

THE BOUNTY HUNTER

by Shirley Buck

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He rode tall in the saddle, lean, bronzed with a large brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes to shade them from the hot sun. His horse picked it's way over the rough terrain, but her rider could feel she was beginning to tire. It would soon be time to stop for the night.

He gave a sharp tug to the rope attached to the pommel of his saddle and a slight smile lit his face as he heard the heavy thud and low moan that followed that action. His prisoner would be more tired than the horse - and the man gave an inward chuckle. Darchez would pay him double this time. A goldshirt! The first he had managed to catch. Even more money would be his if he brought the goldshirt to the ranch only just alive.

He looked around to see his captive, scrabbling to get to his feet. They had covered many miles today and Pandros knew that he would not get to his feet many more times. Too bad!! He would just have to be dragged at the end of the rope. It was all the same to Pandros; as long as his prisoner was alive, he would get his money. How much suffering was involved concerned Pandros not at all.

The captive was on his feet again, for the moment. He was covered in dirt and sweat; cuts, bruises and abrasions covered his body and face. His clothes, torn in many places, scarcely resembled the smart Starfleet uniform it had started out as. The man licked his dry, cracked lips and squinted up at the sun. At last it was falling towards the horizon. His badly blistered and bleeding, feet, trapped within his boots, could hardly keep him going, but it was infinitely more preferable to being dragged, helpless, over this dry, rocky ground.

He seemed to have been stumbling behind the horse at the end of a rope forever. He couldn't seem to remember how he came to be here, his wrists bloody and sore, his whole body aching from constant falls and his head spinning from the effects of the sun. But worst of all was the thirst. The Starfleet officer could now think of nothing else - cool water, gurgling in running streams, dripping from rain-drenched leaves. Water held out to him by invisible hands, almost touching his parched lips.

Suddenly the man in the saddle dismounted, leaving the prisoner to sink to the ground in exhaustion, watching as Pandros tethered the horse in the shade of a large overhanging rock, giving her food and water. Then before he had a chance to rise, Pandros jerked the captive across the ground at the end of the rope, causing more bruises, and fresh cuts opened as his skin caught sharp edges of rocks. The rope was slung up around the branch of a dead tree, dragging the arms of the prisoner above his head, and he was left, tethered there.

Pandros reached for the waterbottle he carried and unscrewed the lid.

"Drink, goldshirt?" he asked and laughed at the almost desperate look in the prisoner's battered face.

Slowly, Pandros tipped the bottle inches from the

upturned face. The drops, shining and cool, trickled slowly on to the dirty gold shirt, missing the prisoner's open mouth by a fraction of an inch. Pandros gave a bellow of laughter.

"This is the way you pay, goldshirt! But remember, this is only the beginning." And he laughed again.

Slowly, Kirk closed his eyes and mouth. Inwardly he called, desperately, hopelessly, "Spock! Sweet Jesus, Spock, help me!"

Darchez was a bitter man. He had been robbed of the two people he had loved best in the world. He had always been a hard man, but Maria had found the chink in his armour. She had been a warm, passionate woman, who had ruled him completely and he had loved her to distraction. She had been killed when the horse she was riding had thrown her. Their only daughter had been barely two years old at the time.

The bitterness he felt at the death of his beloved wife grew year by year, as he raged at the fates who had done this awful thing. Estrana, his daughter, was the only one he responded to. He guarded her closely, never letting her far from his sight, frightened that he might lose her too. As she grew, she became more like her mother and Darchez worshipped her, believing she could do no wrong.

At first she was happy on the ranch, finding many things to interest her, not missing the companionship of others in the almost exclusive demands of her father. But as she grew older she longed to visit Dantos City, which she had heard about, fleetingly, from the cowboys who worked the ranch. She began to question her father, to coax him into letting her visit her uncle, who ran the distribution office for the ranch in the city. Darchez resisted her, unwilling for her to go so far away from him. But when she reached seventeen, he knew he could not deny her further; she was a woman grown with a mind of her own and Darchez knew that if he did not give his permission, she would find a way to go on her own. He was frightened at the thought of his beautiful, chaste daughter in Dantos City, but his brother would look after her, she was a good daughter, she would come to no harm, he told himself. Finally, he agreed and impressed on his brother the need to look after Estrana.

