarrassed voice. "I guess I over-reacted a little to some of the rumours. It just annoyed me that they could bother to repeat such dross."

He left before explaining further, leaving Scott looking with wide-eyed apprehension at Kirk and Spock. Spock broke the silence.

"Some of the rumours were of an extremely personal nature."

"Personal?" Scott looked at Kirk, who flushed. "Och no! Not THAT one again!"

"THAT one, and Bones. And you."

"All of us?"

"Yes."

Scott drew in a breath, looked at the two men, then smiled. "At least it proved that Ah've got good taste. The two Alpha males of the sector!"

"I'm glad that you're flattered.

"Oh, Ah'm no' flattered. Just confused. Which of us?"

"All of us."

"All?"

"All," said Spock firmly.

"Couldnae be done. The beds arena' big enough."

That surprised Kirk into a hoot of laughter and Scott joined in. Spock looked from one to the other then up at Christine Chapel.

"Yes, Nurse Chapel?"

Kirk snorted, trying to smother his laughter but failed hopelessly.

"Dr. McCoy asks if you will join him in Treatment Room Two. He said to say that it could be trouble."

Kirk sobered immediately, and was out through the door, closely followed by Spock and Scott.

Christine shrugged. "Was it something I said?" she asked the empty room.

Kirk swept into Treatment Room Two trailing Scott and Spock like a comet tail. They came to a halt at the foot of a diagnostic bed which contained a young man. McCoy stood on one side of the bed and M'Benga the other. They were both heavily engaged in cleaning up an impressive amount of blood. A lightly spattered security guard was standing against the wall. Kirk looked more closely.

"Bankerswoppe?"

"Sir."

"Is any of that yours?"

"No, sir. All his, sir."

"You sure about that?"

"Absolutely, sir. Not a scratch on me."

"What happened?"

"I was going on duty, sir, waiting for the lift. When the door opened he staggered out. He wanted to go to his own quarters, but with the amount of blood - I thought it best for him to come here. He didn't want to, sir. I had to insist."

"Did you now? How interesting. Mr. Scott." Kirk gestured at the uniform that had been cut off the man and was now sealed into a sterile pack. "I think he's one of yours."

Scott moved around the bed and peered at the man, then backed away out of M'Benga's way before the doctor could complain. "Diego Jones. Ensign. Bright lad, been aboard about seven months. No trouble worth mentioning."

"Is he on your list, Spock?"

"Affirmative."

"Doctor M'Benga, did he say what happened?"

"I am rather busy right now."

"Talk and work at the same time," suggested Kirk. "Did he say anything?"

M'Benga looked at McCoy for support but found himself being ignored. "No, sir, he refused to say what had happened, or where he was when whatever it was did."

"And the nature of his injuries?"

"That's what's so strange. Multiple lacerations. All fairly shallow, but ragged, torn, as if something that wasn't too sharp had been jabbed in and then dragged. That sort of wound tends to bleed a lot."

M'Benga moved onto a new patch of wounds and Kirk peered at them as M'Benga wiped away the drying blood. The wounds didn't look too bad once the blood was gone.

"What caused it?"

M'Benga shook his head. "I've no idea. Mr. Jones is going to have to tell us that."

"Opinion, Bones?"

McCoy paused. "This is M'Benga's patient, I'm only assisting, but I'd say... that he'd been scratched by a cat, a cat with nine claws on each paw." He pointed to a freshly cleaned area of back. For about three inches, nine parallel tracks could be clearly seen. "No trace of toxins yet, but we're going to have to clean up each cut to make sure, and there are a lot of cuts. Nothing life-threatening but it'll be a while before you can talk to him."

"Stick with him. You know the answers I need. I want them as soon as possible."

Kirk turned away from the bed.

"Scotty, raid Engineering. Ah - Mr. Baillie."

The Chief of Security, summoned by Bankerswoppe's explanation of his non-appearance for duty, had arrived on silent feet to listen and learn about the latest problem. He'd long since given up being surprised by the odd things he'd been called to do, but hearing the Captain telling Scott to raid his own section did generate a frisson of startlement.

"Mr. Baillie, go with Mr. Scott, please, and take some of your lads and lassies along. Mr. Scott will brief you. If it's okay with you I'll want Mr. Bankerswoppe to stay here with Mr. Jones - after you've cleaned up, that is, Mr. Bankerswoppe."

Baillie nodded a curt dismissal and Bankerswoppe ran to shower and change. "Captain?"

"Later, Mr. Baillie. Carry on."

Scott hurried Baillie out and Kirk looked round for Spock. He'd retrieved the sealed pack containing the remains of Jones' uniform.

"With your permission, Captain, I would like to investigate this." Spock looked up. "There may be information here about the creature that made this attack," he added quietly.

Kirk nodded. "Anything, Spock, and as soon as possible."

"I'll come and help when I've finished up here," offered McCoy to the retreating figure. "Did he hear me?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Bones, all the medical records will be needed as evidence. I'll require full statements from you, Doctor M'Benga, and everyone else involved. Mr. Jones is going to have to provide some answers, here, and possibly at his court martial. So too could a number of other crewmembers. When Bankerswoppe gets back tell him that Mr. Jones is suspected of breaking Standing Order 6, amongst others, and will require formal guarding until he is well enough to be removed to the Brig."

Kirk left in the stunned silence that followed his announcement.

"Standing Order 6? That's the one about endangering the lives of other crewmembers?" Christine Chapel passed instruments and swabs to the intent doctors.

"That's the one," agreed McCoy. "It's a pity there isn't a Standing Order against blatant stupidity, but then there's no way of testing for that! And I'd have failed it too!" The last sentence was muttered but both Chapel and M'Benga heard it.

Forty-seven minutes later most of the senior officers of Enterprise sat in Briefing Room One eyeing each other and muttering scraps of information, comment and conjecture. Some had been roused from their beds, some disturbed from their duties and one had gleefully excused herself from a medical examination in order to attend the meeting that Kirk had peremptorily announced over the 'All-call'. Chief Baillie had a sketchy idea about what had been going on, based on what Scott had told him on the way from Sickbay to Engineering, and some interesting



guesses, all of which he kept to himself despite some leading questions from those present.

Scott walked briskly in, sat down in his normal chair, ignored everybody and glowered at his hands; McCoy followed a few minutes later, sat down, ignored everybody and glowered at the ceiling. Kirk arrived shortly after him, noted that Spock was still absent, uttered a curt, "We'll wait," and glowered at everyone impartially. Baillie was on the point of offering to go hunt up Spock when he arrived, nodded once to Kirk and sat down.

"Captain's Log, supplemental recording."

Kirk looked around the room, at the people looking back at him with various degrees of interest and curiosity, and cleared his throat.

"This meeting will be recorded and may be used in evidence for charges which will be brought against various people, crew and passengers, who are currently aboard Enterprise. As these charges are of sufficient seriousness to warrant formal proceedings and a court martial for the crew members concerned, I am holding this briefing session so that you, as the senior officers and heads of department, can be made aware of the facts as they are currently known to us."

The officers exchanged a few glances and listened intently.

"To summarise; Mr. Scott became aware that some persons, as yet unidentified, were placing food in the access tunnels in the lower storage areas. He approached Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy and asked for their help to investigate and confirm the discovery. Ladies and gentlemen we again, have an uncontrolled infestation aboard this ship."

He paused, waiting for the ripple of reaction to die down.

"An accident involving the 'whatever' has put one ensign in Sickbay. There is sufficient evidence to give credence to the theory that he not only knew about the infestation but actively connived in the concealment of this fact. He will be questioned on this subject when he is well enough. Everyone who knew anything of the infestation will be court martialled. I ask now, and for the official record, did anyone here have any knowledge of this infestation and, knowing that it formed a hazard to the ship and crew as defined in Starfleet Operational Orders, fail to report it?"

A chorus of 'No, sir' and shaking of heads answered the question.

Kirk looked faintly relieved. "There will be a full enquiry, and you will all be asked to confirm that statement under verifier scan. In the meantime we can't wait until our casualty is well enough to talk to us. We have to find out what it is, and how it came aboard, and how it got loose. I'm hoping that Mr. Spock will be able to help us on the first of those questions. I take it from your unusual late arrival that the analysis of the ensign's clothing was fruitful?"

"I have arrived at a tentative identification of the creature. This is based on some hairs adhering to the uniform, the injuries sustained, and such factors as the estimated size, mobility and strength of the creature. I believe that what is loose in the access tunnels is this."

Spock's hands moved slightly over the computer controls in front of him and the viewscreen showed a picture. The blue-green leaves of the tree analogue parted to show a living being. The creature had long silky fur that was a variety of shades of blue, ranging in gradated series from a delicate pastel duck-egg colour on the head and flanks to the vivid blue-green of a tropical lagoon on legs, paws and tail. The image of the creature moved, staring at the

person who had disturbed it with an expression of beatific innocence glowing in its two huge violet eyes. Ears, pale blue skin topped with tufts of long sky-blue fur, unfurled and moved, cupping to catch any sounds as the creature moved cautiously along the branch of the tree to investigate the intruder.

"What is that?" asked Kirk in an astounded whisper as the pictures continued.

"That is a Lovely," stated Spock.

There was a short pause then Kirk dragged his attention from the screen. "A lovely what?"

"The common name for that creature is a Lovely, supposedly because the first team of scientists were charmed by its appearance." Spock's voice indicated his very low opinion of the mentality of those scientists. "The proper name is - "

"Spare us," muttered Kirk harshly, and Spock was instantly silent. Silence reigned until McCoy ventured a swift kick against Kirk's shins. Startled, Kirk looked wildly at McCoy then collected himself.

"My apologies, Mr. Spock, for my rude interruption. Please continue."

Spock, totally withdrawn behind a glacial Vulcan mask, did so promptly. "The creature is arboreal in habit, preferring to remain aloft in the planetary tree analogues, and only venturing onto the ground when absolutely necessary. Its diet consists of vegetation, leaves, flowers and fruit, although some were noted to take insects on occasion. Despite its benign appearance and docile manner it can be roused into attacking and defeating predators. It has retractable claws, of which there are nine on the end of each limb, and additional small hooks on the palm of each paw, which are furless. These hooks are used to aid its grip on the 'bark' of the 'trees' that it inhabits and allow it to function effectively as climber and leaper. It was recorded as being both swift and agile."

The scene on the viewscreen changed to show a group of Lovelies chasing each other about the bare branches of a dead tree starkly showing against a sunset sky. It was more of a travelogue than a scientific study, but despite the rather hackneyed setting was extremely effective. Kirk found himself trying to count the number of Lovelies in the branches. He thought that there were seven in the group, but they were moving too fast for him to be sure.

"So what we have got is a small, fast, vegetarian. The question is how do we catch it?"

"We could seal the vents and knock it out with gas," suggested Chekov.

"The physical makeup of the Lovely makes that method of questionable efficiency. The Lovely has three entirely separate respiratory systems."

"Three?" exclaimed McCoy.

"A matter which has caused some debate amongst the scientists endeavouring to study the creature. The current theory is that air is held stored in one system and used in the manufacture of enzyme-laden gas which is then used to aid digestion. The process is rotated through each system in turn. The theory is one marked by inconsistencies at each stage of explanation; the research is inadequate."

Various nods of agreement greeted this damning statement. If Spock said that the research was inadequate then the crew was more than willing to accept

Spock's judgement in the matter.

"This unusual physical feature, for whatever purpose it is used, means that the saturation level required would exceed the amount of air-borne soporifics currently available and although we could manufacture sufficient quantities of a variety of standard and non-standard gases, there is also the problem that no information is available about their efficiency when used on Lovelys. Additionally there is a danger of contamination of ship's atmosphere and supplies if soporifics are utilised." Spock paused to draw breath and said, "However, steps have been taken to seal all the vents. Whilst the access tunnels are extensive they are a containable space within the ship."

"Quite, and well done. I wouldn't want to play hide and seek all over the ship," agreed Kirk. "And I think that we can rule out opening the storage decks to space. There is a lot of cargo down there that could be damaged and we could end up getting very hungry if anything happened to it. We can't rely on getting any more supplies from K7. We drained all their spare stock as it was - what was left by the tribbles, that is."

"I was going to suggest we try baiting the food stores we found." McCoy flushed as he admitted it. "But that would have to be poison, and we'd have no way of monitoring when it ate it. Or the food stores could be salted with tracer elements, but that would only tell us where it was; it wouldn't get it out of the access tunnels. We could try tracers and poison, but again, we'd have to wait until it ate from the poisoned piles."

"As time is not on our side it looks to me like the only way to get the Lovely out of the access tunnels is for us to go in and herd it out," said Baillie.

"Agreed, Mr. Baillie. But there are several complications to that suggestion." Spock looked enquiringly at Kirk for permission to continue and received it, together with a warm smile. Spock pretended to note one and not the other.

"Research into the life cycle of the Lovely indicates that they are gregarious, living in large troops and travelling considerable distances, foraging as they go. When a female is pregnant she and her mate split away from the troop, being unable to keep up with the other members' normal rate of travel. They establish a territory, set up food stock-piles and raise the young in a large drey made of branches, twigs and leaves, until they are old enough to be able to travel with a troop. The adults and their young family will then join up with any passing troop, or will form a new troop with other pairs and their young. I believe that the Lovely that is aboard is either pregnant, or has recently given birth. In either case she will defend what she considers to be her territory from intruders."

Spock switched the viewscreen to show a line drawing of a skull. There were a surprising number of teeth.

"As you can see, the average Lovely has a most proficient set of fangs. There are no nasal passages in the muzzle as the respiratory openings are set on the flanks. The dental armament is normally used for biting through twigs and small branches or for stripping the 'bark' from 'trees'. They are used against predators. The incisors of a grown female vary from 3 to 5 cm of exposed tooth, with a gape of at least 21 cm. If that creature landed on the back of your neck she could bite through your spine before you had a chance to dislodge her."

McCoy shivered, thinking of all the vertical shafts he had crawled under, and reflexively rubbed his neck. He and Scott both looked embarrassed as they simultaneously realised that they were doing the same thing and quickly removed their hands. The humour served to lighten the mood a little. Kirk smiled grimly then summed up.

"As silly as it sounds, that creature could kill. We know from the condition of the crewman in Sickbay that it can inflict extensive injuries. So what we have is a small, fast, potentially deadly vegetarian, in a confined space where her small size and natural turn of speed will far outweigh all our advantages of strength and mass. So we'll have to out-think her. I need suggestions, practical and fast, on protective equipment that we can use. I also need you to investigate your own people. If I have to check on everyone aboard individually I will. We will, after all, have plenty of time. Quarantine procedures will be initiated. Again. Shore leave is hereby cancelled. We are going to be going nowhere in particular very slowly for at least 28 days. That is after we catch the Lovely, decontaminate Enterprise and do another complete systems check."

Kirk sighed. "This is no tribble. There is waste product scattered about Enterprise. The Lovely has been aboard, and potentially roaming about freely, since we left K7. We are going to have to white glove every centimetre of every passageway, conduit, cable-run and vent-shaft, not to mention the Jefferies Tubes, the floors, the ceilings, the walls."

He let his voice trail away as wry grins, resigned shrugs and slow if unhappy nods of agreement informed Kirk that the senior officers were already thinking of ways and means of completing the total cleaning of their sections.

"All suggestions on protective clothing to Mr. Baillie. Mr. Spock, will you and Mr. Scott work out how to co-ordinate the Lovely Drive. Everyone else, you know what you have to get ready for. I'll make a formal announcement to all hands immediately, then I'll tell Starfleet." He got up, paused then said softly. "I'm sorry about Pilar Majoris."

Kirk sat in the centre seat for five long minutes trying to frame an announcement that would be free from the bitterness he was feeling towards certain members of his crew, and at least one passenger. The officers on duty eased their way about the Bridge, unwilling to disturb the black concentration lest the wrath that it heralded fall unwittingly on themselves. Finally Kirk exhaled slowly and relaxed back into the firm padding.

"Open shipwide channels, please."

"Ready, sir." The ensign on duty in place of Uhura looked horrified then vastly relieved when he realised that the shipwide channels were indeed ready and tied into the Captain's console. *I did it!* he thought joyously. *I did it! How about that?*

"All hands, this is the Captain. By now some of you will have heard some rumours concerning unusual activities in the lower engineering sections. These are the facts. Since leaving K7, Enterprise has been operating under quarantine conditions. No announcement to that effect was made as we didn't want to hand out invitations to certain groups of unhappy beings of a belligerent nature. The quarantine was due to end upon our arrival at Pilar Majoris, subject to the normal restrictions. Unfortunately a confirmed incident has been recorded. This means that the quarantine is extended indefinitely. An unconfined creature is loose in the storage area in the lower engineering decks; that section of Enterprise is restricted until such times as the creature can be captured or destroyed. Your section chiefs will detail duties for you if you are to be involved in this procedure. Once this has been accomplished a complete ship decontamination procedure and circuit by circuit check will be undertaken."

