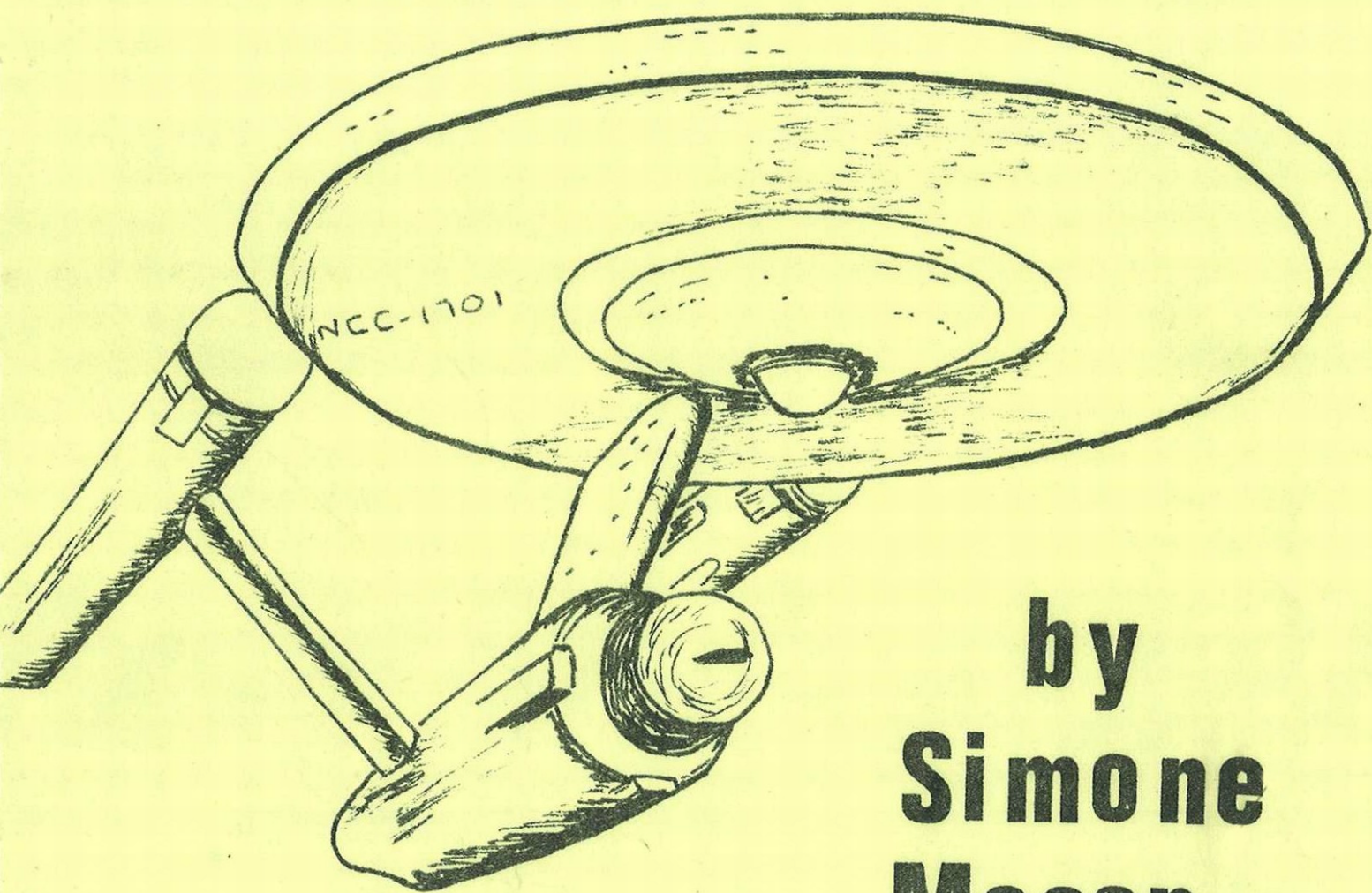
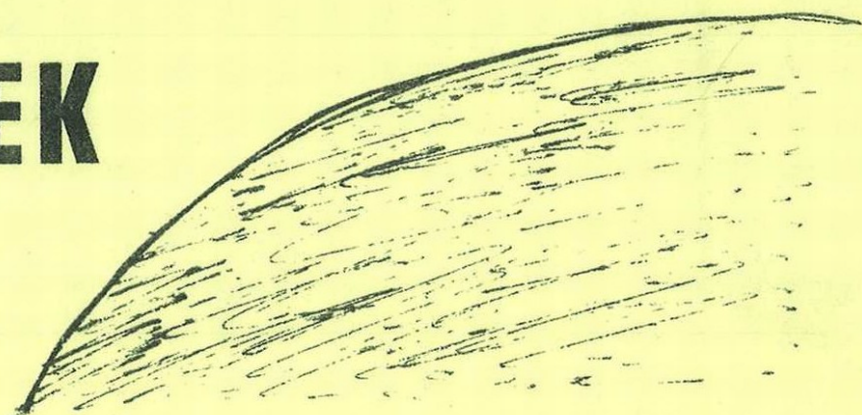


The Beginning and The End



**by
Simone
Mason**

**a
STAR TREK
fanzine**



THE BEGINNING AND THE END

An Alternative View

by

Simone Mason

Illustrations

by

Lesley Smith

A Difficult Beginning
Mission's End

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Page 48

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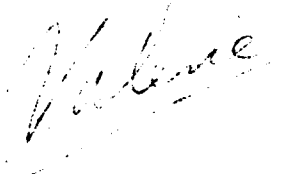
I'm afraid I have an explanation and apology to make by way of introduction to this zine.

We are anxious to have this zine ready for the Con, but to get it ready in time the stencils will have to go directly to Janet for printing instead of via Sheila for proofreading. I fear this will mean more than the usual number of typos - I hope it won't spoil your enjoyment too much.

The main apology goes to Simone, and to the artist who did the illos. Simone sent them to me with a note of the artist's name, but in the process of sending the illos off to have the stencils cut, the note vanished through a Black Hole, and I've been unable to find it. As Simone will be on holiday until the end of August, I won't be able to contact her in time to get the name.

My apologies to them both, and the artist will be credited in the editorial of the next issue of Log Entries to go onto stencil.

We are looking forward to seeing as many as possible of you at the Con - do come up and say hello!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Valerie', is centered on the page. The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid.

P.S. - The day we ran this off, we phoned Simone in the hope that she might be home, and she was; so were able to get the artist's name after all.

A DIFFICULT BEGINNING

Captain James T. Kirk made sure that his dress uniform was perfect as he got ready to beam up and take command of the Enterprise. He repeated the name several times with relish - his own ship at last, and one of the most advanced vessels in Starfleet. This was his first command, and he was determined to make his ship and crew the best in Starfleet.

A problem had already occurred. Captain Pike had been transferred two months ago, along with his First Officer, while Kirk had been unable to take up his command at that time. There had been no replacements available, even on a temporary basis, for the Enterprise commanding officers; and Pike had suggested that his Science Officer, Lt.-Commander Spock, should act as First Officer until a replacement was available.

Kirk had protested at the meeting with Admiral Komack on Starbase 1. "Science Officer is a full-time job. It's not fair to put such a burden on Lt.-Commander Spock - and a double burden at the moment, without a Captain aboard."

Chris Pike had laughed. "He won't even notice it! That Vulcan thrives on work. There's no-one like him for keeping the crew on their toes. The ship can be left to him until you go aboard."

The Admiral had agreed, so Kirk could no longer protest.

Pike, taking advantage of the few minutes left before his departure, had drawn Kirk aside.

"I left a tape for you aboard the Enterprise, and also part of my personal log; you may find them useful. Have you known or dealt with any Vulcans before?"

"No, but I understand that Lt.-Commander Spock is half Human."

"Probably a myth! You'll see. He's not popular off duty - or on duty, for that matter - but he has that rare ability to get things done. He's a faultlessly efficient officer."

"Why the dislike?"

"Don't you go feeling sorry for that Vulcan, or you'll hear a few choice remarks from him that will make you see the error of your ways! Whatever he gets, he deserves - he asks for it. I must go now. Good luck!"

As he remembered Pike's words of warning Kirk wondered again at the difficulties awaiting him in his first command. Vulcans were an unknown quantity to him. His class at the Academy had included none, nor had the ships he had served on. He had heard talk, of course, mostly wild speculations and jokes about emotionless aliens, and he had taken little notice of it, aware of the Human fondness for exaggeration.

The telepathic angle had bothered him a little. There were few Human telepaths on Earth, and they inspired a similar uncertainty - the idea of anyone being able to spy on something as private as the mind was not attractive to Humans.

Kirk had taken the trouble to look at a tape about Vulcan, and the high code of ethics of the people had reassured him. Moreover, he would not be alone aboard the Enterprise, for he already had friends there, Engineer Scott and Dr. McCoy, although he knew Bones best.

The doctor had been a happy man the last time Kirk had seen him just after his daughter's birth; then shorter and shorter letters had made him realise that things were very wrong with his friend. Scotty's last letter had contained the news of the breakdown of McCoy's marriage, and it had depressed him. Kirk had encouraged the doctor to apply for a post aboard the Enterprise, so that he might be able to help, do what he could for the friend who had in the past encouraged him to realise his dream.

The beam-up signal came at last, and in a few seconds Kirk was aboard his ship. Self-discipline enabled him to conceal his excitement as he stepped down from the transporter pad, but his eyes must have betrayed him, because he saw Scotty smile.

His gaze was drawn to the immaculately-uniformed Science Officer who stepped forward.

"Welcome aboard, Captain."

The voice, without inflection, and the unblinking stare of dark eyes as frozen as a cold night, dampened his enthusiasm. Refusing to be daunted, however, he extended his hand which was taken in a firm but brief handshake.

"Thank you for your welcome, Mr. Spock. I regret not having been able to come aboard earlier. It's meant you've had to be Captain, First Officer, and Science Officer for the last couple of months."

"It is of no consequence, sir. The last mission was routine."

"I expect you know that you're to continue acting as First Officer on a temporary basis?"

"Yes, sir."

"I realise that this puts an unfair burden on you, and I'll do my best to minimise it."

"I assure you, that will be unnecessary, Captain. It is my duty to assist you."

Turning to the other officers present, Spock introduced them. Kirk smiled at Scotty, and wondered at McCoy's absence, but the doctor could be on duty, or dealing with medical reports on Starbase 1.

"The ship is ready for your inspection, sir," Spock said. "May I be your guide?"

"I'd appreciate it, Mr. Spock," Kirk replied formally.

As he followed the Vulcan, Kirk wondered how he was going to be able to command a ship with such a distant First Officer. That icy coldness was enough to justify his apprehension but, refusing to be daunted by the prospect, he became instead immersed in his, and had to make an effort not to touch different parts with the sheer delight of ownership. He also became absorbed by Spock's concise but very clear explanations. His queries were answered without hesitation - Kirk was left in no doubt that this officer knew his job.

Pike had been right, though - there was no sign of Humanity in the man, and the Captain could sense the dislike from some of the crew members they passed during the tour. Yet in spite of the dislike there was respect, and quick obedience to orders. Perhaps through fear? Not exactly, Kirk thought. The man by his side had a rare and impressive dignity.

Spock was summoned to answer a query from the bridge while they were in Engineering, and Kirk took the opportunity to draw Scotty aside.

"What do you think of Lt.-Commander Spock?"

"A cold fish," was the immediate answer. "He's obsessed by logic. Those remarks of his, and that cold stare, are enough to inspire fear if you're in the wrong."

"Not a very nice picture," sighed Kirk.

"However, he does know his job back to front, and he is the best officer aboard - I have to say that in all fairness."

Kirk had no time to comment as Spock was returning, but Scotty's words impressed him; the combination of dislike and praise confirmed Pike's words. The fact did not relieve Kirk's anxiety.

The tour finished on the bridge, where Kirk was introduced to the officers on duty, after which Spock led him to his quarters.

"Congratulations, Mr. Spock, the ship is in perfect order," said Kirk. His friendly smile was met with nothing but a cold stare from the dark eyes.

"The ship is as she should be, sir. It is my duty to ensure this."

I can't even congratulate him! Kirk reflected. How will I ever get used to that cold impassivity of his? I'll keep wondering what he's thinking, and never guess...

They were now in the Captain's cabin, and Spock showed him the amenities; before leaving he stated, in the same cold and expressionless voice,

"Captain, I should not have to say this, but it may help you. I am your Science Officer, and I will endeavour to assist you with my utmost ability at all times." He then bowed slightly and left.

Kirk stared after him - the Vulcan had sensed his doubts, his uncertainty, and had apparently made an effort to reassure him. Was it coincidence? Kirk had read nothing in the dark eyes... was there nothing there to read?

With a sigh Kirk settled into his quarters with the knowledge that he had more than one challenge on his hands; and he had the feeling that the challenge of his command would be easy compared to the challenge of getting to know his Science Officer.

Why should I want to get to know him? he wondered. Is it simply because I can't read him, yet he seems to be able to read me? Or is it because he's half Human? I certainly saw no evidence of that...

Kirk took the tape Pike had left for him, and listened to the part concerning Spock.

"You'll find Lt.-Commander Spock to be a most able and trustworthy officer. Many were the times when I was glad to have him under my command. However, he's not like us - he's an alien, a Vulcan. I saw very little evidence of his being half Human. Your Science Officer is a very private person. He likes solitude, lives for his scientific work and research, and cares little for company. That's the way he wants it, I suggest you respect it as I did. I tried to draw him out after his promotion to Science Officer, partly because I was curious about him, and partly because I prefer to know my immediate subordinates. I failed. Most of the crew are used to him by now. He's fair, and they respect that; but they don't like him. Don't let it bother you if you fail to get to know him - he'll be invaluable to you just the same."

Kirk turned the tape off. It was clear from his tour that the ship was in first class condition and running smoothly, proof that Spock was an able officer. The Captain didn't care for the impression he gave, though; how could anyone actually like solitude...?

His reverie was interrupted when McCoy came bursting in. "Jim, sorry I wasn't here to welcome you! I tried to be here, but I was detained by a difficult case at the Starbase hospital."

"A doctor's work is never done," smiled Kirk. "That's what you used to say. Sit down, tell me about the ship, everything."

"Do you mean about a certain pointed-eared Vulcan?" asked McCoy with a knowing smile.

"Well... yes," agreed Kirk, grinning back.

"You've the best computer aboard with him! Wish it didn't make him right so often."

"Humans don't like that," Kirk reflected aloud. "How do you get on with him?"

"I don't know," replied McCoy thoughtfully. "I've not been aboard for very long, as you know, but I'm damned if I know what makes him tick - apart from his logic. Me, a top psychologist - and that Vulcan defeats me!"

"He's not Human, Bones."

"That's why, I expect. Just try to get a reaction from him, you'll see. I even insulted him once, and he thanked me in that icy manner of his. Made me feel

I'd paid him a compliment by saying he was inhuman - he almost made me feel that to be Human was to be inferior."

"That was clever of him. Any other reaction?"

"None. Whatever I say, whatever anyone says to him, leaves him quite unperturbed."

"There's something about him," Kirk said thoughtfully. "I'm not sure what... perhaps inner strength."

"That alien has an armour about him that nothing will break. What there is behind it - if anything - is quite unknown."

"In other words, he's a challenge to you," Kirk smiled. "His coldness must be hard to put up with at times."

"You'll get used to it, as we did. He does help by keeping to himself. However, to be fair, he's good in a crisis. For instance, he's never likely to panic, and he'll go to any lengths to save a life if he can. He has admirable qualities, like courage and loyalty. That's why even those who don't like him, respect him."

"The more I hear and see of Lt.-Commander Spock, the more he interests me. Wish me luck - I might get through his armour."

"I hope it's worth the effort! Mind you, I've not had much time to study him."

"You've had more than your share of trouble, I know," Kirk said gently.

"I've settled in quite well, and the past is over and done with," McCoy replied with a finality Kirk respected. The Captain guessed, however, that his friend was putting a brave face on it for his benefit. Maybe the past was still a ghost to be laid... He'd keep an eye on McCoy, and be ready to help if he could.

The Enterprise left orbit around Starbase 1 for her first assignment, which was routine, and during the next few days Kirk familiarised himself with the ship and the crew. He met no difficulty, and quickly proved a popular Captain, his warm personality and his love for the ship winning everyone over.

On the technical side he nearly made a few mistakes due to his lack of familiarity with the Enterprise, which was a more advanced type of ship than the others he had served on before. On each occasion Spock stepped in so smoothly and unobtrusively that no-one noticed. Kirk drew Spock aside afterwards to thank him, and met the usual cold stare.

"I was simply doing my duty, sir. A Captain has to be perfect."

"Perfection is not a Human characteristic, Mr. Spock. If you expect it from me, you'll be disappointed."

"I do not expect anything, sir, so the question is irrelevant. The running of the ship requires perfection from the Captain - it must be provided."

Kirk did not argue, but he felt chilled. Perfection did not appeal to him at all, yet he knew that Spock was right as far as the crew's attitude was concerned.

Two incidents Kirk did not care for took place a short while later, although neither proved to be serious. Several new crewmembers had come aboard at Starbase 1, and he heard a couple of them speculating about the telepathic abilities of Vulcans, and wondering if they would have to be careful. Kirk stepped in and quashed the idea in no uncertain terms, telling them that if they had taken the trouble to check their facts, they would have discovered that the Vulcans' code of ethics was sufficient safeguard.

Afterwards the Captain made a quick survey of his crew to make sure that such appalling ideas did not exist elsewhere. To his relief, they did not. The crew members who had been aboard for some time were well aware of Vulcan ethics.

Spock came to him when he heard. "Captain, you would have saved yourself time if you had asked me about this."

"Maybe, Mr. Spock, but prejudice is one of my pet hates, and I wanted to make sure there was none aboard."

"Logical," Spock agreed. "My main concern as a telepath is to keep Human thoughts out."

"Yes, I can see that it would be. Afraid of being influenced, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked lightly.

"No, sir, there is no risk of such an occurrence."

The voice was cold, as usual, and the Vulcan left stiffly, his attitude indicating his strong disapproval of the idea that he might become Human.

The second incident was one which sometimes occurred when a new Captain took over a ship. Kirk entered auxiliary control and heard Spock reprimand one of the new crewmembers in that icy tone of his, and his cutting remarks were unlikely to encourage a recurrence of the offence. The man was upset, not having heard Spock at his best before; Kirk's arrival made him hope for an ally - the Captain was known to be a nice fellow, not like that frozen alien.

"Sir," he appealed, "I meant no harm and I didn't know..."

"Then you should have made it your business to know," Kirk cut in sharply. "I'm not interested in excuses, Mr. Spock is perfectly justified in making sure you learn quickly. Mistakes in space can be costly. Dismissed."

The man left, throwing Kirk a dark look, which didn't bother the Captain in the slightest.

"There was no need for you to interfere, sir," said Spock with cold formality. "Antagonism against the Captain is not desirable."

"But against you it doesn't matter?"

"No, because I disregard emotions. Humans do not."

"Nevertheless, you are entitled to my support just as I am entitled to yours, Mr. Spock."

"Provided that you approve of my actions, Captain. You did not approve of my strong reprimand to the crewman."

He's reading me again! Kirk thought. "I thought it a little excessive, not unjustified, Mr. Spock," he corrected. "If you didn't go to such lengths, the crew wouldn't dislike you to such an extent."

"The emotions of the crew are none of my concern, sir."

"It's mine, though. I prefer a crew to obey without fear, because they like their officers, think of them as friends..." Kirk faltered, not quite sure why.

"If that is your concept, Captain, then I must resign. I have no wish to be liked, therefore I have no place on your ship."

Kirk shrugged, not wanting to make an issue of it. "There are exceptions to every rule, Mr. Spock. My concept, as you call it, is not rigid, and can accommodate other factors."

"Please specify."

"Loyalty, honesty, courage, among others. If you wanted compliments, Mr. Spock, you've got them!"

"Wanted... I do not understand."