But two things were against Darchez - the irresponsibility of his brother and the wantonness and naivety of his daughter. She was a warm and passionate woman like her mother and she had had no chance to flower within the confines of the ranch. In Dantos City she found life very different and infinitely exciting. For Dantos City was a wide open frontier town still and the lovely Estrana found herself at the centre of an admiring circle of men, who lavished gifts and compliments on her. Many of the men were Starfleet Officers on R and R and they were the most generous of all.

Her uncle, knowing the sheltered life she had led on the ranch, encouraged her to 'go out and enjoy yourself'. Having no children of his own, he gave little thought to the consequences that might follow. So she went out and

enjoyed herself - with almost every man she met. She gave herself almost exclusively to the Starfleet officers, finding them kinder, gentler and more accomplished lovers! She had planned to stay six weeks, but in fact stayed six months and by that time she knew she was pregnant. She was terrified at what her father would do, but there was nowhere else to go.

She returned to the ranch and told her father that she had been raped by several Starfleet officers. He believed her implicitly and vowed revenge on all officers of Starfleet. No one should know of her humiliation. He would look after her here, on the ranch and no one would know what had happened. His housekeeper could deliver the baby and then his Estrana would live quietly here with him. Life would be as it was before she went to Dantos City.

His white hot rage at Starfleet officers had cooled to a cold; implacable hatred; an unreasoning, twisted, evil thing, when his daughter went into labour. For three days he listened to her suffering as she struggled to give birth to her child, with only the inexperienced housekeeper to help her. She was a kindly, capable soul who was completely helpless in the face of the difficult, agonised birth. She pleaded with Darchez to send for a Doctor but he wanted no one to know of his daughter's plight. It never entered his mind that she might die. It was three days before the housekeeper could say that Estrana would suffer no more. She had died giving birth to a dead son. It was this which finally pushed Darchez over the edge of insanity.

From that day Darchez lived only for vengeance against the men who wore the shirt of Starfleet Command. And in his twisted, demented mind he planned an awful revenge.

The Enterprise went into synchronous orbit over Dantos City on the planet Alvarez. Uhura announced their arrival and was acknowledged and welcomed by City Control.

Dantos City was in most ways still, a frontier town. Alvarez was a hot dry planet with little to recommend it for comfortable living but it was found to have rich veins of several, scarce and therefore valuable minerals. There had been no intelligent life on the planet and the mining companies had moved in to dig the wealth that the galaxy needed.

Inevitably, property developers had followed and four main towns had grown up near the various mining centres. Men with a love of the land had set up ranches around the towns to keep them supplied with fresh meat. Water was scarce and the life hard, but the ranchers had grown rich, supplying much needed food to the people who flooded into the towns, aiming to make their fortunes by taking the planet's wealth.

Gradually Dantos City had emerged as the richest and most sophisticated of the four towns. It gained a reputation as a place where anything could be bought - at a price. Starfleet allowed its Starship crews a stopover of only seventy two hours at any one time, preferring them

to use other planets for R and R. For the rest of the galaxy - if you could get there, anything was yours for as long as you liked - if you had the money to pay.

The Enterprise crew had never visited Alvarez before, and most of them were disappointed when they heard that no shore leave was to be granted. Captain Kirk was to beam down with two security guards to see the City Keepers, but not many of the crew knew why.

Captain Kirk had received a confidential and urgent request from Starfleet Command regarding Dantos City. It seemed that during the past year eleven Starfleet Officers had disappeared without trace while on stopover at Dantos City. Starfleet was extremely concerned and instructed Kirk to investigate the problem with the City Keepers as soon as the Enterprise could reach there.

Kirk and the security guards stood on the transporter pad, as Kirk gave final instructions to Mr. Spock.

"I want a constant monitor of our positions. Any suspicious actions and you beam us up immediately. I should be on the planet no longer than an hour on this visit. I don't anticipate any trouble. And I want no one else beaming down."

"Understood, Captain," Spock responded. He gave Kirk a long, steady stare. "Take care."

Kirk gave him a jaunty grin.

"I will indeed, Mr. Spock. Mr. Scott, when you're ready."

"Aye, Captain."

And the three men faded into a shimmering sparkle and disappeared.

Three figures materialised on the beam down pad nearest to the City Keeper's Hall. They walked quickly across the square, their shirts bright in the sun. Their appearance was watched carefully by a tall figure standing in the deep shade of one of the buildings. His eyes glinted as he saw the gold command shirt of Captain Kirk. Pandros began to make his plans.

