

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS

STORIES by SHEILA CLARK

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A ScoTpress publication.

Enterprise Incidents 1, price £1.15 inside the U.K., is put out by ScoTpress and is available from

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Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland.

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton.

(C) STAG 1975 200 copies
Reprinted 1977
(C) ScoTpress December 1980 100 copies.

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At the time of the first British STAR TREK convention, I was very new into fandom. I'd written a few stories, purely for my own entertainment - and thinking back over them now, most of them were pretty bad. I bought those zines which were available when I joined STAG - at the time, there weren't very many - but I still didn't think of submitting any of my own material for consideration. Then I met Janet - and when she discovered I could write, the pressure was on! I quite literally churned out stories for her - still with no thought of submitting them anywhere; I still didn't think they were any good.

And then one of the competitions announced for the second STAR TREK con was for zines. I was staying with Janet at the time, and Marion Dougall (now Marion van der Voort) was also there for a few days; we'd been swapping story ideas, writing stories for Janet (I don't think I'll ever forget the evening when Marion and I were both working on stories, alternating reaching the end of a page, and Janet had those pages off us, alternately, as soon as they were out of the typewriters and managing to follow both stories at once.) And out of the blue I decided to compile a zine out of the best of my stories and enter it for that competition. And it won.

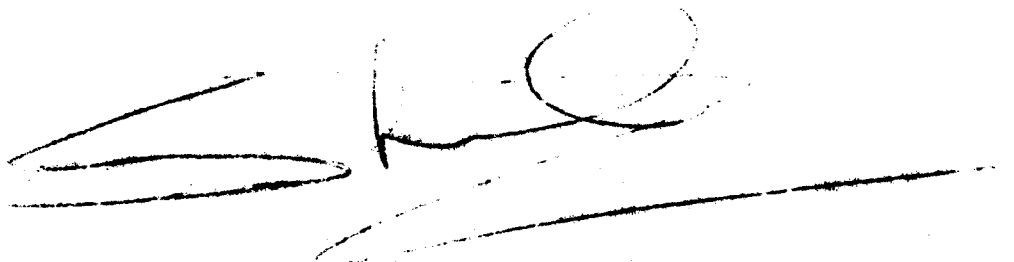
Janet and I, with Beth Hallam, took over the running of STAG just after that con when Jenny Elson, who started the club, had to give up for health reasons. And this was the second zine we put out (the first being Log Entries 1). Although we reprinted it, it has been out of print for some time, so when Janet, Valerie and I decided to go independent and started up ScoTpress, it seemed an excellent idea to bring it back into print.

At the time the zine was first compiled, I considered these stories to be the best I had written; obviously with experience my writing has improved and I'm no longer of that opinion. I did tidy the stories up slightly when I did the stencils for this issue of Enterprise Incidents 1, but did not rewrite the stories in any way.

Two of the stories, Fires of Lorn and Prejudice, were reprinted in Repeat Missions 2, which is also now out of print. And two of them, Cruelty is a Way of Life and When Friends Fall 'ut were from ideas by Marion Dougall.

I enjoyed writing these stories; I hope you enjoy reading them.

December 1980



THE FIRES OF LORN by Sheila Clark

Kirk was puzzled.

Since the new Senior Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy, had come on board the Enterprise, he had been trying to develop some sort of relationship with him - in vain. McCoy, it seemed, did not want any sort of Human relationship; even Spock had noticed it. But then, neither did he want a Vulcan one; Spock had tried speaking to him, and had been rudely rebuffed.

"Just leave me alone," McCoy had growled. "Let me get on with my duties; you don't need to discuss anything with me unless and until I prove inefficient."

Kirk was unhappy about the situation as well as puzzled. He prided himself on running a happy ship; it upset him that anyone on board should reject the camaraderie the Enterprise offered everyone.

What he did not - could not - know was that McCoy also was desperately unhappy. He wanted to respond to Kirk's friendly attitude; but he couldn't. His divorce was too recent. He turned away from companionship...and alone, he brooded over the long breakdown of his marriage. His wife's frequent infidelities... He had come to accept them, he loved her, even part of her attention was precious to him...only she knew too well that he had decided that even accepting her cruelty and living in misery was preferable to living without her...and she had set out to make his life more and more unbearable, to show him her power over him... She had even alienated their daughter from him. Though, he remembered with a spark of pleasure, Joanna had eventually seen through her mother's actions. It was she who had eventually persuaded him to break free...yet, free, he still longed for the faithless woman who had subjected him to hell for so many years.

