

# **THE WIND BENEATH MY WINGS**

by Shirley Buck

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"Sealed orders," commented Kirk, as he held the small tape in his hand. He looked across at Spock, who merely waited, eyebrow slightly raised.

Kirk placed the tape in the console and pressed the button. The voice of Admiral Komack, abrupt and incisive filled Kirk's cabin.

"Captain Kirk. Mr. Spock. Starfleet have a mission for you. Utmost secrecy of course. We have, what we believe to be problems with the Carahdria planetary system. As you are no doubt aware, this system is a vital communication link for our fleet in the three south quadrant of the galaxy. In the last few months, several of our Federation vessels have been denied port facilities. The authorities always have what seem to be water tight reasons, but we feel the number of occasions has been too high to be pure coincidence.

"We have decided to send both of you, as high ranking Starfleet officers and with a certain amount of renown ..."

Kirk grinned across at Spock as he heard those words. "...on a goodwill visit to the Court of the Golden Dragon. While you are there, assess the situation and try and discover if there is anything happening which could be considered detrimental to the Federation and to Starfleet.

"The Emperor is a young boy, and we believe him to be under the influence of the Chamberlain, TaiHengis. From all our reports, TaiHengis is a secretive man, who speaks little. We know nothing definite about him.

"The Enterprise will take you there, transport you to the Court and return for you in two weeks. We need the Enterprise on a short haul mission and Mr. Scott can take temporary command during that time.

"I will expect a full report when you return. Komack out."

There was a silence as the tape finished and the two men digested what they had heard. Finally Kirk stood up and removed the tape.

"A secret mission! Why did they have to pick on us?" Kirk said, angrily. "The Enterprise and its crew are supposedly on a five year exploratory mission. I don't take kindly to being sent to spy on our allies!" Kirk slammed his fist on the table. "Damn Komack! This is just the sort of mission I detest!"

Spock looked at his Captain, glad that Kirk would not be going alone. At least, he, Spock would be at Kirk's side and together they would stand a chance of success.

"It is a Starfleet officer's duty to obey orders," Spock spoke mildly.

"Yeah, I know, Spock," Kirk said resignedly. "I suppose it's just that I hate leaving the Enterprise for whatever reason. Even with Scotty in command I worry about her and about my crew." He glanced across at Spock and smiled, as he made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

A smile lit Spock's eyes in return.

"I'm glad you're coming along, Spock." Kirk spoke seriously.

"I, too, Captain."

There was a moment of silence. Spock never did say a great deal, but somehow Kirk was always aware of his supporting presence constantly beside him. When he had once told Spock that having him as his First Officer was an enormous asset to him, he had spoken the literal truth. Command of a Starship was never easy, but to know that there was someone on whom he could rely implicitly, whatever the situation, was something that Kirk believed few Starship Captains had.

It wasn't just Spock's support and strength though, it was his friendship Kirk valued too. He had had friends before, one or two of whom had been quite close, but none like Spock. It seemed to Kirk that Spock was closer in many ways than his brother Sam, had been. Both he and Spock had faced death together, on more than one occasion and perhaps it was the knowledge that each was prepared to sacrifice everything for the other, which had brought that special closeness.

Kirk gave a half smile, as he looked at Spock and pressed the intercom button.

"I guess I'd better let Bones know that we'll be leaving the Enterprise for a while."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where the hell are you going?" demanded McCoy

Kirk grinned, knowing what was in McCoy's mind.

"We are going on a goodwill visit to the Court of the Golden Dragon in the Carahdria system."

"For two weeks?" exclaimed McCoy.

"It's important to the Federation. Carahdria is way out in an empty sector of the galaxy. We need their resources to refuel and revictual our vessels on our longer star journeys."

"But why you two?"

Kirk smiled.

"Don't you mean 'why not me as well?'", he asked.

McCoy gave a wry grin in return.

"Well, maybe you're right," he admitted. "I guess I'd like to tag along just to make sure you two don't get up to any mischief."

"Sorry, Bones. Not this time," responded Kirk. "Orders from Starfleet. Mr. Spock and myself only. Admiral Komack .."

"Admiral Komack!" exclaimed McCoy. "What's he doing arranging goodwill missions?" He looked from Kirk to Spock, his eyes narrowing. "There's more to this than you're telling me. What is it?"

Spock remained impassive, merely lifting an eyebrow at McCoy.

"There's nothing, Bones," replied Kirk. He hated having to lie to McCoy, but he had no other choice. No-one must know why he and Spock were going to Carahdria.

To all intents and purposes, their visit was purely a goodwill mission.

"We were 'chosen because we have a 'certain amount of renown', according to Komack."

McCoy snorted.

"A certain amount of renown!!!? Komack always was prone to understatement. I'll tell you, Jim. I'm not happy about it at all."

"No-one has asked that you be happy, Doctor. In fact,

the whole thing has nothing to do with your state of mind," said Spock.

McCoy glared at him.

"You know damn well what I mean, Spock. But it seems I have no say in the matter. Orders are orders."

"I am surprised that you have actually remembered that on this occasion," said Spock, mildly.

Kirk could hardly suppress a grin.

"What do you mean by that remark?" demanded McCoy.

"That you are not renowned for your obedience to Starfleet rules and regulations," responded Spock.

"Perhaps, because my Hippocratic oath was made first, and to me, is more important." McCoy gave a sharp nod at Spock and for once Spock could not think of a retort. McCoy turned to the Captain.

"When do you leave?" he asked.

"I shall be instructing Mr. Sulu on the course change and speed straightaway. We should be there in three days." Kirk turned to Spock. "We will have a meeting of all division heads at sixteen hundred hours. Arrange it, please, Mr. Spock."

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later the Enterprise entered the Carahdrian star system and went into orbit around the fourth planet, ready to beam the Captain and First Officer down to the Court of the Golden Dragon.

The Carahdrian system consisted of ten planets revolving around a single sun. All the planets were inhabited except for the innermost one which permanently presented the same side to the sun and was a barren, inhospitable world with no atmosphere.

The fourth planet was the home of the Court of the Golden Dragon, which was the central administrative and imperial centre for the whole of the star system. Originally it had been the Kingdom that had brought the battling principalities of the fourth planet together under a peaceful rule. From that core had developed the technology that had colonised the other worlds and had, in the final analysis, limited their further expansion.

Now the Court itself was more of a figurehead; the fighting warlords a taint of the past. But the traditions and heritage remained and the Court was a formal and richly diverse place. The Emperor, Kwang Hatus, was a young boy and the burden of his authority lay heavily on his young shoulders. His main advisor was the High Chamberlain, TaiHengis.

The Carahdrian civilisation had started several thousand years ago. Their progress had paralleled Earth's in many ways; and they had gone through the upheavals and traumas which seemed to be the cost of technological and sophisticated development. For the last hundred years, however, the Carahdrian system had been at peace and when they agreed to an alliance with the Federation, fifty years ago, both allies had benefitted. Carahdrian civilisation had never moved outward to the stars; minerally rich and agriculturally fertile, they felt no necessity to travel beyond their own system. The restless drive which had pushed humans upward and outward to the stars, was not a characteristic of Carahdrians.

Carahdria was a large star system in a virtually empty quadrant of the galaxy. Federation and Starfleet vessels on long haul star flights found the system invaluable and Carahdria had been happy to provide stop-overs for shore leave, refuelling and revictualling. In return the vessels had brought the stars to Carahdria - in goods and people. It had proved an amicable and profitable arrangement.

Kirk and Spock were to beam down to pay homage to KwangHatus and as the Enterprise locked into orbit, they made their way to the transporter room. McCoy and Scotty awaited them. Kirk had spent several hours with his Chief Engineer, going over every minute detail he could think of, even though he knew Scotty already knew them all, but Kirk also knew that he understood his Captain's concern and anxiety.

Kirk grinned across at Scotty, as he took his place beside Spock on the transporter pad.

"Take care of her, Scotty."

"Aye sir."

"And you, Jim, take care," said McCoy. "I want to see you both back in one piece."

"As indeed do we," rejoined Spock. He looked significantly at the Captain, who studiously avoided the look. Neither was lost on McCoy, whose apprehensions of the mission grew even stronger.

"Energise," was the last thing he heard Kirk say, before they both faded into sparkling pieces.

\* \* \* \* \*

They materialised on a transporter pad unlike any they had ever seen before. Richly embroidered draperies hung on the walls, while thick carpets covered the floors. The transporter pads were soft and cushioned and revealed embroidered golden dragons on their surface as the two men stepped off.

A small guard of honour awaited them and this was led by the Chamberlain of the Court of the Golden Dragon himself. TaiHengis was a man of medium height, with dark hair and piercing dark eyes. He was dressed in black flowing robes, embroidered here and there with small silver motifs representing the Carahdrian system. There was an aura of power and menace that emanated from him, which Kirk felt straightaway. TaiHengis was a man to beware of. He bowed low as Kirk and Spock stepped off the transporter pads.

"Welcome to the Court of the Golden Dragon." His voice was deep and melodious. "I am TaiHengis, Chamberlain to the Emperor. I am at your service."

"I am Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise and this is my First Officer, Mr. Spock."

"Your renown has gone before you. Your names are well known at the Court. Many of our citizens are anxious to meet you. We are all both proud and happy that you have been able to visit us."

"Thank you, TaiHengis. It is our pleasure to be here."

Kirk refrained from looking at Spock, knowing that the Vulcan found the rather inane platitudes as tiresome as he did himself. TaiHengis gestured for them both to follow him and he led the way through the corridors of the imperial

palace.

The palace was large and luxurious. The hundreds of years of its heritage was evident in its rich furnishings, the ornate carvings on walls and ceilings and its wealth of paintings depicting the court life over the centuries. Kirk and Spock looked around in fascination, interested in everything they saw.

TaiHengis neither stopped nor engaged the officers from the Enterprise in conversation. He strode along the corridors, oblivious of the bows from each of the guards as he passed. Kirk and Spock followed closely behind him and the guard of honour brought up the rear. At last they reached the Throne Room of the Golden Dragon itself. Two large, ornately carved doors reached from floor to ceiling and they slowly swung open as the party approached.

The Throne Room was enormous and seemed to be filled from end to end with a great throng of people. As the doors opened, all heads turned in their direction and a murmuring, as of many bees, began and grew slowly to a loud roar. Kirk and Spock realised it was the Carahdrian way of showing respect and honour to their guests. Slowly they followed TaiHengis through the throng, acknowledging the people on either side with slight inclinations of their heads. It seemed a long way until they reached the end of the room.

A flight of steps led up to the dais upon which stood the mighty Golden Dragon throne itself. Made of pure gold, it had a large golden dragon carved upon its back. Golden gauze curtains hung at the back of the dais and a canopy of the same material hung over the throne.