"I meant it as a joke, take no notice. I hope you don't resign - I need you." The words came out very naturally, but Kirk wondered why he had said them.

"In that case, Captain," I will remain aboard," said Spock with dignity.

Kirk watched him leave, ruefully aware that Spock had never intended to resign, and had somehow manoeuvred the Captain into asking him to stay. For someone without emotions, the Vulcan certainly knew how to handle Humans. Spock was someone he wanted to know, without being quite sure why - there was something intriguing about his self-imposed isolation, his indifference to dislike... and yet he contributed so much to the ship...

During the next few days Kirk observed his Science Officer, and the crew's attitude to him during off-duty time, and came to the conclusion that Spock was indeed a very private person who preferred solitude. The Vulcan did not take advantage of his rank, and had meals in the canteen like everyone else. He even went to the recreation room, although he always sat alone with a review or a book. Alternatively he would look at a scientific tape on the viewscreen of his table, so absorbed that he never noticed what went on around him. Occasionally one of the crewmembers would make a sarcastic remark, wondering aloud if they all had the plague that he kept himself apart, but as it was obvious that Spock did not hear, the remarks were few and far between.

When Kirk made some enquiries, he was told that attempts had been made to get the Vulcan to join them, but without success. If the Science Officer thought he was too good to mix with Humans he could stay away, was the general opinion expressed.

Had they tried hard enough? wondered Kirk. Or did they give up too easily? Maybe Spock did not make it easy... but was it by design, or not?

One evening Kirk walked into the recreation room and saw Spock playing chess with the computer, intent on the game and oblivious of his surroundings. At least in this field I can meet him, thought the Captain. I was unbeatable at the Academy.

As he approached the solitary figure, though, Kirk slowed his pace, trying to think of the best way to ask, afraid of saying the wrong thing. What harm could there be in a game of chess? He didn't remember seeing any allusion to it in Pike's log, but then he hadn't looked at all of it yet.

"Mr. Spock, I'd be glad of a game if you can spare the time," he said at last.

The dark eyes lifted to his, registering a faint surprise that was quickly erased.

"I would not advise you to play, Captain."

"Why not?"

"You would probably lose."

"So what? It's only a game. I believe Chris Pike played."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you play often with him?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"He did not like to lose every time."

"Oh. Why didn't you let him win occasionally?"

"It did not occur to me to lie, sir."

It wouldn't! Kirk said to himself. Aloud, he asked, "Do you like to win?"

"The object of the game is the skill involved. To win or lose is of secondary importance."

"Agreed. In that case we can play."

"As you wish, Captain. You will lose."

"Mr. Spock, don't you realise that your statements can be irritating to a Human?"

"A Human emotion, no doubt. Your move, sir."

Kirk found it difficult to concentrate on the game, so fascinated was he by his opponent's attitude. Such absorption in a game!

"You can't win - you're playing with a computer, Jim," chuckled McCoy, who had just come in.

"Thank you, Doctor," said Spock, quite unruffled.

"I told you so, Jim. He thinks that to be a machine is preferable to being Human."

"Definitely, Doctor. A truth I learned a long time ago."

Kirk disliked that answer, perhaps because he didn't want to believe it, and yet he could not convince himself that Spock was lying...

"Your move, Captain. Checkmate in two moves."

"What? Oh yes, all right, you win, Mr. Spock," Kirk conceded, aware that he had not been concentrating.

"Your mind was not on the game, sir," said Spock, surprising Kirk again by his insight. "It is not logical to play chess in such a manner - you have the ability to play far better."

"Really, Mr. Spock!" protested McCoy. "You should be grateful that someone is willing to play with you for once. Don't play with him again, Jim."

"I apologise for my lack of concentration, Mr. Spock," said Kirk, ignoring McCoy. "Can we try again tomorrow?"

"For what you Humans call revenge?" queried Spock in his completely flat voice.

"No, Mr. Spock, just for another game. Next time I'll try harder to win." The Captain got up and added, "I believe we're both due on the bridge in a few minutes. Would you care to accompany me?"

"As you wish, sir," was the indifferent reply.

Kirk nearly protested that it wasn't an order, but managed to remain silent. The Vulcan certainly didn't intend to make things easy, he thought as he settled into the command chair with the same satisfaction as on his first day.

That evening in his quarters Kirk looked up Pike's log for any references to chess and found none, which meant that Pike didn't like it known that he was a bad loser.

When the Captain met Spock for the next game the Vulcan had begun to play with the computer, perhaps assuming that Kirk had lost interest. You won't get rid of me so easily! he thought as he sat down.

He concentrated this time, studying Spock's logical play with great care. Although he didn't win he made Spock fight for victory, and knew that once he was more familiar with the Vulcan's tactics, he could win.

Knowing that Spock in turn had been studying his game, Kirk said defiantly as he stood up, "I will win sooner or later, Mr. Spock." And not only at chess, he reflected with a smile.

The Vulcan's eyes watched him carefully for a second, then Spock replied, "You may win at chess, Captain."

Kirk nearly sat down in amazement. That Vulcan was reading him again! And his voice had an undertone of defiance...Good! That meant there was something to find. "So this is war!" he said with a smile.

"War, Captain? I do not understand."

"Mr. Spock, I have the feeling that you understand Humans far more than we understand Vulcans."

"In your case, sir, your features are so expressive that there is little merit in doing so."

"From a Human I'd take that as a compliment. Coming from you, it must be an insult."

"I was merely stating a fact, sir," said Spock, faintly outraged. "To insult my Captain..."

"All right, I'm not upset," grinned Kirk. "I'm starting to admire your logic, Mr. Spock. Believe me, if we have to face an enemy, I'd rather have you on my side."

"Thank you, sir."

Kirk was distracted from his 'battle' to get to know Spock by his concern for McCoy. The doctor was painfully trying to gather what self-esteem he had left, and to rebuild a life on the ashes of his old one. His ego had taken such a beating that Kirk's warm friendship was an invaluable help, as was Scotty's jovial humour. McCoy's divorce was in progress, and lawyers' letters and reports didn't help the doctor's peace of mind, reminding him as they did of a past he was trying to forget.

Because of this McCoy was no help about Spock; he was too absorbed in his own problems at the moment to be able to take much notice of an alien who remained aloof and unsociable. Kirk understood, and did not blame McCoy, but he felt guilty at spending most of his free time with the doctor, so the next evening he invited his Science Officer to share a meal in his quarters. He met with a polite but firm refusal - the Vulcan wasn't hungry, and was working on a scientific paper.

"I could make it an order, Mr. Spock."

"On what grounds, sir? I do not believe there is any regulation about forcing someone to take food against his wishes."

"I'd like to meet you outside duty hours, Mr. Spock. Isn't it normal that, as we have to work together, we should get to know each other?"

"It may be normal for Humans, sir. I am a Vulcan."

"You don't have to remind me!" flared Kirk, then he immediately felt guilty. He hadn't intended to say anything which might hurt... Hurt! That was a joke! The Vulcan certainly didn't look hurt. He wished he hadn't said it, though - Spock would never have done so. It made him understand, though, why Humans resented Spock at times - his unshakeable control did make them feel inferior.

"I'm sorry I said what I did," Kirk said directly. "I'd not dream of forcing my company on you. You may go."

Spock went to the door, but turned back. "Captain, my refusal did not imply any dislike for your company. Captain Pike must have told you that I prefer solitude. He respected my wish - I trust that you will do the same."

"If that's the way you want it, I have no choice. Did Pike extend this same invitation to you?"

"Yes, sir, after my promotion to Lieutenant-Commander, which made me a senior officer."

"Did you refuse?"

For the first time Kirk saw a slight hesitation before Spock answered, "No, I did not."

"Then why do you refuse now?"

"I should specify that I accepted Captain Pike's invitation once. It served no purpose, and I fail to see any logic in repeating the experience."

"What happened?" Kirk asked curiously.

"I have no wish to discuss it," was the icy reply. "I do wish to state, however, that the fault was not Captain Pike's - it was mine for having accepted. If you will excuse me, sir?"

Spock left with his usual dignity, leaving Kirk frowning in puzzlement. What could have happened during a simple meal between two officers? Spock had stated that the fault was his, but was he speaking out of loyalty? With an impatient shrug, Kirk went to see McCoy and Scotty - they at least would not object to his company!

The next day Kirk saw Spock in the canteen, eating alone at his table as usual, and absorbed in a scientific paper. Resolutely Kirk approached the table with his tray and asked if he could sit down. He had to say it twice before he was heard, and a slight surprise at Kirk's request appeared in the Vulcan's gaze for a fleeting instant.

"Captain, there are empty tables."

"I'd like to sit here if I may, Mr. Spock."

"As you wish, sir. You have as much right to this table as I have."

That sounds promising! Kirk thought sarcastically as he arranged the contents of his tray. He was aware, however, that he had to tread carefully, go slow. Spock had sensed his advances, and was puzzled by them, but probably thought they would soon stop, as all the others had. You'll find out how stubborn I can be, Mr. Spock of Vulcan! Only he's even more of a challenge than I anticipated, he reflected morosely. Can't think why I bother...

Yet he knew he wanted to bother, wanted to find out... he wasn't sure what he wanted to find out. His respect for his Science Officer's abilities grew, but it irked him to think that he knew nothing about Spock as a man. Though he acknowledged Spock's dignity, he wondered if the alien's loneliness was indeed his own choice, or if it had been forced upon him.

His reverie finished when he noticed that his food was getting cold, and he started eating. Spock had gone back to his review, and was oblivious of his presence. Kirk decided to jump in with both feet.

"Mr. Spock, do you prefer solitude because you're among Humans?"

Spock looked up and answered without hesitation, "No, sir."

"Is it then a Vulcan trait to prefer solitude?"

"At times, yes."

"Not all the time, then. Why do you prefer it all the time?"

"Is there a regulation against it?"

"You're evading the question, Mr. Spock."

"Sir, may I request permission to leave?"

"Answer my question first. What is so special about solitude?"

Spock visibly hesitated. Unknown to Kirk the words, "The freedom to be myself" were nearly drawn out of him by his Captain's determination. Vulcan self-discipline won, but Kirk guessed that he didn't get the true answer when Spock replied, "Nothing, sir."

"I'm lonely too, as you must know. Command does not allow many friends. Where is the logic in your refusal to share a small portion of that loneliness?"

"I doubt that my presence would be of assistance, Captain. Humans like Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott are far more suitable as company for you. I do realise that loneliness is forced upon you by your rank. The same does not apply to me - my loneliness is a logical choice."

Spock made a move to get up, but Kirk forestalled the movement. "Sit down, Mr. Spock, and clarify your statement. Why should loneliness be logical? Were you lonely on Vulcan?" asked the Captain with sudden insight.

"Yes, for obvious reasons," admitted Spock in his most frozen manner. "Now may I leave, sir? I would find further personal questions most distasteful, and any emotion they might provoke an insult."

"You may go, Mr. Spock," said Kirk in a soft voice.

Spock got up stiffly, and for the first time a hint of disdain was in his voice. "I fail to see what gratification Humans find in pitying someone, sir. However, feel free to indulge in what is obviously a satisfying occupation for you, no matter how insulting it is to me. I trust that no future reference will ever be made to this distasteful conversation?"

Kirk got up too, his expression fixed and impersonal. "None will ever be made, Mr. Spock, and you misunderstand my reaction. However, I will not pursue a subject which is so abhorrent to you."

Unnoticed by either of them McCoy had been standing nearby listening to the last part of their conversation, and he was outraged by Kirk's mild answer.

"Mr. Spock, is that the way to talk to your Captain...?"

"Shut up, Bones. Go away," said Kirk, with such a stern expression that McCoy retreated hastily. Kirk turned back to Spock, his features impersonal once again. "May I ask one last question?"

"If you must."

"Did you choose to be a Vulcan?"

"Naturally, it was the only logical choice. Is that all, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock. My congratulations on your achievement. You're a Vulcan I'm proud to know."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed the cold features, but it was gone in a flash and the Vulcan left the room. Kirk watched him leave, the crew members automatically making way for him, giving him the deference that was due to his rank.

McCoy came forward and took the vacant chair. "More frozen than ever! I don't know what all that was about, but I'd swear that Vulcan is made of ice. That heart of his has a purely physiological function... Jim, what's the matter with you? You look upset."

"I am upset."

"Why?"

"Because I hurt someone, as Humans so often do, without thinking first."

"If you're referring to Mr. Spock, you can't hurt him."

"You resent that, don't you? Just like all the others. So you try to pity him for having no emotions - a freak who'll never be Human like us."

"What's got into you? You're angry."

"Is what I said right?"

"I suppose so. Mr. Spock is half Human, after all - why should he be so different?"

"You're a doctor, and you don't even try to understand," Kirk said.

"What are you talking about? Do you mean that you understand Spock?"

"No, I'd not presume that much. Mr. Spock is a Vulcan, and they are a special people."

"Special? In what way?"

"Because of what they are."

"A race of cold-blooded computers? If Spock's a sample, no wonder the crew pity him."

"No, they don't!" snapped Kirk, flaring up so suddenly that McCoy was startled. "They tried to pity him, but they can't because Mr. Spock won't let them. Can you blame him for preferring dislike and solitude?"

"Do you mean he sets out to be disliked? That's crazy!"

"By Human standards, yes." Kirk's voice was tired now. "I've no right to blame anyone, I made the same mistake... Bones, I don't know if I'll ever get through to him, but if I fail I'll always regret that one mistake."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Jim; but how can I help?" asked McCoy, looking unhappy.

Kirk felt remorse. The doctor had enough on his plate at the moment, and couldn't be blamed for not bothering about a complex challenge like the Vulcan.

"Forget it, Bones. You're doing a fine job with the crew. I'm happy to have you aboard."

"You're a nice man, Jim Kirk," said McCoy, his gruff tone hiding his emotion. "I know I'm not functioning as I should yet. About Spock... take care. Whoever or whatever he is, he's not like us."

"I never thought he was!" grinned Kirk as he got up and left the room. He went to his quarters, glad to be off duty. He had much to think about.

For once he had made progress. He knew now that solitude was a way of life for Spock because he didn't fit on Vulcan; yet he was not at home among Humans either - he was different from both. Having Vulcan features, and having been brought up on Vulcan, it was logical that he had chosen the Vulcan way of life - but at what cost? Kirk couldn't even guess.

Then Spock had joined Starfleet, and had been assigned to a Human vessel at his own request. Why he should have such difficulty in adapting to life among Humans, Kirk didn't know. Did he resent the pity they tried to show him? Or the personal questions Humans loved to ask? If so, no wonder he had withdrawn further and further...

Perhaps there was a clue in Pike's log, which he had not finished reading. After running the tape for a while Kirk found a reference to Spock, and that invitation to share a meal.

"I asked my new Science Officer to dinner tonight, and I wish I hadn't bothered. All my questions were answered by yes or no, or by silence. I'd have liked to know more about Vulcan ways and customs; some of them must be strange, even funny, perhaps. A couple of pals at the Academy asked me to let them know if I found anything peculiar. Fat chance with such a cold, morose individual! I've been told that no-one has succeeded in getting anything out of him, and after receiving one of his freezing looks, I can understand why they don't persevere!"

Kirk turned the tape off angrily. How could Pike, and probably others, have done that to Spock? How could they subject him to avid curiosity, endless questions about the ways of Vulcan, even try to pity him for having no emotions?

The Captain realised, however, that most of this was speculation on his part, with Pike's log as thin evidence. Maybe the former Captain and the others had been friendly towards Spock at first, and had been rejected at once...

His speculation fitted, though. It was against Spock's very nature to answer personal questions, so he had come to the conclusion that the fault was his, and had refrained from imposing his company on anyone outside duty hours. Logically, it was up to him to fit in with the Human crew, and if he could not to take what steps he could to minimise the fact so that the ship ran smoothly.

Kirk wondered if Spock had tried to fit in at first. Perhaps he had, only to be hurt, insulted, by pity and curiosity. So he had set out to be disliked instead, by making himself even more Vulcan than he was as the one defence he had.

His rigid control of his emotions, achieved at what could only have been great personal cost, enabled him to be a full Vulcan in Human eyes, something he could not be among his own kind. It was no small achievement to have earned the respect he had, no matter how grudgingly it was given. He had earned dislike, too, and solitude... but Spock was used to that...

As he settled to sleep Kirk tried to imagine the Vulcan's loneliness, but shied away from it with a shudder. He made an effort to think of more pleasant

things and at last he fell asleep.

A nightmare set in. He was alone, in utter darkness, and he knew that enemies were stalking him, but he couldn't see, couldn't understand the darkness, and he was alone... so alone...

He woke with a stifled scream, unable to remember having had such a nightmare since he was a child. His mind had followed his thoughts as he slept and evoked what it must have been like for Spock, perhaps from his childhood.

Maybe it's too late, reflected Kirk, anxious and worried. Who could blame Spock if he had lost all ability to experience any emotion? Perhaps he had become far more Vulcan than any Vulcan. If I'm right, Kirk's thought continued, if he became what he is through being hurt, how can I avoid hurting him further? And... how much have I hurt him already?

Once again Kirk was distracted from his efforts to get to know Spock by McCoy's troubles. The strain on the doctor had been increasing for a while, and the next day the notice of his divorce came through.

At least now it's final, which might help, thought Kirk, heading for the doctor's cabin as soon as his duty shift ended. He found McCoy half drunk, which made Kirk very angry at the woman who had done such harm to a fine man. With Scotty's help he tried to keep the doctor's mind off the painful memories. Although McCoy had been expecting the news, the final end of his marriage still hurt, for the doctor had loved his wife deeply.

Kirk and Scotty took it in turns to keep an eye on him. They made sure he always had someone to talk to whenever he needed it. Kirk did not begrudge the time spent with his friend - it was worth it if in some small way it helped.

It took Kirk a while to notice that his paperwork and routine tasks were done by Spock in an unobtrusive and efficient manner. He appreciated it, but felt guilty - the Vulcan must be working non-stop. After making sure that Scotty was with McCoy that evening, Kirk buzzed Spock's cabin and entered at his invitation, looking around curiously at the simple ornaments, the lyre, and the chess set.

"Did you wish to talk to me, Captain, or did you only wish to see my quarters?" Spock asked in an icy tone.

/Another mistake!/ thought Kirk guiltily.

"I wanted to thank you, Mr. Spock. You've been doing most of my work, and it's not fair. In future, don't take so much in hand. I'll see to it."

"Very well, sir. Am I to assume that Dr. McCoy is now able to function normally?"

"Not quite, perhaps, but he'll make it. I'm sorry my concern for him made you work overtime, Mr. Spock."

"It is normal for a Captain to wish to retain the services of his Chief Medical officer, no matter how over-emotional he might be."

"Bones had plenty of reasons you'd know nothing about!" Kirk said sharply. "If you knew you'd make allowances..."

"Would I?" interrupted Spock. "I have no wish to know which extreme emotions are disturbing the doctor at the moment. However, I trust that he will recover."

Kirk did not say 'No thanks to you', because Spock had helped by doing so much work. Changing the subject, he pointed to the lyre.

"Do you play?"

"Not often, sir."

"I've never heard the sound of a Vulcan lyre. Would you oblige?"

"I would rather not, sir."

"Why not?"

"Music is a matter of personal inclination. You would not appreciate mine."

"How do you know?"

"You are Human. Will that be all, sir?"

Kirk went to the door, but turned back. "Is it a crime to be Human, Mr. Spock?"

"No, sir - no more than it is a crime to be Vulcan."

"Is being half Vulcan and half Human a crime, then?"

"No, sir."

"It is a life sentence, I guess," remarked Kirk thoughtfully.

"Whatever it is, it is my concern alone, sir. I am sure Dr. McCoy needs your company - do not keep him waiting." The dismissal was haughty, the rejection total.

"At least McCoy has friends, which is more than can be said for you!" Kirk burst out at last, his patience giving way.

"An accurate statement," agreed the Vulcan calmly. "Let me remind you, however, that to miss something one never had is illogical."