He was enough of a psychologist - and certainly enough of an introvert - to know that his preoccupation with the past was unhealthy. Yet he found that he was afraid to trust anyone...even another man. One of her lovers had been a man he called friend, a man he had believed he could trust...that had been the most hurting of all her fidelities, he thought...she had set out to seduce his friend, and he had not only succumbed but had then prolonged the affair. He could have forgiven Bill, he thought, if it had only been the once; he couldn't forgive the months that Bill had continued to deceive him. And he couldn't forgive the loneliness that the affair had caused him, for he hadn't trusted anyone since.

He tried persuading himself that here, on this Starship, things could be different; but his fear of fresh disillusionment was too strong. He tried telling himself that the Vulcan could be trusted; Vulcans were known for their loyalty - they held disloyalty in total abhorrence, he knew; and was convinced that with his luck, he'd strike the one Vulcan who was capable of disloyalty... anyway, Spock was half Human, and McCoy certainly distrusted the Human half. Only with Scotty was he at all at ease...the man he had known before his marriage, and hadn't met during it, but with whom he had carried on a spasmodic but worthwhile correspondence during the terrible years when death itself would have been preferable to life. Even with Scotty, he held back...but Scotty understood. He knew a little - a very little - of what had been done to McCoy during those years - times when McCoy, in despair, had given him some clue, in the bitterness of his letters, of what had been happening. Virtually all he could offer McCoy was his company when solitude became even more unbearable than company. One night he got McCoy drunk, and learned a great deal more than he had previously known; but he kept his own counsel. He could have mentioned something to Kirk, who was, he knew, worried about the surgeon, but he felt that McCoy would regard it as another betrayal if he did. And the last thing McCoy needed was another betrayal. Just one more might destroy him utterly.

Matters continued in this way for some time, while the Enterprise moved on through space. McCoy, seeing the friendship around him, became, if anything,

even more bitter that he could not - dare not - share it; and rejected every attempt to include him among them that the rest of the crew made. He found himself even beginning to reject Scotty, who watched, not knowing what to do to help his friend.

Matters were at this stage when the Enterprise reached Delta Leporis. There was a small research station on its third planet, living in an uneasy peace with the native humanoids, who called their world 'Lorn' - a word which, in their own tongue, meant 'Earth'. The natives themselves were friendly, but there was a small but powerful guild of men who, for lack of a better term, the research personnel called 'witch doctors'. Certainly they seemed to have the function of healers, but the settlers had early learned that their cures were rather ineffectual. Most of the sick who were 'cured' by them would have recovered naturally by themselves; the really sick died. And the witch doctors claimed that the dead had not had enough faith in the cure for it to work.

The station personnel had not, however, tried to do anything about it; that would have been accounted interference in the native culture. But one or two of the natives, seeing that none of the newcomers had yet died, had gone to them for medical help instead of to the witch doctors.

The station doctor had given it; so far, no-one had died after his help, and so the witch doctors had said nothing. But he knew that they were only biding their time. The first death after a Federation treatment, and there would be trouble. But he was temperamentally incapable of refusing help to the ailing.

Kirk included McCoy in the landing party, wondering if the change in environment, and the company of the station doctor, might begin to break down the wall that the surgeon had so obviously erected around himself...no-one, Kirk knew, could be so utterly self-sufficient except through choice - or so apparently self-sufficient. And it was becoming clear to him that whoever broke through to McCoy, it wasn't going to be him.

Only it didn't work. McCoy was even more abrupt and cynical than usual.

They were still there, talking to the station personnel, when two natives arrived, one of them carrying a sick child. The station doctor turned to meet them; McCoy, showing the first sign of interest that he had yet shown, joined him.

"They've begun to trust us," Dr. Watson said. "They've been coming for treatment for some months now."

"What about the native medicine men?" McCoy asked.

"They don't like it, but they haven't done anything about it that we know of."

The two doctors bent over the sick child. The illness was obviously well advanced - too well advanced.

When the landing party went back to the Enterprise, McCoy asked permission to remain behind - the ship didn't have to leave for some hours. "The child's very ill," he explained abruptly.

Kirk nodded. "Yes, of course," he agreed, glad to see McCoy showing concern for someone, and also, in a way, glad to let McCoy see that he could be flexible and reasonable.

The child died.

Immediately, the witch doctors moved.

They went to the station, demanding the two doctors, accusing them of

causing the death of the child by their alien treatment. Before the station commander could do anything, the witch doctors had left, taking Watson and McCoy by force. The commander, Lt. Taylor, contacted Kirk.

He explained what had happened, and finished, "There was nothing I could do."

"I'll be right down," Kirk said.