As Kirk and Spock approached the steps, the curtains were drawn aside and a diminutive figure stepped through them and came to sit upon the Golden Dragon throne. The throng of people fell to their knees and both the Enterprise officers did the same. The figure inclined his head graciously and beckoned for the two men to approach the throne.

TaiHengis went ahead of them and bowed low before the Emperor before taking his place to one side of the throne.

"Emperor Kwang Hatus, may I present Captain James T. Kirk and his First Officer, Mr. Spock, of the U.S.S. Enterprise."

Kirk and Spock bowed low. KwangHatus looked at them with bright-eyed interest. He appeared to be a young lad in his early teens and he spoke; his voice confirmed his appearance. He had dark hair and blue eyes and was dressed in glittering gold robes, which seemed almost too heavy for his small frame.

"We are pleased that you have honoured our Court with your presence." The voice was high pitched and clear. "We are interested in all you have to tell us about starships."

"It would be my pleasure to tell you all you wish to know," replied Kirk.

"Good! We will make arrangements with our Chamberlain for a private interview at a convenient time."

Kirk bowed his head and smiled his agreement.

"We hope you will enjoy your visit to the Court of the Golden Dragon. We have many things planned for your entertainment and interest."

"We are looking forward to our stay here. We appreciate your thoughtfulness."

KwangHatus smiled, - a boyish eager smile.

"I shall look forward to seeing you later." His formal way of speaking was forgotten and he was just a young boy looking forward to a treat. Then he remembered himself and his eyes shifted, somewhat apprehensively, to where TaiHengis stood.

"TaiHengis. Make the necessary arrangements for the Enterprise officers to visit us later."

"Yes, Emperor." TaiHengis bowed, his hands tucked into his sleeves.

KwangHatus stood and acknowledging the crowd before him turned and walked back through the gauze curtains.

TaiHengis came forward.

"If you will follow me, gentlemen.. I will show the apartments we have ready for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

TaiHengis closed the door to Kirk and Spock's apartment and walked slowly along the corridor, deep in thought. It was strange that these two should come at this time, when his plans were beginning to come to fruition. He was so sure that he had raised no suspicions. Was it just coincidence that they had come now? TaiHengis believed not. Did they know anything about his plans? Perhaps he had been too quick to start turning Federation vessels away from the ports. TaiHengis gnawed at his knuckles in consternation. Surely something as small as that would not have brought Starfleet Officers here so quickly.

TaiHengis gave a quick laugh. Fool! Now was not the time for panic and overspeedy reactions. The Captain and his First Officer would be watched - nothing more - for the moment. But he must also be sure that they did not try to exert any undue influence on the Emperor. He, TaiHengis, alone must guide KwangHatus' footsteps.

He reached the door to the Emperor's apartment and knocked quietly. A servant opened the door and bowed silently as TaiHengis walked in. Supremely confident, TaiHengis stood waiting in the middle of the room, and sure enough, a minute or two later KwangHatus appeared in the doorway. He was dressed simply now; the robes of the Emperor put aside.

"Well, what do you want?" KwangHatus spoke truculently.

"I come only to advise the Emperor," said TaiHengis silkily. "You must take care that you do not trust the strangers too far. We have no reason to believe that they are here just for the purpose they state."

"What other reason could there possibly be? Captain Kirk of the Starship Enterprise would not lie."

"How can you be sure?"

"I have heard tales of his honour and his courage. I welcome him to my court."

"You are young and unversed in the ways of the people of the Federation. It may well be as I say, that they are not to be trusted."

"But they are our allies. They would not lie to us." KwangHatus' voice rose a little. He always felt unsure of himself in TaiHengis' presence. It was nothing that TaiHengis ever said or did, but something in his manner, that KwangHatus could not put a name to, unnerved him. Sometimes there was a look in TaiHengis' eye that made a chill of fear run down

KwangHatus' spine. It was there now.

"Perhaps not," TaiHengis spoke quietly.

"Captain Kirk is a hero, a legend almost. I have heard many good things of him."

"A hero to the Federation only. To others he may appear differently."

"The Federation has been our ally for many years and we have never had a cause to doubt their loyalty and their friendship. Why are you against them now?" asked KwangHatus.

"I am not against them. I merely advise caution."

But KwangHatus was not deceived. For some reason

TaiHengis actually disliked Captain Kirk. What reason could there be? KwangHatus didn't know, but he mistrusted TaiHengis' motives.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next four days were tedious to both Kirk and Spock. All day, every day they were occupied in meeting Carahdrians in situations that seemed manufactured and made only to present the best possible face to the two men. It seemed almost impossible to actually meet someone on a friendly, relaxed basis. Banquets, cocktail parties, press calls, visiting museums, factories, schools - everywhere, in fact, in the city of the Court.

But the people were sincere in their desire to meet them. The fame of the Enterprise and her intrepid Captain were well known. Kirk was always the one called on to make the speeches, deliver the prizes; the centre of attention. But Spock was always there, at his Captain's side, silently supportive and Kirk was grateful for his presence. Both of them longed to be back on the Enterprise and away from the trying boredom of supposed goodwill missions.

So far as they had been able to ascertain, there was nothing to indicate that the Carahdrians were thinking of breaking their alliance with the Federation. In spite of all the contrived situations, it appeared only to be a genuine desire to show their best to their Federation allies.

TaiHengis was often present on these visits - but rarely so in an obvious way. His was a presence that was felt rather than observed and it bothered Kirk considerably. Any time he spoke to TaiHengis, the Chamberlain was quiet, polite and told him absolutely nothing at all.

During a break in their commitments, Kirk and Spock enjoyed a rare moment of relaxation in their apartment. Kirk spoke of his apprehension regarding TaiHengis.

"I, too feel the same, Jim," responded Spock. "There is an old Earth saying which I think describes TaiHengis well - still waters run deep. There is much to him that is below the surface." He paused, thoughtfully for a moment. "I believe the Emperor fears him."

Kirk looked sharply at him.

"What makes you say that?"

"It is difficult to put into words. The way that KwangHatus looks at TaiHengis. His attitude. There is evil here, but how I know that ..." Spock paused.

Kirk grinned in sympathy.

"I do know what you mean, Spock. I have a red alert



going off right here." He placed his hand at the back of his neck. "I don't know why. It's something I don't get too often, but when I do it's usually accurate. We'll just have to keep our eyes open. We've got another ten days yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

In another part of the palace, TaiHengis sat in his room. He was pleased with how things were going. The visit of the Starfleet officers was routine and there appeared to be no suspicion of anything on their part. TaiHengis laughed to himself; so much for the much vaunted integrity of Starfleet. They were fools, both of them, mouthing platitudes and observing only what TaiHengis wanted them to.

And soon, his long awaited guest would be here. Once he arrived TaiHengis would have nothing to fear from anyone. His strength would be unassailable. He might even stop the Captain and First Officer from returning to their ship. It might prove interesting to see how they would react if he did just that.

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft tap at the door.

"Come," he called.

A servant, carrying a tray with TaiHengis' favourite beverage, entered and almost apprehensively moved across the room, towards his master.

"My Lord," the servant murmured, as he placed the tray on the table near TaiHengis' elbow.

"Not there, you fool!" His voice was low, but penetrating.

The servant jumped and spilled some of the drink onto the tray.

"It seems impossible for you to do anything right, doesn't it, Olong?" TaiHengis asked softly.

"I..... try ... my .... best, Lord,, Olong answered, fearfully.

"Not well enough, it seems."

Tai Hengis rose and approaching Olong, forced him to his knees.

"You will have to learn not to be so clumsy, won't you?" His voice was quiet, but there was a thread of malevolent delight running through it. From his desk he picked up a long barbed needle and very deliberately ran it through the muscle of Olong's forearm. Olong gave a long moan of agony and perspiration stood out on his forehead. TaiHengis grinned and twisted the needle. Olong moaned again and stared at the blood which ran from the wounds the needle had inflicted. TaiHengis watched him for a moment or two and then, tiring of the spectacle, he pulled the needle out sharply and kicked him with his foot.

"Get out! And don't be clumsy again or something worse may well befall you."

Blood trickled from the two puncture marks and Olong covered them with his hand, as he picked himself up and hurried from the room.

TaiHengis gave a short laugh and cleaned the blood from the needle. He enjoyed watching men suffer; he thought suddenly of Kirk and what he would like to do to him if he got the chance. What would make it even better was that fact that the Vulcan would suffer more just watching Kirk in pain.

TaiHengis might not appear to be much in evidence in all the functions that had been held for the Enterprise officers, but TaiHengis had missed little. There was a closeness between the Captain and First Officer which TaiHengis had rarely, if ever, seen before. It was beyond the comprehension of TaiHengis that two men of such different backgrounds, of different races and different characters could achieve the brotherhood and love that these two obviously felt for one another. He wanted only to use that simple feeling to cause pain and misery to them. TaiHengis had never felt that sort of closeness for anyone and regarded it as weakness. He believed he had sized them both up and had nothing to fear.

\* \* \* \* \*

The city of the Golden Dragon Throne was a small but ancient one. The Golden Dragon Palace was situated at the southern edge of the city, near to the woods and plains that spread out on all sides. Near the place was the Administrative Headquarters for the Carahdrian Solar System and then fanning out from there, was the large residential area. The industrial area was on the eastern edge of the city and it was here that Kirk and Spock went on one of their visits to Carahdrian factories.

This one was a large complex of buildings where the planning and execution of the Carahdrian space ships were carried out. Both men were much interested in all they saw and spent considerable time there.

It wasn't until they had returned to their apartment in the palace that they were able to discuss the visit together fully. Both of them were puzzled by the fact that, in spite of fairly lax security generally in the factory, there were several areas they had not been allowed to enter; one of which was a large warehouse. It had been difficult to say much without the Carahdrians feeling that they were trying to pry and thus arouse suspicion. However the people themselves were off hand about it all and seemed completely disinterested.

"Are we being overly suspicious, Spock?" questioned Kirk. "Is there anything secretive going on?"

"It is difficult to say, Captain. The people, I believe, do not know what is in the areas we have been kept away from. They have just been told not to go there and not to allow us to go there either. It is strange. There is very little security at the factory. If there is something untoward being planned the person or persons in charge seem quite confident about it."

"The Carahdrians seem to be singularly incurious people generally," commented Kirk.

"Which might explain why they have never felt the need to go beyond their own star system."

"Mmmmmmm," Kirk was thoughtful. "I believe that factory could bear closer inspection." Kirk smiled across at Spock, the light of adventure in his eyes. Spock gave an inward sigh. He knew it was inevitable that Kirk would wish to see what was behind the locked doors.