Kirk paused, waiting for the reaction to hit his crew. On the Bridge the crew did not disappoint him. Low imprecations in a variety of languages zithered into the air. He waited a full 20 seconds before continuing.

"Such a check whilst in space, and without the facilities of a Space Station to help us out, will be arduous. I am confident that the professional expertise of this crew will enable it to be accomplished in the shortest possible time. However, no short cuts can be tolerated. A complete systems check is essential. If you have any doubts about the reasons behind this decision consult the library computer about Ceti Eels; and consider why the tribbles have been declared a non-belligerent, hazardous lifeform."

The young navigator sitting in Chekov's seat swung round to stare at Kirk then turned back to stare fixedly at the console.

"Finally. The current infestation has been allowed to continue for approximately 18 days due to the co-operation of some members of this crew."

Stiffening backs, sudden tension and total silence around him told its own story.

"I intend to discover how the creature come aboard; and the identities of all persons who had any knowledge of the infestation and failed to behave in the correct manner. These people will be brought before a judicial review and may well face a court martial. It will save a great deal of time and effort if all personnel who knew about the infestation and did not report it go to the Security Section now. The investigation into this matter will be very thorough, and I'll have plenty of time to trace everyone involved. Further information about the progress of the quarantine procedures will be posted as and when they arise. Kirk out."

The Bridge was as silent as Kirk had ever heard it. Only the muted clicks and hisses sounded in the stillness. Kirk swivelled around to face the Communications Ensign. "Patch me a call in to Starfleet HQ. Admiral Komack, person to person. When it's ready I'll take it in my quarters."

"Sir."

The stifled voice caught Kirk's attention. "Are you all right? Ensign Figus?"

"Yes, sir. I'm all right."

"Ensign?"

The hapless ensign looked up and Kirk saw the traces of tears.

"You?"

"No, but I've just realised who might be. I should have realised."

"Nobody else did. Why should you? And you might be wrong." Kirk offered the slim hope without real enthusiasm.

The misery in the shaken head was definite. "I'm not wrong. I'm sorry."

"You okay to finish the shift?"

The Ensign cleared his throat, wiped at his eyes and said with utter determination, "I'll be just fine, thank you Sir."

"Good. Get Starfleet as soon as you can."

He didn't ask who Ensign Figus had just identified. Given the current circumstances he felt he didn't have to. Figus would talk to the person, Kirk suspected a female-type crewman, and would do the right thing. People like Figus, and like Spock, always tried to do the right thing. Even when it hurt.

Especially when it hurt. *Look on the bright side*, he chided himself as he stalked angrily back to his quarters, *at least Spock can't resign for another 28 days. And anything can happen in 28 days.* As the door to his cabin slid open for him he found that he had a childish wish that there could be one door on Enterprise that he could slam.

Komack listened with surprising restraint to Kirk's bald and stilted relating of the situation on Enterprise.

"Tell me, how do you do it?"

"Sorry?"

For once the surprised look on Kirk's face was genuine, and Komack acknowledged that it did look very like the practised one Kirk used when about to flatly deny any knowledge of the latest cause for complaint about his people.

"This genius you have for turning the most innocuous and uncontentious set of orders into a chain of multiple disasters."

Kirk ventured a half smile. "Talent?"

"If so it's imparted by the Devil! Sent to baby-sit a warehouse full of grain.... "

"Quadrotriticale."

"Grain," repeated Komack heavily. "We find that you've turned up a lifeform that's so radically different from anything yet found that the Life Science people can't even agree on how to classify it, let alone agree on how it evolved, survived, and Heaven help us, multiplies! And you manage to uncover not only a fiendishly simple Klingon plot but a spy whose deep cover you break using one of the said life-forms, so influencing policy on planets over half a quadrant. Now, ordered to take shore leave, *shore leave* mark you, and on a planet that the rest of the Captains in the Fleet would trade their yeoman, their eye teeth and half their stock of dilithium crystals for, YOU, James T. Kirk, galactic hero, manage to get another infestation on your ship! Don't you want to go to Pilar Majoris?"

Kirk, who had sat wincing at the sarcasm, simply said, "Yes. My people need to have a rest."

"And you don't? So? You didn't say how you got infected."

"I've no proof yet but the best candidate is part of the diplomatic baggage. One Veronica Kenyon. She lined up to disrupt the beam-up from K7 and gave her word that the bag she didn't want Security to search didn't contain any tribbles. It passed all the standard Security screens so Spock let her aboard. Security searched all the cabins and baggage again a few hours later but by then the creature was out and away."

Komack scratched at his chin. "How is Spock holding up?"

"He's... being very Vulcan about it all."

"I take it that he hasn't got round to handing in his resignation yet?"

Kirk cleared his throat. "The possibility that he might try that has been noted. I'm - we're - not going to let him."

"Glad to hear that confirmed. Now about the crew involved in the

concealment?"

"Initial reports from Security have nine people so far, all very young. Seems that someone fed them the idea that if they could capture the creature they could make sure that the shore leave wasn't cancelled, so they tried to catch it on their own. All the best motives, all the wrong actions, and not backed up by too much experience."

"The road to Hell," agreed Komack. "This creature, this Lovely, think you can catch it without getting anyone else hurt?"

Kirk glanced down at the messages on his desk. In the short time it had taken to make the announcement to the crew his officers had provided the initial ideas that he had asked for. "Security says that they've come up with a sort of shield, and they're experimenting for optimum materials now. Spock and Scott have rigged up part of the game tank and are running a prototype maze in it, based on the structural details from the original hull specs. They say that they can herd the thing into a capture zone. McCoy has got remote capture boxes ready so that it can be contained. If it all hangs together we can start the Great Lovely Hunt in about 7 hours."

"All that trouble for a little Lovely."

"The trouble isn't the Lovely, it's the lady who smuggled it aboard, and when I prove that she did, she'll be spending the rest of the quarantine in the Brig!"

"With the others?"

"Yes! Hell! They're only kids."

Komack nodded sympathetically at the misery on Kirk's face. "It always hurts, Jim. We both know because we've both been here before. But the Regs. are there for everyone's protection, and we managed to survive our youth operating inside them. It's a question of judgement and perspective. If those kids aren't mature enough to check out the facts themselves, or to ask for advice from their line chiefs or officers then they simply shouldn't be on a Starship. It's a hard universe, Jim, but the safety of every ship depends on people; and those people didn't trust us to make the right decisions for them. That is not a criticism." The five words were snapped out and Kirk flushed.

"It's not a criticism. It's a universal truth. If they can't trust us, with the weight of history and example and tradition, to give them the lead then there is no place for them in the Fleet. End of lecture. And think on this. Out of 430-some people, only nine failed us. That's a good ratio. Not one to be proud of, it should have been zero, but we're only Humans!"

"I'm not Human, I'm a Starship Captain!"

"I'm a Starfleet Admiral. What's your projected schedule?"

"The decontamination is going to take longer than with the tribbles. This one has waste, and Scotty's already found indications of circuit damage that the youngsters were patching round."

"Dangerous?"

"Second and third level backups, but everything is being monitored heel and toe. Security has a volunteer squad on standby to go in and protect repair crews as and when it becomes necessary. If it all holds together it'll take about six days for the decontamination, then another 28 days going around in circles."

"So we'll call it 35 days. I'll tell the Majorites to expect you then."

"What?"

"The word is given. Enterprise's next shore leave is on Pilar Majoris. Nobody put any time limit on it. I'll have Serenity waiting there to take off your defaulters."

"Serenity?"

"It's a new light cruiser, fresh out of the yards and doing a shakedown cruise. 200 crew, all Vulcans; it's about the only Starship that won't want shore leave there."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Vulcans have excellent taste."

"Some do. Take care of him, Jim."

"I intend to try. Kirk out."

Kirk left his cabin and was heading towards the turbolift en route to the Security Section when a quiet voice announced

"Captain. I must speak with you."

Sheer momentum carried him onwards for 4 more steps before the voice registered and he swung around. He pointed a finger at the small figure who had addressed him.

"You," stated James T. Kirk, rather in the manner of one struck by lightning, "didn't lisp!"

Dermot Kenyon Jnr. sighed heavily. "I don't have to all the time."

The lightning reversed itself and scored another bull's-eye. "Only when your mother is around?"

"Yeah. She thinks it's cute."

"Then why do it?"

Dermot looked up. "Didn't you ever do something that your mother wanted you to do so she'd leave you alone?"

Honesty won the battle over several answers that the Starship Captain's ego thought were more suitable. "Yes, I did. I guess your mother can be a bit difficult to live with sometimes."

"*Sometimes?*" The young boy's voice broke into a squeak. "Only sometimes?" Suddenly anxious, he looked around the deserted corridor. "I'm sorry, but is there somewhere that we can go and talk? There's something I've got to tell you."

"Sure. The Rec. Room?"

"No! I mean... Someone will see us, and tell her, and I'll get into trouble again, like over Mr. Spock." The words came out in little spurts and real fear shone out of his big, blue eyes.

"My cabin," announced Kirk decisively and retraced his steps with Dermot pacing alongside him, visibly wishing that they could run. Kirk kept to a quick march. He'd wanted to find out more about the Kenyons and it looked as if he was going to get all that he wanted to know handed to him, as well as a great



deal that he'd have preferred not to hear. *Ah well. It goes with the territory.*

Once inside the privacy of Kirk's quarters, with the door safely shut, Dermot managed a shaky smile.

"I guess you think I'm being really silly?"

"Far from it. I think that you've got some real problems, and I hope that you've come to me for help. Which is good." Kirk smiled at Dermot. "Because solving problems is what I am especially good at. That's why I'm the Captain. So how about we sit down and you can tell me whatever it is you're bothered about?"

Dermot slipped into the visitor's chair and then hesitated, biting his lips.

"How about you start with whatever the bother was with Mr. Spock?" Kirk offered gently when the silence had dragged on a trifle too long for comfort.

"I didn't mean to bother Mr. Spock. Honest I didn't. I mean it's just that on all the other ships we've been on the Executive Officer oversees the schools programmes; so I took my grade reports to him and asked if he would allow me access to the computers."

Kirk nodded encouragingly. It was part of the Exec's duties on any ship, although Spock had rarely been called upon to act in that capacity.

"I can't imagine that Spock would have complained to your parents about that?"

"Oh he didn't," Dermot assured him earnestly. "He's setting me some really interesting lessons, and he explains things so clearly I hardly ever have to ask him to tell me again, and when he does he never gets angry or tells me I'm stupid 'cos I didn't understand first time."

"So what was the problem?"

In a 'need you ask' tone Dermot said, "Mother. She doesn't like him. She found us playing chess in the Officers' Lounge and she pretended to be all apologetic to him, saying how he wasn't to let me bother him, or make a nuisance of myself about the ship. If she knew that he was tutoring me she'd be so angry! I think that she's been making trouble for him."

The elusive memory that had been plaguing Kirk suddenly popped into focus, and he closed his eyes briefly, cursing again at yet more repercussions from his one night of drunken folly.

"I think that she could well have been trying to do just that, but I think she's not going to find it quite so easy from now on."

"Oh! You mean... You do already know about Galadriel?" The relief was as obvious as the fear had been.

"Galadriel? Who's Galadriel?"

"You didn't mean Galadriel?"

Cautiously Kirk ventured. "Was it about Galadriel that you wanted to talk to me?"

"Well, yes, in a way."

"Go ahead," invited Kirk.

"Huh, I wasn't snooping, or being nosy. Honest I wasn't. It was just that they were arguing and their voices carried."

It was obvious to Kirk that whatever it was that Dermot was trying to talk about was upsetting him. As the odds were that his mother was at the bottom of it, and Dermot was trying to pluck up courage to say something that he expected to trigger off her anger at him, there seemed no earthly use in putting any pressure on the child. Consciously relaxing back in his chair Kirk said soothingly, "I'm sure that nobody would think that, if 'they' were arguing loudly."

Relieved to find such ready acceptance of his word Dermot continued. "They were really yelling at each other. I couldn't understand most of what Mr. Scott was saying but Dr. McCoy was quite clear. They were blaming each other for getting Mr. Spock into trouble again. Is he in trouble?"

"Not with me. At least no more than usual. You see, he overworks; and because that can be bad for anyone, I have to try to stop him. Of course Spock, being a Vulcan, often thinks that he's done something wrong when I, as a Human, don't think so. It's a question of how we look at life, and trying to understand how each other does."

"Good. I like Mr. Spock. He's fun."

"I think so too," agreed Kirk solemnly.

"Does he teach you stuff about Maths and Computers?"

"He tries," said Kirk dryly, "but I'm not such a good student."

"I am," said Dermot shyly. "Only Mother doesn't like that too much either."

"Been faking bad grades, huh?"

"Middling average. It stops her giving Dad grief."

*Nothing ventured*, thought Kirk. "It seems to me that your mother doesn't get on too well with a lot of people."

"It depends. If they're interesting or unusual or useful, or she can have fun playing with them, then she's okay until she gets bored. She's really mad at you though."

"Why?"

"Because you've ignored her. You don't pay her compliments, or invite her to dinner or even talk to her unless you meet by accident and then it's obvious that you're only being polite. She hates not getting her own way. She thought that you'd date her."

"I don't date married ladies, and she can't be angry at Spock because he's ignoring her...?"

"No. I think she's mad at Mr. Spock because of Galadriel, only I don't really see how she can be 'cos I'm certain that he wouldn't have helped her sneak Galadriel aboard."

The lightning made a surprise attack. "Is Galadriel, by any chance, a Lovely?"

"Yes. When I heard the announcement you made, about the creature that's running loose, I wondered if it could be Galadriel. I'm afraid that Mother's... well..."

"Where did she get the Lovely - er, Galadriel, from."

"A bunch of scientists. They were going home and they had to find homes for their pets. Mother said that she wanted Galadriel. Dad tried to stop her 'cos he said..." The youngster's brow furrowed as he tried to remember one out of many arguments. "That it wasn't right or fair to split up a pair." Dermot sketched a sad smile and shrugged. "When Mother wants something, 'right' and 'fair' don't matter. Dad gave in. Mother has *difficult* down to a fine art."

"I'm beginning to appreciate that. You think that she sneaked Galadriel aboard?"

"Yeah. I even figured out how."

"How?"

"Easy. In the bag that she wouldn't let anyone search. She promised that there weren't any tribbles in there. Well, Mr. Spock was bound to remember that, wasn't he? When we got to our cabin she decided to sleep alone, so I moved in with Dad. It's not unusual, but if she was sharing with Dad she wouldn't have been able to let Galadriel out of the bag 'cos Dad would have told on her. And you'd already done a full decontamination of Enterprise to get rid of the tribbles so whatever is loose could only have come aboard after... Is it Galadriel?"

"We found some samples of hair on one of the crew who was attacked. Mr. Spock says that we have a Lovely."

"Attacked?"

"Yes. I'm afraid that Galadriel has decided that the access tunnels are her territory and that we are predators. She's only defending herself."

"So she was pregnant. I thought that she was."

"You thought?" Kirk wondered why he was so surprised.

"I read up about Lovelies. I knew Mother wouldn't and someone had to make sure that she got the correct diet and environment. I couldn't do much about making Mother keep her in amongst plants and stuff but I sneaked in fresh leaves and some mineral supplements. That's when I saw her plucking at her fur."

"Is that important?"

"It's a sign that the Lovely is nearly to full term. The female plucks out the soft fur from her tummy and lines the drey with it. During pregnancy the fur grows much longer and thicker so that there's plenty of it for the lining. Protecting a territory is another sign. I guess that she's had babies by now." Dermot looked very young.

"Yes, and when we capture her - Yes, we do intend to try to capture her, not kill her - we'll make sure that she isn't separated from them and that she's given a proper place to live in."

"I knew you'd understand. You said that we'd have to stay in quarantine?"

"Do you mind?"

Dermot shrugged again, very much in the manner of one quite accustomed to missing out on promised treats, and pushed the over-long fringe from his eyes. "We have to stay aboard, don't we?"

"Everyone does."

"Good."

The lightning dinked Kirk for the fourth time. "Want some more lessons from Spock?"

"Yeah."

The child smiled at Kirk. It was quite clear that even given the choice between a holiday on Pilar Majoris and lessons with Spock, Dermot had chosen Spock. That, and the fact that he'd very bravely come to talk to Kirk about his mother, greatly raised Kirk's opinion of him.

"He is going to be a bit busy for the next week or so. We do have to do a full decontamination and Galadriel is not a tribble. But after that we'll be going back to cruising about very slowly; I'll talk to Spock." Kirk promised.

"Oh good. Could you ask him to teach me about Fractile Equations, please?"

Having assured Dermot that he'd pass the message on, Kirk escorted him to the door. An anxious little hand tugged gently at his.