He beamed down alone. Spock wanted to accompany him, but Kirk refused. "The situation down there must be pretty explosive," he said. "The witch doctors must be the bosses down there; with a dead child as ammunition, they'll be able to manoeuvre things to suit themselves. I want to try to save McCoy; he's a good doctor, even if he wasn't one of my men. Watson, too, if it's at all possible; but I don't want to risk anyone else in the process."

Taylor met him when he beamed down. "The natives are showing signs of hostility - though not as many as I'd have expected. Maybe they're a bit disillusioned themselves at the witch doctors; they wouldn't have been coming to us for medical help otherwise. And one of them whispered to me that the dead child was an orphan, brought here by members of a witch doctor's family."

"Watson and McCoy were set up?"

"It looks like it."

"Any idea where they were taken?"

"To the witch doctors' village," Taylor replied.

"And?"

"I don't know. But I imagine they'll be killed. I didn't have enough men here to defy the witch doctors, Captain...and anyway, I have my orders; not to alienate the natives if at all possible."

* Taylor gave Kirk directions for finding the witch doctors' village, and Kirk set off quickly, afraid that, even so, he would be too late.

The village was built in a hollow surrounded by low, undulating hills. Trees grew sparsely around. To one side of the village was another hollow. Smoke rose ominously from it; and from its direction came the sound of screaming. Kirk shivered at the agony in the screams, wondering what was happening, aware that the two Humans must be the victims, angry that they should be treated in such a way, and yet realising that it was stupid - Spock would have said illogical - to be angry with the natives for behaving according to their own culture.

He moved quickly towards the smoke-filled hollow, not yet able to see into it.

As he came in sight of its centre, the screaming stopped. At first he could see nothing in the hollow for the smoke. Natives stood around the rim of the hollow; fewer of them than he'd expected; then he realised that the killing must be being watched only by the witch doctors - and perhaps by some chiefs, too, but not by the ordinary people.

Then the smoke cleared slightly.

In the centre of the hollow was a pole. Tied to this pole, hanging limp, held up only by it, was a man in surgeon's blues - a uniform burned and smoke-blackened, but still recognisable - barely. From this distance, and with the victim's head dropped forward, Kirk couldn't make out which of the two men it was. He ran forward.

The natives were moving now, as several of them made their way into the hollow, picking their way carefully - the ground was obviously very hot. They removed the limp figure from the pole, carried it out of the hollow, and dropped it carelessly on the ground as Kirk reached them.

He looked down at it. He still could not tell which of the doctors it had been; the face was burned beyond recognition. Feeling slightly sick, he looked away from the half-cremated body and up at the witch doctors who stood there.

"What have they done, that they must suffer this?"

"They are responsible for the death of one of our people."

"Would your own cures have worked?"

"Perhaps. If the child believed sufficiently that we would cure him."

"The child was too ill, and too young, to believe anything," Kirk replied.

The spokesman of the witch doctors threw him a look of pure hatred, and said, "Your 'doctors' are not members of our guild of healers."

"They are members of the guild of healers of our own people."

"The child died."

"The child would have died anyway. Would he not?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk saw another figure in blue being forced into the hollow...no, not forced, exactly, he was not resisting - but without turning and looking directly he couldn't see which one it was. "Must they both die?" he asked.

"No." Despite his obvious hatred of Kirk, the man was honest. "Any of the witnesses may attempt a rescue."

"Attempt?"

"When the fires are lit, any of the witnesses may try to cross the flames and release the criminal. If he does so, successfully, and brings the criminal back safely through the flames, the man is freed."

Kirk nodded. "I may attempt this?"

The witch doctor signified agreement. "You may; but what guarantee have we that your people will not take vengeance on us for your death when you fail?"

Kirk pulled out his communicator. "I will tell my people that if I die, it is my own fault."

"Very well."

Kirk flipped open the communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Spock here."

"Mr. Spock. I have a chance to save one of the doctors. If I die in the attempt, it will be my own fault, and not that of the natives."

"Captain - "

"You will not interfere, Mr. Spock. That's an order. We must abide by the local rules, otherwise the research station will have to close and we will be unable to maintain contact with this culture. Kirk out." He closed the communicator and turned back to the witch doctor. "Satisfied?"

The man nodded again. Kirk could see satisfaction in his face, and knew that in the native's opinion, he had no chance, and that the witch doctor welcomed the thought that another of these intruding aliens would die.

Kirk now looked directly into the hollow.