"Indeed Captain, I expected nothing less."

"Do you think there will be any difficulty in getting in?" asked Kirk.

"I do not believe it will be beyond my powers to obtain access to the places you wish to see."

"Good," exclaimed Kirk. "We'll go tonight. Fortunately we have no engagements to fulfil for the rest of the evening ..."

"I think it would be prudent to wait until later in the night," rejoined Spock. "We do not wish to be seen."

"Quite right, Spock. Exactly what I had in mind."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirk and Spock found it relatively easy to leave the palace without being seen. They had about an hour's walk to the factory and preferred to do this rather than take the risk of being spotted taking a car.

It was rare for Kirk to have an hour in which he could talk with his Vulcan friend uninterrupted and both men rather enjoyed the walk in the quiet darkness of the night. Carandria possessed no moons in its system and there were very few stars. But once their eyes had grown accustomed to the dark they found their way quite easily.

The roads of the city were wide, with trees and gardens on all sides. Houses were set back from the roads and were well hidden by bushes for privacy. Kirk and Spock saw no one at all on their walk and it seemed that once darkness came, no one moved from their houses. Spock's retentive memory was invaluable and he led the way directly to the factory without hesitation. As they neared the fence which surrounded the factory, they could detect the slight flicker of a low voltage force field.

"They must have had that switched off when we visited earlier," commented Kirk. "Can you do anything, Spock?"

"I believe so, Captain. It is fairly basic and I shall only need to find the switch to shut it off."

"From this side of the fence?" queried Kirk.

"There is always one on both sides, in case of emergencies. It is a matter of knowing where to look."

"And you know where to look?" Kirk grinned.

Spock looked slightly surprised at the question.

"Of course, Captain."

It took Spock less than five minutes to turn off the forcefield and the two men found themselves inside the factory grounds. They made their way to the main office block, as it was there that both men had noticed the long corridor which they had been discreetly guided away from.

"And I suppose you can pick a lock with the best of them," said Kirk, as Spock placed an examining hand on the main door.

"A relatively simple lock, sir. I shall not keep you long."

Kirk was surprised yet again, by the many skills that his First Officer had. It never ceased to amaze him that someone who appeared so quiet and a little apart from the rest of the crew, was the one who gave him the most support and on whom he relied the most.

There was a slightclick and the main door swung open.

"Why, Mr. Spock. We'll make a cat burglar of you, yet!"

"I have no desire whatsoever to steal cats, sir. And I cannot understand why you should think I would want to do so."

Kirk smiled. The way in which his First Officer always seemed to take everything he said so literally was a constant

source of amusement to him. He was never sure just how much the Vulcan deliberately misunderstood.

The main office block was a maze of corridors and offices, but Spock's unerring sense of direction soon led them to the corridor in which they were interested. It was quite dark, but they were able to make out doors opening onto the corridor on both sides. They opened each in turn, finding them all unlocked.

"You were right, Spock. Their security is very lax."

"Unless of course, they have nothing to hide."

"Mmmm," Kirk grunted, non committally. "Let's find out."

Most of the rooms proved to be general administration offices, containing the usual office paraphernalia. However, one door they opened led into a large drawing office. There were plans and blueprints fixed to the walls and on the drawing boards. Kirk and Spock examined them closely.

"Look, Captain," exclaimed Spock.

Kirk walked to where Spock stood before one of the blueprints on the wall.

"What have you found?"

"These are blueprints for a starship, Captain. Much bigger and more sophisticated than anything the Carahdrians yet have."

"So, they plan to move out of their star system. Strange we haven't heard anything about it."

"Most strange. And what is even more strange are some of these designs. Look," Spock pointed to several areas on the blueprints. "Here. And here. And here again. I've seen these ideas before." He paused and looked Kirk in the eye. "On Klingon battlecruisers."

"What!" Kirk looked closely at where Spock pointed.

As he studied the designs in detail, he realised his First Officer was right. Klingon designs on Carahdrian ships. Ships of the kind that Carahdrians had never had before.

Kirk and Spock looked at one another, each knowing what the other was thinking. The Klingons were at work again, turning Federation allies against the Federation itself. Stepping in to take over and turn the people into Klingon slaves.

"There must be someone in Carahdria who plans to break the alliance," said Kirk. "Someone powerful enough to authorise all this." He gestured at all the plans, "There is only one person who could do it."

"TaiHengis," stated Spock, quietly.

"Who else," replied Kirk. "But is this as far as they have gone with the plans? And where would they build the ships? We saw no signs of anything remotely resembling this kind of operation as we came through the system."

"I would speculate that some ships have been built already," said Spock.

While they had been talking, Spock had opened a large folder and rifled through blueprints of several other types of starships, none as big or as powerful as the one they had first looked at, but all part of what could be a battle fleet. Silently, Spock showed them to Kirk.

Kirk could only look at them with a growing sense of apprehension.

"I can't understand why anything as big as this is just left around. On Earth, this would have the strictest security

going."

"It is the nature of the Carahdrians. Their lack of curiosity and 'drive' seems to be very widespread. Most just would not think of doing what we have just done."

Kirk gave a half smile.

"But there must be some with the drive it needs to push something even as far as the drawing board."

"It would only take one man to lead, the rest would follow if TaiHengis commanded. Through fear, if through nothing else."

"If they have got to the stage of building the ships, then many people must be involved. But many, I suppose, need not know what they are actually building, if they are just manufacturing the parts that are needed." Kirk was thinking out loud. "We have to know how far this has gone, Spock."

"Agreed, Captain. Perhaps the warehouse which was missed out in the itinerary of our visit would be worth looking at."

Kirk grinned.

"I believe you're right."

Quickly and silently they left the office block. Both men were unaware of the cold unblinking eyes of two hidden video cameras. One in the corner of the drawing office, the other situated near the main door, recording their every move. Unknowing they made their way silently through the factory grounds until they came to the warehouse they were looking for. It was much bigger than they had at first realised and gaining access proved to be more difficult than they had anticipated. However, Spock finally managed to open a small door in the large double doors of the warehouse.

It was crammed from floor to ceiling with starship parts, labelled and numbered and packed; and obviously awaiting shipment .... to where?

Quietly they moved around, looking at the labels and Kirk spotted some enormous baffles of a kind he had never seen before, but obviously intended for use in building enormous shields of some kind. He called Spock over to have a look.

"What do you make of ehse, Spock? They couldn't be used on any kind of starship I've ever seen. And they are built to withstand an incredible amount of heat. Look at the thickness and material."

Spock was silent for a moment, studying the baffles.

"I believe this supplies the answer to where they are building the ships, Captain," he said. "The innermost planet. It is the only possible place."

"Of course, Spock!" That planet always presents the same face to the system, so it is completely barren and devoid of life. No one would dream of looking on the further side. And the baffles ...."

".... are used to build protective shields against the power of the sun," finished Spock.

"There's enough space to hide a whole fleet there."

"Indeed, Captain," said Spock seriously.

"This is bigger than even Starfleet and the Federation believed it to be. The Carahdrians would only build a fleet such as this if they planned to use it. And if they are using Klingon designs, it is obvious who they are going to use it against. This is interplanetary war they're planning

with the aid of the Klingons."

"And we have no way of letting the Federation know until the Enterprise returns."

Kirk and Spock looked at one another in horror and despair. And high above, another video eye watched them.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took longer than the hour for Kirk and Spock to return to their apartment in the palace. They walked slowly, discussing all they had seen and the possibilities the evidence had opened up. Both men were desperately worried and would dearly have liked to make some arrangement to enable the Enterprise to return sooner than planned, but they could do nothing which might arouse the suspicion of TaiHengis. They were both quite sure that he was the master mind behind the treachery they had uncovered.

Silently they entered the palace and crept towards their rooms. It was late in the night and the whole palace was silent and dark. Quietly they entered their rooms.

Immediately the light flashed on and their arms were seized and pulled savagely behind their backs. Blinking in the bright light and not sure what had happened, it took them several moments to realise that TaiHengis stood to one side, arms folded, watching them with narrowed eyes, as his henchmen tried to control the two men and force them to their knees.

Kirk and Spock struggled to free themselves, but there were just too many of them. Eventually, they were forced to kneel before TaiHengis. Kirk had had his shirt ripped and there was a bruise darkening the side of his face, as well as blood trickling down his chin from a cut lip. Spock had fared no better - there was a deep cut near his hairline which oozed green blood down the side of his face.

"What is the meaning of this, TaiHengis?" demanded Kirk.

"You tell me, Captain," replied TaiHengis, quietly. "We treat you as honoured guests and offer you hospitality. And we are repaid by you and your First Officer breaking into our factory and inspecting plans and equipment that are none of your business."

Kirk managed a quick look at Spock, who raised his eye brow. TaiHengis gave a short, nasty laugh.

"Yes, we know where you have been tonight. Our security is not as lax as you would like to believe."

"O.K. So we broke into your factory," retorted Kirk, sharply. "But you are doing far worse. You are planning to break your alliance with the Federation. You plan a new alliance with the Klingons. And a lot of good may it do you. It seems to me, you know very little about the Klingons if you plan to work together."

TaiHengis' eyes widened slightly at Kirk's mention of the Klingons and Kirk knew that his and Spock's surmise had been correct. But TaiHengis committed himself to nothing.

"Your babblings do not interest me at all." He leaned forward, bringing his face closer to Kirk's. "I want to know where you have been for the last hour. And you will tell me, Captain."

Kirk gave a mirthless smile.

"I shall be quite happy to tell you where Spock and I have

been," he said, looking TaiHengis in the eye. "We have been walking back from the factory. It's quite a way you know."

TaiHengis stiffened.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Kirk." His hand flashed out and caught Kirk a stunning blow on the side of his head. He would have fallen; if he hadn't been held by TaiHengis' men. There was a cut on his cheek from the ring TaiHengis wore.

"Do you seriously expect me to believe that two Starfleet officers would walk to the factory and back again, when there are many cars which you could have used."

"We didn't want to be seen," replied Kirk.

"Really? How very surprising. No, Captain, you will have to do better than that. Your ship is circling our planet."

Kirk looked at Spock stunned to think the Enterprise was so close and hadn't contacted them. His heart lifted. But at TaiHengis' next words, Kirk realised he had misunderstood.

"Why don't you admit it? The Enterprise is up there, although she doesn't show on our screens. What is it, Kirk? A new kind of cloaking device?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

TaiHengis' hand caught him again on the side of his face, making his head swim and causing the blood to flow freely from the cut on his cheek. Anger began to rise in Kirk and he struggled again to get free, but he was held too tightly.