"You won't tell Mother it was me, will you?"

"Was it any secret that she had a Lovely?"

"No."

"Were there any other Lovelys on K7?"

"Only the other one that the scientists had, but the people who took that one left soon after they did."

"So any of the other diplomats could have told me, or any of the crew, that she had a Lovely."

"Thank you."

Dermot peered out into the corridor, checking that it was clear, then bolted away. Muttering to himself, Kirk again left his quarters to see how Spock and Scott were getting on setting up the game tank for the Lovely hunt. This time he made it to the lift without interruption. "Engineering," he said and sighed. He'd soon have enough evidence to lock Mrs. Kenyon in the Brig; but the junior crew who'd listened to her rumours would be in there too, and he wouldn't put it beyond the woman to amuse herself by manipulating them for the 35 days it was going to take to Pilar Majoris. Perhaps he should just confine her to her quarters. But that would leave Dermots Senior and Junior vulnerable. He still hadn't decided what to do when the lift stopped and he exited to find Baillie showing Spock and Scott an intriguing piece of apparatus.

"What is that?"

Baillie blushed slightly. "It's a prototype portable shield."

Kirk eyed the metal spokes, took it from Baillie and tilted it up over his head. "This is an umbrella."

Baillie's blush deepened. "It's based on that design. There are more

spokes, and they're stronger. The transparent material should be strong enough to resist the teeth and claws of the Lovely. We might even be able to stun her."

Scott interrupted. "I dinnae think that ye've considered that whoever fires a phaser in yon tunnels is going tae get hit by the echoes of the blast. Getting an unconscious man out of there willna' be easy!"

"Maybe we won't stun her," conceded Baillie.

Kirk folded the umbrella and handed it back to Baillie. "Will she be able to get around the... er... shield?"

"Not if it's open. Scotty has confirmed that all the access tunnels have the same diameter, to within .5 of a centimetre, so this - " he waved the umbrella gently - "can block it most effectively. We're working on an impact sensitive cap for the end of each spoke, to fill the gaps, and a method of erecting it automatically and fast."

Kirk rubbed his hands together. "That all seems in order. Now how is this maze coming along?" He smiled at Scott and Spock.

His feeling of confidence evaporated when he got a good look at the complex interweaving of tunnels rotating in the game tank. "Why is it so complicated?" he muttered.

"The tunnels were designed to support the large cargo holds. Such an area, without bracing, is a liability to the stress tolerances of ships' manoeuvrability," began Spock.

"And putting the bracing inside the holds would cut down the storage areas so they put the bracings around the holds and ran any ducting through inside them," continued Kirk.

"An elegant solution," commented Spock.

"I'll just bet a Vulcan thought of it."

"Aye," said Scott. "How did you know?"

"It had to be either a Vulcan or a mad Scot. Nobody else would have gone to all the trouble of making the tunnels all the same size!"

Scotty and Baillie chuckled at the mild joke.

"So. How are you going to control the herders in that 3-D mess?"

Spock's response was to lay a small device on the desk. "This is a tracer. It is somewhat crude but easy to manufacture and operates using sonics. Each of the 'herders' will be issued with one, each being set to a slightly different frequency to enable the computer to plot that position within the matrix." Spock swallowed. "It will also serve as added protection by forcing the Lovely away from the source of the noise. I have targeted the frequencies which will repel it."

"Thanks," muttered Baillie.

Spock nodded. "Each herder will be instructed when and where to crawl and when to erect a shield. It should be a relatively simple matter to encourage the Lovely into a position where the capture boxes provided by Doctor McCoy can be triggered."

"So noted and approved. How long to get sufficient umbre... shields and tracers ready, Scotty?"

"It'll be about 4 hours. Those tracers require precise tuning and the material for the shields has to be specially cooked."

"The herders? Have you got them picked out?"

Baillie grinned. "We had plenty of volunteers. All the crew in the Brig did too."

"No," stated Kirk firmly.

"Didn't think so. Mr. Spock tells me he'll need 42 herders, so I've got them and a few extras as standbys. Briefing on duties will be 60 minutes before the projected start time."

"Thank you, gentlemen."

Scott and Baillie left at the dismissal and Kirk and Spock eyed each other warily. Kirk flopped down into the chair beside Spock's.

"Going to tell me about it?"

"I am... concerned," admitted Spock.

"About what?"

"What may be found in the access ways."

"What in particular?" Kirk asked gently. He knew that Spock would eventually get to the point but sometimes the process was wearing on the nerves.

"The offspring. I do not believe that they will be alive."

"Oh. That's why you set on the sonic device. You think that they're beyond harm?"

"Yes. Also that the Lovely will not react sanely to our intrusion."

"Sanely? You... you think that the Lovely is insane?" Kirk felt a trifle foolish discussing the mental state of an animal with his First Officer.

"Without more data to support the theory I cannot draw any firm conclusions, but the possibility does exist."

"You're just trying to let me have all the facts. What if I told you that I've had it confirmed that Mrs. Kenyon did have a Lovely on K7. That it was one of a pair, that Mrs. Kenyon wasn't too precise about its board and lodging and that in all probability it did come aboard stuffed into that carry-all she made the fuss over."

"It would tend to firm the probabilities that the offspring did not long survive and that the Lovely is no longer operating within behaviour normal for her species."

"She'll continue to guard the drey as if her young were still alive?"

"Perhaps more fiercely than you would expect her to do. If events have happened as we suspect, in a short space of time she has been removed from an environment that she knew, has been separated from her mate, treated, perhaps not badly but incorrectly, then has escaped into the cold bareness of the access tunnels. Any attempt to remove her from the territory she has established there will be most strongly resisted. All of the changes which have occurred have led to a degradation in her circumstances; even the birth of her young would not have been without trauma and so would be additional damage."

"I could cheerfully ring Mrs. Veronica Kenyon's beautiful neck."

Spock tilted his head, a bird-like brightness burning briefly in his eyes. "But think of how many forms you would have to fill in if you did so."

Kirk dissolved into startled laughter. "You're right. She isn't worth the effort. I had meant to hold her in the Brig, but the youngsters are all in there and she could do quite a bit of verbal damage before we get to Pilar Majoris."

The tilt straightened and an eyebrow went into hiding under Spock's fringe. "We are still going to Pilar Majoris?"

"Yes. Starfleet has decreed that that is where our next shore leave is to be spent, so that is where we will be going. So I still get to walk on that beach and you still get the chance to do some marathon sun-bathing. I'm going to tell the crew after we finish the decontamination." Kirk stretched mightily, and bit back a yawn.

"I'm going to confine Mrs. Kenyon to her quarters. A bit rough on her husband and kid but if it gets too bad for them they can always go bunk in the Rec. Room. At least they can walk away from this."

Spock pursed his lips briefly. "From what I have read of Dermot Kenyon he will be too honourable to 'walk away'."

"A problem that we will have to find a solution for as the occasion presents itself. We have other priorities. Will the maze be ready?"

"Affirmative. I will have the display moved down to Engineering and in place ready for the briefing."

"Fine. Can you take Veronica Kenyon's I.D. out of the computer files? That way she won't be able to move about the ship."

"The door to her quarters can be set to ignore her," offered Spock.

"I'd rather play safe on this one. If she can't get the computer to talk to her, she can't do much damage to it or use it to harm anyone else; she won't be able to get into anywhere else either. I'm sure that woman has a vicious streak; from what young Dermot has told me she's got a nasty temper. I imagine you've drawn the same conclusions from what he let slip during those tutoring sessions."

"Mr. Kenyon gave his permission. He has attempted to protect his son, but is somewhat over-matched."

"Beautiful, clever... what a waste. If there's nothing else I can do here, I'll go and yell at the Kenyons some and then take a nap. I'm kinda overdue."

"Yes, you are."

The dry confirmation brought a bounce to Kirk's steps as he left the room. He and Spock had had a conversation! They had managed to communicate effectively without Kirk offending Spock back into injured silence, and despite the seriousness of the situation had even managed some gentle teasing. Buoyed up by the lessening of tension Kirk made his way down to the quarters assigned to the Kenyons and leaned on the door chime.

Dermot Kenyon keyed the door open and found himself facing a Captain wearing a very official looking frown.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"There certainly is, Mr. Kenyon. Is your wife here?"

"Yes. Please come in."

Either Dermot Snr. was the best actor he had ever met in his life or he had no idea that his wife had been the cause of all the trouble. The tired blue eyes had been quite without any trace of guilt, or concern. They were just very tired. Veronica was laid out on the couch, almost posed, a display of physical attributes designed by Eros to raise a man's blood pressure. As Kirk now knew that Dermot Snr. was sharing a room with his son and not his wife Kirk decided that life with Veronica was a ripe slice of Hell at the moment, and that he was about to add to the load. The chances were very good that Veronica had used people's concern for her husband and son to escape censure in the past, but she'd never tied up a Starship for 53 days before. Kirk hung onto his temper.

"Why, Captain, what a pleasant surprise. Please sit down." Veronica cooed out the words, swung her legs to the ground, affording both Kirk and her husband an excellent view of their long length, and then patted the seat next to her invitingly.

"No, thank you. Whilst you were on K7 did you have any pets?" Kirk shot the question out harshly.

All he got for his pains was a prettily arched eyebrow and, "Pets, Captain?"

"Yes, Mrs. Kenyon. Pets."

Veronica looked at her husband. "Did we have any pets, dearest?" She didn't quite flutter her eyelashes.

"I was not asking Mr. Kenyon. I was asking you."

"I do not like your tone, or your attitude. I refuse to be bullied. Please leave." Veronica tossed her head and turned away.

"Willingly and gladly. Before I do it is my duty to inform you that I have enough evidence to believe that you have knowingly contravened a variety of Federation Laws and Starfleet regulations concerning the illegal transportation of animals; that you have broken several more relating to the laws concerning quarantine and have violated many others on such subjects as health and safety, endangering others by wilful neglect and slander. There will be a full hearing, taken under truth verifier, to determine your innocence or guilt in these and any other matters that may have not yet become known to me. Until such time as you can be formally handed over to the requisite authorities, by the powers invested in me by Starfleet under the terms of the Federation Charter, I am deeming that you are not responsible for the consequences of your actions and I am, therefore, placing you in confinement for the safety of my ship."

Dermot Kenyon's jaw dropped in blank surprise.

"Ridiculous!" stormed Veronica Kenyon. "Utterly contemptible! Get out."

Veronica flounced magnificently to the door, obviously determined to stand in the doorway and be seen to throw a Starship Captain out of her quarters. The expression of total disbelief when she bounced off the closed doorway pulled a snort of smothered amusement from her husband.

"Taken her I.D. out of the computer?" he asked.

"Yes. I was going to put her in the Brig. Unfortunately it's a little crowded down there at the moment."



"Crowded?"

"She managed to con some of the younger members of my crew into covering up the smuggling of an animal aboard."

"Galadriel!" Dermot sighed, and shook his head apologetically. "I should have known she'd do something daft like this. She was so angry when the orders to ship out came through and then she calmed down so fast. I should have realised. I'm sorry."

"Don't you dare apologise to him! This... this jumped-up, tin-pot little dictator with delusions of godhood!"

Kirk spared her one long, measured look then turned back to Dermot Snr. "As I have been trying to explain to the members of my crew when they've been apologising to me for not realising that some of the others had been acting stupidly, you're not responsible for anyone else's actions or activities, only your own. Good night, Mr. Kenyon."

As the door whisked shut behind him he realised again that the sound-proofing on Enterprise was not adequate. The unmistakable sound of raised voices, followed by the shattering of something, followed him down the corridor. As he settled himself down to nap he made two mental notes. One was to ask McCoy if there was anything they could do to get Dermot Jnr. away from his mother's baleful influence; the other was to ask Spock if he wanted the soundproofing around his quarters increased.

The assortment of clothing being worn by Baillie's chosen herders led Kirk to have severe difficulty during the briefing. The colourful variety of protective gear, elbow and knee-pads, helmets and gloves coupled with the slightly frenetic air of the herders could have left an outsider wondering whether he was seeing a StarFleet briefing or the planning session of a carnival. Spock managed to maintain a superbly detached indifference to the mishmash of colours and styles listening attentively to his concise and thorough plan, but Kirk was totally unable to maintain anything except a slightly too wide grin.

As the herders filed out to take up their positions he caught sight of McCoy and Baillie exchanging grins and followed Spock to the games tank, trying to hold back his giggles until the two officers had left. Spock looked warily at him.

"Have I done or said something inappropriate, sir?"

"It wasn't you, Spock. The rainbow effect was for my benefit."

"I did notice an unusual diversity of styles."

"That's McCoy and Baillie telling me, in their normal, very unsubtle way, that the crew of Enterprise is behind us 100%. They don't want me to fall into a black depression over the kids in the Brig."

"They failed in their duty by choice. My failing was through stupidity."

One part of Kirk yipped that Spock was TALKING to him, the other part was groaning that the Vulcan picked the damned weirdest times to hold a serious conversation.

"I have never thought that you have failed at anything through stupidity, Spock."

"Allowing the Doctor and Engineer Scott to carry out their practical joke on the Klingons betrayed a severe lack of judgement. I made a stupid error."

"They came to you with a plan that they said was a joke. As a Vulcan I don't expect that you've ever had an opportunity to play a joke on anyone. I seem to recall a conversation about girls' pig-tails and ink-wells?"

Spock nodded.

"As senior officers, ones that Starfleet has decreed to be responsible and capable, I would expect you to trust their judgement in matters of which you had no first-hand knowledge. Like ingrowing toenails, or practical jokes. It was perfectly right of you to accept their judgement in this matter. As I recall, you did have reservations about the plan and you were going to check it out with me?"

"You were not available for consultation." The tone was muffled, Spock clearly not wanting to remind Kirk of precisely why he hadn't asked about the joke.

"I was drunk. Now *that* was stupid. I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me. I'm sorry I let you down."

"You did not. I am the one who betrayed your trust. I let your officers get into a situation that could have had most serious consequences. I... I cannot be certain that it will not happen again. If you wish me to request a transfer...?"

"No. Absolutely not! Is that what all this has been about? You've been nerving yourself up to offer to leave?"

Spock looked confused. "I did not protect you or the people aboard. I allowed you to be placed in a position which could have led to your court martial. I failed in my duty. I thought that you would require me to go."

"Scotty and McCoy are big boys now. They make their own mistakes and they take their own lumps. I appreciate that you do a wonderful job in keeping us out of trouble, pulling rabbits out of the hat in the nick of time, but you can't always be there to look after us. Sometimes we just have to look after ourselves."

"It is part of my duties as First Officer to see to the welfare of the crew. It is my duty to 'be there' for you all."

"It's part of my duty too. So let's say that your unfortunate error of misplaced faith occurred at the same time as my drunken act of folly and that they cancel each other out. I most definitely do not want you to leave Enterprise; and neither does Starfleet. I've already had warnings from several senior officers that you'd try to leave."

That effectively ended all of Spock's arguments.

"As far as I can tell the only things we've learnt from all this is that Scotty and McCoy have rotten senses of humour; that I shouldn't get drunk; and that you need more practice with practical jokes and humour."

Spock's wide-eyed stare met with a sweet grin.

"Just joking."

The air of dignity Spock drew around himself was palpable and he turned back to the tank, concentrating on the task in hand and trying to ignore Kirk's moist breath on his neck and face as the Captain leaned on the back of Spock's

chair and peered at the monitor.

The 3-D cube showed a schematic of the access ways as a network of transparent silver-grey tubing. At Spock's crisply delivered signal to "Commence," little yellow blobs began to creep along the tubes from the red-marked access ports. As the herders completed checking sections of the tunnels they placed opened shields in position and the colouring of the schematic changed from silver-grey to green-yellow.

"No sign of the nest yet?" breathed Kirk after what seemed an age, unwilling to distract Spock from his flow of commands.

"Negative. A plentiful number of food stores and boundary markers increasing in concentration in this area." A blue rod indicated a section of tunnels. "It would be logical to assume that the nest is positioned nearest the largest of the stores."

He made another notation on the board before him as Kirk very gently tapped the ear-piece. "How's the language?"

"Some of the terms in use I am not familiar with. However none of the personnel are as creative as you, or as loud as Mr. Scott."

"Do they know you're listening in?"

"I do not believe that they have arrived at that conclusion, but as I am issuing instructions, the fact that the information flow is two-way should be obvious."

"If you want to make a note of anything you don't understand, I'll try to translate later."

Spock spared him an eyebrow. "Your offer is appreciated."

Kirk watched in silence as more shields bloomed into place and more of the maze was cleared. Finally Spock straightened. "The Lovely has been sighted." The blue rod flicked in. "Just there."

"All personnel hold position. I repeat, hold position." Spock switched to the external speaker so that Kirk could hear.

"\*\*\*\*\* \*\* \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*," said one voice heatedly.