The doctor was tied to the pole; and Kirk could still not see clearly which one it was. He hoped it was McCoy - logically it should be; the witch doctors would surely be more intent on destroying the one they knew, the one who had been usurping their position - McCoy had simply been a bonus to them, as he would be - but he had no certainty that the natives could, in fact, tell one alien from another. If that was so, McCoy could have died first...and though McCoy was still a stranger to him, he was one of his men...and he hated losing any of his men. Smoke still curled lazily from the ground. What made it burn? Wisps of smoke drifted between him and the sacrificial pole... He didn't think he had been seen

yet by the unfortunate doctor, who appeared to be paying little attention to what was going on. Was it McCoy?

Then, with a suddenness that made him jump, flames shot up from the ground. What made it burn? He had seen nothing to cause it...the natives had lit nothing. He glanced at the smiling witch doctor, who watched him, spite in his eyes.

"Are you still willing to try to rescue him?"

"Yes."

Kirk turned then, and without hesitation plunged forward.

Smoke stung his throat; fumes make him choke, and he gasped in more of the acrid smoke. He coughed, and each cough, as he gasped for breath, forced him to inhale more of the fumes. This wouldn't do. He stopped, shielded his mouth and nose with his sleeve, and brought his breathing under control. As he did, heat from the fire singed his clothes and hair. He tried to orientate himself. In the coughing spasm, had he lost sight of the direction in which he had to go? He could only hope not. He could see only a few feet. He went on in what he hoped was the right direction.

Fresh flames shot from the ground close beside him, and involuntarily he jerked away, tripped and fell. His right hand landed on a red-hot stone; he tried to pull away from it, but his weight was on it, and it took a couple of seconds to readjust his balance so that he could lift his hand. He scrambled to his feet again, hardly aware of the burning agony in his hand except as an accompaniment to the inferno. An unwary deep breath brought hot air into his lungs, and he realised that he could have damaged them quite seriously. He must watch not to breathe too deeply.

He moved on, feeling his way, one sleeve over his nose to keep from breathing in too much of the heated air, unable to go too fast in case he walked straight into one of the flame gushers, which seemed to vary their position... No, that couldn't be possible, was he hallucinating? There was as yet no screaming...was that worth anything?

Then he came into an almost clear space. The pole was in front on him. He was behind the victim, and still couldn't see his face. He stumbled round to the front of the pole.

It was McCoy.

McCoy had gone to the sacrifice, if not willingly, at least with complete resignation. This was the end. Death was almost welcome. No more fear, no more worry...no more dread of betrayal, no more loneliness. He prepared himself to die with courage, hoping that he would not give the natives the satisfaction of hearing him scream as Watson had done. The natives were masters of suspense, it seemed; when the flames sprang up, they were not, at first, near him, though the spouts of flame were coming nearer with every eruption.

The flames were close when, out of the smoke behind him, came a blackened figure that he recognised, with some astonishment, as his Captain.

"Captain!" he gasped.

"Are you all right?" Kirk asked as he reached for the knots tying McCoy.

"Yes; the flames have been too far away... But you, Captain..." as he realised more fully the condition of Kirk's clothes and hair, "...what about you?"

"I'll do," Kirk said, struggling with the obstinate bindings. They were not rope - of course not, he thought, rope would burn - and they were difficult to untie. It didn't help that he only had the full use of his left hand; for the first time he realised just how badly the right one was damaged. But he had to use it to unfasten McCoy. He grunted involuntarily as the rough bindings tore at the burns.

"What's wrong?" McCoy asked.

"Burned my hand a little," Kirk said as the fastenings gave way. McCoy turned, reaching for Kirk's hands.

"Let me see..."

"No time," Kirk said. "We have to get out. We can't beam back to the ship, unfortunately; we have to stick to the rules. If we can get back to the edge of the hollow, you'll be counted innocent of causing the child's death. Come on."

Together they moved back into the inferno. "Keep your arm over your mouth," Kirk warned.

McCoy nodded. He knew all about the danger of breathing over heated air.

Somehow, now that he had company, Kirk found the conditions not quite so unpleasant. In addition, he was relieved - more relieved than he would have thought possible - that the survivor was, in fact, the unfriendly McCoy.

Flames spouted up round them, and once, on the way back, McCoy pulled Kirk away from a gusher that sprang up close - though not as close as the one that had burned him. As they went, getting nearer the perimeter, the flames lessened; and at last, they stumbled into clear air.

The witch doctor walked over to them, unwilling respect on his face. "Your friend is declared innocent of causing the death of the child," he told Kirk stiffly.

"Thank you," Kirk said. With his left hand he pulled out his communicator. "Two to beam up."

They were barely materialised when McCoy reached again for Kirk's hand - he knew now which one was burned. He drew in his breath sharply when he saw the extent of the damage to it. "Sickbay, Captain," he said. "Now."