TaiHengis caught a handful of Kirk's hair and pulled his head upwards.

"Now, Captain. Let us try again," he said in a dangerously quiet tone. "What plans have you made with your ship?"

"You guess, TaiHengis," said Kirk, defiantly.

TaiHengis' face darkened.

"I warn you, Kirk, my patience is wearing thin. It will be better to tell me now, exactly what you told your superiors while you were aboard your vessel."

Kirk regarded him calmly.

"I will tell you nothing!"

TaiHengis eyes' glittered dangerously.

"You are going to make life very unpleasant for both yourself and your friend. And neither of you will like what is about to happen to you." He stepped back and gestured for his men to pull the two men to their feet.

"Take them to the dungeon," he hissed, between clenched teeth. "I will find out what you have done to put my plans in jeopardy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirk and Spock were pulled roughly to their feet. With a guard at each side holding their arms, they were hustled into the darkened corridor. TaiHengis closed the door of their apartment, locking it carefully behind him. He gave them a quick glance, hooded and evil, as he passed them to lead the way.

"It would have been wiser to have told me what I wanted to know straightaway. I have plenty of time to extract what I want from you. I hope you plead well, Kirk, because if you don't tell me what Starfleet know of my plans, you will be begging me to let you die!" His voice was low and menacing and a cold coil of fear and apprehension ran down Kirk's spine. He glanced across at Spock and felt a surge

of reassurance at the calm, answering look of his First Officer. At least they were still together.

They seemed to walk down many ill-lit corridors, silent and empty; the whole of the palace seemingly asleep and undisturbed by their passing. They came at last to a heavy, iron door, at odds with the style of the rest of the palace. TaiHengis produced a large key and inserted it into the lock. The door swung open on well-oiled hinges and revealed a sloping rock hewn passage, leading downwards. At intervals flares were stuck into holders, casting an eerie flickering light that glinted on the moisture that ran down the walls and collected on the rocky ground. It was obvious they were now well below ground and that the passage was hewn from the rock foundations of the palace itself.

There was a dank odour that pervaded the whole area and a chill that struck to the bone. At intervals there were doors set into the walls, which were obviously entrances to cells and at one of them TaiHengis stopped, opened the door and Kirk and Spock were thrust unceremoniously over the threshold, tripping on the uneven ground as they did so. With arms bound behind them they were unable to save themselves and they fell heavily to the ground. TaiHengis let them lie, while he busied himself with a small machine that stood on a table in the middle of the room. Apart from a wooden chair bolted to the ground beside the table, the dungeon was empty. Like the passages they had come through, it was dark and cold and lit by flares. At intervals around the walls were shackles and chains.

The six guards waited near the door, silent. It was obvious from their attitude that TaiHengis governed them by fear. They eyed the machine with which TaiHengis was occupied, nervously and glanced shiftily at the Enterprise officers, still

At length, TaiHengis turned and gave his orders. The men jumped to obey quickly and efficiently, unconcerned as to how the prisoners were treated.

Spock was shackled by his wrists and ankles to the wall opposite the table and chair. It took five of the guards to pin him there while the other stood over Kirk. The Vulcan did all in his power to escape, but it was useless. Once shackled, Spock tested the strength of his chains. TaiHengis laughed nastily.

"Even your much vaunted Vulcan strength will be useless against those chains. They are made from a special material that no living being could break." He laughed again as Spock pulled against them in an attempt to prove TaiHengis wrong.

"Pull away, Spock. You will only injure yourself."

He turned away from him dismissively and watched as his guards dealt with Kirk. They had untied his wrists and pulled him roughly to his knees. He had tried to fight them, as Spock had done, but he was easily overcome. Now, while two held him firmly, one stripped off his shirt, while another removed his boots and socks. These they flung into a corner and then they dragged the struggling Kirk to the chair, where he was bound, wrist and ankle, while TaiHengis watched them disdainfully.

"Struggle all you want, Kirk. It will avail you nothing. Soon you will be struggling just to stay alive."



"Trying to put the fear of god into me, TaiHengis?" asked Kirk, in an attempt to show he did not care.

"God?" said TaiHengis. "A meaningless word. But you will fear me before long!"

"I doubt it!"

"Oh, the brave Starship Captain," exclaimed TaiHengis with a sneer. "But we will see who is proved right."

TaiHengis wasted no more time. He attached electrodes from the machine to the muscles on Kirk's chest, stomach, arms and legs, and one to each temple. Kirk watched helplessly and his stomach churned as he began to realise what he was facing. Trying to keep the fear at bay, he grinned across at Spock.

"We always seem to find the tricky situation, Spock. I don't think McCoy would approve, do you?"

"Indeed not, Captain," Spock said softly, but Kirk could feel the Vulcan's support and caring as well as the anxiety he felt for his Captain.

"Silence!" TaiHengis' hand landed heavily across Kirk's face. His head rocked back, his senses reeling. "Well, are you going to tell me what plans were made while you were aboard your ship, Captain?"

Blood trickled from the corner of Kirk's mouth.

"Go to hell, TaiHengis!"

TaiHengis' mouth tightened grimly.

"Very well," he spat and slowly began to turn the dial on the top of the machine.

Tingles flowed in a stream into Kirk's body; tingles which quickly became piercing flames, licking along his nerves and veins, spreading out, clutching like taloned hands at his muscles. TaiHengis turned the dial further and a low moan quickly stifled, forced its way through Kirk's tightly clenched lips. His body arched upwards as the pain spiralled quickly to an almost unbearable level.

"What are the plans?"

Kirk heard the words as from a great distance and his mind, clouded with a pain filled haze, could hardly take in their meaning.

"Go to hell, TaiHengis." The repeated words were faint this time, but clear enough for TaiHengis to hear.

"Stubborn fool!" exclaimed TaiHengis and turned the dial yet again, angered that Kirk should resist him so.

Kirk's body shuddered repeatedly. He had never experienced pain like this before; so excruciating that it threatened to overwhelm him. His head turned from side to side in a futile attempt to escape the all devouring pain. His tormented eyes sought Spock's and his lips formed the Vulcan's name.

Green blood dripped from Spock's wrists, where he had tried to break free. His body agonised in empathic response to Kirk's suffering; but there was nothing he could do to help his Captain. He watched in anguish as Kirk's body writhed in agony and rage rose in him as he saw the pleasure written clear on TaiHengis' face. He was enjoying the spectacle.

Suddenly, he switched the dial off, and Kirk felt the agony ebb away like a tide, leaving him weak and pain-wracked. His breath came in short, ragged gasps; his eyes, half closed were fixed on Spock's face.

TaiHengis watched them both. This was proving most interesting. Never before had he seen such obvious caring

between two people, particularly of alien races. For a Vulcan he had a very expressive face. Kirk suffered and Spock suffered with him.

All the rage and hate Spock felt for TaiHengis was in his look, as their eyes met.

"You don't like it, do you, Spock," said TaiHengis, with a malevolent smile. "Perhaps you will tell me what I want to know and stop your Captain's suffering."

"I am unable to tell you anything you wish to know," answered Spock, truthfully.

For a reply, TaiHengis turned the dial on the machine and Kirk was unable to stop the low moan of agony as the pain raced through his body again; pain which clutched and burned searing him like a white hot flame.

"Tell me! Or the suffering continues," TaiHengis commanded.

Spock watched in helpless anger, as Kirk struggled against the pain, in front of him. He would gladly have taken Kirk's pain himself. To watch his Captain suffer so was worse than enduring the pain himself.

"There ... is .... nothing .... to .... tell ...." Kirk forced the words past his whitened lips.

TaiHengis regarded the Captain of the Enterprise through narrowed eyes. He had seen many men endure pain, but never with the defiant bravery of Kirk. It was as if he had some inner strength which sustained him and helped him bear the worst of the pain. Even now, his face white with the agony he was enduring, his eyes large and pain wracked, he gave a half smile at his First Officer.

"Not a good .... way ..... to spend ..... the day ....." Spock .....", he whispered.

"Captain," Spock's voice was tormented. There was an almost tangible link between them.

Anger mounted in TaiHengis; anger at being thwarted, anger at the closeness these two shared. He could not understand it and what he could not understand he hated. He wanted to destroy what these two had; destroy it utterly and completely; and there was one sure way he could do it. His hands tightened into claws and fastened themselves around Kirk's neck. Filled with an insane rage he slowly began to strangle him.

Kirk struggled weakly, trying to get away from TaiHengis' strong hands, but he was completely at his mercy. TaiHengis squeezed tighter and tighter and Kirk's breath rasped noisily as he fought to stay alive.

"If you kill him you will never find out what you want to know."

The words dripped like melting ice into TaiHengis' fevered brain, pulling him back from his killing rage. His hands dropped from Kirk's throat and he breathed heavily, glancing quickly at Spock.

"You think not, Spock?" he said. "I would still have you."

"And you know only too well, that Vulcan shields against pain are strong. Strong enough to protect me against anything you might try."

"Really?" There was a sneer in TaiHengis' voice. "What a pity you are unable to protect your Captain, then."

Spock was silent. He looked worriedly at Kirk, whose face had turned whiter than ever. His breath came in short, ragged gasps and his chest heaved as he tried to draw more air into his lungs. Still his eyes were fixed on the Vulcan's face and Spock read gratitude in his eyes. But gratitude for what; for stopping TaiHengis from killing him, so that Kirk could endure more pain. Spock felt tendrils of fear coil inside him. Fear, not for himself but for his Captain.

TaiHengis turned again to the machine.

"You will tell me what I want to know, Kirk," He gestured at Spock. "Look how you make your friend suffer. He would gladly change places with you." He paused. "I will not give either of you that satisfaction."

He turned the dial hard and Kirk's body convulsed anew with the incredible pain that lanced through him.

\* \* \* \* \*

For an hour, TaiHengis subjected Kirk to the horrors of the machine. For Kirk that hour took on the dimensions of hell. A hell lanced with red hot flames, fiery swords that seemed to slash his body again and again. His blood pounded in his ears like thunder. There was nothing except excruciating, devouring pain; Except for one thing.

A pair of brown Vulcan eyes fixed on his face throughout that awful time. Eyes that seemed to pour strength into him, encouraged and supported, gave him hope that he would survive.

TaiHengis, at last, grew tired of the sport. In disgust, he flicked the machine off and pulled the electrodes from Kirk's body.

"You bore me with your misplaced courage," he snapped.

"Perhaps left alone you may ponder your foolish pride."

He turned to the guards who were huddled in a corner, seemingly oblivious to what had been going on. Perhaps they had seen it all too many times before.

"Bind them in the usual way and then get out."