He was experienced at isolating his prey and getting him out of the city unseen. He had caught his first Starfleet Officer a year ago and had beamed the unfortunate man directly to Darchez' ranch. Darchez had not been pleased. It had been too easy; the captive was well, if not happy. Darchez wanted his suffering to be prolonged. Pandros must see to it that the next captive did not arrive in such a healthy condition; Darchez had then proceeded to torture the officer slowly to death, taking delight in each moan of agony, each drop of blood spilt. Pandros had been sickened but the money was good, and Darchez promised more if the prisoners were made to suffer before getting to the ranch.

Pandros had learned quickly. A two day walk, tethered at the end of a rope, across the rough terrain with no food and little water, produced a suffering man, defenceless against the evil ways of Darchez. The screams of the second officer haunted his dreams occasionally. After that Pandros

just delivered the prisoner, collected the money and departed. Let the sick mind of Darchez conjure up whatever it wished. Pandros preferred not to think of what happened to the men after he departed. Pandros wanted the money and he was getting it for very little work. His account with the Dantos City Bank was increasing rapidly and with a little luck, it shouldn't be too long before he was able to make a down payment on his dreams - a single man space craft. Then he would be free - free to travel wherever he wanted, whenever he liked. No longer would he be imprisoned on this godforsaken world! It did not occur to him that he would achieve his dream over the suffering and death of innocent men.

The Enterprise security guards stood at attention, phasers at the ready, outside the door of the office of the City Keeper. Kirk had been inside, closeted with the Keeper, for about fifteen minutes and as yet, no one had even walked along the corridor. The Enterprise guards remained alert.

Pandros waited, just out of sight, in a small dark storage room next to the Keeper's office. Silently he opened the door, but even that small noise was heard by the nearest guard, who went to investigate. He never even knew what hit him, as Pandros rendered him unconscious with a hypospray pressed to the temple. He was bundled into the storage room and when the second guard came to see what had happened to his comrade, he was as swiftly disposed of. Pandros smiled grimly as he secured the door and silently left the building, knowing the guards could reveal nothing of who had attacked them. He took up his new position and waited.

Kirk left the Keeper's office with little more information than when he went in. He was astounded to find neither security guard outside. He pulled his communicator out and tried to call the ship, but was greeted with loud crackle of static. Now a little concerned he walked quickly out to the square, but still he could see no sign of his guards. He tried again to raise the ship, but Pandros' jamming device was very efficient - he knew Starfleet procedure well.

Alarmed now, Kirk began to walk quickly towards the beam up point. He passed close to a dark passageway, as Pandros knew he would. Kirk felt the tightly constricting bands around his throat, preventing him from crying out. As Pandros dragged him roughly out of sight, his hands clutched at the thongs and he gave a low moan as he sank deep into oblivion.

Pandros loaded Kirk quickly into the hired hover and covered his body with a large cloth. He switched the portable sensor shield on and knew he was safe from the prying eyes of a starship.

On the bridge of the Enterprise, all was quiet. Chekov at the Science Station was carefully monitoring the movements of the Captain and the security guards. Chekov looked around and found McCoy standing close, trying to peer at the sensors too.

"It is alright, Doctor McCoy, I have them clearly on the screen. We should have no trouble beaming them back, sir."

"I am aware of the efficiency of this starship, Chekov," retorted McCoy. "It's the Captain I'm worried about. If anyone can find any action, it's him."

He turned to Spock.

"I don't like the feel of this one, Spock. One of us should have gone with him."

"I agree with you, Doctor. I should have gone with the Captain."

"So you think you can take better care of Jim than I can? I've lost count of the number of times I've pulled both of you through ..."

"Mr. Spock!" Chekov's agitated voice cut through the conversation. "I think something is wrong. Captain Kirk seems to have left the City Keeper's Hall alone. The guards are still inside."

Spock was up and across to the Science Station in seconds and was just in time to see Kirk's sensor trace blink out. There was a horrified silence as Spock tried in vain to regain the trace.

Spock pressed the intercom button.

"Mr. Scott, beam up anything within a radius of twenty metres of the Captain's last known position. Immediately." Spock's calm voice belied his inner concern.

"Aye, sir. Energising now."

They could hear the sound of the transporter beam activating over the intercom.