Kirk nodded. He felt tired and weak now from the reaction, and he stumbled as he left the transporter pad. McCoy caught him before he could fall.

"I'll manage," he said.

McCoy looked at him. "Who are you trying to impress, Captain?"

Kirk shook his head. "I'll manage," he repeated.

McCoy slipped an arm round him. "All right, but lean on me."

In sickbay, he checked Kirk over carefully once he had attended to the immediately obvious injuries - he himself was uninjured. "Some slight damage to the lungs," he said. "Did you breathe in any of that superheated air?"

"A little, I think," Kirk admitted.

"And you didn't think it worthwhile telling me? How am I supposed to treat my patients when they won't co-operate?" He scowled at Kirk, and pointed to one of the beds. "Lie down. I'm not letting you out of here for a couple of days, so you may as well make yourself comfortable."

"Doctor, I think you're a bit of a bully." Kirk watched McCoy carefully as he spoke, his mental fingers crossed that he wasn't ruining his contact with McCoy almost before it was created. McCoy looked at him, and Kirk flinched at the look in the doctor's eyes. "Sorry," he said. "That wasn't a very good joke."

McCoy seemed to relax. "All doctors are bullies," he said. "Sometimes it's the only way to get the patients to behave themselves."

Kirk grinned at him.

"Captain..." McCoy hesitated. "Captain - thank you. You could have died down there..."

"It's all right," Kirk said. "And McCoy - I was glad to see it was you, and not Watson."

They looked at each other. Kirk took a deep breath.

He had reached McCoy after all. Only time would tell what sort of relationship would develop between them. But contact had been made.

Careful, Jim - don't push too hard.

"Doctor - get Spock down here, please. I want to see him."

OPERATION ANNIHILATE - AN INTERLUDE

McCoy sat in sickbay, feeling utterly miserable. He had just made one of the biggest mistakes of his life - but he was not the one who would have to suffer for it. No, the one who would suffer was one of the two dearest friends he had - a man for whom he would willingly have walked barefoot through hell, if by so doing he could have helped him; and who would soon - too soon - be leaving the Enterprise for ever. Somehow, the fact that Spock bore him no grudge, had, indeed, tried to ease his feelings of guilt, made it worse. Spock was blind, and there was nothing - absolutely nothing - that he could do about it.

The intercom buzzed, breaking into his guilty abstraction.

"Sickbay - McCoy here."

"Tell Spock it worked," came Kirk's voice.

It worked. Well, it was something. Spock hadn't been blinded wholly meaninglessly. "He'll be happy to hear it," he said dully.

"Bones - it wasn't your fault. Bones..."

He flicked off the intercom, cutting off the voice. It was his fault. He had acted first and thought after. He had acted far too hastily. He should have waited for the results of the first test to be processed, instead of trying to be clever.

He rose wearily, and went over to the bed where Spock lay. "Spock - "

"I heard, Doctor. We were successful. Gratifying." His voice was even, unemotional as always. There might almost have been nothing wrong with him - except that he was lying with his eyes closed, almost as if he was trying to pretend that his lack of sight was voluntary.

McCoy felt a sudden need to say something - to do something. He was sure that Spock was miserable, no matter how well he hid it; he wanted to try to ease the desolation he sensed Spock was feeling, but which he would not - could not - let anyone see. Yet he knew that any expression of sympathy would be rejected.

"Spock - I'm sorry - " he tried.

Spock broke in. "There is no need to sound so depressed, Doctor. It was my own fault. You wanted to give me a visor to protect my eyes; I refused it."

"Yes - and I should have insisted, in spite of you."

"The Captain agreed with me."

"In spite of both of you."

"Doctor, it is done. There is no point, now, in trying to decide who was, or was not, to blame, or what we could have done to prevent it. I have accepted it; it is time for me to begin learning how to live with my blindness. I am physically well; fully able to begin packing my personal belongings in readiness for leaving the ship at the next Starbase. If you would kindly guide me to my quarters..."

"Not yet, Spock," McCoy said. There was really no reason why not, he knew; but he found himself wanting to put off the moment when he must admit that there was nothing to be done - even though he had known it for some hours now.

Spock turned his head towards McCoy at that, opening his eyes in an involuntary reaction to the doctor's refusal to let him leave sickbay. As he did so, he flinched and shut his eyes again.

"What's wrong?" McCoy asked sharply.

"Pain - behind my eyes."

McCoy moved to his desk for his small ophthalmic torch. He came back, and dimmed the lights. "Open your eyes," he ordered.