"Right. You just keep that shield up. \*\*\*\*\*! Look at the size of those teeth!" said a second.

"I am looking," said the first.

Two red lights had blazed near to Spock's indicator and he switched to an enhanced view of the sector. Five tunnels met at that point, four horizontal, the other as near vertical as made no difference. Spock spoke rapidly, directing another herder through the maze to block the vertical tunnel.

"Yeoman King, Yeoman Patel. Hold your position."

Two muttered, "Yes sirs," overlapped.

"I have directed Yeoman Mattius to descend into the vertical shaft and place a shield there. If possible force the Lovely into the right-hand unshielded tunnel, but do not expose yourselves."

"We could try and grab her," offered the second voice.

"Or she could take the opportunity to try and grab you," countered Spock. "Do not attempt it, Yeoman Patel."

"No sir. Thank you, sir," said the young voice fervently.

Kirk pointed to the flickering red light that was slowly and purposefully edging its way down the shaft. "How's she doing that?"

"I do not know."

"Hope she's on the top side of the shield," said a voice behind them.

"Hi, Bones. Want something?"

"All the traps are ready and I've got people at all of them so I thought I'd look in here. Who's the loony in the shaft?"

"Yeoman Mattius," replied Kirk "One of Baillie's new security people. We're going to have to talk to that young woman."

"\*\*\*\*\*!" announced the speaker suddenly.

"Status?" snapped Spock.

"King here. I think what I thought was another food pile is the nest. I tried to edge forward to get a look and she whipped back into the tunnel and tried to get me. She is fast." The young voice had a decided tremor.

"I trust that you were faster?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is Kirk. Stay that way, Mister. I don't want injured heroes. It upsets Dr. McCoy."

McCoy waved a finger under Kirk's nose as multiple chuckles and snorts sounded from the speaker together with a strong, "I wouldn't want to upset Dr. McCoy, I like my blood just where it is."

"Patel. I think she's heard Matty coming down the shaft. She's backing off. \*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*! Sorry, sir. She went down the left tunnel."

"Noted. Raise shields in both tunnel mouths so that she cannot return. All personnel. Resume as instructed. Maintain extreme caution."

Five red shields appeared in the junction then Spock switched back to the matrix. All the yellow dots had started to move again.

"Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Mr. King."

"It is the nest. I think the babies are dead."

Spock closed his eyes wearily. Kirk gripped his shoulder. "That was expected. Is the nest detachable?"

"Yes. I think so, but it's made of lots of little... \*\*\*\*\*! These are chewed up circuit boards!"

"Also expected. Bring out all the pieces that you can. Mr. Patel, Mr. Mattius, please continue down the right and left tunnels. Maintain your position relative to the other personnel. Mr. King, use exit D. Do you know

the way?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Scott will be waiting there to meet you. Leave your shields in place behind you. There is no way that the Lovely can reach you via the tunnel systems."

"On my way."

"Where did the circuit boards come from?" asked McCoy unhappily.

"That is what Mr. Scott will have to determine," said Spock and bent back over the matrix, pulling free of Kirk's hand. McCoy grimaced at Kirk, who stuck his tongue out. Spock cut out the external speaker and held a rapid conversation with Scott while still directing the slow progress of the herders.

Light and rapid footsteps sounded in the corridor, then Dermot Jnr. bounced into the room.

"Captain! Captain!!"

Dermot stopped his headlong rush by bowling straight into Kirk.

"Hey there. What's wrong?"

"She got out! She tricked me!" Huge tears were rolling down Dermot's face.

"Your mother?"

"Yeah. She had another big fight with Dad, and he walked out. Then she said she was hungry and that I was to get her breakfast, but when the door opened to me she shoved me out of the way and ran off. I tried to follow her but she ducked into a turbo lift behind some people. I'm sorry."

"Damn. S'okay. It's not your fault. Just another stupid decision by me."

"She could be anywhere," commented McCoy as Spock said, loudly and urgently, "Attention Exit F. Check that the access cover is in place. The indicator has ceased to function."

"Ceased?" said Kirk. "You said that they're foolproof!"

"Unfortunately, fools are notoriously inventive," replied Spock, his eyes fixed on the display. "There is no logical reason for the cover to have malfunctioned." He flipped to the external speaker. "Proceed, Mr. Macnamee."

"The cover at Exit F is in pieces. I've put a grating over the portal in its place. The control panel's been ripped off. It's not a malfunction."

"Noted. Please remain there and ensure that the cover stays in place."

"Mother," said a disgusted voice. "It has to be Mother."

Spock and Kirk exchanged a long look then Spock's fingers tapped rapidly over the Comms. panel.

"Security. Be on the lookout for Mrs. Veronica Kenyon. She is believed to be on the Engineering Decks and to be removing the covers from the access points to the lower hull access ways." He switched channels again. "All personnel in the access ways. Hold your position. I repeat, hold your position."

"Of all the stupid things to do. What can she hope - " began Kirk.

"Shield on Exit G has failed," interrupted Spock as another red indicator failed.

"C'mon Bones. That's near here." Kirk stampeded out of the doorway, followed by McCoy and Dermot. Spock half rose to follow them then sat down to resume his task.

"All personnel. Resume your progress. Proceed with caution." His voice did not betray the extreme vexation that he felt but his expression did change for a fleeting instant when Kirk called in a few minutes later.

"Spock. We were too late. Galadriel's out and away. We saw her disappearing down the corridor. Sound Intruder Alert."

"Acknowledged." Spock switched to shipwide. "Intruder Alert. Intruder Alert. This is not a drill. The Lovely has evaded containment and is loose. Be advised, do not approach. Set phasers to heavy stun. Advise Security immediately of any sighting."

As the sirens started whooping, re-enforcing his message, Spock switched back to the channels being used by the herders. "Your attention please. The Lovely has been seen outside the area sealed for this search. Continue placing the shields as directed. They are necessary to prevent further contamination."

He listened to the burst of chatter that answered his announcements. The herders had heard both and the opinions now being voiced were mostly directed to various deities, calling down their wrath on the fool that had let the Lovely get away. Spock nodded understandingly. He knew that he would not have relished crawling along the access tunnels with the probability of the Lovely lurking around the next bend. The removal of the threat, for Kirk had thoughtfully replaced shield G, had done much to lighten the tone of the comments. The herders were crawling faster too.

As soon as all the shields were in place and the last of the herders had been helped from the tunnels, Spock checked with Baillie that the normal procedures for an Intruder Alert were being enforced.

"Everyone's taking this seriously," Baillie assured him. "I don't think there's a person aboard who didn't get a look at that schematic of the teeth. They feel a bit silly, but they are all paired up, the barriers are down and tight, and nobody has yet reported seeing the thing since the Captain did."

"Where is the Captain now?"

"He's at Exit D. Mr. Scott would very much like to consult you on the jigsaw that he's got down here. If you don't mind me saying so, sir, I think that the Captain could use your company."

Spock's mouth twitched briefly. "I do not mind in the least, Mr. Baillie. I shall join him immediately. Spock out."

Kirk pounded down the corridor, trying to be as quiet as he could so as not to alert Veronica Kenyon, or anyone else, to his presence. As he burst round the corner he found himself facing a snarling, bristling, blue fur-ball. Instinct jerked him back and away as the creature leapt at him and he rolled, hearing quite clearly as he did so Spock calmly describing the efficiency with which the Lovely could bite through a human neck. He rose to a crouch, the Lovely a spitting fury on the floor in front of him. The clatter of McCoy's arrival startled the creature and with a final hiss it turned away, unwilling to

take on two Humans.

McCoy's, "My God!" was as sincere as his immediate, "You hurt, Jim?"

Kirk straightened slowly, surprised to find that he was trembling slightly. "No. Just shock."

"That I can believe!" McCoy grabbed Kirk's arm, helping him upright. "Just take a few deep breaths. It's only the adrenalin boosting your heart rate."

"Remind me to arrange a bonus for those herders in the tunnels."

Kirk walked unsteadily to the wall-comm, drew a deep breath and announced. "Spock. We were too late. Galadriel's out and away. We saw her disappearing down the corridor. Sound Intruder Alert."

"Acknowledged." An instant later Spock's voice was echoing about them, followed by the whooping of the Intruder Alert signal. Dermot Jnr. caught up with them and announced,

"Your face is bleeding."

Kirk dabbed at what he thought was a bead of sweat and looked at his reddened fingers in astonishment. "By all that's unholy. She got me!"

"It's just a dink. Here." McCoy planted a small seal over the wound. "When this is all over remember to come down to Sickbay so I can clean it out properly."

"Thanks. C'mon." He pointed at Dermot. "You stick with us. I'm not risking anyone alone with that thing running loose." He looked up as two Security Guards and an Engineer joined them. "Get a shield into that access way so that she can't get back into the tunnels, then stay here and make sure that the shield does too."

He stormed off down the corridor, relieved to find that the next two shields were in place, with personnel at each alertly watching the corridors. Another Security Guard, this one dressed for crawling around in the tunnels, trotted up to him.

"Yeoman King?"

"Captain. Mr. Baillie's compliments, sir, and could you join him and Mr. Scott at Exit D. They, uh, they caught Mrs Kenyon trying to dismantle one of the covers. She isn't being polite."

Kirk bowed to the inevitable. "Come along, gentlemen. You brought the nest out?"

"Just about all of it. It didn't hold together too well, and I shed a few bits on the way."

"How much of it was circuit board?"

"All the outside." King sketched an area in front of him with both arms; Kirk's heart sank as he took in the dimensions. "The inside was blue fur, then there was a layer of chewed up plates and crockery, then the rest of it was broken bits of boards all sticking out, like a protective layer. To stop other animals getting at the babies?"

Kirk looked down at Dermot, remembering that the boy had read up on the behaviour of Lovelys.

"That's the way the diagrams showed the drey is normally built, only they use twigs and thorny branches. Were the babies dead?"

King looked at Kirk for permission before he said. "Yes. They were all dead."

Dermot sniffed firmly. "I thought they would be. I told Mother so. She laughed and said 'So what? It's just a stupid animal.' I don't understand her." The statement was made with determined puzzlement.

"I'm glad to hear it," said McCoy, taking hold of Dermot's hand firmly. "If you had been able to understand a point of view that warped I'd have had some serious doubts about you. You stick with me, and we'll let the Captain deal with your mother."

He was amused when Dermot meekly nodded. "The Captain's very good at solving problems."

"Who told you that?"

"He did!"

"Oh! Did he also say that the Captain is always right?"

"No, Mr. Spock said that; except for when he's wrong, that is."

Yeoman King, a delighted spectator to the interchange of opinions, led the way into the room that contained the point designated as Exit D. The room was really a broadening of the corridor with a secondary level balcony along one side. One long bench, interrupted by ladders to the balcony, ran along the whole length of the room. It was littered with pieces of board. A pile of mangled plates, through which could be seen wisps of blue fur, had been placed on a table by itself just by the doorway Kirk and his little party used. Veronica Kenyon, flanked by two dishevelled Security Guards, was standing by the door at the far end of the room, verbally laying into the character, heritage, supposed parentage and probable fate of all present with a fine display linguistic ability. All present were ignoring her.

Scott looked up as Kirk entered and hurried over.

"It's as we thought. The wee thing's been scavenging for bits an' pieces from all over. We've identified some of the boards. They're from part of the monitoring system for the sensors. Ah've sent some of ma lads in tae eyeball the damage." As Kirk's expression registered he continued, "Well, it's about the only place we know that the poor wee thing isna'."

"True. The other bits?" Kirk looked at the amazing collection being pawed at by a selection of intent technicians.

"Could be from any one of a hundred different places. If Ah could borrow Mr. Spock tae help me, we might be able tae narrow down the field a bit more rapidly."

"As soon as he's finished flushing the herders out of the access ways, I'll get him to join us. Mr. Baillie?"

"I'll pass the word on."

Kirk walked over to Veronica Kenyon who glared at him. He ignored her and noted several deep scratches on one guard's face, and the ruined tunic of the other.

"You two caught her?"



Ruined tunic spoke up. "We did. She'd taken the cover out at K, and was smashing it up when we arrived. The engineers put a shield over the hole. She was in the mood to object, sir. The lady is no lady."

"Utter rubbish. I'd found the shield on the floor and had picked it up to put it back when these two pea-brained oafs jumped me. I demand an immediate apology." She tried to tug her arm free but the guard with the scratches maintained a tight grip. He didn't want to get clawed again.

"You have it. I apologise unreservedly."

At the look of triumph Kirk continued smoothly.

"I mistook you for a reasonable Human being. It's obvious that I was totally and utterly wrong! As you can't even accept the imposing of closed quarters confinement, I have no option but to have you taken to the Brig, and confined there."

Thunderstruck Veronica started to bluster. "You can't do that! I'm a diplomat."

"That's okay. I've put diplomats in the Brig before," Kirk assured her.

"I'm a mother. Who's going to look after my baby?"

It was a trump card, obviously successful in the past, but Kirk had guessed that it would be played and had his answer ready. He looked over his shoulder to where McCoy was peering into the nest, and Dermot, standing beside him, was determinedly not doing so. "Dr. McCoy seems to have the matter in hand, and Dermot does have a father. Bones?" He raised his voice.

"Coming."

Kirk turned back to Veronica thinking as he did so that he'd never seen a woman looking so spectacularly beautiful and so angry at one and the same time.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Kenyon. I'm sorry that no-one's been able to pin anything on you in the past. I'm sorry for all the pain you've been able to inflict and have got away with. Most of all I'm sorry for you. Because you're finished. Get her out of here."

The two guards grabbed Mrs. Kenyon as she lunged at their Captain. His attention finally distracted from the contents of the nest, McCoy moved away from it, Dermot following him closely, glad to leave its vicinity, even if it was to move closer to his mother. A high-pitched, furious hiss jerked his attention back to the nest. Unnoticed, Galadriel had dropped down from the balcony, and was now on the table, crouched over the nest, still trying to protect her long-dead young from the beings that she believed could harm them.

Dermot's gasp and McCoy's "No!" sounded simultaneously as McCoy instinctively stepped forwards, dragging Dermot back and turning to shelter the boy as the Lovely leapt at them - to land instead on Spock whose reactions, faster than any Human's, had propelled him from the doorway he had just entered as the Lovely attacked.

As Kirk turned he saw McCoy hurtling backwards, shoved aside by Spock, and taking Dermot with him away from immediate danger. And Spock, landing and rolling, desperately trying to prevent the Lovely from getting a firm grip on any portion of his anatomy.

Kirk ran forward to help Spock, hurdled McCoy and Dermot as they tried to untangle themselves and then saw that Spock's attempts to avoid the Lovely's attack had wedged the two of them against the wall under the bench. What Kirk

did next was automatic. In one continuous movement, still closing the gap between them, he drew his personal phaser and fired it at the being who was his dearest friend.

Spock shuddered once and then lay still in a boneless huddle, Galadriel spread across his back, her jaws firmly buried in his neck, little trickles of green oozing from around them contrasting horribly with the blue fur and the blue of Spock's tunic.

Veronica's peals of delighted laughter unfroze the members of the tableau from their shock. Gulping down saliva Kirk staggered to the wall and hit the Comms. panel. Keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Spock, and McCoy who was now crouched beside him examining him with total concentration, Kirk yelled, "Bridge."

"Bridge. Sulu here."

"Give me shipwide."

"Aye, sir. You have shipwide."

"All hands. This is the Captain. The Lovely has been captured. Secure from Intruder Alert. Maintain vigilance on all systems monitoring. We now have proof of extensive fabric damage. Kirk out."

He thumbed the controls again.

"Sulu?"

"Here."

"Keep everyone on their toes."

"Understood."

"Patch me through to Sickbay."

"Sir." There was a delay of two or three seconds during which Kirk felt a small hand edge cautiously into his own. Dermot, white-faced and considerably shaken, was crying. He squeezed encouragingly when the boy leaned against him.

The speaker announced. "Sickbay. M'Benga."

"Kirk here. We're at the point in Engineering that Spock labelled Exit D. There's been an accident. We'll need a cart down here. What else, Bones?"

"Tri-ox, pressure pads and get the O.R. cranked up and ready for Spock."

"I heard, Captain. The cart's on its way. Extent of injuries?"

Kirk answered him. "Multiple severe lacerations and phaser shock."

"Who phasered Spock?" blurted out M'Benga.

"I'm rather afraid that I did," said Kirk almost absently and broke the connection.

The technicians were standing about, still stunned by the speed and violence of the events; Scott was gathering them up, ordering them back to work, and they were slowly responding. By the other door, Veronica Kenyon was still laughing. Kirk gestured to Baillie.

"Get her out of here," he said thickly.

"You going to join me in the Brig? Famous Starship Captain kills Vulcan lover!"