Kirk refrained from comment and went out, his anger replaced by sadness and regret. He had tried to get through again, but Spock wouldn't let him, and frustration had made him say things he had never intended. Spock's manner when he had acknowledged having no friends had made it appear normal. It was useless, he couldn't get through to his Science Officer either on duty or off; perhaps on leave he would have more success?

Spock's comments on the Vulcan lyre aroused his curiosity, and he asked if anyone had ever heard it; those few who had agreed that it sounded odd, with very weird notes. Perhaps it was just as well that Spock had refused to play.

As it happened their next port of call was at a shore leave planet. All the missions had been routine up to now, which was normal enough for a ship with a new Captain. It gave him time to familiarise himself with the vessel and her crew. However, because the space exploration programme was due to start shortly, and it could be months before a suitable shore leave planet was found in unknown space, permission for leave had been granted now, with a scientific survey to be conducted at the same time.

The planet in question was a beautiful world without inhabitants or hostile life forms, ideal for shore leave. Kirk had no right to any leave yet, but he could take a few days while the survey was being done. A simple camping holiday would be nice, perhaps with Spock. He should go with McCoy really, but the doctor could go with Scotty...

His mind made up, the Captain called the Science Officer to his quarters; Spock needed leave after all the extra work. The Vulcan handed him a tape.

"The science team has been selected for your approval, Captain. With your permission, I will take charge."

"Permission denied. You need leave, Mr. Spock, you're not a machine."

"An opinion which is not shared by Dr. McCoy or the crew, Captain."

Kirk looked at him uncertainly. Was that a joke? Probably not. "You will obey my order and have leave on that planet."

"Yes, sir." The cold voice managed to convey sheer boredom at the prospect.

"I'll have a few days camping holiday myself, and I'd be pleased to have your company, Mr. Spock."

The dark eyes did not become any less icy, but a slightly puzzled expression appeared in Spock's gaze, as though he was wondering why his Captain persisted.

"Humans find my company a strain, sir. I would recommend that you go on leave with Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott."

"If I'm willing to take the risk it's my affair," protested Kirk.

"No, Captain. Shore leave means relaxation and enjoyment to Humans, neither of which I could provide or appreciate. To go on leave with you is illogical."

"Are you saying that I'm illogical to ask you?"

"Yes, sir. A Human trait to be deplored in a Starship Captain."

Kirk's initial angry reaction soon vanished; technically he could charge the Vulcan with insolence, but what would be the point? Anyway, perhaps Spock was right - a shared leave might be an unbearable strain on them both.

"I will not force my company on you, Mr. Spock. I'll follow your advice and go with Bones and Scotty."

"A wise decision, Captain."

"You will go on leave, though. My order stands."

"Yes, sir." Spock left, stiff with disapproval.

However, Kirk did not go on leave with McCoy and Scotty, but by himself. Maybe the solitude would enable him to think of a way to get through to Spock. He selected a suitable site, and had camping equipment prepared, then went to the transporter room to beam down.

"Mr. Spock's site is not far from your own, Captain," said the Transporter Chief.

"I wonder if he meant to do that?"

"No, sir, he beamed down before you."

"That explains it. How far is he?"

"About three kilometers."

It was far enough not to get in each others way, so Kirk decided not to change his site, and beamed down.

He set up camp near a small forest and had supper, after which he sat near the fire, admiring the sunset in the red sky. Nearly asleep, he was woken by faint notes of music, and tried to find their origin. As he approached the sounds drew him irresistibly. It was not a surprise to see Spock playing.

Holding his breath not to be seen or heard Kirk listened, fascinated, immersed into the sounds from the Vulcan lyre. The harmonious notes floated into the air, rising with the breeze, on a breathtakingly high plane, above all things. The Captain let himself be carried into it. The perfection, the sheer artistry, was overwhelming, every single note clear, pure, making a faultless pattern, a beautiful symphony of sounds.

Why had Spock refused to play?

Kirk listened with more attention, conscious of something hidden, something unknown he had missed. It was fleeting, difficult to notice, but the Captain heard it. Underneath the flowing current of the harmony discordant notes existed. He realised with admiration how cleverly the discordant sounds were hidden, mingling so well with the rest that they were part of the whole piece. Kirk came to sense that behind the faultless facade a haunting loneliness pervaded the music, not spoiling it, but giving it a freedom, a dignity nothing could mar.

How could anyone call such music ugly?

Or did Spock hide to play like this? The Vulcan had no idea Kirk's camp was so near. He would never play like this in public, for it revealed too much.

The answer was simple, after all, thought Kirk. Spock preferred solitude because he found in it the freedom to be himself. Only did he accept what he was,

the half Vulcan, half Human combination? Kirk had the feeling he did not.

The Captain took care to depart unseen, and thereafter avoided taking his walks near Spock's camp, feeling that he had no right to intrude. Besides, Kirk did appreciate solitude at times - when he had problems, for instance.

A couple of days later Kirk thought he heard cries from Spock's direction, but they did not sound like the Vulcan. He approached cautiously to investigate, and saw the Vulcan rescuing a furry animal from a carnivorous plant. The small grey beast had a broken paw; Spock made a splint and fastened it on with a gentleness that amazed Kirk. Then his Science Officer fetched some food and water for the small animal, after which he made a shelf on a nearby tree for protection from possible predators.

"You remind me of a cat I knew on Earth," he heard Spock say as he stroked the animal's fur. 'He was the famous 'cat who walked by himself'. I understood him, a dignified creature relying on no-one. Do not rely on me, little one, I shall be gone in a few days; but I will keep an eye on you till then."

Kirk could not move, too surprised by the new facet he was discovering to the supposedly cold Vulcan, the compassion for something hurt, the careful gentleness. Did it apply only to animals? Some Humans were like that...

Too late he saw Spock turn, and as the Vulcan caught sight of him there was violent anger in his eyes for a second, then the rigid control took over.

"I trust this incident will be fascinating for the crew to comment on, sir," said the icy voice.

Kirk would have given anything not to have been seen. Without a word he returned to his own camp - Spock would see for himself if he told anyone about this.

Taking care not to go near the Vulcan's camp again, Kirk explored his surroundings during the next few days, enjoying the sight of unusual plants or life forms. He loved swimming, and the map told him there was a river not too far away. It meant passing near Spock's camp, but he wouldn't stop or even look.

He left the next morning and enjoyed the fast pace he set himself. He was pleased to see no sign of Spock, for it meant he had not intruded.

The map did not prove accurate, and it took him quite a long time to get to the river, but he heard the sound of running water at last, and ran enthusiastically ahead. A few minutes later he fell heavily into soft ground.

Unhurt, he tried to get up, and found he could not. His light pack had disappeared, and worse, his feet were sinking. He was being sucked in... it was a swamp!

Forcing himself to keep still Kirk tried to grab one of the strange plants that grew within reach, but it came away in his hand. The suction was increasing, and he had no way of saving himself.

His communicator was lost, dislodged from his belt as he fell. With no other choice he called for help, doubting that Spock would hear.

He had reckoned without the Vulcan's sharp hearing, but when Spock, who had been bathing in the river some distance away, arrived on the scene the situation was critical. Kirk's body was already under the surface, only his head and shoulders above ground.

The Science Officer acted quickly. He pulled a strong creeper from a tree and threw it to his Captain.

"Put it around your shoulders and hang on. I will pull you out."

Kirk did not need to be told twice. Securely tied, he signalled to Spock, wondering if this would work - the swamp had him fast.

The Vulcan had fastened the creeper around himself, and used his whole body to pull with all his strength. The Captain rose about two inches with an awful noise of suction giving way, but the grip of the swamp was strong and he sank back nearly the same distance. If Spock let go he would be drawn under quickly. A communicator would have saved him, but Spock had come to his help wearing only the pair of shorts he had been swimming in, and he could not leave Kirk to go back for it. There was no other way but for the Vulcan to pull him out.

The Captain was not sure it would work, but it was his only chance. Spock had managed to get the creeper round a tree trunk to ease the strain, but the tree began to give way, and the Vulcan had to take the full load again.

Kirk shivered, dreading such a death. If Spock could not hold him... He looked up and met his Science Officer's eyes, and their expression filled him with confidence. Spock would never let go - they would survive or die together.

Wishing he could do more to help that simply keeping still, Kirk watched his companion's efforts and understood the meaning of Vulcan strength. Slowly, the swamp was being made to return its victim. Though Spock had to stop occasionally to take a deep breath he always returned quickly to his task. Kirk would never have believed there could be so much strength in the Vulcan's lean frame, but he was becoming concerned. Spock was having difficulty in breathing, the creeper cutting into him so tightly it hampered his efforts.

At last the Vulcan won, and Kirk's body was drawn out of the swamp, to fall heavily on firm ground. Spock was thrown hard against a tree, and lay trying to get his breath back. The Captain staggered to the nearby river, using a stick to make sure the ground was safe. By the time he came out, feeling better, Spock had joined him and gave him a hand up the bank.

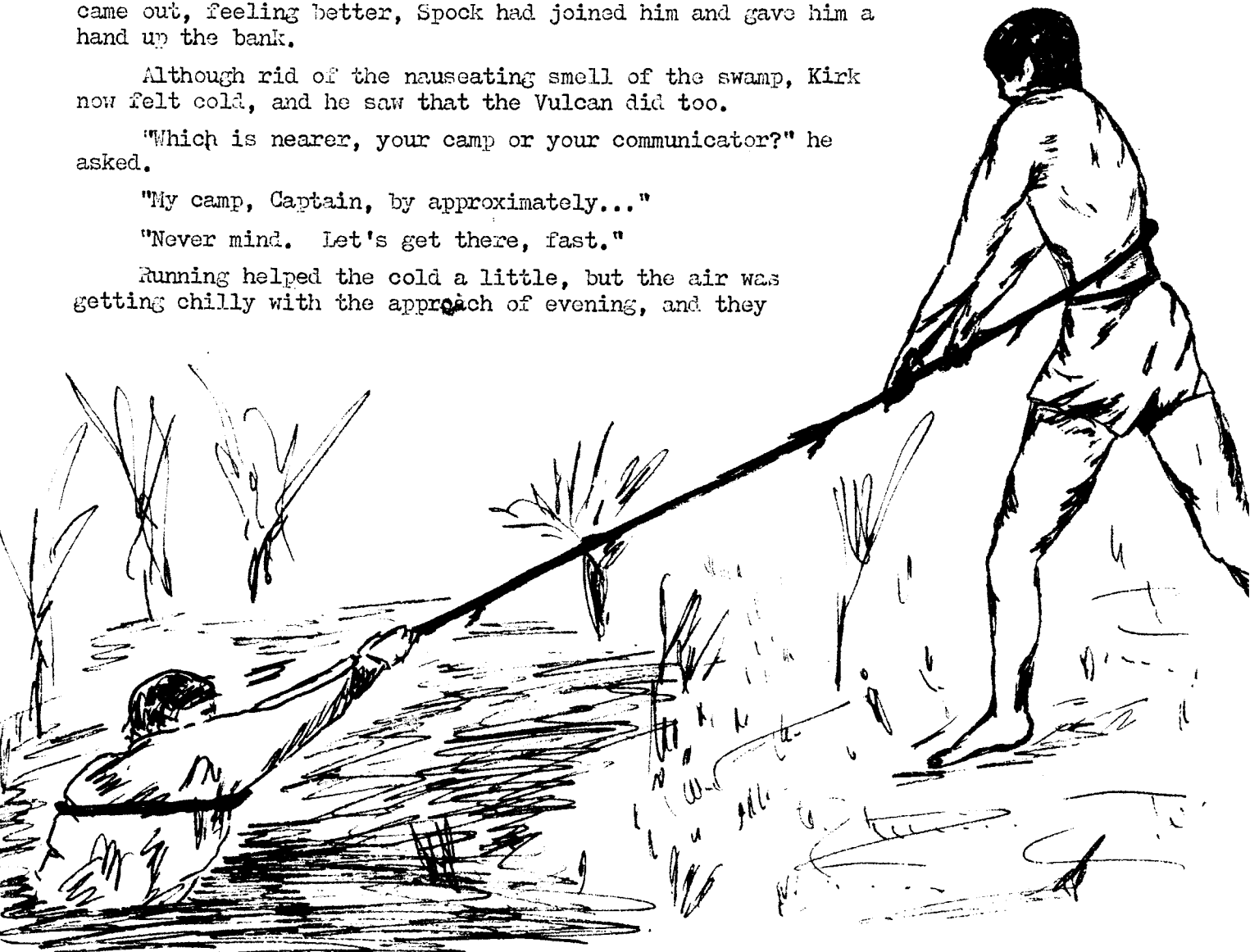
Although rid of the nauseating smell of the swamp, Kirk now felt cold, and he saw that the Vulcan did too.

"Which is nearer, your camp or your communicator?" he asked.

"My camp, Captain, by approximately..."

"Never mind. Let's get there, fast."

Running helped the cold a little, but the air was getting chilly with the approach of evening, and they



were not sorry to get inside the small dome, where the infrared heater soon made it as warm as an oven.

Kirk threw off the blankets Spock had given him, and noticed for the first time the ugly green bruise on his Science Officer's back. Drops of green blood had oozed out in several places where bits of tree trunk had embedded themselves.

"Why didn't you tell me?" snapped Kirk. "We should have gone for your communicator and called the ship."

"It is only a superficial wound, sir. There is no need to bother Dr. McCoy, who needs his leave. In any case, we will be returning to the ship tomorrow."

"It needs seeing to. Lie down and keep still - that's an order."

With the supplies in the first aid kit Kirk removed all the bits of wood he could see, cleaned the wound, and applied a dressing, after which he gave a shot against possible infection. Spock in turn made him swallow a couple of tablets in case something poisonous in the swamp had infiltrated his body, and they settled to sleep.

Kirk woke during the night stifling a scream, and he felt cold and shivery again; he knew it was only delayed shock, but it annoyed him to have Spock there.

"Only a nightmare," he explained shortly. "When I was a child I had a nasty experience with a quicksand - today brought it back. I suppose you know what a nightmare is?"

"Yes, sir. I realise how painful the incident must have been for you, yet you showed no sign of it."

"I am now! I told you I wasn't perfect, Mr. Spock. I was terrified in that swamp." The confession escaped him, but it no longer mattered that Spock knew.

"To know fear is normal, Captain. The merit is in mastering it."

"From you that must be a compliment!" grinned Kirk, settling back to sleep.

By morning he felt back to normal, so nothing in the swamp had affected him. Spock was nowhere to be seen, and Kirk was about to get up when the Vulcan entered with his Captain's breakfast all ready. He was immaculate in his uniform, and Kirk guessed that he had not only collected his communicator and pack, but had also been to his Captain's camp to get the food. It made Kirk feel a little lazy, but he was sure Spock had not intended it to do so; he thanked his Science Officer briefly, and asked how his back felt. He was relieved when Spock reported there was no sign of infection.

While he ate Kirk was wondering how best to thank Spock for saving his life. Pushing his empty tray aside he got up and helped the Vulcan pack up camp. It was the last day of the shore leave. Spock remained silent, although he insisted on running the small medical scanner over Kirk to make sure he was all right.

At last Kirk said simply, "Thank you for saving my life, Mr. Spock."

"It was my duty, sir."

That's right, make it sound ordinary! thought Kirk with a heavy frown. I know and you know that you risked your life to save me. "Mr. Spock..."

"Sir," Spock interrupted, "I wish to point out that the emotion Humans call gratitude is illogical and unnecessary."

And that takes care of that! reflected the Captain with a sigh. "Very well, Mr. Spock, we'll say no more about it. I trust you made a note of the swamp on the map, and will feed the information into the records."

"Yes, sir. It is possible that the swamp is seasonal in occurrence."

Without further conversation Spock accompanied Kirk to his camp and helped him to pack. Kirk discovered that he accepted the alien's presence readily, remote though Spock was. There was nothing wrong with silence occasionally - many Humans talked too much.

They beamed back on time, and Kirk found he was carrying Spock's lyre. He handed it to the Vulcan after they had stepped down from the transporter pad.

"A beautiful instrument, Mr. Spock. Take good care of it."

Spock's gaze locked onto his, and the Science Officer guessed that the Captain had heard him play.

"There's a saying among Humans, that silence is golden," smiled Kirk, trying to convey reassurance.

McCoy, who had been waiting in the transporter room, watched them with a frown. "Did you share your camping holiday with Mr. Spock, Jim?"

"No, we met by accident. Mr. Spock, have the doctor check your back."

"There is no need, sir. The wound is slight, and is healing perfectly."

Kirk knew that the Vulcan did not want questions from McCoy, but there could be bits of bark left in the wound - he was no doctor.

"I'm afraid I must make it an order," he said regretfully, trying to indicate that he would not talk.

McCoy naturally ordered Spock to sickbay without further delay, while Kirk settled back into his quarters. Afterwards he went to sickbay to get the latest medical reports, and found McCoy putting the final touches to Spock's dressing.

"You were right, Jim - I found two minute bits of wood in the wound. How did your Science Officer get those into him?"

Kirk saw Spock's tightly-closed mouth, and nearly smiled. "What does he say?" he asked.

"That he fell against a tree."

"Then he fell against a tree," Kirk agreed blandly, picking up the reports and going to the door. As he was leaving, on impulse, he winked at Spock, although he wasn't sure if the Vulcan would know the meaning of a wink.

During the next few days Kirk sensed Spock's gaze on him, observing, watching... In the canteen McCoy and Scotty asked the Captain about his holiday, and Kirk replied with small details, never once mentioning anything to do with Spock or their adventure.

On the way out he met Spock's fixed gaze, and asked, "Anything wrong, Mr. Spock?"

"No, sir." The Vulcan's attitude was, if anything, colder than ever, as though to deny that anything had happened to change their relationship.

This hurt Kirk. Hadn't his silence proved anything? It would have done to a Human, but Spock was Vulcan... Kirk sighed, resigning himself to his lack of success, but not ready to give up. As far as he was concerned the swamp incident had shown him how completely he could rely on his Science Officer, and the knowledge made him find his command a little less lonely, for the familiar blue shirt at his side gave him added confidence. He considered telling Spock so, but did not - it wasn't easy talking to a Vulcan.

There was great interest aboard when the space exploration programme started a few days later. The unknown, as always, held a magical attraction for Humans. Spock remained his usual self, as was to be expected.

They explored the first solar system, and discovered one uninhabited planet possibly suitable for colonisation. The preliminary scans from the ship revealed no apparent danger, the only drawback being that the upper layers of the atmosphere interfered with the transporter, and allowed only a superficial sensor reading.

Kirk went down in a shuttlecraft with a scientific team for a detailed survey, on which the U.F.P. would base its decision whether or not to colonise. Spock and McCoy were part of the team.

Preliminary findings were favourable, although the science department was puzzled by the dryness of the land and the scarcity of water.

Kirk saw Spock working with his tricorder some distance from the shuttlecraft, and joined him.

"Found anything of interest? This looks like a river bed we're standing in."

"An accurate guess, Captain. This is a river bed, and there should be a river. I believe this world may have very odd climatic changes, and further studies are indicated."

"Get extra personnel from the Science Department if necessary, Mr. Spock; we can't spend too long finding answers. Besides, this world needs more water to be of use."

As though on cue a sudden roar brought their hands to their ears. Spock looked at his tricorder and shouted, "Get away, Captain!"

It was too late. Neither had a chance to escape the torrent of water which picked them up like feathers and hurled them down the slope. The two officers managed to hang on to each other, but could do nothing else. The force of that mass of water was unbeatable, they had no hope of fighting it; it was hard enough simply to remain afloat, and to keep their heads out of the water. Kirk was the first to see the dark hole towards which they were inexorably pushed, but there was nothing he could do, and they fell into total darkness.

The drop was vertical, and seemed endless. Half-choked, coughing and fighting for breath, they touched bottom at last and kicked hard to reach the surface, gasping until their breathing settled to a more normal rate.