They leaped to obey. Spock was quickly unshackled, his wrists like emerald bracelets, and was bound, swiftly and efficiently into the foetal position, knees bent up to his chest. Kirk was dragged from the chair, his legs refusing to take his weight, his face etched deep with lines of pain, sweat running down his face and body. He was in no condition to struggle and he was as swiftly bound as Spock had been, into the foetal position and left beside his friend.

TaiHengis stood over them.

"Perhaps a few days alone, will give to you the time you need to come to the only logical conclusion."

Then he strode quickly from the dungeon, his robes swirling around him. The door clanged shut behind him and the key turned in the lock. Then all was silent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spock looked across at Kirk, as they both lay helpless on the damp, rocky ground. Kirk seemed only semi-conscious, his eyes closed, his breath shallow. There were dark, purplish marks on his throat where TaiHengis had tried to strangle him and one side of his face was cut and bruised where he had been struck. Every now and then a shudder would run through his body.

"Jim." Spock called softly to him. There was no reply.  
"Jim," he called again.

Kirk's eyes fluttered open, dazed and disorientated. He tried to move but the thin ropes that bound him were secure. He saw Spock's anxious face watching him and managed a small smile of reassurance, but it faded quickly.

"Spock." His eyes took in how his friend was bound and horror began to grow, as realisation came.

"Are you alright, Jim?" Spock knew it was a stupid question, but it was out before he could stop it.

Kirk smiled, fleetingly.

"Not really. But I guess, neither are you. Is he just going to leave us like this?"

"I would say so. A method of torture used in earlier centuries. I am afraid, Captain, the pain will be excruciating once we are untied, as the blood enters the constricted limbs."

"Thanks for telling me, Spock." Kirk spoke ironically. Suddenly his eyes closed tightly as cramps seized the muscles of his legs. He gasped as the pain increased and he could do nothing to relieve it. Spock watched helplessly and began to struggle with his bonds. After several minutes the cramps eased and Kirk tried to quiet his breathing, but before he had a chance to recover, a wave of nausea swept over him and he was violently sick.

Horrorstruck, Kirk began to realise what being bound into the fetal position would mean; there was no way they could control their bodily functions. Kirk's eyes sought Spock's in desperation.

"What are we going to do, Spock?"

"I am endeavouring to release myself. I am sure I can free myself from the ropes the guards tied me with. Give me a few more minutes."

Kirk watched anxiously as Spock continued to struggle with the ropes. But it was almost an hour before he finally managed to get free. Hastily he crossed to Kirk, moving him away from where he had been sick and then began to attempt to free his Captain.

The door swung open and TaiHengis stood there, hands on his hips and a triumphant smile on his face.

"You did not believe I would be so foolish as to think you could not escape from those ropes, did you, Vulcan?" he said, contemptuously.

Spock knelt motionless beside Kirk, his hands still on the ropes that bound him. He stared at TaiHengis, and black despair began to seep into his soul. This man was evil.

TaiHengis gestured with his hand. The guards returned and quickly shackled Spock to the wall again. Kirk closed his eyes in a despair that matched Spock's, as the guards checked his bonds. Satisfied that both men were now secure, the guards left.

TaiHengis gave a nasty laugh.

"I leave you to ponder anew on the things you will tell me when I return!" he spat, and walked out, locking the door behind him.

"He did that on purpose, Spock. He deliberately made us hope we could get free," Kirk's voice was low.

"I know, Jim," answered Spock softly, "and we did just what he wanted."

"Did we have a choice? Why does he need to know so desperately what he thinks we have to tell him?"

"I do not believe that is the whole of it. TaiHengis enjoys seeing men suffer. This place has been used many times. He controls through fear. You can see it in the eyes of the guards."

"What are his plans? It seems he has plenty of time, if he can afford to leave us bound like this for days."

"I believe his plans will reach fruition very soon. He is confident. Even in this last hour I feel something has happened that gives him cause to feel that it is not so important that he knows our supposed plans. Otherwise I feel he would have pressed harder."

Kirk gave a grim laugh.

"I'm glad he didn't try any harder. Things are bad enough as they are." Kirk paused. "But if you're right the Klingon fleet must be on the move; coming to Carahdria, where they will join the fleet that TaiHengis has built."

"It is all supposition, Captain. We actually know nothing."

Kirk tried to shift his position; the ground was cold, hard and uneven.

"How long do you think he will leave us here?"

"It will depend on his plans. He must believe he will be able to put his plan into action before Starfleet can get their own fleet here, which is what he thinks is to happen. It is only surprising to me that he has not killed us. It would seem we have no interest for him now, other than the pleasure of seeing us suffer."

"He might still kill us anyway," observed Kirk, drily.

"Indeed, Captain. That is entirely possible. In fact, I would put our chances at ....."

"Please, Spock. I don't really want to know."

Kirk shivered.

"It's cold in here. The next few days are going to be hard."

"You won't want the statistics on that either?"

"No, Spock." Kirk gave a grin. "I can do without that knowledge, too. I only hope he doesn't attach me to that hellish machine again. I don't know how much more I could take." His voice was ragged with remembered pain.

"I was troubled for you, Jim."

"I know, Spock." Kirk's voice was gentle. "I could feel your concern for me. It seemed to me that you gave me some of your strength." As Spock looked away, Kirk continued. "You did, didn't you?"

"Yes, Captain."

"How did you do it?"

"It's difficult to explain."

"Try!" Kirk commanded, gently. "I have plenty of time."

Spock was silent for a moment.

"It is because we are .... close, Jim," he began, slowly. "It is impossible if the two people concerned do not have empathic responses to each other."

"And we have those responses?" questioned Kirk.

"I believe so. It would not have worked otherwise. We have been reliant on one another in moments of extreme .... danger, several times ...."

"It's not only that though, is it Spock?"

"No, Jim."

"It is because we care about each other so much." It was a statement.

Spock was silent.

"Is it so hard to admit that, my Vulcan friend?"

"For me ... yes," Spock said, reluctantly. Then continued so quietly that Kirk could barely hear the words. "I have never known anyone with whom I could become close. I am different. Alien ... both on Vulcan and Earth. I belong nowhere." He paused.

"What about the Enterprise?"

Spock's gaze returned to his Captain's face.

"A place, merely. Until you became her Captain." The words came with difficulty. "It is you who have helped me accept what I am, by accepting me without question. I once told you that a ship runs on loyalty to one man. You have my loyalty." His voice dropped even lower. "You also have my love."

Kirk's eyes opened wide in surprise, never expecting to hear those words from the Vulcan.

"Thank you, Spock." There was nothing else to say.

"You are to me the brother I never had," Spock continued. "When you told Garth that you and I were brothers, I replied that you spoke figuratively. I would like to withdraw that statement. You spoke only the truth."

There was a silence as the two men regarded one another with a new understanding which warmed the long, painful hours ahead.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next three days were indeed long, painful, cold and humiliating. During that time, no one visited them. They were given no food or water.

They spoke of their happier times together on the Enterprise, their shared experiences, the people they had known. It helped to pass the hours and served to distract them from their bodily discomforts. But by the third day, Kirk was weakening. He found it an effort to talk and the silences grew longer. By the evening of the third day, he had developed a cough and his face became flushed. It was obvious to Spock that as well as all he was enduring Kirk had now developed a fever of some kind.

During the night Kirk lapsed into a restless slumber. He moaned sometimes and occasionally spoke unintelligible words.

Time and again, Spock had tried to free himself. The leather of his boots were worn where the shackles rubbed against them. His wrists were a mass of green blood and broken flesh, swollen with the efforts he had made.

Early on the fourth morning, a guard entered the dungeon. He pulled a face at the stench that greeted him but said nothing. He placed a bowl of water and another of what looked like soup or gruel on the ground near Kirk. Then producing a knife, he cut the ropes that bound Kirk and without a word left, locking the door behind him.

Kirk was unaware that he was free. His arms and legs, completely numb after the days of constriction, remained in the same cramped position.

"Jim!" Spock tried to rouse him from his stupor. "Jim, wake up." He spoke more loudly. "Jim, you're free."

Kirk opened his eyes and ran a swollen tongue over his

cracked lips.

"What?" His voice was barely audible.

"Try to move, Jim. The guard has cut the ropes. There is water near you too."

Gradually, Kirk took in what Spock was saying. He saw the bowl of water nearby and tried to raise himself up and reach towards it. Spock was unprepared for the brief scream of agony that Kirk gave. He lapsed back on the floor.

"I can't move, Spock." It was a plea, almost a sob. "I can't move!"

"Jim. Just try a little movement at a time." Spock tried to speak reassuringly. "It will be painful. But you must try. You've got to try ....."

His voice murmured on and on, encouraging Kirk to move.

The next three hours were a time neither of them would ever want to remember, but would never be able to forget. Bit by bit, Kirk moved, gradually straightening legs and arms; and every movement caused absolute agony, agony that caused Kirk to bite his lips till they bled, to try and stifle the cries of torment he was going through. And for every movement he made, Spock was helping him with words of encouragement and trying to give him what strength he had left himself.

At last, gasping for breath and shaking from head to foot, Kirk was able to completely straighten his arms and legs.

"Try to reach the water, Jim. It will help you."

Kirk's eyes fastened on the bowl only an arm's length away, but there was no strength in his arms or legs. Somehow he managed to move enough for his face to reach the bowl, where he lapped at it, feeling the water run soothingly down his swollen throat.

He looked across at where Spock was still shackled to the wall, saw the blood soaked sleeves of his uniform and the unusual pallor of his First Officer's face. Somehow he had to get the water to Spock, but it seemed an impossible task to him at the moment. He dragged himself into a sitting position, his head spinning and the dungeon tilting and turning black as he sat up right for the first time in four days. He closed his eyes tightly, a sick feeling in his stomach. As the feeling eased, he inched his way slowly and painfully to Spock, taking the bowl with him. He sat at Spock's feet, looking up.

"I don't know how I'm going to get this to you, Spock," he said, hopelessly.

Before Spock had a chance to reply, the door to the dungeon opened. The two Enterprise officers looked around in apprehension and saw that TaiHengis was watching them - and beside him, a short stocky figure that Kirk recognised immediately.

"Kor," breathed Kirk.

"Indeed, friend Kirk. I hoped we would meet again. But not really in circumstances such as these." He wrinkled his nose slightly. TaiHengis gave one of his evil laughs.

"Yes, the stench in here is none too pleasant, I agree."

Somehow, propelled by sheer guts and will power, Kirk pulled himself to his feet. His legs trembled, threatening to give way any second. With one hand clutching tightly at Spock's arm, Kirk faced TaiHengis and Kor defiantly.

"Don't think you've broken either of us, TaiHengis. You'll not learn anything you want to know."