Baillie waved the guards away and they hustled her out, her laughter still echoing strangely to Kirk's ears. He looked back to Spock and McCoy in time to see McCoy, who seemed to be liberally spattered with green, wince and shake his head. Kirk suddenly felt very sick indeed and turned his face to the wall, his own blood singing in his ears. When he knew himself again he was sitting on the floor with his head between his knees. He straightened carefully and sagged back against the wall, grey-faced and sweating, his head feeling bloated and oddly light.

Baillie, alerted by Dermot's urgent call for help, was supporting him on one side, with Dermot kneeling by him on the other, still holding his hand. Scott was crouched in front of him, blocking his view of Spock.

"Another myth gone. Starship Captain faints at the sight of blood."

Scott snorted. "Shut up, Captain. Just sit quiet now and breath deeply. T'was a brave thing ye did, and Spock will understand, nivr doubt it."

"Spock?" Kirk tried to get up but found the effort was too much, he slumped back, bathed in sweat, his head swimming.

"Sit still," Baillie repeated. "You got the flashback from the phaser burst. Didn't they teach you not to fire into corners at the Academy?" he scolded.

"Flashback?" Kirk tried to hold his scattering wits together. "How's Spock?"

Scott glanced over his shoulder. "They're moving him to Sickbay now." He was careful to keep his body angled so that Kirk couldn't see that the Lovely was still in place, her jaws still clamped into Spock's neck. "McCoy's said that they'll have to operate to close up all the wounds and scratches," he said soothingly.

The words didn't make any sense to Kirk. "How's Spock?" he managed to mumble before he slumped sideways against Baillie, who supported his weight easily.

"Mr. Scott, I think you can consider yourself as officer in charge of Enterprise for a while."

"Aye. Ah believe that Ah am."

He stood up to let McCoy wave his scanner over Kirk. "Phaser shock, he'll be out for a while. I've sent for a med-couch for him. How do you feel?"

"I'm all right."

"Liar. You were nearly as close as he was," countered McCoy, waving the scanner over the Security Chief.

"I feel sick, and dizzy, and I want to go to sleep," admitted Baillie.

"That's better. You can do that in SickBay. You - King, isn't it?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"When my lot get here tell them that I want both these two in Sickbay for treatment."

"Whit's wrong with me telling them that?" demanded Scott.

"You deal with your own patient and let me deal with mine. Dermot, you are to go back to your father and tell him everything that's happened here, including where your mother is now. Off you go now."

McCoy shooed the boy away.

"A bit harsh, Doc," protested Baillie.

"He'll cope. I'll see you in Sickbay."

McCoy left at a hurried walk and Scott, shrugging, went back to supervising his engineers. As both McCoy and Baillie had pointed out, he had work to do.

King knelt down beside his Chief.

"I'm going to Sickbay. I'd be a fool to do anything else. You're going to have to run a message for me. Go to the Brig and tell the Section Leader - it should be Kotoye - that I want that woman held securely where she can't be seen or heard by anyone, not even the guards. You got that?"

"Aye, Chief."

"Now off with you."

When the Med-Techs arrived a few moments later it was to find the Captain and Chief of Security propped up against each other, fast asleep, and a roomful of Engineering staff apparently ignoring them.

Kirk was awakened by the gentle swish of the door as it opened, and lay still, trying to remember why he was in Sickbay this time. Cautious steps neared, then passed, his bed, then,

"Are you awake, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes."

"They told me that I wasn't to disturb you. I'm not disturbing you, am I? I only wanted to talk to you."

"Then come closer. We must not disturb the Captain."

Kirk lay still, trying to keep his breathing shallow, though his eyes were open wide and a relieved smile was patched on his face. Spock was all right! He'd shot Spock and Spock was awake, so Spock was all right.

"I wanted to apologise, about letting Mother out. And for not doing something about Mother sooner. Dad and me, we just got so used to her playing about that we kinda forgot that she played with other people too. I guess it was stupid of us."

"Agreed."

Kirk bit his lip, choking on his laughter and managed to turn the sound into a fairly realistic snort, resettling himself on the bed. Spock would know he was awake; with any luck Dermot wouldn't.

"You think we're stupid?"

Kirk could almost see the astonishment on young Dermot's face. Nobody

could stand against Spock when he got into this sort of mood.

"Yes."

"Oh."

"You recognised the problem. You, and your father, knew that you were in the most favourable position to deal with it effectively and you both ignored the opportunity and responsibility." The tone was heavily censorious and lacked volume.

"Oh." Dermot sounded disappointed and close to tears.

"And so did everybody else. The other diplomats that your father has worked with. Senior personnel, Starfleet representatives. They all chose to 'do nothing and hope it goes away'. But it never does, does it?"

"No, sir." The reply was very soft.

"Of course, their decision is understandable. Your mother is a person of formidable talents and to 'do something' would have attracted both her attention and her ire, as no doubt you and your father often did."

"Yeah, but we should have kept trying."

"Agreed."

There was a long pause, pregnant with possibilities, then Spock stated, "Now she is no longer the responsibility of you and your father."

"What is Starfleet going to do - to Mother I mean."

"Breaking quarantine regulations is a criminal offence under Federation law. Starfleet has the responsibility to contain your mother safely until such times as she can be transferred to civilian custody for process in a Federation court. We may be called to give evidence at those proceedings, as you will."

"Yes, sir."

"But as I have said, you are no longer responsible for her actions; indeed, you never were. You and your father are only responsible for your own failure to attempt to limit her transgressions, which is not an offence under any law because you were not aware of her activities until well after the event." Spock's voice faded in and out, and Kirk lay, trying to decide whether to interrupt.

"You think so?"

"I do. So you may stop... I understand the phrase is, 'feeling guilty' about actions and events which are, and always were, totally outside your control."

"Yes. Only... she - Mother - has this way of making you feel guilty."

"Guilt transference. An old technique perfected by those not strong enough to bear the responsibility of their own actions. There is a very effective technique to counter it."

"There is?" There was a hopeful lilt in the young voice.

"Certainly. Do not listen."

"It's hard not to."

"But surely she is in the Brig?"

"Yes."

"And you patently are not?"

"No."

"Then I do not understand your difficulty?"

"I have to go talk to her."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes. Why? Why do you 'have to go talk to her'?"

Kirk bit his lip again and steeled himself to ignore the tremors in Spock's voice, and the soft gasps as he spoke. It seemed that Spock had decided that the 'occasion' had arisen.

"Well... I... She's my mother!"

"What has that got to do with anything? She is a person of proven unstable character. If I were your father I would certainly not approve of you associating with such a person."

"She's his wife."

There was a short silence while Kirk waited for Spock's demolition job to continue. When the answer came it astonished him just as much as it did Dermot Jnr.

"No, she is not."

"Yes she is."

"No, she is not. Or perhaps in order to be totally accurate, she was, but is no longer."

The pause stretched out even longer this time, punctuated only by the sound of heavy breathing.

"No longer?" Dermot ventured at last.

"The term contract that your father and mother agreed to was for the term of 10 Terran standard years. Based on the T-standard day length, the contract between them expired 9.23 days ago."

"Are you sure?"

Kirk wondered when the last time was that Spock had been asked that about a mathematical calculation.

"I am sure," responded Spock gently. "Doubtless the multiple time systems that you have used during the moves from planet to planet to be with your father have induced an error into the recording of your dates. My calculation is based on the Atomic Decay Standard, which is the basis for recording by the Courts of Unions, and takes no account of approximations induced by travel."

"So they really aren't married now?"

"They are not."

"Gosh. I calculated that we had another 61 days to go."

"It might also be of interest to you to know that the contract that your parents took out specifically gives sole guardianship of any offspring to your father. Perhaps you should remind him of this?"

"What?"

"Go and tell him." Spock spaced out the words.

"What? Yeah!"

Light footfalls and the double swish of the door announced Dermot's abrupt departure. Kirk immediately rolled off the bed and went to stand by Spock. He didn't like what he saw. Spock's normal pallor was several shades lighter and greyer, and the brace about his head and neck was obviously uncomfortable. There were many patches of plastiskin in evidence.

"He might have said thank you," protested Kirk.

"He will, he is well-trained. The son of a diplomat." Spock's eyes drifted closed.

"I know I said you should tackle that problem if the occasion arose, Spock, but really... "

In a voice barely audible Spock murmured, "Now comes the hard part, humour."

"Huh? Spock? Hi, Bones, I think he's gone back to sleep."

"So what else is new. I thought I could trust you to keep an eye on him. What the hell were you thinking of, letting the kid in here?"

"He wanted to apologise."

"He took off like there were a dozen Klingons chasing him!"

"Spock just told him the good news."

Kirk stretched cautiously, and stopped when his back twinged. "Every time I sleep on these medi-beds I get a backache," he complained.

"What good news?"

"The marriage contract between the Kenyons - seems that it's run out."

"It has? Great! Get back into bed."

"Bones?"

"What? Get back into bed!"

"Umm."

"Have you gone deaf? Get back into bed and stop jiggling around."

"Can I go to the john first?"

After Kirk had made his visit he managed to slip away for long enough to call up Scott and request a status report. The Engineer was still on duty.

"It's guid tae hear your voice. You looked poorly when they carried ye out of Engineering but McCoy says that ye'll be fine. Nay doot that ye'll want tae know of progress. Well, it'll be slower with Spock stuck in Sickbay with ye, but he'd already called up the plans we needed so his deputies know well what they need tae dae."

Halfway through the detail of Scott's report McCoy tapped Kirk firmly on the shoulder, said into the Comms. link, "Thanks Scotty. Keep up the good work. I'll let you know when I let our leader out of Sickbay. McCoy out!", switched the unit off and said loudly, "Bed!"

"There's nothing wrong with me Bones, I'm fine now."

"Shut up and get back into bed."

"But Bones... "

"Bed!"

Kirk gave in and padded across the room, scrambled up onto the medi-couch and pulled the blanket over his legs.

"You haven't asked how Spock is," chided McCoy.

Alarm replaced the tailored pout. "He's all right, isn't he? He talked to Dermot. Why isn't he in a healing trance?"

"You phasered him, remember?"

Kirk looked down at his hands. "I'm not likely to forget in a hurry. Sheer instinct. I didn't even think about it." Kirk shuddered.

"Good job you didn't. Thank heavens for instinct and fast reactions. Jim, Galadriel had got a good hold. Her teeth were touching Spock's vertebra, one had even started to penetrate. I had the devil of a job to get it out. If you hadn't fired when you did, if you'd hesitated or paused to consider, he'd be paralysed now. He's alive, and he'll get better, because you acted."

"What about the next time?" Kirk's face began to crumple, just as a small child's would, dissolving into fear. "What do I do the next time I have to let my instinct take over? What if next time I kill him?"

Deciding it was entirely too soon for heart searching and breast beating, McCoy perched on the bed. "Next time will have to take care of itself. I'm still trying to cope with this time. You're going to be staying in here for a few days."

He overrode Kirk's protests by sheer volume. "This is to let you get over the flashback, and the exhaustion brought on by overwork - and to help me keep him quiet. No healing trances this time. The phaser shock took out that option. He heals the long way round, just like we have to. So he stays still and quiet and that frame around his head keeps his neck in the same place while the muscles heal. Between us, Galadriel and I tore him up."

"How long?"

"Till he's fit for light duty. Couple, maybe three weeks. You help me keep him down and away from all the activity and cleaning and we'll have him well enough to go on shore leave."

"Ah, yes, I've got to talk to Scotty."

"Komack already did that. Pilar Majoris, eh?" McCoy watched as the fear



ebbed away.

"Not bad for a tin-plated little dictator with delusions of godhood?"

"Don't get smart, Kirk! You're in Sickbay. Any wise cracks or misbehaviour and I'll... I'll... "

"You'll what?" taunted Kirk, colour brushing back into his cheeks.

"I'll let Chapel and her trainee nurses give you a blanket bath!" threatened McCoy awfully.

Kirk clutched the blanket to his chest in mock alarm. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me, and I'll restrict your diet to green salads too!"

Spock spiralled briefly up towards the light and the pain and sampled the conversation. McCoy was yelling at Kirk... that meant that Kirk was not badly hurt because if he was then McCoy would not be yelling. Comforted by the argument Spock drifted away back into the darkness.

The following day Kirk was still in Sickbay and the nurses had started to take it in turns to brave his glares and mutterings when Spock decided that enough was definitely enough.

"Have you not asked Doctor McCoy why you are still here?"

"HUH? I thought you were asleep."

Spock twitched a sardonic eyebrow. "I find it very difficult to sleep with my digestive system in open revolt, my head and neck encased in this cage and you continually muttering and mumbling about what you will do to the Doctor when he finally lets you out of Sickbay."

Kirk scratched at his own neck, his expression bashful. "I don't know what's got into McCoy. He's acting really strangely."

"On the contrary, I believe he is acting in keeping with his character."

"Is it hammer on a high-gravity planet time again?"

"If you wish me to be silent?"

"Oh no! Tell me!" commanded Kirk bending over Spock. "Or I'll sic Chapel onto you."

"Threats are illogical; however if it serves to allow me to get some sleep.... I believe that the reason that Dr. McCoy has retained you here is that he is suffering from shock."

"Shock? McCoy?"

"He was attacked by the Lovely - he was protecting Dermot by placing himself between the child and danger."

"Until you got in the way," interrupted Kirk.

"Which he witnessed. He then saw you fire the phaser at me, and immediately came to my aid. He saw you and Chief Baillie collapse, then he performed a delicate operation to remove the Lovely and repair the extensive muscle damage."

Kirk's frown had been getting deeper and deeper. "I wonder if anyone did check him out."

"Given the circumstances, and the efficiency with which Dr. McCoy can conceal his emotions, I doubt it. Keeping you here is merely his way of making sure that you cannot be harmed again."

"But I have to oversee the decontamination."

"Then may I suggest that you go and discuss this aberration of procedure with Dr. McCoy."

Kirk nodded. "I will."

"And Jim - good luck."

Kirk exited from the side-ward and was immediately intercepted by Dr. M'Benga.

"Captain, I think you should go back to bed."

"Where's McCoy?"

"He's in his office."

"Still? When did he last get any sleep?"

"With you and Mr. Spock in here?"

"That's the problem. Physician, heal thyself, and thy leader." Pushing M'Benga gently aside he went into McCoy's office and thumbed the privacy light.

"You look awful!"

At Kirk's words McCoy snapped out of his light doze. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I'm going to try to talk sense to my Chief Medical Officer. Bones, did anyone check you out for shock?"

"Check me out? Why should they?"

Shaking his head Kirk sat down and waved McCoy back into his seat. "Because you're suffering from shock. You have been since Galadriel jumped you and Spock got in the way."

"Jim, if you don't - "

"Stop and think, Bones. Shock, maybe a bit of phaser flashback, you were certainly near enough, then operating on Spock, and I'll bet you haven't been off duty since."

McCoy stopped, then slowly sat down, his expression a mixture of alarm and chagrin. His gaze wandered round his office, finally refocusing back on Kirk. He blinked several times then picked up the scanner and ran it over himself.

"Damn!" he swore softly. "I should be in bed."

Kirk blew out a sigh of relief. "I'm going to have to have a long talk with your staff. They think you're indestructible."

"I'm not in any condition to be on duty," mumbled McCoy, astonished to find that his hand was shaking so badly that he couldn't put the scanner down.

Kirk captured the hand, gently unpeeled the fingers and wrapped them around his own. "It's okay, Bones. You'll feel better soon. A good night's sleep and you'll be okay."

"Okay? Okay! You know what that fool Vulcan did? He nearly got himself paralysed! And who for? Me!"

Kirk abandoned the hand, rounded the desk and got a good grip on the whole Doctor as he started shaking in earnest. "Damned fool thing to do. What did he think he was doing. Getting hurt looking after me. Stupid, brainless, interfering fool."

Kirk just held on, muffling the tirade against his chest until McCoy wound down and stopped shaking so badly, then he handed McCoy some tissues and poured out two coffees from the ever present coffee pot.

"Sorry, Jim."

"No need to apologise to me, Bones. You've held my hand often enough. I'm just returning the favour."

McCoy gulped coffee, wincing as the hot liquid burnt his mouth. "This tastes... "

"Stewed," completed Kirk. "Chances are it's been in here for a couple of days. Just like a certain Doctor?"

McCoy shifted uneasily. "You two will be the death of me." His voice wobbled dangerously. "Here I am, all prepared for big disasters. Klingon invasions, novas, exotic diseases, galactic mayhem. And I nearly lose that crazy green-blooded pixie to a couple of kilos of demented motherhood smuggled aboard by a selfish woman who should have been grounded years ago if only someone had had the sense to update her medical records with accurate information." He gulped more coffee.

Kirk nodded sympathetically. "You, of course, are also blaming yourself for not spotting her immediately she came aboard. Taking no account of the fact that you were busy doing full medicals of all personnel, and that there are other doctors aboard too. You don't have a magic wand, Bones, no more than I do. We both just have to do our best; and rely on Spock to be there to help us over the rough bits."