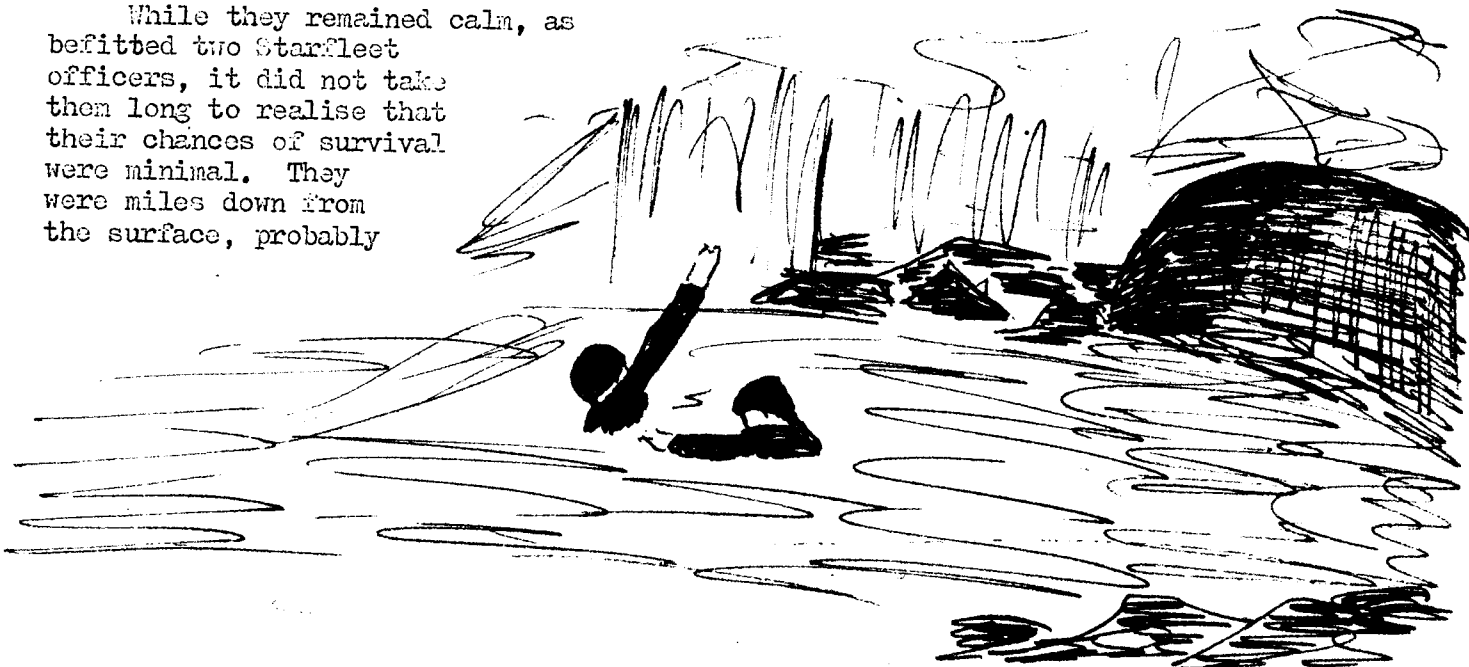
Now able to observe their surroundings, they found themselves swimming in a large underground lake. Apart from the water, all that could be seen were enclosing walls of rock, in which luminous bands gave a faint light which only indicated the extent of their predicament. All their instruments were lost, but they knew they must be deep inside an underground complex of caves.

"There is a ledge to the right, Captain," Spock indicated.

They were swimming towards it when Kirk yelled. Something had trapped his foot so hard he wondered if his ankle was broken. Spock dived, and managed to separate the two edges of the huge shell that was responsible.

They made it to the ledge, where the Science Officer did what he could to help. The ankle did not seem to be broken, but it was badly bruised and very painful. Spock made a bandage with his shirt, but was unable to think of any way to alleviate the pain. Kirk insisted that it felt better, however, and the two officers examined their situation, which was 'somewhat precarious', as Spock pointed out. That, the Captain decided, was the understatement of the year.

While they remained calm, as befitted two Starfleet officers, it did not take them long to realise that their chances of survival were minimal. They were miles down from the surface, probably



miles away from the dark hole they were pushed into, with a maze of tunnels and caves all around. Which tunnel led to the surface was anybody's guess. The crew would look for them, of course, but the task would amount to finding the needle in the proverbial haystack.

However, Kirk and Spock did not waste time thinking about the crew's problems - they had enough of their own. Although water was plentiful, they had no food, and it was rather chilly. At least they had light - they discovered that the luminous lines were made by tiny animals crawling on the rocks and leaving trails of light.

"We can drink, and we can see. I suppose it could be worse," said Kirk calmly.

"Indeed, Captain. The light may be the deciding factor in our survival."

"Provided we can find water higher up. Is there anything we could carry it in?"

Spock searched the ledge, and found several large shells.

"Good," said the Captain. "You can take water when you leave, Mr. Spock."

The Science Officer filled the shells, then used their belts to tie them together in a chain which he slung over his shoulder.

"Safe journey, Mr. Spock," smiled Kirk.

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Am I to understand that our misfortune has robbed you of logic, Captain? You are coming with me. I fail to see why I should have to state the obvious."

"And you talk of logic! I can hardly walk, let alone climb."

"You can if I support you."

"Our progress will be so slow we'll both die. Mr. Spock, go at once. I'm giving you an order."

"I regret that I cannot obey an order which is in direct contradiction to my oath, sir. You are coming with me, if I have to carry you."

Without further ado Spock picked him up and ignored his protests until Kirk gave up.

"At least put me down and let me walk leaning on you!"

The Vulcan complied, but held on to him firmly. "Have you a preference for a specific tunnel, Captain?"

"None whatever. You choose."

Spock took the middle one and they started their perilous journey. They moved as quickly as they could, which helped a little, but the cold and damp made it difficult to stop shivering. Kirk knew that if he had stayed behind his chances of survival would have been nil. Spock knew it too, obviously.

The tunnel was full of loose rocks which were an added hazard, but it sloped upwards, slowly at first then more steeply, so that it gave them hope. Kirk had to concentrate on not crying out, the pain in his ankle was excruciating in spite of the minimal weight he put on it. Spock guessed, and picked him up when the going was too rough.

The time came when Kirk no longer protested. He could not go on, and called a halt. Spock gave him some water, and advised him to sleep for a while; the Captain was so exhausted that he fell asleep immediately.

When he woke he felt so hot he could hardly breathe. The walls, the rocks were wavering in front of his eyes, his head throbbed with pain. Spock was nowhere to be seen. Had he gone and left...? No! No matter how ill he felt, Kirk did not believe that.

"Mr. Spock!" he croaked. "Water..."

After a few minutes he heard the sound of someone running, and the Vulcan's

face revealed his shock at the state the Captain was in. He gave Kirk a drink, and bathed his forehead.

"You were sleeping normally when I left for a reconnaissance, Captain."

"Yes... I'm ill... not my ankle..." groaned Kirk.

"All I can assume is that the shellfish which trapped your ankle was poisonous, and infected your blood."

"That must be it," agreed Kirk. "The skin was broken, and the wound was open."

"Unfortunately I am not a doctor, and have no remedy."

"I know; you can't do the impossible, Mr. Spock. I wish you'd save yourself... if I'm to die, I'd prefer not to have your death on my conscience."

"Illogical, Captain. You would not be responsible for my death."

Kirk did not argue. He had no make an effort not to grab at the water. The fever was increasing, and he became delirious before falling into a restless sleep.

Spock carried him at a fast pace, aware that their water, although he kept it all for the Captain, would not last long. Kirk woke at times, and realised that he was being carried, but it felt more like a dream. He begged for water often, and drank avidly.

A couple of days later Spock halted in a large cave from which several tunnels led off. The water was finished, and Kirk was no better. Spock put his burden on the ground as gently as he could, and set off to check each tunnel in search of water, which was now the prime necessity. The difficulties of the journey, and Kirk's weight, added to the discomfort he was suffering from the cold damp atmosphere, so he maintained as fast a pace as he could in an effort to get warm.

Kirk woke, gasping for water as usual, but his head was a little clearer for the moment, and he saw he was alone. Fear hit him, not fear that Spock had deserted him - the idea did not even cross his mind - but fear that his companion had met with an accident.

Crawling painfully over the rocky ground he went to each tunnel entrance in turn and called. He heard an answer, and Spock appeared a few minutes later.

"Captain, I have found water!" His voice sounded faintly excited. He picked Kirk up and hurried down a slope and through a hole in the rocks. It was like entering paradise - they were in a warm cave, with hot springs on one side. A stream ran on the other side, small, but filled with clear water.

Such a shelter should have helped Kirk, but after a temporary improvement the high fever returned, making him feel hot and cold in turn, and delirium often set in. When conscious for short periods Kirk came to rely on the Vulcan's presence at his side, on the gentle hands that soothed and comforted, on the security of not being alone. Sleep was difficult, with recurring nightmares from which Kirk often awoke to find himself holding on to Spock tightly. This worried him, knowing what a private person his companion was, yet not once was comfort denied him when he sought it in his worst moments of delirium. While the fever lasted Spock did not attempt to move Kirk from the cave; it would have been illogical when the warm shelter might save his Captain's life.

The day came at last when Kirk woke free from the fever, although he felt weak and helpless. Spock's hand touched his forehead, and his own hand settled over it briefly.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," he murmured. "I believe the fever has gone."

"I believe so, Captain," replied Spock, as formal as usual as he offered him some water. Kirk drank, thinking that for once Spock had not protested at the thanks. Was that progress?

His mind felt clear at last, though he remembered very little about the past

few days of illness. Spock had helped him, that was obvious, but there was a haze through which he saw only momentary glimpses of the Vulcan attending to him.

My fits of delirium must be responsible, reflected Kirk, and they must have been bad to cause such gaps in my memory. It doesn't make Spock's help any less, though - without him...

Spock's voice interrupted his thoughts. "One beneficial result of your illness is that your ankle seems better, Captain."

"Help me up and we'll see."

Unfortunately, while he was now able to put most of his weight on it, he was too weak from the fever to stand.

"I was unable to find any kind of food which could be assumed to be safe," said Spock with a hint of apology in his voice.

"Did you have time to look?"

"Yes, while you slept, Captain."

"When did you sleep?"

"I am a Vulcan, sir," was the brief reply, as though it explained everything.

"So you don't need sleep or food? Being a Vulcan makes you superior." Kirk had not meant it the way it sounded, and he was sorry when Spock walked to the stream to fill the shells without replying.

"I didn't mean... Mr. Spock, I wish it was easier to talk to you!"

"Captain, why are words so important to Humans?"

"I guess because we're not telepathic, perhaps?"

"A possibility," agreed Spock thoughtfully.

Kirk was thoughtful too; maybe actions spoke louder than words... However, the problem of their survival was of prime importance at the moment. Spock explained that the only possible source of food he had found were some shellfish in the stream, but they could be poisonous. Kirk knew he had to have food, or he would be a burden to Spock. He ate one of the bland, insipid shellfish, and when he showed no ill effects he knew that one problem at least had been solved.

They waited another day before leaving their haven to give Kirk time to recover some strength, after which they proceeded with their journey, carrying water in three of the shells, and food for the Captain in the last one.

It was a good omen that they had to climb soon, but Kirk could not go fast yet, although he struggled on courageously, accepting help only when necessary. At one time they felt a draught, and were disappointed when they discovered it came from a chimney about a thousand feet high, too wide to be climbed. It was back to the tunnel, which made Kirk comment that though he'd liked potholing once, now he would not mind if he never saw another cave as long as he lived.

The next setback was a fall of rocks barring the way after a very arduous climb. Kirk, exhausted, turned to the wall to hide his depression at the dismal sight. A noise made him turn, and he saw Spock starting to clear the rocks away one by one.

"It'll take ages, Mr. Spock."

"The more reason to start immediately, Captain."

Kirk joined him, trying to ignore his hunger. The food had long gone, and his limbs felt so heavy he had trouble lifting the rocks.

"Captain, our chances of survival are poor. The ship may have left the area."

"Is this the time to be pessimistic?"

"I was merely pointing out..."

"Yes, I know. But as long as we're alive we have a chance."

"Agreed, Captain."

Kirk set to work with more energy, and wondered if Spock had said what he had to make him react against his depression. He would not put it past him. If only he could read the Vulcan as easily as the Vulcan could read him... He vented his frustration on the rocks, which hastened their breakthrough to another tunnel.

Hours, days passed, made up of tunnels and caves and rocks and hard climbing. Kirk was no longer able to refuse Spock's help most of the time. He would not give up, though, and Spock was as stubborn. When the water was all gone, sheer will power carried Kirk on for a while, but soon Spock had to carry him. They had been underground for at least fifteen days, and Spock was beginning to show signs of strain, but he would not give up.

Kirk tried once more to get him to go on alone, knowing that he still had a chance; as before, the Vulcan refused. Soon after Kirk sank into complete exhaustion, which was aggravated by his need for water. He bit his lips until they bled in an effort to keep from crying out, but to his shame a low moan escaped him. At once a sharp pinch at the neck sent him into peaceful oblivion.

The Enterprise crew were getting more and more depressed as days went by and search parties reported failure.

"That planet is nothing but a maze of underground caves," Sulu reported to Scotty. "Caves and lakes and rivers... they could be anywhere."

"It's fifteen days now," muttered McCoy darkly. "Unless they found food and water... How long can we justify staying here, Scotty?"

"In theory we should abandon the search now, but I can invent a repair to keep us here perhaps another two weeks. After that..."

It was on the twenty-second day that Scotty and McCoy, who had landed in a shuttlecraft with a party to search yet another complex of caves, saw a moving shape emerge from a nearby hill. They ran towards it and relieved Spock of his burden before he fell once again.



McCoy was anxiously bending over Kirk when Scotty called to him. "Doctor, I think Mr. Spock is bad."

McCoy rushed over, reaching the Vulcan as his eyes opened, then closed against the glare of the sun.

"Captain... save the Captain..." he murmured haltingly, his voice weak and rasping.

"The Captain is here with us, Mr. Spock," McCoy said soothingly, trying to give him some water, but as though he had only been waiting for that reassurance, the Vulcan slumped unconscious.

"They're both pretty bad, Scotty. Help me get them back to the ship - and hurry!"

Sickbay was on full emergency alert by the time the shuttlecraft arrived aboard the Enterprise, and the two officers were in the best of care in a matter of seconds. Scotty ordered all the search parties back and prepared his report for Starfleet, then went to sickbay to get the doctor's report.

McCoy, being the fair-minded man that he was, made it plain that if they had their Captain back, all credit was due to the Science Officer.

"Than Vulcan is nothing but skin and bones! He's lost twenty pounds - Jim says he never ate or slept. The Captain's ankle was badly bruised, and the infection caused a high fever - Spock carried him most of the way."

"And those tunnels are no joke, as we saw," said Scotty. "Will they recover?"

"Oh yes! We're talking about Starfleet officers, not ordinary men."

"No, I guess we're not," agreed Scotty thoughtfully.

The good news spread throughout the ship, bringing relief and joy.

In sickbay Kirk, now fully conscious, met McCoy's smile with a grin. "Never thought I'd see you again, Bones." He tried to get up, then winced and put a hand to his neck. "What's wrong? It's not half sore!"

You must have had several neck pinches to put you under. Hey Jim... you've got good grounds to have your Science Officer court-martialled for assault."

"I certainly have, but don't you think it'd be illogical?"

McCoy laughed, and helped him to sit up. Kirk glanced at the Vulcan in the next bed. "How is he?"

"He's alive, but not well yet. I'm not letting him leave here until he's put on at least ten pounds."

The apparently inert Spock came to life. "Captain, such a punishment, after all those tunnels, is undeserved," he protested.

"Maybe, but you shouldn't complain, Mr. Spock. McCoy usually wants to take weight off, so you're lucky."

The doctor ordered them to rest and not talk too much while he went to his office for some paper work. As he left the Vulcan noticed Kirk rubbing at his neck.

"I regret I had to administer the neck pinch several times, Captain."

"I'm sure it was better than the torture of thirst. Mr. Spock, I know you dislike emotional displays, but I have to say it once : thank you for saving my life again."

"I did what was necessary," was the stiff reply, after which Spock shut his eyes to indicate clearly that he had no wish to pursue the matter.

Kirk felt angry enough to get up and shake him, but restrained himself with difficulty. After all they had shared, was that Vulcan going to behave as though nothing of importance had happened?

In fact, it was worse. As they recovered side by side in sickbay, Spock seemed even colder; Kirk began to wonder if he had upset him, but couldn't

think how or when.

McCoy noticed the coldness, and Kirk's preoccupied look. "What happened between you two?" he asked one day while Spock was in the gym. "You must have had some rough moments."

"You can say that again! However, there are gaps in my memory, things I can only see vaguely through a haze... What does it mean, Bones?"

"Spock said you had a high fever and were delirious at times, so it's no wonder you don't remember everything."

"You may be right," conceded Kirk.

"What's troubling you, Jim? Can I help?"

Kirk was tempted to confide in his friend, ask for his assistance, but he dismissed the idea at once. Whatever happened between Spock and himself, he had no right to discuss it; the Vulcan would be hurt, and he didn't deserve that.

When Spock returned to sickbay Kirk proposed a game of chess, and they settled to play. McCoy was called away, and Kirk told Spock they should be out in a couple of days, but the information produced no visible reaction. Kirk decided to be blunt.

"So we're back to square one, Mr. Spock?"

"I do not understand, sir."

"I mean, nothing has changed. Why are you so afraid of me, Mr. Spock?"

Having expected results from his shock treatment, Kirk was disappointed - the dark eyes that lifted to his had never been so cold.

"I repeat, sir, that I do not understand. I am not afraid of you. May I remind you that we are supposed to be playing chess?" Spock's whole attitude was one of utter rejection.

"As you wish, Mr. Spock," Kirk said, acknowledging defeat. "But one day I'll get through that facade of yours, I promise you."

Faint but visible astonishment appeared on the Vulcan's face, then Spock looked down and made his move without a word. Kirk wondered at the reaction - was Spock surprised at what he had said, or the fact that he had said it? Who could be sure of anything with a Vulcan?

By the time Kirk settled back into his quarters, and Spock into his own, the Captain had begun to wonder if he should go on trying to get through to his Science Officer. It was not that he no longer wanted to, but he was beginning to think he had moved too quickly. Whatever lay behind that hard shell, he must not force anything - more patience was required, and he should respect Spock's privacy. The victory would be worth the wait.

When they returned to duty Kirk was amused by Spock's carefully-hidden surprise at the change of attitude in quite a few crew members. Many officers had seen at what cost to himself Spock had saved his Captain's life, and McCoy and Scotty had made sure the truth was known. The conclusion had been reached that the Vulcan was not so bad after all. It did not mean any less annoyance at the Science Officer's sharp remarks, or his ability to talk at length about logic, but they accepted it with more patience and less resentment. Spock was clearly not at ease with the new situation - although he refrained from direct rebukes, he offered no encouragement.

The Captain, after a series of incidents with the Klingons during which he had fully appreciated Spock's unfailing and efficient support, decided to take the plunge and act on an idea that had been at the back of his mind for a while. He sent a recommendation to Starfleet that Spock be promoted to Commander, and permanent First Officer.

The coded reply was not encouraging. Starfleet pointed out that the two posts were too demanding to be combined for a long period. Kirk refused to accept the reply, and sent another message reminding them that as a Vulcan Spock was well able to handle both posts, and had indeed done so to his Captain's satisfaction for quite some time already. He added forcefully that Spock was the best officer under his command, and that he wanted no other as his First Officer.

Having got that off his chest, Kirk wondered whether to tell Spock about the possible promotion. He had still not decided when the red alert sounded as the ship lurched violently. Kirk called the bridge at once.

"What's wrong, Mr. Spock?"

"Unknown, sir. We have encountered an invisible energy barrier we cannot at the moment either destroy or penetrate."

"I'm on my way."

As he sat in the command chair vacated by Spock at his arrival, Kirk listened to his brief report, then let him get on with his work at the Science station. The Vulcan would tell him if and when he found anything.