"Nothing, Mr. Spock," came Scotty's worried voice. "Just a long leather thong with weights on each end. Mighty peculiar."

"Bring it to the Bridge, please."

"Aye, sir."

"What in hell can have happened to him?" came McCoy's bewildered voice.

Spock turned to Chekov.

"Keep monitoring. A close sensor scan of the whole city. Street by street."

"Aye, sir," Chekov's voice was awed at the thought of the task he had just been assigned.

"Lieutenant Uhura. Get me a line to the City Keeper."

"Aye, sir."

They were all stunned at how quickly it had all happened, but the efficiency of the Bridge crew never faltered. If anyone could find the Captain, Spock was the person to do it. He would never give up. Each person on the Bridge thought back to other occasions when the Captain had disappeared and somehow Spock had always come up with the solution. This time would be no different, they told themselves.

Spock was deep in thought. He knew the Captain was still alive. He couldn't have put it into words, but the closeness of their relationship was such that he knew he would be aware of Kirk's death. No, his friend was still

alive, of that he was sure. But what had happened to him?

Kirk was woken from a shallow, uncomfortable sleep by water splashing on his head and face. He turned his head upwards and opened his mouth, searching avidly for the life giving liquid. The cool water slid down his throat like nectar. He swallowed noisily, reluctant to miss a drop of the precious fluid. All too soon the flow stopped and Kirk opened his eyes to see the face of Pandros, leering above him.

"Well, goldshirt. Had a good sleep?"

He untied the rope from around the branch, allowing Kirk's arms to drop forward onto his knees. Pandros jerked him to his feet and dragged him across to where the horse was already saddled. The rope was tied to the pommel and Pandros swung himself up into the saddle.

He grinned, evilly.

"Ready for another walk, goldshirt?"

Kirk looked up at him in despair. The circulation was beginning to return to his arms, causing him almost unbearable pain. His swollen and bloody feet trapped within his boots felt as if he was walking on sharpened knife blades, each step searing agony. His whole body ached as if he had been savagely beaten, the cuts and bruises from the previous day's falls throbbing anew.

"Why are you doing this to me? I don't even know you," Kirk's voice was a husky creak.

Pandros laughed.

"For money, goldshirt. For money!!"

"What is it you need so badly that you would treat a human being like this?"

"What do I need? Freedom, goldshirt. That's what I want. Freedom. To do what I like, be what I like."

"And this is how you buy your freedom?" There was incredulity in Kirk's voice.

"Shut your mouth, goldshirt!" Pandros slapped him hard across the face, causing blood to trickle from a cut on his lip. "Or I'll shut it for you, permanently."

"I need that money badly. I want to get away from Alvarez. People think they can get anything they want on Alvarez and if they stay here a week or two, its like living in Aladdin's cave. But to live here, really live here, year in and year out, that cave becomes a prison. The heat, the dust, the hard labour to make any money." He laughed nastily. "Oh, yes, it's a good place to make easy money, if you have money to start with. I came here with my father, as a boy. He laboured in the mines and expected me to do the same when I was old enough. And I did, naive fool that I was! Day after day of gut wrenching work. For what? A mere pittance! Enough to keep you going until the next pay day. But there's more to life than just being a slave. I want to get away from this godforsaken planet. I'm going to buy me a one man space ship."

His eyes lit with the glow of fanaticism and Kirk knew that here was a man who truly believed what he said. Life here wasn't as Pandros had painted it, but Pandros believed that it was.

"I can travel wherever I want," Pandros' face came close to Kirk's. "The universe will be mine! Surley you understand that, spaceman!!"

"And you think that having a space ship will give you freedom?" Kirk could barely force the words out. His throat was still dry, in spite of the water. And the sun, coming up over the horizon, sucked the moisture from him like a sponge. His head was spinning.

Pandros sneered.

"And you think it won't?"

"Not true freedom, no." Kirk shook his head dizzily.

"Who's paying all this money and why. I don't understand."

"No, goldshirt, I don't suppose you do. But as long as I get my money, I don't really care. Darchez can do what he likes to all of you. How he must hate Starfleet." Pandros' voice took on a reflective note. "All the things he does to the rats I bring in."

A cold chill ran through Kirk in spite of the sun.