McCoy snorted. "If he's not more careful, he's going to get himself into a situation where I won't be able to patch him up. And that goes for you too!"

"Who, me?"

"Yes. You work too hard. You're not a Vulcan, you know. You need to get some sleep every now and again, not just cut loose with a monumental drunk and think that's enough relaxation to keep you going. You need to get away, unwind!" yelled McCoy, slopping coffee onto his desk.

"I'll make a deal with you. You get some rest now, and let me out of Sickbay so that I can help Scotty with the decontamination, or he'll be in here too, and when we get to Pilar Majoris, you, me and Spock will go find ourselves a nice little self-maintaining cottage with a well-stocked food storage unit, a pleasing view, lots of sun for Spock, a nice long sandy beach for me, and a hammock in the shade beside a drinks cabinet so that you can create the perfect mint julep for us. What do you say?"

"How long have we got for shore leave?" asked the ever-suspicious McCoy.

"21 whole, perfect, days, and I'll guarantee that we'll spend every one of

them planet-side, unless we get called on to deal with Klingon invasions, novas, exotic diseases, galactic mayhem... "

"Deal. You're back on duty."

"Right." Kirk pulled himself upright and levered McCoy to his feet.  
"C'mon."

"Where?"

"You're going to your cabin, now, to get some rest. We have a deal, remember?"

The medical staff watched in silent disbelief as Kirk, his arm about McCoy's shoulders, steered the medic through Sickbay and out into the corridor. M'Benga logged Kirk as being released from Sickbay then thoughtfully informed Spock that Kirk and McCoy were both gone.

Spock merely breathed deeply and went to sleep.

Uhura sighed, resisting the very urgent urge to dump her coffee on Sulu's head. "It's all very well carping on about the childish level of these games, but unless you'd like to tell the Captain that despite plenty of time and a very firm directive from him, we have come up with no games, no timetable and no organisation, you'd better can this obstructive attitude and do some CONstructive thinking. Now."

Sulu squirmed under the glare of the Communications Officer. "But the games are childish!" he protested.

"So much the better. Haven't you listened to McCoy lecturing on the value of play behaviour? The higher the intellect, the more childish the games. The crew will love this."

"I know vat's wrong wit' him," announced Chekov suddenly.

"Oh and what's that?" asked Sulu.

"You tink dat because you are organising de games, you von't get a chance to play de games," said Chekov, thus proving himself to be a shrewd judge of character.

"That is not true."

"Yes it is!"

"Enough!" Uhura slammed both hands down on the tabletop. "I have had this. You are both useless! Go away," she stormed and was more than a little surprised as the pair sheepishly obeyed her. Uhura then completed her rare show of temper by throwing a data square at the closed door. "Damnation!"

"Do you wish me to leave?" asked Spock quietly and was rewarded by Uhura whirling round to face him, considerably startled.

"Oh! Mr. Spock. I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realise that you were here. Did we disturb you?"

"I became aware of your presence about the time you were advocating CONstructive thinking. Is there anything that I may do to aid you?"

"Not unless you know how to organise a bean bag race?"

"I regret that I am not familiar with the event. How does one race a bean bag?"

Chuckling Uhura joined him in front of the panoramic starview. "You have to run a set distance in competition with other people while trying to balance a small, soft bag on the end of a long, thin stick. If you drop the bag off the stick you have to go back to the start line and start again. It's a fun way of teaching children co-ordination skills."

The next question followed naturally. "Why are you trying to organise such an event?"

"Because the Captain told me to."

"Why should he wish such an event to take place? There are only six children on board at the moment. Surely the organising of such a limited number of children would not require your skills?"

"It's not that simple. I wish that it were. Shall I start at the beginning?"

"If you think that it would help."

"Well, we were all on the Bridge. The Captain had called us all up there to try to think of some way to raise morale and to keep the crew occupied. The announcement that we're going to Pilar Majoris after all did help a lot, and so did letting the kids out of the Brig. It helped us; they still have to cope with the waiting and wondering. McCoy's busy trying to counsel them, but... We all know why they did what they did but living with the consequences is tough."

"It always is, for everybody."

"You aren't going to transfer off, are you?" Uhura wondered at her daring.

"No. I am not. The Captain has expressed his opinion of my behaviour and also the fact that I too have to live with the consequences. Being somewhere else will not necessarily be of any assistance to me."

"Good. Anyway, we started bouncing in ideas. All the usual ones, plays, study groups, specialist classes, inter-departmental contests. Sports tournaments. That's when I suggested bean bag races," she admitted.

Spock regarded her with great interest. "It seems that my enforced absence from the Bridge is achieving some intriguing results."

Uhura looked up indignantly then she giggled again. "Consequences! Me and my big mouth! Then the Captain remembered the three-legged race." Spock's slightly blank look made her explain. "You team up two people and fasten the right leg of one to the left leg of the other. Then you race against other couples similarly tied."

"Co-ordination," commented Spock.

"And co-operation. Sulu pitched in with sack races and then Scotty started on about the Highland Games and how there were always fun events for 'the wee ones'. The more we talked about it the more it seemed like a good idea. I was designated as organiser - it was my idea - and Sulu and Chekov were assigned to help me."

"And they would rather participate than organise."

"All the memories it brought back. Can't say that I blame them for wanting to try to relive them. And it is a good idea. Instead of the normal sporting

events, have something a little different. Something to make people laugh."

Spock took on a stuffed, thoughtful look as he tried to absorb the idea. "If I may venture the same opinion as Mr. Sulu, the games that you describe may divert the attention of the crew, and officers, for a few days, but they are not sufficiently complex to involve them for another 25 days."

"That isn't quite what Sulu said, but it's the right general area and the problem remains we have to do something; the majority of the crew, and officers, are becoming bored."

The minority of one accepted the plea for help with a tentative, "If I may ask some questions to clarify the objective of the contests that you have described?"

"Of course."

"They are tests of skill."

"Yes."

"Designed to have the participant placed in situations which a watcher may find 'humorous', thus providing diversion for both active and passive person."

"Exactly."

"I am not familiar with the parameters of humour. My last attempt was... not a success."

Uhura swallowed, then said sternly. "Scotty and Bones should have known better. That's always the problem with practical jokes. There's always a price and the person who is the butt of the joke, the one that it's played on, doesn't always react as the jokers would wish. They should have remembered that Klingons are bad losers. The bean bag race isn't quite the same. The people entering into the race know that they are going to be the butt, but the watchers are going to be laughing WITH them, not AT them."

"An interesting distinction. Shared humour is regarded as beneficial?"

"You know our Captain." Uhura grinned and leaned back in her chair. "Me, I'm convinced that he's really 5 years old and just wants company in his sand-box."

Spock nodded very slightly, clearly knowing about sand-boxes, then winced as pain shot up his still tender neck to explode blinding at his temples.

"Sit still. Uhura to Dr. McCoy."

"McCoy here," came the response after a short pause.

"I'm on the Observation Deck with Mr. Spock. I think that you should join us."

"Damned fool Vulcan." The link cut and Uhura bore Spock's look of resignation with stoic indifference.

"How much latitude did the Captain give you in the organising of the bean bag races?"

The question was unexpected. "He gave me complete control."

"You do not have to gain his approval for the content of the events?"

"No. Well, he didn't say that I had to. He just said to get on with it. Do you have an idea?"

"Several; but I will have to do some research to verify what would be involved."

Spock stopped speaking as McCoy entered with a rush. Glaring awfully McCoy waved a medical scanner over him.

"I've had this one set up especially for you. It saves me time trying to recalibrate to your crazy readings. Guess what the little devil is telling me now?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Bed?" he hazarded.

"Bed." confirmed McCoy. "And you are going to stay there until I say that you can wander about the ship again. I told you to rest. You can either be sensible, or you can sleep in Sickbay."

Spock rose to his feet very slowly. "Will you allow me visitors?"

"Who did you have in mind?"

"Uhura."

McCoy shot Uhura a deeply suspicious look then said, "Tomorrow, and check with me first."

Uhura dimpled at him. "Yes, Doctor. Thank you, Doctor."

"Bed!" repeated McCoy, not as loudly as he could have, and shepherded his charge away.

Having checked with McCoy that Spock was allowed visitors Uhura called Spock and made an appointment. Promptly on time she arrived to find that Spock was indeed confined to bed, and that a low table, laden with her favourite nibbles, had been set up in Spock's bedroom, together with a comfortable chair. Spock was reclining against a contoured rest wearing a bland look and exuding a decided air of expectation.

"Uhura." Spock gestured her in. "Dr. McCoy has carried out his threat. I am not allowed to leave this bed. However, Nurse Chapel has provided these refreshments for us; if you would pour the tea?"

"Certainly." Uhura blithely ignored her surroundings, poured tea for them both, and gathered a selection from the table. Seating herself she said, "Several ideas?"

"Indeed. I must again state that humour is an alien concept to me. If you find the suggestion that I am about to make... inappropriate, I must ask you to say so."

"Noted."

"Watch," invited Spock and keyed in the screen set up by the bed for his use.

The picture of a young, blond man appeared, the close-up of his face showing grimly intense concentration. After a few seconds the display widened to show that he was somewhat garishly dressed in a red and white costume, and appeared to be dragging himself along a horizontal, circular pole which was

suspended over a large pool of water. The man reached the end of the pole, dragged himself onto firm ground and was rewarded by cheers from an unseen audience. His place on the pole was taken by a woman, also dressed in red and white. After a few seconds what appeared to be a leg of meat was hurled at her by a lavishly dressed woman in yellow. The missile struck the pole crawler neatly on the right ear, part of the pole rotated and the woman disappeared into the water with a resounding splash. As she surfaced, to loud laughter and applause, another red and white clad man edged out onto the pole and lost his balance immediately to even more laughter. The first successful crawler appeared at the end of the pole, calling out encouragement to a woman now edging along it. The two in the water were being helped to the side walls of the pool by men who were obviously lifeguards. They heaved themselves over the side and scrambled up to join the blond man to scream advice to the woman on the pole. More items of food, thrown by men and women clad in green, blue or yellow costumes, bounced off her, a section of the pole rotated and she too landed in the water. The blond man immediately knelt down and began to edge out across the pool.

Incredulously Uhura managed a strangled. "What is that?"

"A mass media entertainment from the later part of the 20th century. This is a portion of a contest between notables in the fields of sport and art with each team, denoted by colour, having a member of the local nobility as team leader. Earlier contests took place in towns and cities in the majority of the Western European landmass."

"What?"

Spock could not blame her for her disbelief. "In a series of contests, teams representing communities would battle one another for the prize of representing their country in a contest against winning teams from other countries."

"Super bean bag races." Light was beginning to dawn.

"There is a strong resemblance to a 'pillow fight' which the records inform me is a contest commonly included in Highland Games."

Spock froze the picture, now showing a truly monstrous vegetable easily avoiding capture but never-the-less doggedly pursued by a singularly large man who was additionally handicapped by a recalcitrant pair of leggings which would have better suited a man 40lbs and .5 of a metre smaller.

"Are you suggesting that we do that?"

"In moderation. We have limited resources, and time; that is if you think that that sort of activity is suitable?"

"Eminently suitable. How do we do it?"

Spock blinked, slightly startled at this immediate deferment of control.

"The Captain gave you certain directions."

Uhura raised a tea-cup in toast. "He most certainly did. He told me to organise some events to divert and entertain the crew whilst we are en route to Pilar Majoris; and to co-opt any member of the crew to help me. You, my dear sir, have been co-opted. In fact, you have been co-opted to tell me what to do."

Spock sipped his tea, testing the idea - and several others that popped up uninvited and refused to go away.



"We would require personnel to assist us. Engineering to fabricate the games equipment, Medical to access the fitness of the gamers, and to monitor them during the events."

"Christine is the best bet from Medical; she wouldn't want to take part but she'll just love to help out to make sure everyone else has a good time. She'll know who of the other staff she can trust; and John Kyle can handle the Engineering side of things."

"I believe that the first thing that we should establish is the number of people who would wish to actively participate. Do you have an estimate of the number?"

"Mr. Spock, I've already had 47 people approach me, asking about how to sign up. Once we make an official announcement, there will be a stampede!"

Spock held out his cup for a refill. "Would 288 people be interested?"

Uhura paused, then said, "With crew and the diplomats, who are really bored, easily."

"If you make it known that we require 36 teams of 8 people? I believe that we can cope with 6 contests each of 6 teams, with the 6 contest winners competing in a Grand Finale just before we reach Pilar Majoris. If we allow ourselves 10 days to plan and fabricate the equipment, and hold one contest every 2 days.. "

"That would fill in the time perfectly. It would give the gamers something to look forward to, and keep their attention. But we'll need a lot of ideas." Uhura frowned, slightly daunted by the sudden escalation of the task. Then she grinned. "And you do have a lot of ideas, don't you, Mr. Spock, sugah?"

"Perhaps slightly too many. I must ask you again to veto any that you think would be unwise."

Uhura nodded agreement then watched some Spock's ideas, illustrated by more excerpts from the archives. Ribs aching from prolonged laughter, Uhura finally left to enlist her fellow conspirators, and to add a few embellishments to Spock's plans.

Several hours later she arrived on the Bridge for duty and was eagerly greeted by her Captain.

"How are you getting along with the games ideas?"

"Oh Lord," she thought. "He IS 5 years old."

"I've several suggestions to make." The Bridge crew paid absolute and eager attention to her.

"By all means."

"We did have a little difficulty to begin with, in agreeing what we should do."

Kirk looked at Sulu and Chekov, who looked embarrassed. "So I have been informed. They mentioned that you were a little upset."

"Slightly frustrated, but I've got it all sorted out now."

"Ah. Good." Kirk leaned back in his seat, nodding encouragingly.

"I went and asked Mr. Spock to help."

Uhura watched as Kirk visibly censored the first seven replies and mentally applauded her Captain's restraint when he limited himself to a mild, "What did he say?"

"Once I'd explained what a bean bag race was, and why we were planning to hold one, he put forward some intriguing ideas. Between you and me I think that the light duties restriction is wearing at him."

Kirk sighed sombre agreement. "Don't I know it! He's beaten the socks off me on the last four chess games. Total slaughter. But he's far from well, and he really needs to rest."

"This way he can rest and keep his mind busy. After all he's never tried to organise anything like this before. There will be all sorts of little details that'll crop up to occupy his attention. Christine said that she'll organise the Medical side of things, and Kyle's promised to make up any equipment that we need. We just need your authorisation for the materials to fabricate the games equipment?"

"Medical side?" questioned Kirk.

"Every sporting contest has to be medically monitored. To make sure that no-one does anything silly and hurts themselves." Uhura smiled limpidly at Kirk, the innocence of her expression perfectly covering her mental chorus of, *But it doesn't say that they shouldn't do anything silly and not hurt themselves.*

Kirk nodded. "It sounds good to me. Bones? Any objections?"

"Nope. Christine can handle anything that comes up. And, if it keeps Spock mentally alert and physically nonactive, well, I'm all for it."

Kirk stabbed at the controls on his chair. "Kirk to Spock."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Uhura's just told us that you've agreed to organise our little games. You therefore have my permission to enlist anyone to help out, absolute authority to requisition any supplies to make the necessary equipment, and the final say in all matters pertaining to the games. It's your job to do anything necessary to make them a success."

"Thank you, Captain. If I might suggest, may Lt. Uhura, Nurse Chapel and Engineer Kyle be placed on assigned duty to assist me?"

Kirk frowned at the unexpected request but McCoy leant forward and whispered, "Say yes, dammit, I don't want him gallivanting all over the ship!"

"Of course, Spock. They're all yours."

"Thank you. Spock out."

Uhura's smile widened. "We've got the games structure already set up. We need 36 teams of 8 people. One person designated as team leader and no-one can be in more than one team. I've already set up a file in the computer with details of what is needed and I've posted it for general viewing. When you organise a team, all you have to do is register it, and join in the fun."

She turned back to the communications console, determined not to laugh. Kirk carried on watching her for a few minutes then looked up at McCoy who was watching him quizzically.

"Something wrong Jim?" he asked quietly under the hubbub of voices raised in debate about the makeup of teams.

"She's up to something," Kirk replied, muffling the comment with his hand. "I've got a feeling that she is definitely up to something."

"What the hell can she do? It's a bean bag race, remember?"

Kirk flicked a finger at the screen now showing details of the contest structure. "First contest is posted for 10 days time. It doesn't take 10 days to make a bean bag."

McCoy grimaced, then shrugged. "With Spock in charge? He'll have them investigating what the best type of bean is to use."

Kirk snorted. "And I daren't ask him about the delay in case he misinterprets it as a criticism."

"I guess you'll just have to wait and see, and get a team organised."