After about five minutes Spock reported. "Captain, it is my belief that the energy barrier extends to an area of space as large as a quadrant."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes. Many worlds may be contributing to the energy field, and its nature is more advanced than anything we are aware of. There are at least three solar systems within that quadrant, but sensors cannot detect more than their approximate location and the fact that they appear barren. However, the sensors may be unreliable."

"Not much use if we can't get anywhere. Can we destroy or make a hole in the energy field?"

"Negative, sir. The science lab has been working on that from the beginning, without success."

"Get to work on it yourself, Mr. Spock."

"I am doing so, sir, also without success."

With a smile Kirk saw the surprise among the bridge crew. The Vulcan's ability to have his mind working on more than one problem at once did take some getting used to.

"Why is there such a barrier, Mr. Spock?"

"Unknown, sir."

"Speculations? Opinions?"

"Both would be without foundation, therefore illogical at this stage, Captain."

"Can we go back?"

"Affirmative." Spock approached the command chair and lowered his voice. "I trust you will not order the ship into reverse, sir. We must discover the reason for this barrier, and its nature. Care is advisable, however, since the sensors may be being fed wrong data."

"Curiosity is a Human trait, Mr. Spock."

Kirk had meant to tease, and was amazed by the sudden coldness of the eyes fixed on his.

"I am a scientist, sir. A scientist without curiosity is illogical."

The Science Officer returned to his station. Kirk swore under his breath, and returned to the problem of the barrier. If they could not ram it, destroy it, or make a hole in it, what could they do?

"Found anything, Mr. Spock?"

"No, sir, but someone or something has found us. We are being scanned. A mind probe is also being directed at us."

Whatever was taking place, no-one could sense anything, although Spock was gazing at the screen with a very frozen look. Kirk was distracted by Uhura.

"Captain, I have a contact."

"On audio-visual, Lieutenant."

The screen showed a tall and handsome alien wearing a simple but elegant white tunic. His most striking features were his skin and eyes, which seemed to glow like gold.

"Aliens are not welcome in this quadrant, Captain Kirk. I advise you to order your ship away from here."

"Sir, if you know my name you must know about our peaceful mission. The United Federation of Planets would appreciate a Starbase on the edge of this quadrant, preferable on an uninhabited world, as we wish to cause no interference."

"We do not accept contact with aliens unless they measure up to certain specifications. Our scanners and probes have given satisfactory results on the whole, but we require proof."

"What kind of proof?"

"You, Captain, will be the subject of our checking. Another will be the one you call Lieutenant-Commander Spock. He is an unknown quantity, as we read nothing from his mind. If you doubt him, do not come, but leave now."

Kirk looked at Spock and thought he saw fear in his gaze for a second, but it was so unusual to see anything in Spock's eyes that he could not be sure.

"What happens if we refuse?"

"Then we will have no contact with your Federation, and you may go."

"Where does the checking take place?"

"On our world here."

"What about my ship?"

"Your ship will not be interfered with at any time."

"Can you explain why you are so wary of aliens, sir?"

"Certainly, Captain. There are several races in this quadrant we have to protect from possible harm - some are at a very delicate stage in their development and must not be interfered with. Hence our caution. I repeat that you are free to go now, we wish you no harm."

"Thank you, sir. May I give you my decision in a few minutes?"

"I'll call you back, Captain," agreed the alien.

Kirk first made sure that the truth had been told by ordering the ship into reverse. She obeyed, and everything was functioning normally, which was a relief to the Captain.

Facing his senior officers in the briefing room he said, "I think we have to go. It seems fair enough that they should want to make sure who they are dealing with."

"Yes, sir, it seems reasonable," agreed the Science Officer.

Kirk wondered again if he was beginning to read the Vulcan - he was sure there was something on his mind.

"I don't like their asking for you and Mr. Spock, Jim," said McCoy. "Suppose they kill you?"

"For what purpose?"

"How should I know, with aliens? They might be a barbaric race wanting victims for sacrifice."

"They didn't strike me as barbaric, although they weren't welcoming. Besides, we can leave if we want to."

"Why don't we just go, then?"

"Because of Starfleet's last orders. There's increased tension between the Federation and the Klingon Empire, and we need a Starbase in this area or the Klingons might get it. Of course, the aliens might refuse, in which case we'll have to look at other possibilities nearby, but if we can get an agreement it'll save a lot of time."

"If you've made up your mind to go, why ask?" grunted McCoy.

"Several heads are better than one," smiled Kirk. "One of you might have thought of something I missed. Mr. Spock, any comments? I believe something is bothering you."

"Nothing relevant, sir."

"Let me be the judge of that. Speak up."

"I have nothing to say, Captain."

"I'm giving you an order, Mr. Spock."

"I regret I cannot obey, sir."

Kirk stared, appalled and bewildered. Scotty couldn't believe he'd heard correctly, and neither could McCoy.

"You're not well, Mr. Spock. Come down to sickbay..."

"I am perfectly well, Doctor. Your suggestion is illogical."

McCoy turned to Kirk for support, but the Captain brushed him aside and faced Spock.

"What are you trying to do? If you know something I don't, it's your duty to tell me, Mr. Spock."

"Only if it might be beneficial to you or to Starfleet, sir. This is not the case."

The only clue Kirk had was the fear he thought he had seen in the Vulcan's eyes, yet his Science Officer had faced Klingons and shown no fear. It didn't make sense! How could a Vulcan be illogical?

"Mr. Spock, let's use the language you understand : logic. Does your oath as an officer require you to obey my order?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then obey it."

"No, sir."

"Very well," said Kirk, his voice cold and severe. "You will put on record that you are on a charge of insubordination."

Spock complied as though the order was an ordinary one, adding that he acknowledged the charge; he seemed quite unperturbed by the shock he had created.

Kirk swallowed uneasily. Had he been mistaken all along about Spock? Could a Vulcan be disloyal? Was it safe to take him?

"Jim, you can't take Spock with you now," said McCoy. "Remember the alien's warning."

"Your comment is inaccurate, Doctor," Spock pointed out. "The alien stated that we should both go, or leave the area."

Kirk wondered if Spock was trying to sabotage the chance of a Starbase, but for what reason? None he could fathom... It was no use - the more he tried to understand, the less he was able to. Let the aliens find the answers.

"Captain," Spock reminded him coldly, "the alien should call very soon."

"Yes, Mr. Spock, and we're both going, so whatever your game is, you've failed."

No reaction appeared on the still face, and Kirk led the way to the transporter room, conscious of an increasing unease, and a wish to reverse his order. He wasn't sure why, but his intuition was now telling him that he would regret taking Spock with him. Was he beginning to doubt the Vulcan? Yet Spock showed no fear now, his attitude was even more withdrawn than usual.

The alien called and told Kirk there was no need to operate their transporter - he would do what was necessary. The Captain asked if there was any objection to his ship retreating, with a shuttlecraft left for their return. The alien agreed, which calmed Kirk's greatest fear - at least his ship would be safe.

He gave the necessary orders, and McCoy just had time to say, "Take care, Jim!" before the two officers disappeared.

"Let's hope the Captain gets back safely," murmured Scotty.

"You can say that again, when he's gone with that crazy Vulcan!" was McCoy's comment.

Kirk and Spock materialised in a beautiful city of glass buildings that sparkled in the sunlight. Two aliens were waiting for them, and the one they had spoken to introduced himself.

"My name is Talmor. Welcome, Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock. This is my brother Nylor, he is also a Supervisor. Do you wish to rest before we start?"

"No, thank you, sir. Let's get on with it," replied Kirk.

"Then please, call us by name. There is no need for formality."

The two aliens led them through a garden Kirk had to admire, and Spock slowed his pace to look at magnificent sculptures blending with beautiful plants and flowers. Other aliens they met appeared to be mildly curious about them, but did not stop, or stare rudely. The impression given was that these people were highly civilised, and Kirk relaxed a little, although he knew better than to go by appearances.

They entered a building, and Kirk was instructed to follow Talmor, while Spock went with the other alien.

The Captain was led into a luxurious room and Talmor smiled, a pleasant smile full of friendliness.

"There's nothing to fear, Captain, this is only a check as far as you are concerned. We're sure you are what you appear to be. Lie down and relax, you should feel no discomfort from the scanning, although a slight headache is possible later."

Kirk sank onto the soft couch, and thought that if torture was coming, it was very comfortable torture. Patterns of light appeared on the ceiling and he watched them, fascinated by the beautiful mingling of colours. Time lost its meaning, and he was surprised when the process stopped and he was told that it was over and he could get up.

"Well, are you sure now that we're peaceful people, Talmor?" he asked with a smile.

The alien was watching a small screen Kirk was unable to see; he turned round, looking grave.

"I fear we are not, Captain."

"Why? Is it because of our past history? I admit that Humans were not always very nice to know, but that was a long time ago."

"It has nothing to do with you, Captain. Lieutenant-Commander Spock rejects the scanning, which indicates a discipline of the mind we do not trust. It could hide many things."

"Mr. Spock is a Vulcan. Vulcans are peaceful - there's nothing to be feared from them."

"Yet you have doubts yourself about your officer, a man who disobeyed you before you came here. You do not know him."

Kirk could not refute the charge. "Let me talk to him - I'll see what I can do."

Talmor led him to another similar room, and Spock rose when he saw the new arrivals.

"What's the problem, Mr. Spock? Why do you refuse the scanning?"

"I do not refuse it, sir. I cannot accept it."

"What's the difference?"

"If you know something of Vulcan history, Captain, you will know that Vulcan minds have never been conquered."

"Yes, I know. Go on."

"That is the answer, Captain. What you call scanning is in fact a probe to the very depths of the mind. A Vulcan mind can only reject it."

"But you're half Human."

"The fact is irrelevant."

Perhaps it is, Kirk thought inwardly. I've seen little evidence of Humanity in him. It is rather odd, though, that he should be able to reject a scanning I didn't even feel...

"You are not a telepath," explained Talmor, guessing at his thoughts. "That makes scanning easy because you don't even sense it. Let me assure you that the Supervisors have a code of Ethics as rigid as that of the Vulcans."

"How do you know about that, if you didn't see his mind?"

"We saw it in your own mind, and in the records aboard your vessel. Your ship was scanned also."

"Then you saw Vulcan history, and you know that they are a peaceful people."

"Records can be faked, Captain."

"I suppose so," Kirk had to admit. "What happens now?"

Talmor looked at his brother, who seemed unhappy, but nodded. "Captain Kirk," said Talmor, "I'm afraid that unless you order your Science Officer to submit to the scanning, we will have no option but to assume the worst."

"What do you call the worst?"

"That Lieutenant-Commander Spock is hiding some monstrous scheme to penetrate into this quadrant in order to disrupt or destroy it - and that you are in league with him, and able to hide it."

"Your conclusion is illogical, sir," said Spock. "You saw Captain Kirk's mind, and know it is not true."

"We don't know any such thing, Mr. Spock. You are both aliens, and could have special powers. You obviously have, as you were able to reject our scanning device from the first. Captain Kirk is Human, you are half Human, you serve aboard the same ship... we can only assume you are acting as one man."

"To suspect a Vulcan of disruption or destruction is ridiculous," protested Kirk.

"Then Mr. Spock has only to prove it to us. But he states that he cannot."

Which is why he feared coming here, thought Kirk. Why didn't he tell me? Still, it's not his fault if he can't submit...

"Their conclusion is logical, Captain," said Spock. "They need proof."

"Which you can't provide! Oh well, I guess Starfleet will have to find a base in the next quadrant. Some planet there may have a suitable strategic position..."

"I'm afraid it's not as simple as that, Captain Kirk," Talmor interrupted. "Unless you convince your Science Officer to submit, you will both be executed as spies."

"Executed? I thought you were civilised people!" exclaimed Kirk, outraged. "What about my ship? Is it far enough to be safe?"

"Your ship will be left alone. It cannot harm us."

"Then how can we harm you? Why kill us?"

"Believe me, Captain, we do not like this," Nytor assured him, "but we have many worlds under our supervision, some very easy to harm."

"Let me tell you a little of our history," continued Talmor. "Once we found a one-man capsule against our defence screen. We brought him here, and wanted to make sure he was no danger. He told us he had escaped from a world of violence and torture, and was still suffering from the effects. He begged us to wait a little before putting him through a probe - he had suffered so much from them. We believed him. Unknown to us, his race could teleport once they had a guide in a specific area of space. His people took over a primitive planet before we knew it. As a result half the population was killed."

"Why didn't your energy field stop the invasion?" asked Kirk.

"Because those aliens could join minds with the one here, and gave him the strength to compel the Supervisors to turn the field off - and they did not even know they had done it. Since that time the law has been applied without exception."

"Logical," agreed Spock.

Kirk stared at him darkly. "This is a time when I don't like logic! You people are an advanced civilisation - can't you tell by any other method that we are no danger to you?"

"If you were not aliens, it might be possible. As it is, there is no other way."

"In your place, I don't think I could do it. How long before the execution?"

"There will be no execution." Spock had been looking out of the window, and now turned to face the room. "I will submit to the scanning."

"Then you lied!" exclaimed the Captain, completely bewildered. "What's wrong with you, Mr. Spock? Why all this charade, for nothing?"

"I admit deceit and conduct unbecoming a Starfleet officer, sir. I betrayed my oath to Starfleet, and I will submit to a court-martial when we return to the ship. Now, if you would leave the room, please, sir?"

His features were frozen into a mask of complete impassivity, even the eyes looked dead, but the tall Vulcan retained his dignity, although he had just confessed to treason. Kirk let himself be led out by Talmor, wondering if he was dreaming all this. Was his Science Officer the one disloyal Vulcan? Kirk refused to believe that it was because Spock was half Human.

Perhaps McCoy had been right, and Spock was ill? No, it wasn't that... Kirk's head ached; he could no longer think straight, too shocked by the extent of Spock's treason after his initial disobedience. Maybe the headache was caused by the scanning... Were those aliens evil beings, and had they fallen into a trap Spock had anticipated? Spock... was he safe? If Spock wasn't a traitor the aliens must be...

It was no use, whichever way he turned he was unable to see clearly. Truth was hidden somewhere... If only he could concentrate... But the patterns of light

were playing over the ceiling again, soothing, hypnotising him into a sleep he was unable to fight.

He dreamed. A horrible nightmare of fear and horror he could not understand. All he knew was that pain was all around him, some awful torture was tearing him apart. He tried to scream, and it woke him.

He was alone in his room, and a tray of food was by his bed. He didn't touch it, just in case... The dream... Was it a dream?

He got up and put his aching head under a tap, then went to the door. It opened, so he wasn't a prisoner. Talmor and Nylor appeared along the corridor and entered his room. The two aliens were very pale and shaking, their features drawn. Talmor grabbed a glass from the tray and drained it in a gulp. Nylor sank onto the bed and put his head into his hands, his whole body trembling.

Kirk felt like pinching himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. What on Earth was going on? Could these be evil aliens?

"Captain Kirk," said Talmor at last, his voice a whisper. "I... we... we should never have done such a thing!"

"We didn't know!" croaked Nylor. "The law had to be obeyed, the process had to be finished..."

"That law will be changed, I promise you, or I'll never be able to live at peace with myself... I don't think I'll be able to, anyway," finished Talmor.

"Would you mind telling me what you're talking about?" asked Kirk.

"Then you don't know... of course you don't..."

"Know what? Is it Spock? What happened to Spock?" Kirk demanded, seizing Talmor in a vice-like grip.

The alien did not try to free himself. "Do you know, Captain... if you killed me here and now... I wouldn't mind..."

Kirk let him go quickly. "Where is Spock? What's wrong? Is he dead?" His voice trembled.

The aliens shook their heads, and led him to the other room.

Kirk thought the room was empty at first, then he saw a huddled shape in a corner. Spock's back was towards him, he was shirtless and his body, glistening with perspiration, shuddered uncontrollably.

Kirk ran to him, aghast; where was the proud Vulcan he had known? He touched Spock's shoulder, and a whimper of pain was his only answer.

"I doubt he realises that you're here, Captain," said Talmor.

"Why did you torture him? Are you barbarians?"

"Believe me, Captain, we're not proud of ourselves. Had we known, we'd never have asked your Science Officer to submit to the scanning."

"Explain."

"Lieutenant-Commander Spock had many things to hide, we knew that much," said Talmor in a tired voice. "But how were we to know that none were evil? How were we to know that what he had to hide was loneliness, a complete and utter loneliness we had never met before, and never wish to meet again? How were we to know all the pain and suffering he had gone through to achieve Vulcan self-control? And how were we to know that what he kept so carefully hidden was simply his Human half?"

"Oh no!" Kirk sat on the bed, weak with horror.

"We tore his hard-earned self control apart," continued Talmor, his voice low and bitter. "We had to tear his Vulcan half to pieces before we could tear his Human half in turn!" His voice choked on the words.

His brother continued, "We had to force him to reveal what he had revealed

to no-one - his Humanity, his emotions. He tortured himself to let us see it all, knowing that if he did not we might suspect that he was hiding something... He had to ask us to help him give way to the probe, and he apologised..." Nylor's voice broke in turn, then finished in a cry, "I'll never operate a scanning again! Never!"

Kirk did not answer. His horror had been replaced by a fierce anger - an anger directed at himself. Why hadn't he guessed? How could he have let such torture be inflicted in his Science Officer? Spock would probably have preferred death... but his Captain's life was at stake, and so he had submitted...

Kirk got up and went to the form in the corner. "Spock!" he called, touching him again.

He was heard, because the Vulcan turned to face him with a violent movement. His face was haggard, streaked with tears, and his eyes shone as though he was insane. Gone was the icy coldness - and Kirk would have given anything to see it now.

"Well, Captain, you have won at last. Enjoy your victory."

"Spock, you can't think I wanted this!" protested Kirk.

"Did you not? You wanted to see my Human side... You see it now, in all its obscenity!"

"Spock, no! Listen to me..."

The Vulcan escaped his grip and turned to the wall. "Go away. Please, go away... I cannot bear to be... Human." A gasping sob escaped him and he swung round, not bothering to wipe fresh tears. "Now you know something no-one knows, Captain! That I can cry. Not even my mother knows that. You can tell..."

Kirk shook him hard. "I'll kill myself before I tell anyone! Please, Spock, listen..."

The Vulcan fell to the floor and lay there exhausted, his eyes pleading. "Go away," he whispered. "Please... you have won... you see what no-one should ever see..."

Kirk knelt down by his side. "You're right to blame me - it's all my fault, I should have guessed. How do you expect me to forgive myself if you don't? Spock please - don't shut me out!"

The Vulcan was watching him fixidly, as though trying to read his Captain's very soul. His hand touched Kirk's cheek.

"You are crying, Captain."

"I don't care. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"No, not for a Human, and I am Human now... I cannot accept... It is my worst nightmare come true!"

His voice rose to a scream of agony that was sheer torture to Kirk. In desperation he pulled Spock to him and held on tight.

"Whatever your nightmare is, let me share it - as you shared mine."

"Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember some of it. Spock, if you're Human you know I'm not talking about gratitude. If it's any consolation to you, I wish I hadn't won... not like this."

Spock had given up the struggle to let Kirk go and the dark eyes, so vulnerable now without their protective coldness, lifted to his.

"You feel no revulsion towards me, you can bear to touch me, because you are Human... as I am Human..."

The voice was thin and tired, the eyes pleading for understanding; he was trying painfully to work things out, logic was no longer a help...

"No, Spock, you're wrong - the Human angle has nothing to do with it. How could I feel revulsion towards a friend who has saved my life? That would be illogical!"

The words confused Spock. 'Friend' was never a term he had thought of as applying to himself. Exhaustion was winning, and he relaxed against Kirk.

"I cannot fight you," he murmured.

"Good." Kirk smiled, relieved.

The Captain lifted his burden, and took him to the bed. As he settled Spock comfortably he wondered just how he could help; he was no doctor...

Turning to the aliens, he asked, "Can't you help him?"