"And you want your freedom?" Kirk would have laughed if he'd been able to. "Do you think that being confined within the metal hull of a space ship is freedom? You will only have exchanged one kind of prison for another. Space can be a very lonely place. It gives you time to think, to think about who you are. You have to accept what you really are out there. There are no places to hide. Do you think you will have freedom when you know that what you have has been bought with the suffering of innocent people! Can you live with the things you've done?"

Kirk's voice ended on a merest whisper. But he got no reply. He was kicked savagely in the chest and knocked off his feet. Pandros spurred his horse and Kirk was dragged helplessly along behind.

On the Enterprise, two days had passed. Two days in which hope and despair had ranged the Enterprise.

The two security guards had been beamed back on board, but had been unable to throw any light on what had happened. They were dazed and shaken at the thought that they had failed to protect the Captain.

The City Keeper had also been unable to offer any help. Kirk's disappearance had been as dramatic and as sudden as all the other Starfleet Officers. He was deeply distressed and offered any help he could give to try and find out what had happened and to recover the Captain.

Spock said very little. He sat and stared at the weighted leather thongs, feeling that they were the key that would unlock the mystery. They looked such innocent objects, but Spock knew only too well how lethal they could be. He remembered the ah- woon he had used on Kirk during their fight on Vulcan. He shivered at the memory.

Despite the impassive face, Spock was deeply concerned about Kirk. The swiftness with which Kirk had disappeared without trace was indicative of a highly organised action. The fact that eleven Starfleet Officers had also disappeared and had never been found worried Spock even more.

He stared at the leather thongs. He would find out

nothing more sitting here on the Enterprise. Somehow he must find Jim Kirk. He was down on that planet somewhere and Spock was desperate enough to tramp the whole surface if he had to. Picking up the leather thongs, he made his preparations to beam down to Dantos City.

The long, low ranch building came into sight about two hours after sunrise. Kirk was so dazed, confused and pain ridden that he failed to see it. He didn't know the end was in sight.

All the previous day he had staggered along, falling frequently, his whole body a mass of pain. The landscape whirled dizzily before him and by the time Pandros had stopped for the night, Kirk was barely conscious. Pandros had poured some water over his face and a little had trickled into his mouth, but it had not been enough to revive him.

Pandros had left him where he lay, not even bothering to tie him up. He fed and watered his horse and then cooked a meal for himself over the flames of a small fire. A coffee pot stood in the embers keeping warm.

Kirk opened bleary eyes and watched the dancing flames. He could smell the food and the coffee, but it was obvious that Pandros would give him nothing. He shut his eyes tightly and licked at his blackened swollen lips. He thought of Spock and wondered dazedly where he was now. He would be searching for him, Kirk knew. But Spock would never find him out here in the middle of the brown, parched landscape. Pandros seemed not to even follow any sort of track. Kirk's only comfort was that it wasn't any of his crew who were suffering so.

He opened his eyes again and moved slightly, wincing with pain. He could see the stars now and he thought of his ship - his beloved Enterprise. Did he have to die here like this lying in the dust? Surely his fate was amongst the stars, not here in this isolated dustbowl, at the mercy of a sadistic fanatic.

'Dear God, Spock. Where are you?' Kirk moaned softly at the thought of his friend. Spock would never find him now. In despair he closed his eyes and slowly dropped into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning, Kirk was unable to move. His whole body was stiff and aching and he didn't think he would be able to stand. His head was pounding and everything seemed blurred and dizzy. Pandros kicked him, but it made little difference, Kirk just didn't have the strength to rise.

Roughly Pandros pulled him into a sitting position and poured water over his head and down his throat. Kirk coughed and gasped. Then Pandros lifted him up and threw him over the saddle. But at least he wasn't being dragged. Pandros wanted him at the ranch - alive!

Two hours later Pandros led the horse up to the ranch house and yelled for Darchez. He pulled Kirk from the saddle and he slid into a heap on the ground. Pandros

poured more water over his face and Kirk coughed and opened his eyes.

Darchez came out of the ranch house, a tall, thin man with a ravaged face and deep set burning eyes. His mouth widened into a malevolent grin when he saw Kirk lying on the ground semi-conscious.

"A goldshirt, eh? Pandros, you have done well."

"Glad you are pleased." He held out his hand.

Darchez pulled a small pouch from his pocket and dropped it into the outstretched palm.

Pandros tipped his hat and remounting his horse, turned in the direction of Dantos City.

"Don't you want to stay and see the fun?"