McCoy clapped him on the shoulder and left. After a last thoughtful look at Uhura, Kirk bent his attention to attracting 7 others, a task in which he had no difficulty at all. Within 20 minutes the Captain entered his team into the computer. Uhura's smile got wider.

Kirk prowled around the room, nervously eyed by his team.

"They are definitely up to something," he announced.

Garrovick shrugged. "It did seem a bit too easy."

Kirk halted and looked at him.

"Well, it did. I know that we have limited space and limited resources but it still seems to me that the set of games laid out, sack races and that, wouldn't hold the interest of a bunch of five year olds, let alone a Starship crew with an advanced case of boredom."

"Yeah, and then there's the security seals that Mr. Spock put on the labs that the game builders are using. Not even Mr. Scott could get in there," offered another security guard. "Although he did stop trying when Mr. Spock said that he'd regard any further attempts as cheating and ban Mr. Scott's team."

The discussion ended when Uhura entered carrying a large box. Her smile told Kirk everything he didn't want to know.

"We've been had, haven't we?" he asked bluntly.

"Not yet, Captain, sir, but you will be very soon," agreed Uhura. "These packages are your costumes."

"Costumes?"

"For the games. These are for you to wear. A specially designed costume for each of you. They are labelled."

She handed Kirk an opaque, anonymous package. Garrovick's package was four times the size of anyone else's. They looked unhappily at each other.

"Nobody said anything about costumes, Uhura," challenged Kirk.

"It's in the rules that we published. The games organiser shall have the authority to direct all players to wear special or protective clothing."

"Protective, yes, but this?"

"They've been especially designed for each person, and for each person's games. All the other teams have been given the same set of costumes, only in different colours so that the audience can spot who is in which team."

Kirk considered his Communications Officer. Uhura was doing a very creditable job in not laughing at him. He hefted the package. The lumpy outlines gave him no clues as to its contents.

"And if we should decline to wear this special clothing?"

"No special clothing, no games," she announced sweetly.

Kirk stiffened. "Who says?"

"Why, Mr. Spock. You did tell him to do anything necessary to make the games a success."

"He thinks that this special clothing is necessary?"

"Oh yes, sir, he does."

Kirk took a deep breath. He knew now that he had been had. He'd been set up. If he declined to wear the costume, the games, which had generated such speculation, would collapse, and so would morale. He was about to argue when another thought struck him. He'd told Spock that he'd have to learn more about humour. What if...? He swallowed hard.

"Well, if Spock thinks that they are necessary... "

Uhura's smile got wider. "It's part of the rules that you have to wear ALL of the costume."

"Did you have anything to do with designing the costumes?" Kirk's voice was soft.

Unable to answer, Uhura nodded and fled.

"I, for one, am going to change in the privacy of my quarters. I trust that I will see you all on the Rec. Deck." With that he gathered up his package and retreated to learn his fate.

The assembled crew took one look at their Captain and collapsed into hysterics. Kirk took a firm grip on his self control and... padded softly across the wide expanse of the largest ship's Gym towards the still figure of his First Officer. He would have stomped but his usual boots had been replaced by a pair of soft soled shoes. The shoes were a delightful shade of powder blue and each was decorated with a very large fluffy white pompom that bobbed at each step. Spock took in his approach calmly.

"Mr. Spock."

"Captain?"

"Answer me one question. Was this - " Kirk gestured at his clothing - "YOUR idea?"

Spock allowed himself the luxury of contemplating his Captain from the tips of the pompom bedecked shoes, up the form tastefully clad in a somewhat baggy suit of powder blue and white striped material (gathered with frills at ankle and wrist and decorated with more pompoms down the chest) to the snowy white ruff encircling Kirk's neck.

He nodded.

Kirk ground his teeth and turned away.

"Captain."

The soft call stopped Kirk and he turned back to face Spock. Had Spock been any other person in the universe he'd have fled before the murderous intensity. As it was, he merely said. "You have to wear all of the costume."

"I am not wearing this hat." Kirk shook the blue material, enlivened by wavy white lines, under Spock's nose.

"No?"

"No!" retorted Kirk firmly.

"It could have been worse," offered Spock.

"Worse? How?"

Kirk realised the Spock was looking over his shoulder at something, and that Spock's chin was actually quivering with suppressed laughter. Kirk turned slowly.

There were two giant figures lumbering into the Gym on feet at least five times too large. They were incredibly hairy, had long tails, floppy, silken ears and looked to be the ultimate in shaggy dog stories. The one on the right was powder blue and encased Lt. Garrovick; the one on the left was baby pink and Pavel Chekov's face glowed crimsonly around the assembled crowd.

Defeated, Kirk put on the silly pompom ridden hat, slumped to the floor at Spock's feet and laughed until he cried.

As Spock had calculated it took some time to restore order, but eventually the teams were marshalled in the indicated gathering area and Uhura announced the first game, calling out the names of the people involved. The six people from each team, excluding the team leader and the shaggy dog, edged forwards and Kyle's helpers ran to meet them. Each group was presented with a long shape that seemed to consist mainly of shoes. After some fierce squabbling the first team was strapped into the contraption, and stood upright. They promptly fell over, much to the delight of the audience. After some quick experimentation the teams discovered that a geared mechanism only allowed forward motion if every member of the team lifted their right (or left) foot simultaneously, and that their step was limited so that the heel of the moving foot was advanced level with the toe of the balancing foot. It soon transpired that furious motion was required to gain any sort of travel. The crowd bellowed with laughter.

Uhura signaled for quiet by setting off an ear-piercing electronic whine. Kirk looked wildly round for Spock and was entirely relieved to see that he had donned some effective ear baffles, and had retreated to the comfort and safety of a medical couch. McCoy was hanging on the side of it, already too weak from laughter to stand unaided.

"Hello," said Uhura.

"Hello!" yelled the crowd.

"We all know why we are here. So let the games commence. The first game is very simple. All the teams have to do is go down the course, negotiating all the obstacles, collecting a flower from each one, turn round the end marker and then it's a straight race back to the finish."

Howling, the crowd and the teams appraised Uhura of the fact that there were no obstacles. The whine sounded again and Kyle's helpers entered in at a flat run with 3 humped backed bridges, 2 low doorways and a device of truly fiendish cunning which was no more and no less than a plank suspended on wires so that it swayed freely. Each set of obstacles was tastefully painted to match each team, and each obstacle was decorated with a metre wide artificial flower on a 2 metre stem.

The teams regarded the layout with silent horror.

"Remember. You all have to stay in the shoes. You all have to go through all the obstacles. You must have a flower each and nobody can help, or hinder, you. All queries and objection will be referred to Mr. Spock for his final decision. Are you ready? GO!"

A short time later Kirk found that he was jumping up and down and screaming exhortations at his team members to move faster. By that time he also found that his sense of dignity about what was right and proper behaviour for a Starship Captain was suffering some severe revisions. His team managed a creditable third, and while they were being released from their shoes the second game was being set up. The helpers removed two of the humpback bridges, changed the order of the obstacles, added two restricting rings to the already low doorways and then laid down a tunnel and a horizontal crawl netting.

"Team leaders to the start line please," announced Uhura.

Each team leader was handed a small package, and invited to pull the release cord. Immediately thereafter Kirk found that he was trying to clutch a 2 metre diameter pompom of appropriate hue. The pompom weighed very little, but the fronds, which comprised the pompom, were surprisingly stiff. There was no handle.

"This is a straight obstacle race. You have to carry the pompom through first ring, over the bridge, through the second ring, through the tunnel, over the swinging plank, under the crawl netting then round the end marker to run back to the start line and home, bringing your pompom with you. Are you ready? GO!"

Kirk quickly found that the only way to progress forwards was to run backwards dragging the pompom. Negotiating the metre wide rings was a little more tricky (take a good grip and dive through) with the tunnel a matter of brute strength to force the pompom in, then along, the length. The crawl net was worse with each person wriggling backwards trying to raise the limp netting up over self and pompom. The other hazards were insignificant when compared to it but all required an appreciable degree of mental and physical agility that left Kirk a staggering sweat-soaked wreck as he dropped over the line in second place behind a super-fit security guard in green.

Lying on the floor, panting, Kirk had serious doubts about the wisdom of allowing the games to continue but could think of no way, short of declaring a red alert, to stop them. At the end of 2 hours and 18 minutes of frantic activity the blue team clawed its way into the lead and stayed ahead in the final game to snatch victory from the green team by a single point.

. . . . .

After he had retreated to the haven of his quarters, washed, dressed himself in a nice normal uniform and drunk three cups of coffee, Kirk found himself a trifle more disposed to be more forbearing about the situation that Spock had placed him in. A perusal of the edited highlights, still being augmented by the Comms. Section, served to raise his blood pressure again, particularly when he realised that he'd been so involved in the content of the games that he hadn't noted the use of remote cameras, mounted on tiny anti-grav sledges, that had provided some truly close-up close-ups. One of the best was of him clutching the 2 metre pompom as he launched it and himself through the ring in the obstacle course.

Blushing, he picked up the ridiculous little hat and marched purposefully down the corridor to Spock's quarters. He signalled for admission and came face to face with Dermots Senior and Junior, a pair he'd taken pains to unobtrusively avoid since incarcerating Veronica.

"Hello, Captain."

"Er... Hello."

"We just popped in to see Mr. Spock to discuss Dermot's schoolwork, and to congratulate him on the games. Captain, could we talk to you later? We've got some questions to ask about what's going to happen with Veronica."

Fatally conscious of the wide smile emanating upwards from the lower of the two faces Kirk managed a, "Certainly."

"Thanks."

Both Dermots smiled at him and left. Attention diverted, Kirk backed into Spock's quarters. "I know what's different. The kid's had his hair cut."

"They are also relaxed, at peace with one another, and Dermot no longer lisps."

Kirk eyed Spock who was sitting at his desk. "You look very tired. McCoy will be after you if you don't watch out."

"He already has been. I am to spend the night in Sickbay."

"Trouble?"

"Not really. The Doctor wishes to evaluate my condition. As I was... somewhat debilitated before the incident with Galadriel, my return to full strength is taking a far longer period of time than he had estimated. He wants to 'check on me' and also to 'tidy up my face'."

"I noticed that there weren't any close-ups of you taken today." Kirk eyed the mass of light scars that still covered Spock's right profile and which slightly dragged at the corner of eye and mouth. "Can he smooth all that out?"

"It is his opinion that he can, and 'have me presentable' in time for the next round of the competition."

It was a clear opening, an invitation made in the clearest way that Spock could. "I'm relieved to hear it. I'd have hated for Galadriel to have left any scars on you."

Spock nodded once, accepting the unspoken apology. "In several ways, Galadriel has helped to remove more scars than she caused."

"Yeah, I guess. The Dermots have... changed."

"The removal of such a negative influence in their lives could only result in a positive outcome. They will wish to discuss the necessity of appearing at the proceedings against Veronica. Dermot Senior has received a number of very interesting career opportunities."

Kirk translated the phrases easily. "You told the Diplomatic Service that he was no longer married."

"It is part of operational procedure to inform the Diplomatic Service of the change in marital status so that the records of Veronica Kenyon's diplomatic status could be correctly maintained."

"Of course, Spock. Why else? What does McCoy say about her?"

"As you assumed, I have entered into discussions on the subject with him in order to prepare the summaries of evidence that Starfleet will require during any prosecution. He has reached several conclusions, none of them flattering. It seems that very early in her life Veronica was perceived to have some anti-social behavioural tendencies. Although not detailed in the current version of her medical records he believes that she was found to be unable to appreciate the idea of personal responsibility for her own actions. She would have displayed no conscience, no sense of right or wrong when discovered to be in error. It is his suggestion that the counselling given supplied her the information she lacked - in order for her to be able to decide that she had no need to belong, to be 'part of the group'. From that time onwards she would have believed herself to be... different."

Kirk failed to conceal his concern, and it was Spock who offered comfort.

"There remains a singular variation between us. I am unique. Veronica made herself so by deciding, quite deliberately, that the accepted rules of society could not be applied to her."

"A sociopath?"

"Not in the accepted definition; she chose not to recognise the rules, not that the rules did not exist, or did not apply to her. Her behaviour, her manipulations of others, her gratification at the disruption so caused, are results of her own, deliberate choice. Dr. McCoy is of the opinion that she used the early counselling, and some judiciously garnered medical knowledge, to 'fake normal'. He is further of the opinion that she will continue to do so; even now, when confined in the Brig and knowing that there is irrefutable evidence against her, she still believes that she will somehow escape censure. She is a very dangerous person, and will continue to be so. The only reason that we, and everyone else that she has ever 'played' with, have escaped so lightly, is that she never realised how truly dangerous she could be."

Kirk frowned, then said, "Huh?"

Spock eased himself in the chair, a motion not unnoticed by his Captain. "Imagine the outcome if she had tried to 'play' with the Klingon diplomats at K7?"

Kirk shivered. "I don't want to think about that," he said firmly. "I take it that you and McCoy have formulated some suggestions about what happens next?"

"Treatment is indicated. However, this course of action may be rendered less effective because of the fact that we will never be able to gauge the effectiveness of the counselling she receives. We strongly recommend that she be confined for the rest of her life."

"Cage her? I don't know, Spock. It just seems to be a little extreme."



Kirk got up and paced about, turning to look at Spock. "She only smuggled an animal.. " He paused, then said thoughtfully, "I wonder how many other times she got away with things because people thought that it seemed too extreme a reaction to a minor offence?"

"In all probability, too many," answered Spock soothingly. "Placed in context, she has removed a Starship from active duty for at least 53 standard days. She has persuaded 17 junior crew to disobey rules and procedures that were designed for their own safety, to the future detriment of their careers, and she has caused her own child to be adversely affected by her actions. There are many types of cages. You must remember that by denying her her chosen behavioural patterns she will be punished in the most effective way possible - she will not be allowed to be her chosen self. This, in itself, will be a cage. Whatever future method of containment is devised, she must be prevented from causing harm to others. With the resources of the Medical Section of Starfleet engaged on the problem I am certain that one can be devised that will enable her to be... negated as a problem."

"I know it's silly, but I can't help feeling sorry for her. I think that I'd feel sorrier for me, though, if she ever did get loose again. I'd feel sorrier for the Dermots too. Will they be okay, do you think?"

"Dr. McCoy is unusually positive about the prognosis."

"Which takes care of them, so leaving the more difficult matters. Humour, for example?" Kirk leaned on the desk and, picking up the hat, suspended it by its pointed top and swung it gently to and fro.

"An interesting concept," conceded Spock.

"One worthy of study?"

"There is a vast body of information to be accessed in the computer memory banks about it."

Kirk balanced the hat on a finger and twirled it around. "What safeguards do you have in place for the current experiment, Science Officer?"

"Lt. Uhura seems to have a mature appreciation of the concepts involved. She is endeavouring to teach me the value of moderation."

Kirk raised the hat to eye level and waved it. "You think *this* is moderation?"

Absolutely straight-faced, Spock traded look for look. "I said that she is *endeavouring* to teach me moderation. I did not say that she had been successful."

Kirk cracked up and dropped the hat on the desk, tipping it over as he would have done to indicate the acceptance of defeat in a chess game.

"When do you have to report to Sickbay?"

"I am ready to report there now. All the preparations are in hand for the next two rounds of contests."

Kirk hovered watchfully as Spock carefully rose and walked to the door. "Got everything figured out, eh? When are the diplomats going to be sacrificed?"

"They are risking their dignity in the fourth contest."

The turbolift doors opened to reveal McCoy carefully rehearsing six members

of his team in the techniques of multiple shoe walking. Yelling left, right, left, right, a caterpillar of people travelled along the corridor, bypassing the two senior officers at a very respectable speed. Kirk sighed, then looked at Spock gazing with supreme unconcern at the blatant practising.

"Be right with you," called McCoy.

"Spock?" said Kirk softly.

"Yes, Captain."

"Different games?" inquired Kirk hopefully.

"Have you ever known me to be anything less than thorough when carrying out your orders?" responded Spock.

"Ah. Quite," said Kirk, then ventured, "different costumes too?"

The not quite totally suppressed twitch gave Kirk the answer.

"Just be glad that you're being operated on today, and not after McCoy's appearance," suggested Kirk.

"This operation will be the last that the Doctor need perform to remove the scars left on my person by Galadriel."

"How fortunate. Just remember that Doctors can get their own back in seriously underhand ways."

"I am counting on the Doctor's ethical behaviour to prevent such occurrences."

"I wouldn't," responded Kirk and left Sickbay savouring the faintest look of concern that Spock now wore. It had been a long time since he had been able to tease the Vulcan, and he'd really missed it.

Kirk thought that he'd never stop laughing. The expression on McCoy's face was priceless. Spock had been as efficient as he had promised and the costumes were indeed different. The fabrication team had developed the images supplied to them by Spock and had turned out an hilarious parody of Medieval English costume. The fact that not one of the teams was dressed in Lincoln Green only emphasised where the idea for the outfits had originated.