"It really doesn't matter, Kirk. It doesn't matter at







all. Kor, here, has arrived with his fleet. We are ready to descend on your Federation and blow them to oblivion. Whatever you told the Federation, they have left it too late to stop us."

He walked across and pushed Kirk out of the way. Kirk fell helplessly on the floor, half tipping the bowl of water. TaiHengis then unshackled Spock and walked back to Kor.

"Let us leave them to wallow in their own filth. We have more important matters than these pigs."

Kor turned without a word, with a final glance at Kirk as he lay on the ground, staring at him. There was pity in the Klingon's eyes, that made Kirk's belly crawl with resentment. He wanted no pity from Kor.

The door clanged shut and they heard the key turn in the lock. Slowly Spock slid down the wall and joined his Captain on the ground. He pulled Kirk up and helped him sit against the wall. Then with great care he picked up the bowl, now half empty, and held it to Kirk's lips.

"You first, Spock. I've already had some."

"Drink, Jim. Please."

Kirk obeyed and then leaned his head against the wall, closing his eyes. They were still alive, but for how long?

\* \* \* \* \*

TaiHengis walked with long strides along the corridor. A smile played around his lips and he hummed snatches of a melody. At last, after years of planning and conniving; of kowtowing to a very old man and then to his heir, the boy, KwangHatus; of presenting one face to the world and keeping the other true face only for himself; at last his dreams were about to come true. Kor, his ally, had arrived, with a full Klingon battle fleet four days behind him. Kor himself had come by a small, fast destroyer, to tie up the final details.

TaiHengis' own fleet, safe from detection behind the inmost planet, was ready to join the Klingons in their advance to Federation space. And always there was the materiel for more and more starships. It was all going so gloriously well! There remained but one thing for TaiHengis to do. He was on his way now, to tell KwangHatus that he was no longer Emperor.

KwangHatus stood at the open window. It was a beautiful day, sunny and warm, with a wind that would have made kite flying ideal. In fact, KwangHatus could see one now, outside the palace grounds, dipping and swirling as unseen hands controlled the kite's motion. KwangHatus had loved flying kites, but it was considered beneath the dignity of an Emperor to do so. It had been two years since he had last flown one. Even horse riding was frowned on, except on state occasions when KwangHatus would have to keep the horse to a slow walk, burdened with all the trappings of an Empire.

He wanted to gallop a horse across the plains, feel the wind in his hair and the movement of the horse beneath him. With a sad smile he remembered Janji, his favourite mare. She was beautiful, easy to control and when they galloped he knew she had enjoyed it as much as he. Now she remained in her stall most of the time, except when a groom walked her for exercise.

Suddenly KwangHatus made up his mind. He was the Emperor and he was going to ride Janji! He turned from the window, excitement building in him at the thought of escape to the plains outside, even for just an hour. Quickly, he changed into a pair of riding pants and an open neck shirt and was just pulling on his old riding boots when the door of his apartment opened and TaiHengis strode in.

Slowly, KwangHatus stood up.

"I don't believe you knocked, TaiHengis," he said rather brusquely.

"No, I didn't." There was an insolence in his tone that KwangHatus had never heard before. "Nor do I intend ever to knock again. Your days as Emperor are finished, KwangHatus. So you had better start getting used to different treatment from everyone."

"What do you mean?" KwangHatus' voice was high-pitched for a moment and he cursed the lack of control he had over it, wishing he had the deep pitch of a fully broken voice. "I am Emperor here, by birthright."

TaiHengis laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"Your birthright counts for nothing now. I rule and I rule with more power than you ever dreamed of. You are nothing! In future you will bow to me, you will do as I bid."

"By what right?" KwangHatus flung out his arm. "These are my people. My responsibility is to them. They will not see me cast aside .... for you!"

TaiHengis leaned close to the boy who stood straight and proud before him.

"By right of force!!" he hissed. "The Klingons are here, in strength, to back my words and deeds, if I should need them. But I won't need them."

"The Klingons?!" KwangHatus was horrified. "But they are brutal murderers. They will subjugate my people. Make slaves of them." His voice rose. "You cannot have made an alliance with such as they."

"You should be careful how you speak of your new allies, KwangHatus. Otherwise you will regret it."

"You can't do this."

"It is done!"

"But we have Federation guests in the city. They will have plenty to say about this."

"In fact, they have nothing to say," replied TaiHengis. "Although I have tried at some length to persuade them." A wicked smile crossed his face.

"What have you done to them, TaiHengis? They were my personal guests. They came to represent the Federation. If you have harmed them ....."

"What will you do?" TaiHengis laughed. "If you could see them now, wallowing in their own filth, useless and broken. Oh, if you could just see them!" TaiHengis began to laugh.

"Stop it! Stop it!" KwangHatus lashed out, catching TaiHengis across the face.

"Why, you little brat!" He seized KwangHatus by both arms, shaking him hard and then sending him careering across the room, where he hit the wall hard and slid to the floor dazed. "I've wasted enough time on you. You will stay here until I decide what I shall do with you."

He turned and strode from the room. And KwangHatus heard him lock the door behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the dungeon, Kirk and Spock lay huddled together for comfort and warmth. When TaiHengis and Kor had left, Spock had managed to get Kirk to drink and eat a little of the gruel. He had massaged Kirk's arms and legs, trying to ease the cramps which had returned again and again, taking more and more of Kirk's remaining strength.

He had retrieved Kirk's boots, socks and his command-gold top, helping him put them on. And all the while, Kirk had coughed; harsh, rattling coughs which had distressed Spock to hear them. His temperature was up and he admitted to a pain across his chest.

After several hours, a guard had brought them another bowl of water and one of gruel, but this time Kirk could only manage the water, and insisted that Spock eat all the gruel. It was weak and held little nourishment, but it worried Spock that Kirk would not eat it.

Now sitting, close together against the wall, Kirk had fallen into an uneasy sleep, his head against Spock's shoulder. Occasionally, a shudder would run through him and his limbs twitched. Spock could only wish that McCoy was here with his medikit.

As for Spock himself, he was not so debilitated as Kirk. Many times he had gone without food and water for long periods of time, while he had lived on Vulcan. But he knew his wrists were infected. They were swollen and the flesh was broken and ulcerated where he had tried to free himself from the chains. There was a painful throbbing that continued without ceasing. He knew they were a mess and wished again for McCoy's medikit.

Lying quiet and still, so as not to disturb Kirk's rest, Spock's thoughts ran again and again on how they could escape. He had already tried the door and there was no way he could open it. There were no windows or bars, the dungeon was carved from the living rock.

There was a slight sound at the door and Spock looked up. Someone had turned the key in the lock and the door slowly swung open. Spock tensed, wondering what they were to be subjected to now. A small figure stood in the doorway, a look of horror and concern written clear on his young face.

"Captain Kirk! Mr. Spock!" KwangHatus called quietly. "Are you alright?"

Spock shook Kirk gently awake. Kirk seemed to swim upwards from a pain filled haze of misery.

"What is it, Spock? What's happened?" His voice was weak and husky.

"The Emperor is here, Captain."

Kirk looked to the door and seeing the figure of the Emperor there, he tried to drag himself to his feet. It was only with Spock's help that he made it, and staying there was achieved by leaning heavily on Spock, who supported him with an arm around his waist.

KwangHatus came into the dungeon and walked to where the two men stood.

"Why has TaiHengis done this to you?" he asked. "I don't understand. You are our guests and our allies."

"TaiHengis thought we knew something that might affect

his plans for making war on the Federation," Kirk said quietly. "We guessed what his plans were, but did not know for sure. And we were unable to tell the Federation, as he believed we had." He was wracked by a spasm of coughing.

"You are ill, Captain. I wish there was something I could do for you."

Kirk gave a wry smile.

"I need to get back to my ship. Are you able to get a message to her somehow?"

"I'm sorry, Captain. I can do nothing. TaiHengis has told me of his plans and that he is now the Emperor. He locked me in my room." KwangHatus gave a small laugh. "He doesn't know the palace as I do. It is filled with secret passages and hidden rooms. It was easy for me to get out. I guessed you must be here from what he said. He thinks I don't know what he does down here or even where it is. But outside the palace I am helpless. And to contact your ship I would need to get to the communication centre on the other side of the city."

"The only thing I can do for you is to get you out of the palace. Once outside you must make out as best you can." He reached inside his jacket pocket. "I have managed to get one of your communicators; also some food and drink. You must get as far away as you can. TaiHengis has dogs which he will not hesitate to use to find you." KwangHatus gave a slight shudder. "They are vicious!"

He put the communicator and food into Spock's hand.

"Thank you, Emperor. We are indeed most grateful."

"You must come with us," said Kirk, with an effort. It hurt him to breathe - he felt as if he was drowning. "TaiHengis will kill you once he finds out what you have done."

"I cannot come, Captain. My duty is to my people. I must remain here to do what little I can. Please try and get the Federation to save my people from TaiHengis and the Klingons."

Kirk smiled, a brave, sweet smile for the young boy who refused to allow TaiHengis to trample him into the dust.

"We will do everything we can."

KwangHatus smiled in return; boy and man shook hands.

"Come. We had best go now. You will have a couple of hours of daylight left. It would be best if you made for the woods about a mile outside the palace grounds. It will give you some cover. I wish there were more I could do."

"You have done more than enough. You have given us our freedom. Thank you." It was Kirk who spoke. The boy turned and led the way from the dungeon.

Quickly, KwangHatus led them through narrow, winding tunnels, which led upwards, dark and uneven. Kirk had been half carried by Spock, but even so, he felt as if his chest was on fire and the cough became worse, draining away what little strength he had.

Soon, they felt a clear, fresh wind on their faces and KwangHatus led the way into the open. They were outside the palace walls, behind some shrubbery. KwangHatus pointed to the distant woods.

"If you go now, there will be few to see you or to remark on your presence. Good Luck."

Without waiting for a reply, the boy Emperor turned and

was gone, back down the passageway, towards whatever fate awaited him. Kirk and Spock looked towards the woods and freedom.

"Can you make it, Jim? We must be as quick as we can."

"I'll make it, Spock."

They started off, with Spock supporting his Captain, but they had barely gone a quarter of the distance, when Kirk's breath, already laboured, became ragged and shallow and his legs began to give way beneath him. He tried to wave aside Spock's concern, but Spock wasted no time. Quickly he bent and picked Kirk up, carrying him over his shoulder. It wasn't elegant, it wasn't comfortable and it did Kirk's breathing no good at all, but Spock's long strides got them to the shelter of the wood in half the time it would have taken Kirk to get there.