"Your idea of fun and mine are somewhat different," responded Pandros in distain.

"Are they really, Pandros?" He looked at the man lying helpless at his feet. "I don't think so, I really don't think so."

"Damn you, Darchez." He spurred his horse and galloped off. Darchez gave a loud cackle of mirthless laughter.

"Now, goldshirt," he said in a deceptively soft voice. "It's payment time."

Seizing Kirk by one arm he dragged him roughly to a large stake in the middle of the yard.

"Get up!" Darchez' voice cracked out.

Kirk looked up at him with painfilled eyes.

"Why are you doing this?"

His voice was barely audible.

Darchez gave a nasty laugh and kicked Kirk brutally in the side. There was a slight crack as a rib fractured.

"Why, goldshirt? Why?!" His voice rose almost hysterically. "because you killed my daughter." Darchez kicked him again and Kirk gave a low moan. "My sweet, innocent Estrana."

"I don't even know your daughter!" gasped Kirk. Even breathing was painful for him now.

"Maybe you didn't, but someone from Starfleet did. You're all the same. Every last one of you. Whoring around the galaxy, leaving innocent girls to suffer because of your desire for momentary pleasure. My Estrana took three days to die. Three agonising days - giving birth to a dead child. A child of Starfleet. You're to blame. You're all responsible and I'll make you all pay. Every last one of you!!"

An insane look shone in his eyes as he roughly dragged Kirk to his feet and tied him tightly to the stake. He took out a long sharp knife and laughed at the fear in Kirk's eyes.

"Now where do I start?" he asked softly. Slowly he brought the knife close to Kirk's face. He jerked his head back, watching the slow movements of the knife.

Darchez laughed softly.

"Or somewhere else?"

Slowly the point of the knife travelled down Kirk's chest, slitting the gold shirt open and drawing a thin line of blood along the skin. Swiftly Darchez drew the knife across Kirk's ribcage, just where the fractured rib was. Kirk moaned in agony. Darchez laughed again. "No, let's try somewhere else."

Kirk's eyes watched as the knife travelled lower.

"Oh, God, Spock? Where are you?"

He tried to struggle against his bonds, but he had so little strength left. He could only endure, as best he could, what this madman was going to do to him. Kirk closed his eyes against the sight of Darchez' crazed expression. His head seemed to spin and his ears seemed full of familiar humming.

'Dear God, do it and get it over with!'

"Jim!"

Perhaps he was dead already. That had sounded like McCoy's voice. And what was all that shouting and scuffling about? His strength had finally deserted him and he couldn't even open his eyes. Then firm hands held him, bonds were cut and he was lifted bodily into the air. Slowly he opened his eyes.

'I really must be dead!'

It was Spock who held him so firmly, yet so gently in his arms. Spock, speechless with worry and fright that showed only in his eyes. Carefully Spock knelt and lay Kirk gently on the ground, supporting him with his arm. Then there was McCoy running a scanner over him, his voice rough with the same worry and fright he shared with Spock.

"We can't leave you alone for five minutes. Will you never cease to get into trouble. Ninety percent of my work is patching you up." McCoy pressed a hypo to Kirk's arm and then held a cup of clear, sparkling water to Kirk's lips. "My God, I'm glad to see you, Jim!"

Barely conscious, Kirk lay in Spock's arms and gulped gratefully at the water. Carefully Spock poured another cup of water over Kirk's head and neck, easing the dry cracked lips.

"Glad you made it, Spock!"

His voice was the barest whisper and Spock had to bend close to hear the words.

"I, too, Captain."

"You wouldn't want Starfleet to lose a fine Starship Captain, is that it?" Kirk gave a faint smile.

"Something like that, Captain," the fright had faded somewhat from Spock's eyes, but deep concern at the Captain's condition was still there. "Besides, some Captains are irreplaceable."

Kirk turned to look at Spock then moaned in agony as even that slight movement caused renewed pain across his chest.

McCoy had put away the hypo and scanner.

"Let's get him to Sickbay. He's badly in need of treatment."

"Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk's painfilled, hazel eyes looked into Spock's.

"Thank you."

His eyes closed and his head slipped against Spock's shoulder. Alarm flared in Spock's eyes and he looked across at McCoy.

"It's okay, Spock. He's just fainted. He's had about all he can take. Perhaps it's the best thing for him. I can get him comfortable before he comes round."