McCoy, clad in pointed shoes, clinging hose, a frilled tunic and an exquisitely feathered hat, all in a startling shade of bright yellow, was glaring at Spock, promising death, dismemberment and repeated bedbaths as repayment for the indignity of the costume. Kirk was on the point of intervening when Chekov gasped in his ear,

"He looks just like a banana!" and collapsed into giggles. Kirk joined him and left it to Uhura to intercept McCoy and so save Spock from whatever immediate fate the irritated medic had decided upon.

"It's in the rules," she called to the rest of the yellow clad team. "Any violence, physical or verbal, to any of the judges, officials or helpers, will result in the immediate dismissal of the entire team!"

The yellow team took note and McCoy was borne away protesting loudly, and fortunately, for the maintenance of decorum, the command image and the sensibilities of the more delicately nerved of the enthralled audience, somewhat incoherently.

"Oh ye little gods! Am I going to enjoy this!" wailed Kirk.

"Pardon?" Chekov mopped his streaming eyes.

"Think, Pav. Do you think for one second that Spock is going to be content with dressing McCoy up in that Robin Hood outfit?"

"Oh!" murmured Chekov and then scrambled to his seat to watch the next contest with a far different appreciation of events.

With the crowd in an expectant and murmuring gallery Uhura checked that Spock had retreated to his couch and had donned his sonic mufflers before she sounded the klaxon for the beginning of the proceedings.

"Hello!" she yelled.

"Hello!!!" screamed back the audience.

"It's time for the first game," she announced and watched as the teams reassembled into lines of six.

"What are you doing?"

The teams turned warily towards her, slowly realising that all was not as they had thought it would be.

"The game!" ventured one blue clad Merrie Man who Kirk tentatively identified as hailing from Biology (Marine).

"Oh. I tell you who's in the game," said Uhura, and some quality in her voice sent a happy stir through the audience and a shudder of terror through the contestants. "The contestants are..." She paused. "Are..." She paused again, building the effect. "The Team Leaders," she finished very quietly.

The Robin Hood analogues edged forward, eyeing each other. In size they ranged from McCoy's willowy slenderness to a two metre, heavily muscled woman in an excruciating shade of orange who was one of Scott's Black Gang. The Engineering Department had drawn lots to be in the group led by Scott; she had been one of the many disappointed people.

Uhura sounded the klaxon again and Kyle's helpers erupted in with the game apparatus. A low table, (sides padded) topped with plates of coloured foam, a post (heavily padded) and an empty table (also padded) were soon anchored to the decking in a line which stretched some 15 metres.

"Please stand by your posts."

Shoulders squared, McCoy trod out to the post, and appraised the situation. Table one way with plates, table the other way, no plates.

"ALL you have to do is run to the table with the plates, pick up one, and only one, plate and place it on the other table. The winner is the team with the most plates," explained Uhura.

McCoy folded his arms and leaned against his yellow post. "It's too easy," he said very loudly.

"Oh. Did you all hear that?" Uhura affected surprise. "Dr. McCoy wants the game to be made a little bit more interesting. We're always ready to listen to suggestions."

Kyle's people scampered in again and tethered each gamester to the post by long, thick coloured ropes. McCoy picked up the rope and tested it. It gave

slightly in his hands.

"I'm still waiting for the other shoe!"

Uhura laughed and waved the helpers in again. Another item was added to the course between the posts and the tables covered in plates. The long, low tray glistened. McCoy gulped.

"As you can see," explained Uhura sweetly. "The path to the plates is somewhat slippery, and Mr. Spock has been VERY careful in the calculations regarding the tensile strength on the tethers. Each rope is specifically tailored to equalise the physical differences of strength; and of course, age."

Kirk giggled happily, his fertile mind creating the images of what was about to happen.

"And the tethers don't quite reach the tables."

The Black Gang engineer threw back her head and wolf howled.

"The games lasts for three minutes."

The klaxon sent the team leaders hurtling towards the plate laden tables. McCoy reached out and grabbed a plate, grinning broadly at his success. He made the mistake of standing still as he celebrated and as the tether pulled him backwards his feet slid away from under him. To Kirk's loud delight McCoy landed face down on his newly acquired prize and slid inexorably back to his post. His team exhorted him to get up and run, and after a short delay he managed to do so. To his credit he managed to collect the most plates, but admitted later that if it hadn't been for the orange engineer and the pink clad environmental technician crashing on the slides and getting their tethers in a twist he'd have finished much further down the placings.

The admission took place much, much later, long after the bruises had faded and he'd forgiven Christine Chapel for her spuriously professional air of detachment as she'd checked his breathless frame over for serious damages and for her falsely sympathetic, "Nothing that a hot bath and a massage won't cure. Better hurry up and change. You're in the third game too."

Cleansed and reclad in another hideous yellow Robin Hood suit McCoy returned to the fray with the light of battle in his eye and fire in his breath. By a mixture of low cunning, perversity and mayhem McCoy's medics trounced their opponents by six points.

Still crying with laughter Chekov joined Spock as the Vulcan calmly supervised the clearing up operation.

"Sair."

"Yes, Ensign?"

"Sair, my team is defeated, and as I am out of the contest, I vondered if I could offer my services to you in any vay?"

Spock tilted his head, regarding Chekov with a light of interested speculation. "For any particular reason?"

Chekov edged closer. "Revenge! Whatever it is you have in store for McCoy, I vant in!"

"In store'?"

"In de Grand Finale!. Ah, yes, of course. I vill not say vun vord. Not

to dem, nor to anyvun else."

"Revenge is said to be best when served cold," commented Spock calmly.

Kirk sat in McCoy's quarters, nursing a brandy and listening appreciatively to McCoy's furious description of the havoc he was going to wreck on Spock the next time that the Vulcan was unfortunate enough to find himself in Sickbay.

"No you won't," he contradicted.

"Watch me!" dared McCoy.

"You won't do anything to Spock other than treat whatever ails him," stated Kirk. "And that's an order."

"You think you can enforce that order, Captain, Suh!" As McCoy was clad only in shorts Kirk was afforded an excellent view of a wide range of bruising on the Doctor's person. He figured that they were about equal on that score.

"Yes. Spock may be daft enough to rely on your sense of ethics but I'm not. Not until you've calmed down at least."

As McCoy gathered himself for another broadside Kirk said, "We brought this on ourselves. If you and Scotty hadn't talked him into that joke on the Klingons, and if I hadn't been too drunk to stop it, he wouldn't have had such a bitter lesson to learn."

"Lesson?"

"A gap in his knowledge. How can he keep US out of trouble if he doesn't understand the motivation as to how we get in it! Apart from blaming himself about causing the death of all the tribbles, he was blaming himself about failing in his duty to me that let you and Scotty get into trouble, and that also led me into trouble. We could have been in very serious trouble, you realise that?"

"Now I've had more time to work on the tribbles, yes I do." McCoy shrugged gingerly into a dressing gown and accepted the glass of brandy held out to him. "Even one tribble smuggled to Earth and dropped on an uninhabited area, one of the national parks say, or the wild preserves, could lead to a disaster."

"We know it now, but Spock blamed himself for not figuring it out earlier, before you transhipped the tribbles, and fortunately the Klingons didn't figure it out either. I had to do some very fast talking to talk Spock out of offering his resignation. And later, when we found out how many kids there were in the Brig! 17! Far too many. Even my Yeoman, Trebert, was in on it! Just plain stupidity. Well he offered again, and I turned him down again, for the same reasons. They made their own decisions, they have to live with them, just as we have to."

"I thought that it was something like that. You know at one point I thought that he was going to apologise to me for letting me get into trouble. As if you could have stopped me."

"The point is that from his point of view he should have anticipated that you could get into trouble because of the practical joke, and as he doesn't understand practical jokes, or humour, I... well, I suggested that he should learn about them so that he wouldn't make the same mistake again," admitted Kirk in a rush.

"You did what? You mean to tell me that those games, those costumes, are

all Spock experimenting with humour? With practical jokes?"

"Yeah. You have to admit it, they are funny."

Wincing, McCoy sat down. "I am covered with bruises, I've just worked harder than I have for years and my head nurse is smirking at me, and you expect me to think it's funny?"

Kirk considered the question. "Yeah."

McCoy took a long pull at the brandy, then snorted with laughter. "Damned right it is."

Sulu took a deep breath and left his quarters. His own advice to his team, stop practising and plead with your gods for divine aid, had been totally ineffective, as he had assumed it would be. He got several neck wrenching double takes and some of the most astonished looks he'd ever managed to collect before he reached the temporary sanctuary of the turbolift. By this time his cheeks were as red as his costume, and his inscrutability was wilting under the strain. He sagged against the wall, only to be balked by his costume. He looked down in disgust, muttering words which would have sent Spock searching in the lingual banks for translations, then he paused, thinking of the first two sets of games. Each team had been identically dressed, albeit in different colours. That meant that there were five other team leaders wearing exactly the same costume, in different colours, as he now was. And he knew that one of those team leaders was Scotty. Suddenly gleeful, he straightened up and could hardly wait for the lift to stop. He entered the Gym almost oblivious of the wails of merriment his entrance caused.

As the more massively muscular Engineer entered, in a fetching shade of palest green, Sulu fluffed out his costume and skittered up to him twittering, "It's not fair, Scotty, you've got far more sequins and pearls on your bodice than I have!" before darting away to take cover behind Uhura and Spock.

The engineers who had lost the draw to be in Scotty's team drew a collective sigh of relief, and settled down to watch the fun. The team leader's game was a deceptively simple problem of travelling a set distance using planks balanced on stands with no part of the gamester or apparatus except the stands touching the floor. The 2 metre flowers also had to be transported and as both hands were needed to move the planks these ended up clenched between teeth or stuffed willy-nilly into the lavishly sequined and bepearled bodices. The wide and unfortunately stiff skirts of the ballet-style tutus also proved to be a hazard; they kept getting in the way!

As was widely expected Scott's team trounced the field, sweeping all before them in a magnificent display of teeth-bared, homicidal fervour. Chekov went to console Sulu who was sitting on the floor in a sweat-streaked pile of limp lace.

"Congratulations," said Chekov, and waited.

Sulu lifted a weary head. "It may have escaped your notice, you maniac Cossack you, but I lost. In fact, my team came third!"

"Oh yes, I did notice. Congratulations. You should tinker yourself most fortunate."

Sulu shook his head, decided that it wasn't a good idea and climbed to his feet. Chekov, all solicitude, helped him, trying to avoid the fresh bruises.

"Why am I fortunate?" asked Sulu once he had got upright.

"Because you lost."

Sulu patted Chekov comfortingly. "Why don't you come down to Sickbay with me and I'll have one of the doctors check you over for brain damage."

"Sulu, I'm serious. Ve have both been vewy, vewy lucky."

"Because we lost?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because ve vill not be in the Grand Finale."

"Still can't see it."

"Oh but you vill, at the Grand Finale." Chekov's smile did the impossible and got wider.

Sulu shook his head and started towards the door, Chekov trotted alongside him.

"Tink," he urged earnestly. "You and Scotty got ballet tutus. McCoy got a yellow Robin Hood outfit dat made him look like an animated banana and de Captain, he got that baggy blue and white ting wit' all de pompoms." Chekov pulled Sulu to a stop and whispered in his ear. "Vot do you tink dat Mr. Spock is going to do to dem in the Grand Finale?"

"I don't know do I?" said Sulu irritably, then he got the message. "Oh my," he breathed. "He couldn't get worse. Could he?"

"Dere are ALWAYS possibilities," quoted Chekov.

The Grand Finale was everything that Chekov promised. The six winning teams, led by the Captain, the C.M.O., the Engineer, Dermot Kenyon (the diplomats), Security Chief Baillie and a junior warp technician leading an ad hoc team whom nobody had taken seriously, dutifully paraded in a wild display of colours and costumes obviously based on Circus characters, headed by the team leaders as Ring Masters. Spock thoughtfully added music to the parade. By this time they thought that they had all got some idea of what to expect; Spock surprised them by adding water to the events.

A simple game of crossing a number of stepping stones to retrieve the ubiquitous 2 metre flowers was enlivened by the fact that the stepping stones floated, lightly moored into place; the resulting platform tipped with distressing ease and the subsequent waves created by the swimmers moved the platforms about, so adding to the technical difficulty.

A large rotating platform, which had to be crossed and recrossed in order to collect water in a bucket seemed, at first sight, an easy enough problem until the hapless gamesters were led away to don costumes with enormous feet. The resulting anarchy with people tripping up and knocking other people flying had even the contestants laughing.

For the last game Spock produced the simplest and most devastating idea of all. It was a straight round robin pillow fight, with each team leader taking it in turns to sit on the rotating circular pole and attempt to belabour the other team leaders into the water below. Scott, no doubt because of earlier experiences at various Highland Games, proved singularly successful at it and downed all comers with consummate ease, to the loud cheers of the audience.

Even the Captain's unorthodox method of hanging on tightly whilst upside down did not faze the Engineer, who managed to unhook the crossed ankles, so making Kirk's descent a vertical one.

Scott's team were the clear winners, although the winning margin was only three points over the Captain's group (the junior warp technician's group beat Baillie into fourth place) with the diplomats taking fifth.

Spock barely twitched an eyebrow as Kirk and McCoy closed in on him after the final game. Both were dripping wet, and weighed several more pounds than normal owing to the fact that the costumes were designed to let water in easily, but not to let it out. Both men patently wobbled as they walked, and additionally McCoy had developed a decided squelch.

"You arranged that," Kirk accused him.

"Yes, Captain," agreed Spock.

"Not the games, this!" Kirk plucked at the sodden material that clung with such affection to his chest.

"I rather thought that Mr. Scott was the other person on the pole."

"But you put us up there."

"Yes," conceded Spock.

"You did do it deliberately, didn't you?" demanded McCoy.

"Certainly, Doctor, and it was a fascinating study in the application of humour, specifically practical jokes."

"And your conclusions?"

"That the practical joke is not objected to if there is a practical purpose for performing it."

Kirk bowed his head as McCoy fairly gobbled in rage. "That is the most illogical excuse for illogical behaviour that I have ever heard."

Kirk, beginning to lose control of his mirth managed, "When in Rome, eh Spock?"

"This did seem the most practical way of investigating humour, and diverting the crew, and officers."

"Bread and Circuses as a logical diversion. It's been done, Spock."

"A logical solution developed by an illogical race."

"Prove it," demanded McCoy.

"That this was a logical solution?" queried Spock.

"No. That Terrans are an illogical race," shot back McCoy.

"The proof is self-evident; but if you require a specific?"

McCoy ignored Kirk's warning look.

"I do."

"Then consider the inter-reaction of the Terran species with the Equine."



"Huh?"

"If the Terran species were logical Doctor, considering your physical topology, the Human male would have developed the technique of riding side saddle."

With a regal nod Spock beat a strategic retreat as McCoy gaped after him; Kirk, leaning against the wall, broke into hysterical giggles. After a short pause Kirk got back into control of his mirth.

"He does have a point, Bones."

"He sure does, and a sense of humour. I just hope it survives."

The self-satisfied tone sobered Kirk. "What have you done?"

"Nothing much."

"Bones?" Kirk grabbed hold of McCoy's sodden cape and dragged him back. "What have you done?"

McCoy folded his arms, looked down at his wet clothes and murmured, "Revenge. Just a *little* revenge. I was only doing my job, Jim. Honest."

"McCoy!"

"I filed a report on how we were keeping the crew occupied during the quarantine, and gave them illustrations of the technique. It went off automatically, oh, about 37 minutes ago, when the quarantine ended."

"You gave Starfleet pictures of this? Are you mad?"

"No. I gave them you running about with the pompom, and me with yellow foam sliding about, and Scotty with the planks, and Kenyon tangled up hanging upside down in the assault netting and having to be cut free. I gave them the lot, including my evaluation of a successful morale boosting exercise and a valuable new dimension in experience training, HOW TO DEAL WITH THE UNEXPECTED. Starfleet will lap it up like gravy."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Yeah. Of course, Spock'll have some explaining to do."

"Why?"

"I told them that this was his idea. I rather think that the Captain of the *Serenity* will want to discuss it with him, and so will half the behavioural scientists in Starfleet."

Kirk slumped against the wall again. "Bones, he's supposed to be going on shore leave with us, remember?"

"Of course I remember. And I've just ensured that he's going to. I know Spock well enough to know that he'd want to stay aboard and play with the computers and generally keep out of our way so as not to cramp our style. Do you really think that he's going to hang around aboard *Enterprise* if he knows that he'll have to discuss these games with Starfleet all the time? Of course not. He's going to have to come with us so that he can hide from Starfleet."

"I told him. I warned him that Doctors got their own back in evil and underhand ways."

"You'd better believe it," said McCoy and squelched virtuously away in a

damp cloud of satisfaction.