Spock obeyed. McCoy shone the light into one eye, then the other, watching the reaction carefully. The eye muscles were again reacting almost normally, but... Spock was still staring blankly up at him.

He put down the torch, and moved dispiritedly to put the lights up again. He stood, then, looking down at Spock, allowing his misery to show on his face.

Spock said slowly, "You need not look so worried, Doctor."

McCoy stared at him, his heart leaping with sudden hope. "You can see?"

Spock nodded. "A little dimly still, but my sight is recovering quickly."

"I don't understand. The optic nerve couldn't have survived that intensity of light..."

"I had forgotten it myself, but Vulcans have an inner eyelid that closes involuntarily to shut out high-intensity glare. It must have afforded me sufficient protection to enable my eyes to recover, even though I was at first dazzled."

McCoy continued to stare at him with barely-concealed relief. Then, in sudden reaction, he buried his face in his hands, wanting to hide his expression. Spock looked at him, not fooled. He reached over, and put his hand for a moment on McCoy's arm.

The doctor took a deep breath, and reached out for his torch once more. "Lie back, Spock, I want to check you over."

"Doctor, I assure you - "

"Yes, I know... Well, you seem to be all right. Let's go and tell Jim."

Together, they walked out of sickbay on their way to the bridge.

CRUELTY IS A WAY OF LIFE

The boy ran desperately down the dimly-lit street, his lungs straining for air as he went. Behind him came his father, only fractionally less distressed. They slowed for a moment, unable to hear their pursuers any longer, to relieve their distress, but almost at once the dreaded cry of "Havi! Havi!" came from behind them again. The boy sobbed in fear, then they were running again.

"This way!" the father gasped, and they ducked down a narrow alley. For a moment, the boy hoped that his move had shaken off their pursuers, but seconds later they heard the harsh voices. "They went this way!"

They passed a pile of old boxes lying at the side of the alley, jumbled untidily.

"Hide!" the father gasped. He hesitated long enough to be sure the boy was hidden from view, then went on, faster now that he was not held back by the child's lack of speed.

In his nest of boxes, the boy struggled to control his too-fast breathing, sure that the pursuers would hear him panting for breath.

The horrible sound of a mob's footsteps came nearer and nearer. He peered out of a tiny crack. First came the fanatics, the bigots, the ones who were the force behind all mobs. Then came the mass of them; the ones caught up in the mob spirit, the ones easily led, the ones afraid to be different, all as dangerous

to him as the leaders. At the rear, the less enthusiastic, who were beginning to feel that they'd done enough, that perhaps the Havi would leave now that they'd had this chase to frighten them, who were feeling the strain of the long chase as much as their terrified prey. Then they were all past, and he remained undetected.

He relaxed for the first time in many hours as he listened to the yells disappearing into the distance. Then, with horrifying suddenness, the yells took on a new note - triumph. He shuddered, knowing what it meant; the mob had caught his father. He closed his eyes, taking a silent farewell of the man he knew he would never see again. He would not even dare try to retrieve his father's body, but must leave it for the dogs and the carrion birds that preyed on the filth in the city streets, for he knew that that would be what his father would want.

He stayed put for some time, until the horrible sounds ceased and he knew the mob had had time to disperse. They would be triumphant at having killed a Hava, but irate that another had escaped them. Some of the fanatics would doubtless prowl the streets all night, hoping to find the Hava cub. He would have to be very careful if he wanted to escape...

Sensors indicated that the planet, though now at a primitive level of development, had once been much more advanced; possibly a war had destroyed the world's culture, but it was certain that some knowledge of the old civilisation must have lasted; the traces of civilisation were not so old as to be more than two or three generations back. And in one area, there were even traces of still-existing technology.

Kirk chose to beam down to this area, taking with him Spock, McCoy and three guards.

They had barely materialised when they found themselves prisoners. The guards reacted more swiftly and automatically than their officers; and on producing their weapons, they were promptly killed.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy were taken to a large building, along poorly-lit passages and up many stairs to a large, comfortable-looking room. A tall man waited there; tall, impressive, well-built, he looked every inch a leader. He regarded them thoughtfully.

"I am Medolla, chief scientist of this city," he said. His voice was deep, quiet; he gave the impression that he never, for any reason, raised his voice - or needed to. "And you are - ?"

"Captain James T. Kirk, commanding the U.S.S. Enterprise. My first officer, Mr. Spock, my chief medical officer, Dr. McCoy." He paused for a moment, then went on. "Mr. Medolla, I would like to know the meaning of this. We came here in peace, and were arrested, three of my men killed, almost before we had time to arrive."