"No, Captain. Any mental contact with one of us would only be a further torment."

"Then may I get McCoy?"

"No!" Spock screamed, agitated by such violent fear that he gasped for breath.

"Then a Vulcan doctor?"

"No! Please, I could not... please..."

Kirk did not hesitate to commit himself. "Then I promise you, no-one you don't want to see will come. You have my word."

Reassured, Spock closed his eyes and fell into a light and restless sleep. Talmor drew the Captain aside.

"Captain, as you surmised, you are the only one he will allow to help him. Can you do it?"

"I'll do all that I can; that'll I can say."

"It won't be easy - he will need care for a while, perhaps for a long while. What about your ship?"

Kirk had forgotten about the Enterprise. He had never thought anything could make him do that...

"My ship will have to wait. Starfleet won't like it, but that's too bad."

"They might punish you by taking your ship away," insisted Talmor.

"I won't let them do that without a fight," Kirk promised, "but for the moment Spock is the one who matters."

"I'm glad you said that, because he needs you. Do not fail him. He didn't fail you when you were ill - do you remember?"

"Yes, it's coming back in patches."

"I'll help you." Talmor touched Kirk's head briefly, and every single memory returned: the gentle care, the unfailing devotion, the soothing hands comforting him after a nightmare - the nightmare he had thought he had conquered for ever, the fear of being crushed by his surroundings, of an enclosed space... claustrophobia. He could still remember his anguish as a child when he had realised that unless he conquered it a space career would be denied him.

"You know, of course?" he said to the alien by his side. "You saw it all during the scanning."

"I saw nothing for you to be ashamed of, Captain. I saw the sheer courage with which you conquered that fear. Your doctor helped, but the victory was yours."

"I was warned it might recur in extreme circumstances, such as a bad illness." Kirk had only to shut his eyes to see the rocks closing on him; the fever and delirium had brought the nightmare back in those tunnels. He remembered he had screamed and clung to Spock, begging for release, begging to be taken outside.

The Vulcan had shown no surprise or disdain at the sight of such fear, and Kirk could remember the gentleness and comfort he had received from his companion. Ashamed of his weakness, he had tried to make Spock admit that he found his Captain despicable, worthy of nothing but contempt; he had failed, and Spock had continued to care for him. Then, when he had improved, Spock had used a very light mind touch - far less than a meld - to cloud his mind so that he would not remember the worst of his illness.

"He didn't even let me remember all I owe him," Kirk said softly. "Can you doubt that I'll help him now?"

"No, Captain, we do not doubt. Mr. Spock is a very gentle man who has been terribly hurt," said Talmor. "He retreated behind a protective shell of Vulcan discipline and self-control. Now, it has been broken, destroyed... He is helpless and vulnerable until he rebuilds it."

"Can he do it?"

"Yes, I don't see why not. He did it once before, and alone - he has enough courage to do it again. If there is anything at all we can do, ask, and we will do it."

"We might be able to protect the Captain's career," said Nylor, who had been listening to their conversation. "Your stay here could be explained if you were selecting a site for a Starbase. Send your ship to survey suitable planets - we will open the barrier. You and Mr. Spock will remain as our guests, to discuss the treaty - and to allow Mr. Spock time to recover."

"You should also explain the Federation to us," smiled Talmor. "Your superiors will not realise that we already know all through scanning your records. Are your officers capable of conducting the survey? Will they ask awkward questions?"

"They'll manage," grinned Kirk, "and I'll deal with any questions."

The arrangements were quickly made, and if Scotty was surprised to find himself in charge of the ship for the duration of the survey, he said nothing.

A luxurious dwelling, isolated in beautiful surroundings, with all facilities provided, was given to Kirk and Spock. The two aliens helped to carry the Vulcan there; he was so exhausted that he only roused for a second when they laid him on the bed, then fell asleep again immediately.

Emotional exhaustion, thought Kirk as he lay on the next bed. Unable to sleep, he watched the ravaged face of his companion, and wondered if he would have had the courage to do what Spock had done. He could only guess how it must have tortured such a private person as Spock to have his mind invaded by strangers.

Kirk soon realised that the Vulcan's sleep was becoming restless and agitated; afraid of a nightmare, he tried to wake him, and Spock clung to him like a child. As he soothed and comforted Kirk realised he had a difficult challenge on his hands - he had to help his Science Officer become a Vulcan.

Spock's eyes opened as he woke completely, and he stared at his Captain in bewilderment, then disengaged himself from the reassuring arms, clearly most embarrassed.

"Spock, you had a nightmare," Kirk said softly. "It can happen to anyone. It happened to me in the caves, and you comforted me then as though it was normal to see a Starship Captain affected by claustrophobia."

"You remember all of it?"

"Yes, Talmor helped me. I appreciate all you did, including making me forget the recurrence I dreaded."

"The circumstances were extreme, Captain."

"Spock, now you know something not even McCoy knows. The doctor who helped me fight claustrophobia when I was a child was my grandmother. There was no record that I suffered from it."

"It will remain that way," said Spock. "Where are we? This is not the ship."

"No, we are guests of Talmor and his family. You need rest before you start to recover."

Spock's eyes were troubled, and Kirk wondered how long it would be before he would again be unable to read their expression.

"Captain, I appreciate your concern for me, but you have your ship to think of. You can leave me here to recover, then I will join you at a Starbase for the court-martial."

"Court-martial? What court-martial?"

"I put myself before Starfleet's interests by refusing the scanning."

"I know now that you had every reason to do so."

"There is also the charge of insubordination aboard..."

"Forget it! Look, Spock, the only thing you need to think about is getting well, and I'll help you. Then, when we go back to the Enterprise, we should find Starfleet's answer to my request."

"Request for what, Captain?"

"For your promotion to Commander and First Officer."

"No!"

"Why not?" asked Kirk, surprised.

"You want a Human First officer, and because you see me as Human now..."

"No!" It was Kirk's turn to protest as he explained that he had made the request before they contacted the aliens. "And I want a Vulcan First Officer, Mr. Spock," he finished, "so you'd better get on with it. After a few days rest, a kind of leave, you'll see things logically again."

"You cannot help me; you are Human, Captain."

"It won't do me any harm to control my emotions a bit, and practice logic for a change. Don't worry about me."

"I wish I could refuse. I understand that you believe you owe me what you call gratitude..."

"Illogical!" Kirk interrupted. "Or did you look after me in those tunnels out of gratitude?"

"It was my duty to look after you, Captain."

"Was that all it was?" Kirk's eyes met Spock's challengingly, then they softened into affection as he saw the green colour deepen on the Vulcan's cheeks.

"Jim, I..."

"I thought you'd never say my name," Kirk grinned.

"I believed you were like the others at first," Spock said slowly. "But you are not."

"The others?"

"Just people. It is not important. I know you are sincere."

"What did you mean about the others?" Kirk asked curiously. "Can't you tell me?"

Spock hesitated, and Kirk understood that only the fact that his Vulcan control had been destroyed enabled him to speak of his life prior to meeting Kirk.

Spock had always been different, half Human, half Vulcan, the only one of his kind. On Vulcan other children taunted him with his Humanity every time it

showed - or they thought it showed. Even the Kahs-wan had made no difference. On Earth, where he had attended school for a while, he was mocked for being different. A few children had been friendly, and he had responded shyly, only to learn that they repeated what they learned of him for the amusement of the others. Thereafter he withdrew, and refused all offers of friendship.

Back on Vulcan, although he qualified in Science with honours, he knew he would never fit in; he could never be a Vulcan among Vulcans. He joined Starfleet, where all races were accepted.

Here Spock stopped and remained silent for a second. Kirk understood that something was being held back, but he did not press his companion, and was rewarded by a glow of thanks in the dark eyes. In deference to his father, Spock made no mention of the breach with Sarek, and continued his story.

When he joined Starfleet he had asked to serve on a Human, rather than a Vulcan ship; because of that, his training was in the company of Humans. Spock hated their curiosity and avid questions, but tried not to antagonise them with refusals; instead he gave vague answers. A couple of the students sought him out, and refusing to judge from past experience, Spock trusted their overtures of friendship. Again he discovered that their aim was to discover things about Vulcans to tell the others. Hurt again, Spock withdrew further and remained aloof, unable to trust anyone.

When he came to the Enterprise he decided to make one last effort to fit among Humans, so he did not keep to himself at first and mingled with the others. Their curiosity made him cringe, but he tried to answer without giving anything personal away, which was not easy. His reticence antagonised some of the crew, who considered him aloof; most, however, simply lost interest in a fellow officer who did not share their pursuits. It was only when Pike invited him to his quarters after his promotion to Science Officer that Spock began to think that the Captain might understand.

Then, the day before, Spock went to Pike's cabin to collect a tape. 'It's either on the desk or in the viewer,' the Captain had said. There was a tape in the viewer, and Spock had checked to see if it was the right one; it was not, and what he heard froze him to the spot.

Pike's tape was addressed to a friend; in it he mentioned his brilliant Vulcan Science Officer, and his intention to get to know him better - the man was half Human. Then, with a laugh, Pike added that he's let his friend know if he learned anything interesting about Vulcan, or about being the product of two worlds.

It was too late to refuse the invitation. Spock went, and faced a questioning more subtle, but as curious, as all the others. He refused to answer. The conversation remained very one-sided, and Pike sent him on his way angrily, saying he had no time to waste on an unresponsive companion.

When he finished his account Spock was startled to see that Kirk looked upset.

"How could they? How could he?" Kirk muttered.

"It was no-one's fault but my own, Jim," Spock said. "It is normal for most Humans to talk freely about themselves, to exchange confidences and make friends. Because I am half Human they thought I would be like them - but I was a Vulcan among Humans."

"It wasn't your fault," Kirk said. "Pike at least should have tried to understand. I don't suppose he meant any harm by that tape, but it was thoughtless and hurtful."

"Captain Pike never discriminated against me," Spock protested. "I was one of his most trusted officers."

"I bet he gave you plenty of work - and how often did he say thank you?"

"Why should he thank me for doing my duty?"

Kirk looked at his companion helplessly, then smiled. "Old habits die hard, Spock! That answer was pure Vulcan."

"Yes, it was," Spock agreed, surprised.

"So all's not lost! Go on with your story. I suppose that when I came aboard you thought you had another Pike on your hands?"

"No, I understood very quickly that you were not like Pike, but I dared not hope... You were right, Jim - I was afraid of you... and of myself."

"I understand," Kirk said gently. "Enough talk. You look so tired... you must sleep. Promise me you'll wake me up if you need anything, or if you feel ill."

"I promise, Jim." The Vulcan smiled, a soft smile that lit up his face and brought warmth and life to his eyes.

"I never thought I'd see that," Kirk murmured. "It's a shame you have to lose the ability to smile."

"Because you prefer me as a Human?"

"No! Spock, I don't care whether you're Human or Vulcan - whatever you choose is all right by me. I... care... for both of you."

"I can only be a Vulcan," Spock replied, "but I will no longer reject my Humanity, for then I would have to reject you."

"That's very logical," Kirk agreed. "Now go to sleep - you still need a lot of rest."

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk settled back on his bed, but was unable to sleep for thinking over all he had learned about his companion. How typical of Spock, that he had never mentioned a single name while talking about 'the others'. He understood that Spock must have assumed that he was like 'the others' at first, and so had been unable to trust him on a personal level - no wonder, when he had been hurt and deceived so often in the past. It was probable that many of those 'others' had meant no harm and were just naturally curious, but Spock was unable to judge by Human standards.

However, when Spock saw that Kirk did not talk about the incident in the swamp, or the music he had overheard, doubts had arisen; but Kirk could just have been more subtle. Then they had shared the exhausting climb, and the Vulcan had obscured the extent of his help lest Kirk be embarrassed because an alien knew his secret. The mind contact, though not a meld, had revealed an affinity between the two minds, an affinity which had enabled Kirk to sense Spock's torment under the scanning.

After the adventure of the climb Spock had retreated again, afraid now of Kirk and of himself, of what he was beginning to feel for his Captain. He had not dared even to think of the word 'friend', for friendship was something he had never known...

Spock muttered a few words in his sleep that Kirk could not catch; he became restless, then suddenly screamed his Captain's name. Kirk woke him hurriedly.

"Another nightmare?"

"I have not had nightmares since childhood!"

"Humans are prone to them. What was it this time?"

"You were rejecting me because my Vulcan side was a mere pretence. I was really Human, but not like you, not like the others... I was weak, worthless..."

"You were rejecting yourself, Spock. Nightmares can play such tricks."

"You may be right," Spock conceded. "Jim, this cannot go on, this dependence on you."

"It's only just begun. And remember, you're not yourself."

"I must regain my Vulcan control as soon as possible."

"How will you do it?" Kirk asked curiously. "Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"I do not mind. I shall withdraw into myself for longer and longer periods of meditation to concentrate on rebuilding Vulcan disciplines. The process should be rapid as the loss is so recent."

"Take your time. I want my Vulcan First Officer at my side when we return to the ship."

The two officers settled into a pleasant routine, and Spock did not avoid behaving like the Human he now was. This moved Kirk, for he was aware that the Vulcan would have hated anyone else to see him like this. It was a rare proof of his trust in his Captain, and Kirk appreciated the compliment.

The next few days were pleasant for Kirk as he delighted in the new Spock, the Human Spock. It was a holiday for both, fleeting perhaps, but giving them the chance to enjoy the friendship that was growing between them. They were able to share many activities, such as swimming and boating - they would race each other like small children, and even participated in a general boat race. Their hovercraft came in first, and Kirk knew he would never forget Spock's enthusiastic cry, "Jim, we won!", or the slap on his shoulder that sent him sprawling in a rather painful fashion.

Spock helped him up, full of remorse, and Kirk said with a teasing smile, "There may be some point in Vulcan control after all, Spock - you don't know your own strength!"

Another occasion Kirk would never forget was the first time Spock laughed. They were sitting by the pool, and Kirk had made himself a costume from coloured towels, like an Arabian shiek from the old times, he explained. Suddenly he lost his balance and fell into the water in a jumble of arms, legs and towels. He emerged, laughing, and saw that Spock too had burst into laughter; but after a few moments he stopped abruptly. This saddened Kirk, for his companion was unlikely to know laughter again, and could not even take this opportunity.

"It is not important, Jim," Spock said. "Vulcans do not laugh."



"No," Kirk admitted sadly, aware that this time of theirs would end soon.

In the evenings they lingered over chess, or Spock would play his lyre, which Kirk had had sent down from the ship. Sometimes Kirk talked freely about his childhood, his dreams of space, how his family had thought it only a childish dream at first, then had had to let him go. They also exchanged stories about their Academy days, the training they had been given... but they would also share their silences, and that was a new experience for Kirk. They would often find that their minds had been following the same thoughts, and this was something they both accepted without reservation as proof of their growing affinity.

After four days Spock no longer had nightmares, and was well. Kirk knew that the time had come for him to begin the rebuilding of his Vulcan control. He would regret the Human companion of the last few days, but he would not ask Spock to change his mind. It was possible that he could influence him, but if he did he was sure that it would kill their friendship, a price he was not prepared to pay.

The first time Spock retired into meditation Kirk felt lonely and sad as he wandered through the gardens without his smiling companion at his side. When Spock joined him for lunch, there was already a hint of his former reserve in his manner.

"Jim, it has to be," he said gently. "I can only function as a Vulcan. I understand that you would wish otherwise... thank you for not saying it. Above all, I thank you for those days when I was able to share being Human with you."

"We'll have the memories," Kirk replied. "And I don't believe it matters, Spock - it was the Vulcan I knew first."

A few days later Spock made the most of his ability to talk freely to say to his Captain, "Jim, it will not be easy once I am functioning as a Vulcan again. There will be times when I will be ashamed of the friendship I feel for you, when my Vulcan side will be too predominant to let the slightest thing show. I might even hurt you then."

"So who's perfect?" replied Kirk. "I'm sure there'll be times when I say things I don't mean, because I'm hurt, perhaps, and it's a Human trait to take it out on others then - usually the ones we care for. I know, it's not logical! We'll manage, I have no fear on that score, and I'm looking forward to having you at my side on a permanent basis."

Spock looked troubled. "Jim, I find my dependence on you continues..."

"Of course it does - we're friends!" Kirk exclaimed with a smile. "You never had a friend, Spock, so it's no wonder you appreciate the experience and have come to depend on it. You've forgotten one thing, though: I also depend on you, now. You'll see the truth of that as you get back to normal."

To have Spock depend on him as he had once depended on Spock, and would do in the future, was putting the final seal on their friendship, and both knew it. They became aware that from now on each would understand the other without need for explanations. Neither would need to pretend, or to hide anything, because they accepted each other fully, for what they were, qualities and faults included, as true friends do.

Kirk would not have been Human if he had not watched Spock's gradual reversion to a Vulcan with a little sadness. This soon vanished when he realised that nothing was changing between them at all. While he missed Spock's smile, he came to notice and read the small signs the Vulcan would let him see, and they were enough. Their affinity did the rest, that special affinity that seemed to grow stronger, and enabled them to share silent thoughts in complete harmony. The Captain had never known this with anyone, and appreciated it as much as Spock did.

When the Vulcan spent more time in meditation Kirk visited Talmor and his family, learning about his people so that Starfleet would have the facts when the time came to negotiate a treaty, and the establishment of a Starbase. The

aliens were very concerned about Spock, and interested in the progress of his recovery. They gave Kirk books and tapes to look at and share with his companion, so that both came to know the alien culture.

"This is what makes space travel so fascinating," Kirk said to Spock one evening after they had discussed some of the aliens' customs. "But then space travel is in my blood, as the sea was in the blood of some men many centuries ago. Do you see what I mean?"

"I do not believe that space, or the sea, can exist in blood - it is not logical," Spock replied gravely. "But I do understand what you mean, for I too was fascinated by the stars at an early age."

"Perhaps we watched them at the same time, though they weren't the same ones," grinned Kirk. His eyes became lost in his dreams as he continued, "All I ever wanted was a tall ship, with the stars to steer her by."

"I am gratified that you fulfilled your dream. Jim, about your ship... Now that my control is returning, I believe you should return aboard before Starfleet accuses you of desertion of duty."

"Want to get rid of me, is that it?"

"No! Jim, how can you..."

"Sorry, Spock, I forgot you're more Vulcan than Human now. To answer your question seriously, I don't have to go back. I'm learning about the aliens, and Scotty is looking for a Starbase, which is routine work. Scotty and McCoy won't say anything against me, so don't worry."

Scotty and McCoy were not exactly worried, but they were not quite happy either at the prolonged absence of the Captain and the Science Officer. About halfway through their analysis of possible solar systems, McCoy took it upon himself to call Kirk.

"Listen, Jim, aliens or no aliens, don't you think your place is aboard the ship?"

"Am I needed there?"

"Well, not exactly. The survey of suitable planets is routine."

"Then why worry? Scotty will manage."

"Why should he have to, Jim? Are you and Spock prisoners?"

"Of course not! Would I have called my ship into this quadrant if we were? Be logical, Bones!"

"Oh no - you've started to talk like that Vulcan! Is he converting you?"

Kirk laughed and cut the communication after saying, "See you!"

Spock often joined Kirk for negotiations with the aliens, and Talmor and his people appreciated the complete lack of resentment the Vulcan showed after what they had done to him. When it became clear that the time to leave was approaching, the two officers were taken on a last tour of the planet by Talmor. Finally, they had to take their leave.

"I trust you will not take with you too bad an opinion of us, Mr. Spock," said Talmor.

"That would be illogical, sir. What happened was not your fault, but mine for resisting the scanning."

"I don't think we'll ever be able to see it that way, but thank you, Mr. Spock."

"Live long and prosper, Talmor," said Spock, giving the Vulcan salute.

Kirk waved to the alien with a smile, and they disappeared in the glow of the transporter beam from the ship.

McCoy was waiting for them with such a suspicious look that Kirk asked what was wrong.

"I believe you both stayed so long on that planet because your medicals were due."

"That would be a logical reason, Doctor," Spock agreed. "Your medicals are not events to anticipate."