Once inside the wood, Spock gently lowered Kirk to the ground, where he lay fighting for breath. He glanced up at Spock, as he stood anxiously over him.

"I'm O.K. Spock, really. But can you find a stream somewhere around. Hell, I smell like a barnyard."

"Wait here, Jim. I'll see what I can find. I, too, could use some stream water."

He was back within a few minutes, to find Kirk leaning against a tree with his eyes closed. To Spock's eyes, he looked really ill. There was an unhealthy flush on his cheeks and sweat glistened on his face. Even after only the few days they had spent in the dungeon, Kirk no longer looked strong and there was a fragility about him that Spock hadn't seen before. He shook Kirk gently by the shoulder.

"There is a small stream only three minutes walk away. I will carry you there."

"Thank you, Spock. But the dash across to the woods was more than sufficient. I can manage if you help me up."

But the walk to the stream proved too much for Kirk; he had over-estimated his strength. As they reached the stream's bank, he collapsed and lay, gasping and coughing, only semi-conscious.

Spock regarded him worriedly for a few moments. There was absolutely nothing he could do to help Kirk. He needed McCoy now, badly. At least, however, he could clean Kirk up. Gently, he eased Kirk's clothes off and washed them in the stream, laying them out to dry a little in the sun. Then supporting Kirk, he moved him down in the cold stream water. The water was fairly deep and rushed hurriedly over the pebbles and stones of the stream bed. The coldness caused Kirk to cough again and brought him round enough to realise what Spock was doing.

"Thanks, Spock. I think I can manage for a moment." The humiliation of what had happened in the dungeon brought a blush of embarrassment to his face.

He remained in the stream for several minutes and the coldness of the water brought his temperature down and he felt a little better for it. Spock helped him onto the bank, where he sat, warming his chilled body in the sun's rays. Kirk looked at Spock's wrists, as he began to strip of his own clothes, preparatory to going into the stream. Kirk had not realised before how badly Spock's wrists were infected.

"Your wrists don't look too good, Spock. We could both use McCoy right now."

"Indeed, Captain. But the clean water of the stream should help a little."

Kirk closed his eyes, lying still on the grassy bank, while Spock cleaned his clothes and himself in the stream. He joined Kirk on the bank.

"We'll let the clothes dry as much as we can before we put them on," he commented.

Kirk merely gave a weary smile.

"How are you feeling, Jim?"

"Like, I could use a week in McCoy's sickbay! Spock, I've no strength left. I don't think I can go any further." He leaned heavily against the Vulcan.

Spock remembered the food and drink that KwangHatus had given them. He reached to retrieve the parcel, where he had left it, near the drying clothes.

"Try to eat some of this. It will help you."

"If I don't throw up, you mean!"

Spock did not reply, merely broke some of the bread and cheese off and handed them to Kirk. There were dried fruit and apples, as well as a sweet nourishing drink. Kirk tried hard and managed to eat some of the bread and dried fruit; he drank a little, finding it sweet and refreshing. Wiping his hand across his mouth, he sighed.

"That tastes good. I hope it stays down." He swayed where he sat, almost asleep.

"I think we should dress now and find somewhere hidden where we can rest for a while. Then we must move on. We cannot stay near the palace," said Spock.

Soon they were both dressed and huddled together beneath a thick, leafy bush. Almost before they were settled, Kirk was asleep, his head resting on Spock's chest. Spock kept watch, not daring to move or sleep. As time went on, the flush that the coldness of the stream water had banished, returned to Kirk's face. He began to sweat, his limbs twitched with returning cramps and his cough worsened.

\* \* \* \* \*

Late the following morning found them several miles from the palace. Spock had allowed Kirk to sleep for three hours and then they had set off through the woods. Their progress had been distressingly slow. Kirk was very weak and although he tried his best and was supported by Spock, both knew that the distance they covered would not be enough if TaiHengis set the dogs on them.

The woods were thick and extensive; the ground covered with shrubby vegetation which made walking difficult. As the day wore on, it grew hot, the sunlight splashing through the leafy trees, making bright puddles of light on the ground. At last Kirk could go no further. His breathing was ragged and laboured, made worse by his bouts of coughing; his arms and legs, weakened by the torture he had undergone, refused to work anymore and he sank, exhausted to the ground.

"It's no good, Spock. This time I really can't go any further. We'll just have to hope they won't find us here before the Enterprise arrives."

"A forlorn hope, I fear, Jim."

Kirk looked up at his First Officer and managed a small smile.

"I think you're right." He paused. "How are your wrists?"

Spock looked down at his wrists disinterestedly.

"They are infected. Even the clean water of the stream has made no difference." He sighed. "I fear I need Doctor McCoy's ministrations."

"He'd love to hear you say that, Spock. He'd never let you forget it."

Kirk grinned, but a longing swept over him to see Bones again and to know that he was in the doctor's capable hands. He was bone weary, with a tiredness that he felt he had never been without. The muscles to which the electrodes had been attached, ached and throbbed with an insistence that couldn't be ignored and spasms of cramp would attack them from time to time. He also knew that there was something wrong with his lungs. Each breath he drew was an effort and it felt as if there was a broad band of fire across his chest that constricted him ever tighter. He leaned against the trunk of a tree and closed his eyes.

Spock looked around at the trees and shrubs, seeing nowhere they could hide and nothing with which to defend themselves. There was nothing to do but wait. There was some food and drink left, from the package KwangHatus had given them at the palace. Spock opened up the parcel and offered some to Kirk. But Kirk refused. He just couldn't eat, even though he knew he needed to. He drank a little and then quickly fell into an uneasy sleep. Spock sat beside him and putting his arm around Kirk's shoulders, drew him close for comfort and protection. A couple of times, he tried to raise the Enterprise on the communicator he carried, but it was to no avail. He knew they were alone, with no weapons and very little strength left. They could only wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was late afternoon when Spock heard the baying of dogs in the distance. He sat up straight, taking his arm from around Kirk's shoulder and easing him back against the tree. Kirk woke up, unsure at first, exactly where he was.

"What is it, Spock?"

"I can hear dogs, Captain. Only two, I believe, but they are coming this way."

"TaiHengis didn't waste much time, did he?" Kirk looked around helplessly. "We've nothing to protect ourselves with. And I don't think I have the strength to, even if we had."

A sense of futility gripped Kirk. After all they had gone through, was it to end like this - savaged to death by dogs on a planet ready to make war on the Federation.

Spock stood up. The sound of the dogs was nearer now. They could hear them crashing amongst the undergrowth as the dogs forced their way through, their barking growing louder with every passing minute. Their situation was desperate indeed. Kirk tried to rise, to stand alongside his First Officer, but he only managed to get to his knees and he crouched there, gasping for breath.

Suddenly a large brown dog with massive head and large, ferocious jaws appeared at the edge of the clearing. It stopped, sniffing the air then gave a loud, baying bark which echoed around the Enterprise officers like the tolling of a bell of doom. The dog sprang forward, towards the figures in the clearing and as he did so another dog appeared,



black as night, a creature from the pits of hell.

The first dog reached Spock and leapt upwards, jaws wide. Spock caught him as he jumped and swiftly broke his neck with his strong Vulcan hands. Even as he did so, the other dog joined the attack, his eyes red and glaring; growling deep in his throat. Spock's responses weren't quick enough and before he could stop him, the dog's fangs had fastened on the side of Spock's neck. He managed to force the dog's jaws open and pull him away, despatching him as quickly as he had the other. But it was too late. The wound on Spock's neck dripped blood, and he stumbled to his knees and then sank, semi-conscious, to the ground.

Horrified, Kirk knelt over him, swaying dizzily as he realised that Spock was badly hurt. He had nothing with which to staunch the wound and could only murmur, "Spock! Oh god, Spock!"

He heard a laugh behind him and there, standing at the edge of the clearing was TaiHengis, hands on hips, regarding them with obvious delight. Just behind him stood Kor, an unidentifiable look on his face.

"So, you have finally finished your little jaunt?" TaiHengis said contemptuously. "Did you really think you would get away from me?"

Slowly, by sheer guts and will power alone, Kirk staggered to his feet, standing protectively beside Spock. The last rays of the setting sun turned his hair to gold and cast his shadow across Spock's face. Spock watched him from half closed eyes. Standing proud and defiant, his hands clenched tightly at his sides, Kirk had the look of eagles.

For a moment, Kirk and TaiHengis regarded one another.

"Your friend is dying at your feet, Kirk. And you will follow him, but not so quickly, my brave starship Captain."

"You don't scare me, TaiHengis," replied Kirk, huskily, unable to speak more clearly. "You may have killed Spock with your hellish dogs and you can kill me; but you will never win. Your kind never do. If you think that you will be allowed to dominate your Klingon friend, here, you would do well to think again." Kirk flicked a glance at Kor and surprised a faint look of admiration for Kirk on his face. Although polesapart in culture and beliefs, they had one thing in common, they were both leaders of men, in a way TaiHengis would never be.

"Kor is my ally. I have no wish to dominate him. We understand each other completely," replied TaiHengis.

Kirk managed a smile with what effort only he knew. His legs trembled and his breathing grew ever more shallow, but he was determined not to give either of them the satisfaction of seeing him collapse.

"You may think you do. But I believe you will have a few surprises coming your way."

TaiHengis gave a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Enough, Kirk! You surprise me. Your friend lies there, dying and all you can do is try to stir up trouble between Kor and myself." He gave a mirthless laugh. "And I thought you cared for the Vulcan."

It was a deliberate attempt to provoke Kirk, but he ignored it. His feelings for Spock were too deep to allow these two to see how much he really cared.

"If you're going to kill me, you should get on with it!" Kirk said, defiantly.

"Not so fast, Kirk. Not so fast. I want you to have time to think how you have killed your friend. You can watch his last dying breaths and then die slowly yourself, with only regrets for company." TaiHengis produced a length of rope. "That tree should provide a good viewing place for you." He stepped towards Kirk.

In despair, Kirk knew he had no strength to resist and he looked down at Spock. For a moment their eyes met.

"I'm sorry, Spock."

"Do not be sorry, Jim." Spock's voice was a merest whisper. "No one could have a finer friend." It was an effort for him to speak. His eyes closed; and all the while blood trickled from the wound in his neck.

Kirk felt tears prick at his eyes and fought them back. Ignoring TaiHengis, he dropped to his knees and took Spock's cold hand in his. There was a buzzing sound as Kirk looked up, TaiHengis shrieked as he was phasered out of existence. The shock was almost too much for Kirk, his legs gave way completely and he sat down with a thud at Spock's side. He looked at Kor in bewilderment, as the Klingon put the phaser away.