"Peace?" Medolla asked. "What is peace?"

They stared at him in astonishment; he sounded as if he genuinely didn't know the word. He turned to Spock. "You are different from the others."

"That is correct. I am a Vulcan."

"Vulcan...oh, yes. Vulcan. I remember seeing a reference to Vulcans in one of our old books. It is said that Vulcans have a remarkable capacity to endure pain. Now that we have a Vulcan here, it would make an interesting study - to see if the book is correct." He turned back to Kirk. "How did you come here, Captain James T. Kirk? What is the 'Enterprise'?"

"Since you already know about Vulcans, you must be able to work that out for yourself."

"A spaceship, Captain James T. Kirk. Am I right? Yes, of course I am; and very useful it will be, too.

I want that ship, Captain."

"You must be joking."

"Joking? Never. We need your ship - and we need it now. Surely you will co-operate with us in this small matter. Or would you rather see your friends suffer?" There was a vicious note in his voice now, and his very quietness intensified it.

"I can't betray my ship, Medolla - whatever you do to us." Kirk's voice was as quiet as Medolla's.

"As you wish, Captain." He turned to the guards who stood behind the prisoners. "Take them to the interrogation room."

Kirk and McCoy were manacled to bars while Spock was dragged to a frame in the centre of the room. A guard busied himself lighting a brazier near it.

Once the fire was lit and catching up well, he put an iron onto it, then left. The three men looked at each other.

"Do not distress yourself, Captain," Spock said. "You cannot betray the ship. We all know that. I can block out the pain."

They were left for nearly an hour, then Medolla came in, accompanied by several guards. He pointed to Spock. "Remove his shirt."

They unfastened him to pull off his shirt, then fastened him back again in the frame, this time with his arms held wide apart above his head.

"That will be all," Medolla said, and the guards left. He turned to Kirk. "Well, Captain? Have you changed your mind?"

Kirk shook his head. "I cannot."

"I wonder." He took the iron out of the fire, and studied its red-hot tip for a moment with clinical deliberation. Then he applied it firmly to Spock's chest. The horrible smell of burning flesh filled the room. Spock's face did not change, but pain showed clearly on McCoy's face, while Kirk closed his eyes, unable to watch.

Medolla prolonged the torture until the iron was no longer showing red, then he put the iron back in the fire. Spock, who had endured in silence and defiance, collapsed unconscious as soon as the iron was removed.

Medolla glanced at Kirk. "I see that what the books said about Vulcans was true, Captain. He does indeed endure pain to an amazing extent."

Kirk ignored him. Medolla moved over to him. "Yet even he cannot endure for ever. What will you say when he begs you for mercy, Captain?"

"Do you really think he will?"

Medolla looked at Spock consideringly. "Perhaps not...but your other friend. He is not Vulcan. What will you do when I start on him? When he begs for mercy?"

"None of us will beg for mercy," Kirk replied.

"Can you even guarantee that they will remain your friends when you are so inconsiderate of their well-being?"

"It'll take more than you can do to break our loyalty to each other!" McCoy broke in.

"I wonder," Medolla said, almost purring now. Behind him, Spock raised his head again. "It will be interesting to see if you are right." He glanced towards Spock. "Ah, good. You are back with us again. Just in time for the next act."

He moved back to the brazier. "The first time is...comparatively easy to endure. But a second burn - on the same place - that is...not so easy." He lifted the iron again, its tip glowing red. He applied it very carefully.

Spock made no sound, but the others could see the sweat running down his

body. Again Medolla kept the iron in place until it lost its colour; this time Spock collapsed before it was removed.

Kirk fought to remain in control of himself. Anything less would betray Spock's endurance. Medolla turned to the others.

"I would not like him to die too soon," he murmured. "Doctor - you have with you a bag, containing, I believe, medications. You will give him a stimulant, to revive him more quickly."

"So you can torture him again?" McCoy snapped. "Like hell I will!"

Medolla smiled unpleasantly. "Would you prefer to take his place?"

"Yes, I would!" McCoy exclaimed. "I'd give you better entertainment, too. I haven't his endurance or his control. You'd get your screams of agony from me - but you still wouldn't break me!"

"You think not? His eyes come next."

Kirk's heart cringed. No, he moaned to himself in agony.

McCoy looked across at Spock, hanging limply in the frame. "I'm still ready to take his place."

Medolla looked at him, his eyebrows raised, then on to Kirk, whose lips were firmly set as he struggled to hide his torment. "I see what you mean, Captain. You are all very stubborn. However, it is easy to make such a decision on the spur of the moment; I will give you an hour to think about it. It will be interesting to see if you are still willing to take his place after you have had time to think, Doctor."