McCoy glared at him, and changed the subject. "I expect you both had extra shore leave - you might as well admit it."

"We did and we didn't," replied Kirk. "We were guests of the aliens, and therefore had some leisure time. You'll see my report - which reminds me, I'd better get on with it. Spock, we might as well combine our reports. Come to my quarters - we'll have a meal there while we work on it."

He called the catering department and ordered a tray of mixed Earth and Vulcan food, then noticed McCoy's and Scotty's amazed looks. "What's wrong with Spock and me wanting to eat?"

"Mr. Spock refused your invitation before, Jim," said McCoy. "You were hurt..."

"That was a long time ago," replied Kirk airily. "By the way, any confirmation from Starfleet about Spock's promotion?"

Their renewed surprise reminded him that he had not told them of his request, so he explained, and Scotty told him that a reply was on his desk. Followed by the others, he hurried to his quarters and played the tape.

Spock's promotion to Commander was confirmed, but the request for his appointment as First Officer was unusual, and required a preliminary enquiry at Starbase 10, at which Captain Pike would be present. Kirk was instructed to proceed there to meet Mendez and Pike.

"What has it got to do with Pike?" asked Kirk, rather angrily. "If he puts his oar in, he might not like what I have to say!"

"Jim, you must not..." Spock started to protest, then the presence of McCoy and Scotty, and their amazed looks, stopped him. Kirk had no such inhibitions, and gave him such a warm and affectionate smile that the other two were startled.

"It's nothing to do with you, Spock - I'll deal with Starfleet. From now on, you are my First Officer, and that's that."

The news spread throughout the ship, and Kirk was pleased by the reaction. Not one voice said that it was undeserved, the general opinion being that as Spock had been doing the work already, and as his loyalty to Kirk was proven, the promotion was justified.

As for McCoy, he had something on his mind. Noticing it, Kirk was glad that his friend was beginning to forget the past, and was taking an interest in the present. The doctor decided he had to talk to the Captain before they arrived at Starbase 10, and went to his quarters. It was embarrassing to find Spock there, engaged in a game of chess.

"I'll come back later," McCoy mumbled.

"No need, Doctor, I have work to do. Captain, this game will have to wait."

"Spock, you don't have to go!" Kirk protested.

"I have a scheduled check of the Science Department in four minutes, Captain."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten. All right, you may go."

The Vulcan left, and McCoy sat down. "I didn't mean to chase him away, Jim, I hope you believe that, but as I wanted to talk about him..."

"I guessed that," grinned Kirk. "What is it? Do you object to a Vulcan First Officer?"

"Of course not! I have to admit - between you and me - that he's good at his job. My concern is for you."

"Explain."

"I saw your report on your visit to the aliens. It was remarkably short, considering the length of time you spent there. What happened, Jim?"

"What it says in the report," replied Kirk, quite naturally.

"Which means you won't tell me. Whatever it was, it's obvious that it created a new relationship between you and Mr. Spock. I expect he saved your life or something, and after that other time in the tunnels you feel you owe him a lot. And you do," he hastened to add. "Gratitude is perfectly normal."

"What are you getting at?"

"Simply that gratitude isn't a strong enough reason to chose a First Officer."

"Then put your mind at rest. Gratitude has nothing to do with it."

McCoy looked so startled that Kirk had to make an effort not to laugh as he added, "I know it's easy to talk after events, but I believe I always knew he'd be my First Officer."

"You've not known him very long... Jim, this is weird!"

"Why? Because he's a Vulcan?"

"No... He's changed slightly, and you have too... You never made close friends easily with Humans, Jim Kirk, yet with an alien... Is he really Human?"

"No, Mr. Spock is definitely a Vulcan," said Kirk shortly.

"Then Vulcans can't be that bad," said McCoy in a thoughtful voice.

"I've no idea, I only know Spock."

"Then you do know him!"

Kirk swore at himself for having said that much, and said lightly, "Of course I know him, as I know everyone on board. What's odd about that?"

"I didn't mean it that way," said McCoy, unable to read Kirk for once. "It's clear, however, that I'll get nothing out of you. Haven't you a single doubt about Spock as First Officer?"

"Not a single one," assured Kirk.

"In that case I'd be wasting my breath arguing with you."

"You would," Kirk agreed cheerfully.

McCoy still looked troubled, so Kirk continued, "Look, Bones, you've had so much on your plate you haven't had time to get to know Spock. That'll change, I hope. In any case, a friendship between Spock and me makes no difference to us."

"I never thought it did, but thank you for saying it, Jim. That Mr. Spock of yours is becoming interesting - I'll keep my eyes open and see what I can learn."

The arguments between Spock and McCoy started in earnest from then on, and Kirk smiled as he watched McCoy's efforts to get through to Spock. He never interfered, aware that Spock enjoyed the sparring as much as McCoy did, and their arguments provided great entertainment for the crew. The Vulcan usually got the better of his opponent, sometimes making the Captain burst into laughter; on those occasions McCoy's glare made him feel a little guilty, but he knew the doctor was not really angry, and that he would come to know and appreciate Spock given more time.

From then on, too, Spock became a part of the 'family' of the Enterprise, so much so that by the time they arrived at Starbase 10 he had played his lyre to an appreciative audience in the rec room; and when his colleagues on the bridge dared to tease him he responded in kind, usually having the last word.

Once in orbit around Starbase 10 Kirk was told to await a call from Commodore Mendez before beaming down. He had no warning when Captain Pike came aboard and went directly to his quarters. Finding McCoy and Scotty there, Pike stopped them from leaving.

"You two can help me make Jim see the error of his ways about that Vulcan."

"I never heard you complain about Mr. Spock before, Captain," said Scotty rather sharply. "Not when it came to doing more than his share of work!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" flared Pike.

"Gentlemen," Kirk said severely, "this is a meeting of Starfleet officers - let's keep it dignified. Chris, why do you object to my new First Officer?"

"Because he's an unknown quantity, Jim."

"Speak for yourself," Kirk said shortly.

"So you got further with him than I did! He's still an alien, and unless you're absolutely sure..."

"I am absolutely sure."

"Jim, you can't be!"

"Look, Captain Pike, just because you can't see what's under your nose, it doesn't mean that others are blind too. Mr. Spock is my First Officer, and that's final."

"Can't see what I missed," muttered Pike, bewildered. "Jim, do you realise that because this sets a precedent, Starfleet may ask you to swear on oath that Spock is the best officer you can have?"

"Then I'll swear."

"If anything goes wrong they'll throw the book at you. You're crazy!"

"I've had enough of this anti-Spock campaign!" Kirk exploded, his patience running out. "Captain Pike, say what you like to the enquiry, but if you win I'll never speak to you again."

"That goes for me, too," said McCoy with sudden heat. "What business is it of yours, Captain? We're the ones who'll have Mr. Spock, not you!"

"Aye, and what's wrong with Mr. Spock?" asked Scotty belligerently. "If we want him, why should you meddle?"

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Pike. "The crew didn't like Spock!"

"Maybe they needed new eyes to see him with," said Kirk, "and if I provided them, I'm glad. Why such disloyalty to Spock, Chris, when he has nothing but loyalty for you?"

"I've nothing against Spock," Pike protested, "or I wouldn't have recommended him for promotion! I was concerned about you and the crew. The Enterprise must have a good First Officer."

"She'll have the best," assured Kirk.

"Jim, do you realise that Starfleet may want to survey the crew's reactions?"

"They're welcome. Everyone who knows Spock agrees he deserves the job."

"In that case I've nothing further to say," murmured Pike, still at a loss.

"Jim, beam down in about an hour - Commodore Mendez will see us then."

Kirk had to change into his dress uniform, so McCoy and Scotty escorted Pike to the transporter room, where Spock was waiting.

"My congratulations, Mr. Spock," said Pike. "Your promotion should be confirmed soon."

Spock watched, eyebrow raised, as he disappeared from the transporter pad.

"It's all right, Mr. Spock," said McCoy. "The Captain - our Captain - fixed him."

"Fixed him to what, Doctor?"

"Pulled his teeth," explained Scotty.

"I do not believe that Captain Kirk would do such a thing!" Spock protested.

McCoy and Scotty explained what they meant, amused by the Vulcan's lack of understanding. Spock became most concerned about the oath Kirk might have to swear on his behalf, but as McCoy pointed out, once the Captain had made up his mind...

Nevertheless, the Vulcan hastened to Kirk's quarters, closely followed by McCoy, and met the Captain just as he was leaving.

"Jim, you must not swear such an oath for me!" he said, seizing Kirk's arm.

"If we're going to fight, let's do it in my quarters," was Kirk's amused reply. It was enough to make the Vulcan let go, embarrassed.

"Captain, I would not..."

"Never thought you would! I told you Starfleet was my business, Spock, so don't interfere. And don't you go believing I'm doing it for your sake, either, because I'm doing it for mine!" he finished with a grin before he hastened to the transporter room, followed by McCoy who was watching keenly.

Spock watched his Captain go with an expression in his eyes the doctor had never seen there before. He wasn't at all sure what it was, but he could guess... and he thought he was probably right.

"Jim, take care," he said. "We don't want to lose you."

"I know, Bones. Don't worry."

"I'm not the one who's worrying. I think Mr. Spock is, though."

"Then go and distract him with one of those arguments you both relish until I get back."

"Will do," grinned McCoy.

Kirk was rather taken aback to find what amounted to a Court of Enquiry in Mendez' office. An Admiral was presiding, and there were two other officers present apart from Pike and Mendez.

The Commodore made the introductions, and after the Admiral had opened the proceedings, Mendez explained briefly the aim of the Enquiry.

"Regulations stipulate that a Starship should have both a First Officer and a Science Officer, since each is considered a full-time job. To give both posts to one officer is therefore contrary to regulations, and any exception must be fully justified."

Determined to win, Kirk set out to convince the Court, and to demolish the arguments of the officers who spoke against him. What won the day was first, Pike's statement that as the Captain and officers of the Enterprise seemed to want Spock as First Officer they should have him; and second, Kirk's readiness to swear on oath his belief in the Vulcan's suitability.

"On your own head be it," said Mendez after a short deliberation. "We'll confirm Commander Spock's appointment for one year, just in case..."

"I protest, sir," Kirk interrupted, calm but angry. "Such a lack of confidence in my First Officer is insulting, not only to him, but to me."

"Very well, Captain Kirk - have it your own way," said Mendez. "I'll be very interested to see the results of such a Human/Vulcan combination."

"We'll do our best not to disappoint you, sir," promised Kirk.

Spock was rather bewildered by the congratulations he received, but put up with them politely.

"One has to humour those Humans!" was Kirk's advice.

This did not mean that the word 'logic' was any more popular with the crew, but it was now accepted as part of life aboard the Enterprise. For people like McCoy, Scotty, and the bridge crew, the fact that Kirk trusted his First Officer was enough proof that the Vulcan was worthy of it.

Spock did thank Kirk at lunch next day.

"Illogical," said Kirk quite seriously, "because your assistance can only benefit me as it will benefit the ship. You belong aboard the Enterprise now, Spock. What does it feel like to be part of the crew?"

"It is home, Jim."

Kirk nodded, moved. "It's my home, too. I'm looking forward to the next five years."

"Amen to that!" McCoy made his inevitable appearance with a beaming smile.

And so the Enterprise set off for her five year mission, during which she was to become the best Starship in the Fleet. Which was logical - she had, after all, the best Captain and the best First Officer.

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MISSION'S END

It was the end of the five-year mission. Understandably, the crew of the Enterprise were looking forward to their allocated one year of shore leave after their long period of service in space. Plans were being made, and the sole topic of conversation aboard was the coming holiday.

The Captain announced that the ship had been ordered to report to Starbase 1 for overhaul and replacements, which was standard procedure, and the officers and crew were to undergo medical checks, also normal Starfleet routine. The rest of the announcement was not anticipated - after the medicals every officer from the rank of Lieutenant upward had to report for an assessment of their records and of their future in Starfleet.

McCoy was surprised to see Kirk's sombre expression when he met him and the First Officer for lunch.

"I don't like the sound of it, Bones," explained the Captain. "I hope it doesn't mean promotion away from my ship."

"A promotion to Commodore wouldn't deprive you of your ship!" protested McCoy.

"Maybe not, but Commodores have been known to have been given desk jobs. Once I get to that rank I'll no longer feel safe."

Spock had listened in silence, and spoke for the first time. "Jim, I see no logic in giving the best Captain in Starfleet a desk job."

"Neither do I," agreed McCoy.

"Glad to see you two in agreement for once," smiled Kirk. "The trouble is that a Human or Humans will be assessing my prospects. You know it's Starfleet policy to have officers of the same race for that task, because supposedly giving a more accurate result."

The journey to Starbase 1 did not last long, and Kirk's mood was still subdued by the time they arrived.

The Captain beamed down with Spock, McCoy and Scotty, his three senior officers. Outside the impressive Starfleet Headquarters complex, they met Ambassador Sarek coming out.

Kirk was not happy when, after the usual greetings, Sarek said to Spock, "Your mother and I will be on Vulcan shortly to welcome you when you arrive for your leave. I can tell you now that you will have exceptional offers from Vulcan for a high position of scientific research."

"My career is in Starfleet, Father, as I believe I stated before," replied Spock in a respectful but firm tone.

Sarek, after apologising to the others, drew Spock aside to continue the conversation for a few minutes.

"Relax, Jim," said McCoy, smiling to see Kirk's heavy frown. "Spock would tell you not to be illogical! You know very well that Sarek won't succeed."

Kirk smiled back, aware that Spock wouldn't desert him any more now than in the past, but he hoped the Vulcan wouldn't have to face estrangement from his family as a result.

The First Officer came back alone, and looked at his Captain with the half smile Kirk knew so well.

"I trust you did not indulge in what you Humans call worry, Captain."

"No, of course not," Kirk assured him, ignoring McCoy's ironic glance, and aware that he wasn't fooling Spock either. He made his tone deliberately light as he continued, "Well, Gentlemen, this is it. Let's go in there and find out what treats they have in store of us."

The first thing that happened was a bad omen, Kirk thought. They were separated. Each officer was instructed to report to a different section of the building. It was clear that each man was on his own.

As expected the medicals took place first, and were long drawn out, with endless tests of every possible kind. Kirk found the process tiring, and he did not like the feeling of being a specimen in a laboratory, although he understood the logic of such stringent tests after five years in space.

The tests over, he was ordered to report to Admiral Jourdan. Kirk did not know the man, all he had heard was his reputation of being a hard man to deal with. Considering this another bad omen, Kirk reported as instructed and was relieved to get an amicable welcome.

The Admiral, a neat and impressive officer, was all smiles as he congratulated Kirk in no uncertain terms on the success of the five year mission.

Kirk relaxed as he replied, "My crew deserves congratulations as much as I do, sir. It has been said that a ship is not only as good as her Captain, but also as good as her First Officer."

"True. Are you looking forward to your shore leave, Captain?"

"Yes, sir," replied Kirk, rather surprised at the abrupt change of subject.

"Quite natural, after five years in space. Is anyone special waiting for you?"

"Only my mother," answered Kirk, wondering where all this was leading. Or was his superior officer just making polite conversation?

"Then you must be one of those Captains with a girl in every port," smiled Admiral Jourdan, not giving Kirk time to reply as he continued, "Your service record is outstanding, Captain Kirk, so much so that no-one can match it."

"Thank you, sir," said Kirk, relieved at the change of subject this time. His relief was short-lived.

"I'm sure you're not surprised, therefore, to hear that you're being recommended for promotion. What would you say to an easy life for a change?"

"What kind of easy life?" Kirk remained non-committal, hiding his unease at the turn the conversation had taken.

"The kind every ground officer gets, of course," said the Admiral enthusiastically. "Luxurious quarters, reasonable working hours, plenty of time for leisure, girls, or a family life if you are so inclined."

Kirk's expressive face indicated clearly that the prospect held no attraction for him, but Admiral Jourdan continued undeterred.

"Your promotion to Commodore is a mere formality, meant as a short transition to Admiral. We need outstanding officers like you here and on other Starbases. Think carefully - you'd be the youngest Admiral in Starfleet."

And the most miserable! thought Kirk. "Sir," he said, keeping his voice cool and firm with difficulty, "I do not believe I joined Starfleet to sit behind a desk and go home to a loving family. Had I wanted that, I would have stayed on Earth."

"Not necessarily, Captain. It's a well-known fact that young men like adventure, but when you get older those attractions can pale compared to..."

"Older?" Kirk interrupted, worried. "Of course I'm older, but I don't have

one foot in the grave yet! Or were my medicals unsatisfactory?"

"You're perfectly fit, Captain."

"Then with respect, sir - why do you want to take my ship away?"

"The Enterprise belongs to Starfleet," corrected the Admiral, "and we have an able Captain in line to look after her. We need exceptional men like you in top ranks, so your promotion is necessary."

The idea of the Enterprise in someone else's hands was too much for Kirk. His control gave way - he had nothing to lose if he lost his ship.

"I wish I could tell you in simple terms what you can do with your promotion... sir!" he snapped, his voice shaking with anger. "I'm a spaceman, not a pen-pusher. To ask me to serve Starfleet in that capacity is ludicrous. I'd be of no use at all, so I'd rather resign here and now."

Strangely enough, Admiral Jourdan did not take offence. His voice remained amiable and friendly.

"Don't be so hasty, Captain. Changes are often desirable. Besides, even supposing you kept your command, you might find yourself with a different crew."

"I don't understand."

"Your First Officer, Commander Spock, is not interested in Command, as you know. Pity... However, he's such a brilliant scientist that he is being offered, at this very moment, a top research position either on Vulcan or here. In fact, he can dictate his terms. Every major scientific complex in the Federation is anxious to have him."

And Sarek would approve, thought Kirk, but Spock will refuse... No matter how much of a scientist Spock is, I'll doubt myself before I doubt him!

The Admiral had seen the dark frown on Kirk's face, but did not comment on it. He continued smoothly, "Dr. McCoy is being offered a hospital of his own to run, specialising in space psychology and alien diseases. For Engineer Scott, it's a post involving research into spaceship engines. As you can see, Captain, we do take into consideration people's abilities."

"My officers won't accept, they're spacemen like myself," answered Kirk, hiding his dismay at the cleverness of the offers.

"They might accept, Captain. After being in space for so long, a normal life does have attractions... such as the one coming in now."

A pretty yeoman entered with a tray of drinks, and smiled at Kirk before leaving.

"Life is restricted aboard a Starship; a Captain can't afford to look at the women under his command," continued the persuasive voice.

"You can't mean that officers here are allowed relationships with subordinates!" protested Kirk.

"No, of course not - we do have discipline too! The yeoman was only an example of a pretty girl. What I meant was that here and on any Starbase there are plenty of women outside the service it's safe to consort with without fearing complications."

Kirk remained silent, but did not look enthusiastic.

"Five years in space, on top of many years of service and the hard work required to become a Starship Captain do take their toll, Captain Kirk. A break or a change is often indicated."

"Is my medical really all right? Did you tell me the truth, sir?"

"I most certainly did. Your senior officers are in excellent health too, but they might like a change."

"I don't believe they want a change any more than I do. All I want is my ship back, sir."

"I repeat, Captain, don't be hasty. Think of the compensations I have to offer for a few minutes."

To humour him, Kirk tried. All he could picture in his mind was a desk, while some lucky b.... ran off with his ship! What compensations could a desk offer? Or a pretty woman? None, compared to the feel of the Enterprise, the darkness of space with stars beckoning to him from afar... At his side the tall, blue-clad figure of the close friend with whom he had shared so much... The warm smile of Bones... How could anyone in his right mind ask him to give all that up? Might as well ask him to die...

"Sir," he stated calmly, his voice determined, "I want my ship and my crew, nothing else. If I had known that a desk job was the reward Starfleet offered, I wouldn't have joined. I'm prepared to resign if necessary."

"Resignation won't give you the Enterprise, Captain."

"No, sir, but at least it will spare me a desk job!"