"Did you really think I would have TaiHengis as an ally? You understand me Kirk. The Carahdrian System will be ideal for Klingon occupation - it has everything we want. Mineral wealth, abundant food and countless people to do the work for us. TaiHengis would have only been a .... nuisance!" Kor gave a nasty smile. "As for you, Kirk. I shall leave you here for the moment. I don't expect you to go far! When I have time I shall return to see if you have survived."

He spun on his heel and walked back the way he had come.

Kirk stared helplessly at his friend, dying before his eyes. It shouldn't have to end this way. It mustn't end this way.

At that moment, the communicator bleeped! Kirk stared at it in disbelief. He grabbed it and flipped up the lid.

"Kirk to Enterprise," he breathed.

"Captain Kirk?" Uhura's voice questioned, barely recognising his voice.

"Medical emergency, Uhura. Two to beam ... home."

Kirk's voice broke on the last word, the communicator slipped from his fingers and he collapsed, unconscious, across Spock's body.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hours after Kirk and Spock had been beamed aboard were nightmare ones for McCoy. That Spock would die without immediate surgery and blood transfusions was obvious; but Kirk also, was in critical condition. He was dehydrated and extremely weak from all he had endured at the hands of TaiHengis. He was also suffering from double pneumonia.

While M'Benga prepared the Vulcan for surgery, McCoy got Kirk onto oxygen to help his breathing and set up a drip for liquid nourishment. Then, leaving him under the capable supervision of Nurse Chapel, McCoy joined M'Benga in surgery, to operate on Spock.

He had lost a considerable amount of blood and was holding onto life by a thread. It took two hours on the operating table and even then McCoy didn't know if he had saved Spock or not. They wheeled him back into the small side ward where Kirk was lying, now conscious, his eyes huge as he looked at McCoy.

"How is he, Bones?" he questioned, weakly.

McCoy's heart sank as he said the next words, but he could not hide the facts from Kirk. He had to know.

"I don't know whether Spock is gonna make it or not, Jim. The next few hours will tell. He lost an awful lot of blood and he was in a considerably weakened state when it happened. We've just got to hope." McCoy felt completely inadequate as he saw the look on Kirk's face. "I've done all I can, Jim."

"I know, Bones. Thank you." He looked across at his First Officer and the thought that he might lose him was almost too painful to face. He looked back at Bones, the suffering he had endured and was still enduring written clear on Kirk's face. He was a very ill, unhappy man, but he was still a Starship Captain.

"Bones, I've got to talk to Starfleet Command. They've got to know what Kor is planning. It's imperative. There isn't much time. We've got to have the authority to go in there and help KwangHatus. He's only a young boy ....., " he broke off, coughing and fighting for breath.

"And you think you can report to Starfleet in your condition. Sorry, Jim, but no way. You must rest."

Kirk struggled to sit up, coughing even more.

"Bones. I've got to report to Starfleet and I've got to do it now. And that's an order, Doctor."

McCoy grabbed two more pillows, putting them behind Kirk's back, supporting him as he did so. He was sitting almost upright now and he rested against the pillows, trying to calm his breathing.

"O.K! I guess you won't rest until you've done what you have to," said McCoy reluctantly. "I'll give you five minutes. You're not strong enough for more. Let Starfleet see what these secret missions do to their best men and then expect people like me to work miracles!"

Kirk managed a faint grin. McCoy depressed the communication button and swung the viewer around to face Kirk.

"Uhura, direct communication with Starfleet, Admiral Komack. Pipe it down here to Sickbay. Tell Admiral Komack, that Captain Kirk is allowed only five minutes at the order of his doctor. And you time it to the second, Uhura!"

"Aye sir!" Uhura replied. Then added worriedly, "Is the Captain going to be alright, doctor?"

"If he gets enough rest he will."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirk lay back amongst the pillows, resting as much as he could, but his eyes were fixed on his friend who lay so still in the next bed. McCoy had said the next few hours would tell and Kirk knew he would get no rest until he knew if Spock were going to live or die.

Kirk had had his five minutes with Admiral Komack and had received the required permission to send a landing party down to the Court of the Golden Dragon, to assist as they

saw fit. The knowledge had not been as much of a shock to Starfleet as Kirk had thought it would be. Literally minutes before Kirk had contacted Komach, the Organians had also been in touch with Starfleet, advising them of the proposed invasion. The Organians had stopped the Klingon Fleet dead in space. There would be no Klingon occupation of Carahdria.

Lieutenant Commander Scott meanwhile, had been put in charge of the party of twelve and had beamed down an hour ago. Now all there was to do was wait. And for the Captain of the Enterprise, that was the hardest thing of all to do.

Unable to lie still a moment more, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and eased himself into a sitting position. His whole body was still a mass of pain, but had eased somewhat with the medication McCoy had given him. His breathing was still difficult to control and any movement seemed to bring on a spasm of coughing. He sat for several minutes on the edge of the bed and then slowly walked the few steps to the side of Spock's bed. Gently he took one of Spock's hands in his and stood looking down at him.

Spock was paler than Kirk had ever seen him before and there were deep shadows of pain around his eyes. His breath was so shallow as to seem almost non-existent. Kirk bent closer and could just hear the faint susuration of air through the Vulcan's lips.

"Spock," whispered Kirk, "Spock, don't die. Please don't die. I need you."

\* \* \* \* \*

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You must have been cold there in my shadow  
To never have sunlight on your face  
You've been content to let me shine  
You always walked a step behind  
I was the one with all the glory  
While you were the one with all the strength  
Only your face without a name  
I never once heard you complain

Did you ever know that you're my hero  
And everything I'd like to be  
Well, I can fly higher than an eagle  
But you are the wind beneath my wings

It might have appeared to go unnoticed  
But I've got it all here in my heart  
I want you to know I know the truth  
I would be nothing without you

Did you ever know that you're my hero  
And everything I'd like to be  
Well, I can fly higher than an eagle  
But you are the wind beneath my wings

\* \* \* \* \*

Coming in a short time later, McCoy found Kirk, unconscious on the floor beside Spock's bed. He called for medics for assistance and putting his arms around Kirk, he gathered him close. It was then he saw the tear stains on Kirk's face.

With the aid of the medics, McCoy got Kirk back into bed and administered a sedative to keep him quiet for a while. He was in no fit state to be out of bed at all. McCoy stood for a moment beside Kirk's bed, looking down at him with compassion and love. He looked so young to have the responsibilities of this huge starship and her crew on his shoulders. And then to have to go on these damned secret missions! McCoy seethed anew as he thought of what these two men had been through for the sake of Starfleet.

Kirk seemed more comfortable now, his breathing was still laboured, but he seemed to be resting more peacefully. Slowly, McCoy moved across to the Vulcan's bed to check on his life signs. He stared at the readout above his head and breathed a sigh of relief. Spock was out of danger. The life readings showed a definite improvement and quite suddenly too. McCoy looked down at Spock and then across at Kirk and there was a puzzled frown on his face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later Scotty was able to make a full report to his Captain of what he had found at the Court of the Golden Dragon. Both Kirk and Spock were able to sit up now and although McCoy wouldn't allow Scotty to visit for long, he was able to tell them all they wanted to know.

It appeared that Kor had returned to the palace briefly to collect some items from his room. He stopped only to tell some of the servants that TaiHengis was dead. He had then made for the transporter room and hadn't been seen since.

There appeared to have been some panic among TaiHengis' henchmen and several of them had left the palace hastily. But most of them had seemed uncertain what to do and when Scotty had asked to see the Emperor, he could not be found. Search parties had been organised and they had searched the palace and grounds. It was over twenty four hours before they found the body of KwangHatus - in the dungeon where Kirk had suffered so much. The boy had been brutally murdered and the only consolation was that it must have happened relatively quickly. It was obvious that TaiHengis had killed him when he had found out that KwangHatus had helped Kirk and Spock escape.

Scotty had then found the heir to the throne - a cousin of KwangHatus. He was a young able man in his early twenties and Scotty was confident that SanHetan would make an able and trustworthy Emperor. He was anxious to remain an ally of the Federation.

The Carahdrian battle fleet was where Spock had surmised it would be and Scotty had arranged for Starfleet to send a fleet of cruisers to take over the ships and crews aboard them. SanHetan said he would take the necessary action to punish the men concerned. He wanted no part of the starships and Starfleet would absorb the ships into their fleet.

A congratulatory note had arrived from Admiral Komack, addressed to Captain Kirk, complimenting him and his crew on the completion of a successful mission. Kirk tossed it aside and hoped desperately that they would never have to go on another secret mission in his life.

A week later and McCoy was very happy with the progress that his patients had made. Neither was allowed back on duty, but McCoy had let them go back to their cabins, on condition they rest. And McCoy kept a very strict eye on them.

Kirk and Spock were in Kirk's cabin; Kirk lying on his bunk, hands behind his head, while the Vulcan sat on a nearby chair, fingers steepled as they talked over the events on Carahdria.

"I wish now that I had insisted that KwangHatus come with us when we left the palace. I should have known what TaiHengis would do to the boy."

"I don't believe you were in a fit state to insist on anything at that time. KwangHatus would not have come whatever you might have said. He knew where his duty and responsibility lay and young as he was, he had the courage to face them. There was nothing you or I could have done. We must be thankful that he was able to aid us to escape."

Kirk said nothing for a moment, thinking only of the young boy whose life had been cut short by a cruel and evil man.

"It is such a waste. He had hardly begun his life," said Kirk with a sigh.

"Death is something we must all face sooner or later. Who is to say whether it is easier when one is young or when one is old."

"It is hard to face death at any time. And even harder to face the death of a friend."

Spock nodded in understanding that needed no words. They looked at one another for a moment, both remembering the awful things they had faced together on Carahdria.

"There were moments on Carahdria when I thought we would never see the Enterprise again," said Kirk with a faint smile. "I'm glad I was wrong."

"Indeed Captain!"

Kirk looked at the chronometer and swung his legs off the bed.

"It's time Scotty kicked those warp engines in, to get us out of orbit," exclaimed Kirk, with a touch of impatience.

"I believe Mr. Scott has 2.05 minutes before the time agreed, Captain."

Kirk paced about his cabin, impatiently.

"Still, he's on the Bridge. I know he would prefer to be in the Engine Room."

He paused at the door and looked at Spock with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"I think I'll just go to the Bridge, to check on the general situation."

"I am sure Mr. Scott will have everything in order, Captain. Besides, Doctor McCoy would not be happy that you have disobeyed his order by going to the Bridge."

Captain Kirk grinned across at Mr. Spock.

"Who's Captain on this ship, anyway?" he said, as the doors slid open.

Without waiting for a reply, he strode through them and the doors snapped shut behind him.

Spock sighed.

The eagle was ready to fly again.