McCoy was appalled at what Kirk had had to endure. His body was a mass of bruises and abrasions. A fractured rib and the deep gash that Darchez had inflicted across it, McCoy was able to repair before infection had a chance to set in. He was dehydrated and suffering from heat exhaustion. But it was Kirk's feet that shocked McCoy. He had had to cut the boots off because Kirk's feet were so badly swollen. They were covered with bloody, broken blisters, some of which were badly infected.

"How in the world did you manage to walk at all, Jim?" McCoy's voice was soft.

"It was better than being dragged at the end of a rope," Kirk replied wryly. Besides, he slung me across the saddle for the last few miles. I should be grateful for small mercies." Kirk tried to hide the pain he was in behind a facade of flippancy, but McCoy wasn't fooled.

"Well, you won't be walking on those feet for a few days. Which is just as well. It will give your body the time it needs to regain some of its strength. What you need now is complete rest and plenty of fluid."

He handed Kirk a large glass of iced lemon water.

"Drink!"

Silently Kirk obeyed.

"How do my feet look now?" He looked down at the bandages that covered his scarred feet.

"How do they feel?" countered McCoy.

"They hurt! And I have no wish to walk on them."

McCoy gave a snort.

"Good. I've cleaned them up and given them the usual medication. Its just gonna take time. Now rest!!"

"I must see Spock first."

McCoy sighed.

"Okay. I know better than to argue with you. But ..."

McCoy poured another glassful of the lemon water.

"Drink!" he commanded, handing it to his Captain.

Kirk gave a mock groan.

"Yes, Doctor."

McCoy gave a satisfied grin and went to get Spock.

Spock had been waiting outside Sickbay for McCoy's report on Kirk.

"He's gonna be alright, Spock. His feet will keep him in Sickbay for five or six days and he should recover his strength in that time. He's lucky. Another five minutes and I dread to think ..." McCoy shook his head. "Anyway, he wants to see you. Don't stay too long."

Silently Spock entered Kirk's room, to find him lying on the bed with his eyes closed. His face was burned with the sun and there was a large graze on his cheekbone. His swollen lips were covered with cream. He opened his eyes as Spock came in.

"Quite a sight, eh, Spock?" He gave a wry laugh.

"At least you are safe and back aboard the Enterprise, Captain."

"True! How did you manage to find me? I never thought I would see you or the Enterprise again."

"It was the leather thongs used by Pandros that

provided the key."

Kirk fingered his neck. "Ah, yes. I remember now."

"Luckily for us, Pandros was careless and dropped them as he bundled you away.... Mr. Scott managed to beam them up and the vital clue was in my hands. They were a source of pride to Pandros. He learned how to use them as a boy and he was very fond of showing off his prowess with them. Once I beamed down to Dantos City, it took me very little time to find out who they belonged to. Very few people in the City use them."

"But how did you know who he was working for?" I thought Pandros would have kept that a dark secret."

"He does. But Darchez pays in coin, always. He uses hand made pouches with a small insignia. Pandros took the pouches into the bank and although he never parted with the pouches, the bank clerk had sharp eyes and recognised the insignia."

"What has happened to Darchez and Pandros now?"

"Darchez is being sent to Elba II. He is insane. They will do what they can for him." And Spock related Darchez' history.

Kirk shivered.

"I can understand his insanity, but not his choice of revenge. Those eleven poor devils before me! How long would it have gone on, if you hadn't discovered what had happened?"

"Difficult to say, Captain. The insane are usually unpredictable and Darchez was consumed by his hatred for Starfleet."

"And you caught Pandros?"

"Yes, sir, he had gone only a few miles. Mr. Scott was able to pick him out easily in that desolate landscape. He will, of course, be brought to trial. The City Keepers are arranging that. Starfleet, of course, will be sending a representative and I'm afraid, Captain, you will be asked to give evidence."

"I expected that. Its the least I can do for the men who died."

At that moment McCoy entered the room.

"That's long enough, Spock. Jim really must rest now."

"Just a few more minutes, Bones?"

"No, Jim."

"The doctor is quite right, Captain. You really must rest."

Kirk looked at Spock and then at McCoy in amazement.

"You're right," he said, at last. "I do need to rest. My First Officer and Chief Surgeon in agreement. I need to recover from the shock."

He gave a grin at the expression on their faces and closed his eyes. How good it was to be home!