"You seem to be a stubborn man, Captain... Why should the remark amuse you?"

"Sorry, sir, please continue," replied Kirk. He couldn't very well say that his stubbornness might be due to Vulcan influence.

"For your own sake, I'm giving you three days to consider your future, Captain. No argument; my decision is final. You'll stay at a small dwelling on these premises, and see no-one apart from the woman assigned to look after your comfort."

"Is that supposed to mean what I think it means? Is that woman a bribe?"

"No, Captain, it's entirely up to you, no obligation is involved. The only obligation you have is to think about your future and give me your final decision in three days. I'd advise careful thought about the consequences of whatever decision you take."

"Because whatever I decide, I lose my ship," said Kirk bitterly.

"Your words, not mine, Captain."

Kirk had no choice but to obey, and settled into the small house, which had every luxury, including a swimming pool; but his mood was unhappy. The woman assigned to look after him tried to comfort him, but was rebuffed politely but firmly. Kirk had enough problems on his hands without adding to them. Women were fine, as long as they didn't interfere with his career and his ship. He had to concentrate on finding a way to keep the Enterprise - there was too much at stake to be distracted by a meaningless affair.

The prospect of the future without the ship, without space and the stars, was a nightmare. There had to be a solution... Why did Starfleet want to ground him? What had he done wrong? No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of anything... There was that time when he had disobeyed orders and gone to Vulcan, but T'pol had put a word in and Starfleet had been only too happy to forget, so it couldn't be that...

Admiral Jourdan himself had said he was one of the best Captains in Starfleet, if not the best, so why was he being shoved behind a desk? It didn't make sense, there was no logic...

Were McCoy and Spock and Scotty also in isolation and required to think of their future? Yes, they must be... And they won't agree, they're spacemen too... Besides, no beautiful woman was going to influence Scotty... As for McCoy, he'd see through the trick... They wouldn't be stupid enough to try a woman on Spock, but they might try a computer - Spock had mentioned a new model, far advanced, that he hoped to study...

From the depths of his mind Spock's own voice quoted words the Vulcan had said to him at one time. 'Computers make excellent and efficient servants, but I have no wish to serve under them. A Starship also runs on loyalty, loyalty to one man... Nothing can replace it. Nor him.'

Had that been a contact from Spock?... No, just a vivid memory, so vivid he could hear Spock's voice... He was reminded of that awful time when M-5 had taken away his ship, he had felt so lonely then...

The line of that old poem came into his mind. "All I ask is a tall ship... and a star to steer her by." The Enterprise was his, and the stars were there to steer her by... It was no longer true - what could his life be like without his ship and the stars?... The prospect was too hard to consider.

Yet he would have to consider it... His beautiful ship, that he had threatened to destroy rather than surrender to anyone else... Unfortunately, he couldn't use that weapon now... Where was the logic in resigning, though? Whichever way he turned, he lost his ship.

The woman tried to make him talk about his problem, saying that she wanted to help. She pointed out that since he would lose anyway, why not make the best of it? Kirk dismissed her with an effort not to be rude - he could do without such help. He had to take his final decision with a clear mind and stick to it. His life and his whole future were at stake.

On the last evening he stood in the small garden looking at the stars, and knew what his decision had to be, no matter how much it hurt. The one consolation was that as he was resigning he could tell Admiral Jourdan in great detail what he could do with his promotion...

A very small consolation, though, Kirk reflected unhappily. Still, at least he wouldn't have to face a desk... With his record he should be able to get a commercial or passenger ship, but what a poor substitute for his beautiful Enterprise... He would still be in space, among the stars where he belonged, although the work would be routine, without the excitement of new worlds, new discoveries...

Was Spock going through all this too? No, a Vulcan would retire into himself and remain calm, consider every aspect logically...

Was he going to lose Spock?... And Bones?...

Because he was unhappy after the painful stress of the last few days, Kirk's mind did not reject the unbidden thought. The prospect plunged him into a gloom he found it difficult to shake off. He must not be selfish, his friends had the right to choose; and they had given him so much in the past he could not blame them for following a different path now, if they wished...

Kirk would not have been Human if the prospect of the loss not only of his ship but of his friends too had not depressed him heavily. The loneliness... He sat on the garden bench and put his head in his hands, trying to fight despair. The strain of the last few days was taking its toll, and he was alone... His future had gone...

Something - no, someone - was trying to get through to him... Spock! It was Spock! The fleeting contact, no longer than a few seconds, became an impression of pain, then disappeared.

"Spock, you shouldn't have done it!" murmured Kirk, aware of what had happened. His First Officer had either sensed or guessed at his despair, and had tried to contact him telepathically. From the pain that had ended the contact Kirk guessed that Spock had been forbidden to communicate with him; he had probably been placed in a special isolation unit, where thought waves were cut off by a barrier. Any attempt to breach that barrier brought the punishment of pain... yet Spock had tried, because Kirk needed him. It did not matter that the contact had been so short no message had been possible. Kirk knew its meaning.

He got up, all his despair gone. The future was not very attractive, but whatever happened Spock would be at his side, and they would share the bad moments as they had shared the good. Bones would probably stay with him too, if only to argue with Spock... and Scotty would always prefer practice to studies...

For the first time in three days Kirk had no trouble going to sleep. How could he have doubted Spock? Though he hadn't doubted, really... the threatened loss of his ship was a blow that had overwhelmed him, and selfishly he had not thought first of his friends. Now he understood that the loss of the Enterprise, painful though it might be, was preferable to the loss of a certain Vulcan... and a certain doctor...

In a similar dwelling some distance away Spock lay on his bed, controlling the pain in his head which was, at last, receding. His attempt had been what Jim would have called a gamble - he preferred to think of it as a calculated risk. He had succeeded, he had reached his friend, and Kirk would know why. All was well, he had not failed his Captain.

His one regret was that he was unable to give the Enterprise to Kirk, or to force Starfleet to do so. His logical mind had seen a possible reason behind this treatment, but it was pure speculation, and without evidence he would not mention it to Kirk or McCoy. They had faced many dangers together. Now, if necessary, they would face a new life. The challenge was great, but acceptable. The idea of returning to Vulcan did not even occur to him. He had made his choice many years ago, and to reverse it now was too illogical to contemplate. At peace with himself, Spock went to sleep.

In his own quarters McCoy dismissed the attractive woman who waited on him with none of his usual politeness. "I don't like stool-pigeons! You're here to spy on me, nothing else! Go and tell your master, that bunch of bureaucrats tied up in red tape, that they'll never get Jim Kirk into their clutches!"

The woman left, and with a sigh McCoy sank down onto his bed. This was the last day. How were Jim and Spock and Scotty doing? Maybe one of them would manage to convince the top brass that this wouldn't work. If Spock couldn't, though, no-one could. Otherwise there was no hope... Jim would lose his ship... How could they do that to him? After all he had done for Starfleet... The ingratitude and unfairness of it all made McCoy clench his fists in helpless anger.

At least Spock, Scotty and I won't fail him!

The following day Kirk was led to Admiral Jourdan's officer.

"Well, Captain Kirk," said his superior officer jovially, "have you come to your senses? What is your decision? As briefly as possible, please."

Reluctantly Kirk decided not to go into the details he had planned, and opted for a dignified reply, thinking wryly that Spock would have approved.

"My decision stands, sir. I'm a spacemen, and I belong on my ship. While I'm willing to continue to serve Starfleet in that capacity, I'm not prepared to accept any promotion involving a desk job. I will therefore resign."

"I see."

Nothing could be read on Jourdan's face as he signalled on his intercom. Two doors opened at opposite ends of the room. Through one came an Admiral, followed by McCoy and Scotty; through the other came a Vulcan Admiral, followed by Spock.

"Admiral Glanov and Admiral Soltak," said Jourdan, introducing the newcomers briefly. "Your report, gentlemen."

"Dr. McCoy told me in no uncertain terms what I could do with any hospital," replied Admiral Glanov drily, "and Mr Scott stated that he liked engines that went somewhere, not ones he could only look at. Both officers made it clear they wish to remain on active service. They spent half their time pleading for Captain Kirk to keep his ship, and when I told them it was impossible they qualified Starfleet Command with certain adjectives I will not repeat."

The Vulcan Admiral's report followed. "Commander Spock will not accept any other position than active service. He made it clear that I was the one Vulcan

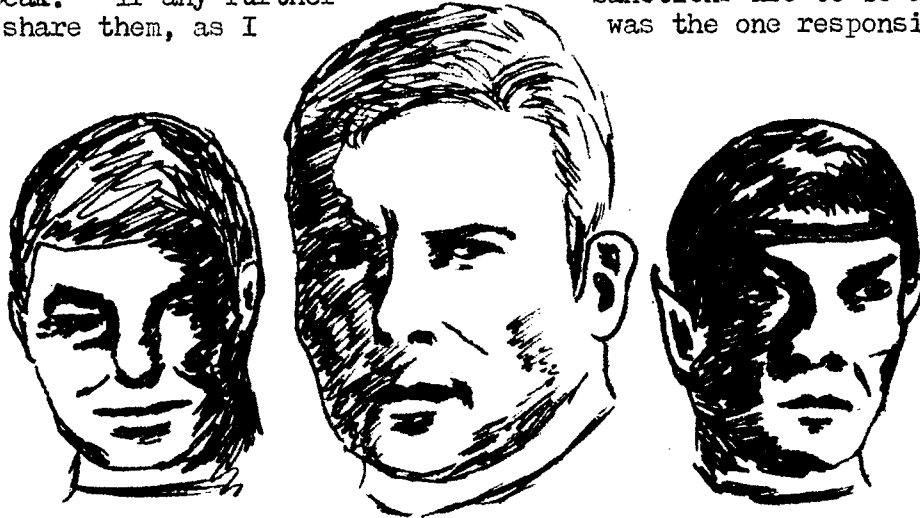
he had met who was completely devoid of logic."

"Why was that?" asked Jourdan with an amused smile.

"Once I had informed him of Captain Kirk's promotion away from the Enterprise, most of the interview was spent discussing not his own future, as I attempted to do (that was illogical, according to him), but his Captain's future and the illogicality of Starfleet. I also have to report that Commander Spock disobeyed orders, and broke through the thought barrier for a few seconds. The usual sanction was applied."

"Why did you disobey, Commander?" Jourdan asked severely.

"My First Officer has already been punished," said Kirk before Spock had time to speak. "If any further demand to share them, as I was the one responsible for his lapse."



"Are you telepathic, Captain Kirk?" asked Soltak.

"No, sir."

"Then you cannot have been responsible."

"I was contacted because I needed help - that makes me responsible!" Kirk insisted.

"A very unusual case," said Jourdan thoughtfully.

"Agreed," said Soltak. "During the telepathic tests, Commander Spock was unable to break through a similar barrier."

Jourdan did not pursue the subject, and instead asked his Vulcan colleague, "Anything to add to your report?"

"Nothing. I cannot repeat Commander Spock's opinion of Starfleet officials - it is not complimentary."

Jourdan leaned back in his chair and laughed. Admiral Glanov joined in, but the Vulcan Admiral ignored their mirth with the impassivity of his race.

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other in surprise - what was so funny? Ignoring the laughter, Kirk ~~harked~~ harked his friends for their support. Spock's thoughtful gaze made him ask, "What's on your mind?"

"I believe my speculation was correct, Captain. There is a logical reason behind all this."

His colleagues wondered if he had gone mad, but there was no time for questions.

"You're too clever for us, Commander Spock," said Jourdan. "I knew you might guess. What made you think of the truth?"

"Logic, sir. Captain Kirk has an exceptional aptitude for logic; it is therefore reasonable to assume that Higher Human officers in Starfleet also have

that ability. Consequently, what we were subjected to was a series of tests conducted for a very logical reason."

Kirk's mind had been working it out, and the word 'test' made him realise the truth. Had not the threatened loss of his ship been such an emotional shock, he might have guessed earlier.

Forgetting all discipline, he caught Jourdan's sleeve. "Does this mean I keep my ship?" he demanded.

"Captain, you're hurting my arm!" protested the Admiral.

Kirk desisted, apologising, but Jourdan smiled as he rubbed his arm gingerly.

"I don't blame you! Yes, Captain, the Enterprise is yours. You will, however, have to accept the promotion to Commodore."

"Must I?"

"I can assure you that the promotion doesn't mean a desk job now or at any time. As you must know, many officers remain at that rank and aboard their ships until retirement from active service."

"Do I keep my officers?" asked Kirk, not quite happy yet. "If not, I refuse."

"They're all reassigned to the Enterprise," Jourdan assured him.

"Then what was all this rigmarole about, sir?" asked a bewildered Scotty; McCoy had also guessed at the truth by then.

"Commander Spock was right, Mr. Scott," answered Glanov. "Starfleet officers are not illogical - not even the Human ones. It would be stupid to dispense with the active services of our best officers. Outstanding Captains, and First Officers, are few and far between, so when we find them, we hang onto them. It has not escaped our notice that the Enterprise is the best Starship in the Fleet because of the exceptional teamwork of her senior officers."

"I still don't understand," said poor Scotty.

"After a five year mission on top of years of previous service, we had to make sure that this team was still composed of dedicated spacemen," explained Jourdan. "Men devoted to a career in space, without reservations, with no longing for a family life, or another career, or simple comforts. It has been known in the past, with some officers."

"So we tried to break you," continued Glanov. "We offered powerful incentives to see if you could be tempted to renounce a space career."

"I see the logic of it now, as Mr. Spock would say," grinned Scotty. "That was no way to treat your best officers, though!"

"I agree," said McCoy. "You didn't have to be so hard on Jim."

"The better the officer, the harder the test," smiled Jourdan. "You've all passed with flying colours - and you've proved what an exceptional team you make. Each of you trusted the others, and relied on them."

"Are we to be subject to this every five years?" asked Spock.

"No, Commander, the same trick never works twice. From now on your ship's achievements will speak for themselves, as will your records. Experience has taught us that any officer not up to the very high standard of a Starship shows up after the first five year mission at the latest. You're all in the clear now."

"Thank you, sir," said Kirk, smiling in relief and anticipation. He had a lifetime of space in front of him now!

"Wipe that smile off, Commodore," said Jourdan. "You'll find immediate disadvantages to staying on active service."

"Such as, sir?"

"Your one year shore leave is curtailed to six months."

"Is that all?"

Jourdan's attempt at severity dissolved into a smile. "I wish we had more officers like you!"

At his signal Admiral Soltak handed out a thin manual to each officer. Jourdan explained that they had to study it during their leave, then return to Starbase 1 for the second six months of their leave to familiarise themselves with the improvements made to the Enterprise. However, they would be provided with comfortable quarters, and their visits to the ship would still leave them plenty of leisure time, so in a sense they would still be on leave.

"Any questions?"

"Sir, will my ship undergo any major alterations?"

"No, Commodore, any changes will be mostly technical. I know how a ship becomes home to spacemen... you will find her as you remember her when you get back after your leave. See you in six months time."

The nightmare was over at last. The other officers had also passed the tests, so there would be no changes, apart from the possibility of a few more junior officers being assigned to the ship for training.

The next day Kirk and Spock accompanied Scotty and McCoy to the spaceport. Scotty was looking forward to his holiday in Scotland, after accompanying the doctor on a visit to McCoy's daughter who was on an Earth colony.

Having seen them off, Kirk turned to the Vulcan. "I've not booked my passage to Earth yet, Spock, because I'd like to book two tickets. My mother has a soft spot for you, as you know. She thinks you keep me out of mischief!"

"Nevertheless, your mother has not seen you for a long time, Jim. I do not wish to intrude on a family reunion."

"You won't intrude. Besides, Peter might be there. He'd never forgive me if I didn't bring you along."

"In that case, I accept your invitation, but I shall have to leave for Vulcan without too much delay - my family is expecting me."

"We'll let you go if you insist," smiled Kirk, as he booked their passages for the next day.

On the way back to the hotel he became aware that Spock's silence was too prolonged, as though the Vulcan was reluctant to speak.

"What is it, Spock?" he asked in his direct manner.

"I was only thinking about our leave," replied Spock, looking away.

It was clear to Kirk that something was on his companion's mind. Was he worried about his family's reaction to his renewed choice of Starfleet? He asked Spock, and was relieved by his answer.

"I believe my father only attempted to pressure me on Starfleet's instructions. He is a Vulcan, therefore logical enough to realise that after standing by my choice for eighteen years, I am not likely to reverse it now."

"I'm glad to hear that the breach with your family is finally healed," said Kirk. "If that's not bothering you, what is?"

"I would like to ask a favour... No, your time belongs to your family."

"My family can only stand so much of me at a time, and six months could be a bit too long. Come on, speak up, or you'll have me worried."

"I would be honoured if you would visit Vulcan, stay at my home. My family would welcome you."

Kirk wondered at the fleeting emotion he saw in Spock's eyes as he spoke, and understood that this was very important to his companion. His gaze locked on the Vulcan's, and he understood. The last time he had been on Vulcan they had fought... Now was the chance to show that the past didn't exist, and to acquire

pleasant memories of a holiday on Spock's native planet.

"I accept," he said without hesitation. "Your world is beautiful, and I'll enjoy visiting it with you as my guide."

"Thank you, Jim." The voice was cool and normal, but Kirk was not fooled. "You will be given a breathing device to spare you any discomfort, and there are many sights you will appreciate."

"Like that beautiful red sky. Hey, we can go camping!" replied Kirk with enthusiasm.

Their shore leave plans now settled, they packed their bags and a shuttle took them aboard the passenger ship for Earth next day. Both officers were wearing a cape over their uniforms to avoid attracting attention. The liner was a luxury class vessel, and Kirk stopped at the bar.

"Come on, Spock, let's celebrate the beginning of our leave with a drink - just one."

Spock humoured him, although Kirk and McCoy had given up trying to convert him to the delights of alcohol. An officer coming aboard saw what they were drinking, and admonished them.

"Haven't you read the notice? It's not wise to drink such strong stuff just before a space journey - it will make the initial space sickness worse."

"Is that so? What do you think of that, Spock?"

"Quite illogical, Jim."

They turned to the officer as they spoke, and their capes opened enough to show their uniforms. The man reddened and apologised.

"You didn't know," Kirk soothed him. "Please keep it to yourself - we don't want to attract attention, we're on leave."

Their wish was respected, but they were quietly treated as V.I.P.'s for the duration of the trip.

"This is the life!" said Kirk, sinking luxuriously into a soft seat, careful not to spill his drink. "This is more comfortable than my command chair, and there are no decisions to make."

"Perhaps you should reconsider that desk job," said Spock blandly.

Kirk nearly spilled his drink. "Don't dare joke about that desk! The ghost of it will haunt me for years to come!"

Kirk steadied his glass and assured him that the Enterprise would lay any ghost. Kirk smiled, and wondered what McCoy would have made of Spock's teasing remark. He'd probably accuse him of being Human!... Spock had changed during those five years, but he couldn't be said not to be a Vulcan - and the good doctor wouldn't want it any other way.

"When you managed to contact me through the barrier," Kirk asked suddenly, "why did you do it? Human intuition?"

Five years ago the Vulcan would have taken such a remark as an insult. Now he considered the question carefully.

"It is possible, Jim," he admitted without embarrassment. "I sensed that you needed me. I could not say how or why."

"We won't let the hows or whys bother us!" said Kirk with a grin.

As the ship left orbit around Starbase 1 Spock looked at Kirk with his half smile. "You must be looking forward to going home."

"Home? I'm not going home. The Enterprise is home, Spock, as you well know."

The Vulcan nodded in tacit agreement, the half smile becoming the nearest

to a real smile the Vulcan could give.

Kirk smiled back and settled comfortably into his reclining seat, day-dreaming about the coming shore leave on two beautiful worlds, Earth and Vulcan. He would enjoy that leave, because his ship awaited him.

Commodore Kirk no longer feared the future. It was the one he had chosen, aboard his ship, with a certain Vulcan on one side of him arguing with a doctor on the other... To Commodore Kirk, it meant happiness.

This story has no end.

Only a new beginning.

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