He moved to the door. The guards were there; as Medolla left, they entered and unfastened the prisoners. Kirk and McCoy were made to lift Spock - not that they needed any forcing - and carry him to a small, bare room.

There was nowhere to put Spock but on the floor. McCoy wasn't even given his medical kit, despite Medolla's earlier order. He looked at the burn, his mouth setting in renewed pain at the severity of it, then turned to Kirk. "Jim, do you really think Medolla would let me take Spock's place? Or was it just another way of torturing us? I think he wants to blind Spock anyway, to see if the renowned Vulcan endurance can bear even that..."

"Would you really do that for him, Bones? But even if you did, it wouldn't help me..."

"He's got - oh, a century of life to go yet. I've got - with luck - a quarter of that. Which of us is the more logical to blind?" He caught at Kirk's arms. "Jim, you can't let them blind Spock!"

"Do you really think Medolla would listen? 'Please, Medolla, blind McCoy instead of Spock'. He'd just go ahead and blind Spock anyway, because that would make him think Spock means more to me than you do."

"Can you stand by while - "

"While they burn out his eyes? I don't know, Bones. But I must try. I can't betray the ship for one man, no matter how much he means to me personally."

"You are correct, Captain. You have no choice."

They whirled. Spock was lying looking at them.

"How long have you been awake, Spock?" McCoy asked suspiciously.

"I have been awake for some minutes, Doctor." Was that a gleam of amusement in his eyes?

McCoy turned away, biting his lip, certain now that Spock had heard his offer and was on the point of saying 'Totally illogical, Doctor'. Then he swung back.

"Spock, how do you think we can watch you like that? It was bad enough... How do you think Jim can stand it?"

"He is the Captain of the Enterprise. He must do his duty. As I would do were I in his place; as you would do, were it forced on you. Suppose Medolla were to offer you my eyes - and Jim's - as the price of betraying the Enterprise. What would you do?"

McCoy buried his face in his hands. Kirk came to him, put a hand on his shoulder, anguish on his face. "Don't, Spock." His voice broke. "Don't waste the few minutes left to us in useless arguing. We will endure whatever he does to us, together."

Spock was silent for some minutes, then said, "Jim...Doctor...I have a favour to ask of you...both of you. Please, do not watch. Shut your eyes, turn your heads away."

"We'll endure together," Kirk said, with an effort.

Spock shook his head. "Please, Jim. It will...make it easier for me if I know you are not watching."

Reluctantly, Kirk said, "O.K., Spock; I won't watch."

"Doctor?"

"I...I promise, Spock."

"We won't have to endure for long, anyway," Spock added, "Medolla dare not let us live - especially after he blinds me. He obviously knows a fair amount about the galaxy; he must know that if he lets us go after...afterwards, reprisals are likely to be taken against his planet."

They sat close together now, enjoying each other's company while they could. They were not left for much longer. The guards came back soon - too soon.

They were taken back to the interrogation room. A new frame stood near the brazier, a more complicated-looking one than had been employed earlier. It was obviously designed to hold a man's head steady while his eyes...

Kirk and McCoy were forced to the bars at the side, and manacled in place. They were placed so that they could not see what was done to Spock except from the side. Spock was dragged - although he did not resist - to the frame, and fastened to it. Bars were fastened across his body so that there was no chance of his moving.

They were given no further respite. Medolla came in at once.

"Medolla!" McCoy called. "I'm still ready."

Medolla looked at him. "Interesting, Doctor. But I really believe it will be more instructive to blind your Vulcan friend." He reached for the iron as the guards went out again.

As Medolla approached Spock, Kirk looked at McCoy. "Bones."

McCoy looked at him. "We promised."

Their faces turned towards each other, they closed their eyes, but they could not close their ears or their noses. They heard the iron as it burned, and smelt the burning flesh again. Kirk choked on a whimper of agony, forcing himself to remain silent so as not to make it harder for Spock. The sizzling sound ceased; there was the sound of the iron being replaced in the fire, then Medolla's voice..

"One. You can still save the other eye, Captain."

Kirk was unable to speak in his need to remain defiant and his even greater need not to disgrace Spock's endurance.

"No? Very well, then." He moved back towards the brazier. Their eyes shut, they heard the iron removed from the fire; the horrible sound of burning flesh as the smell intensified. There was still no sound from Spock.

The iron clattered back onto the brazier. Medolla returned to them. "Still defiant, Captain?"

Kirk forced himself to stare at the man, his disgust at the scientist's smile showing clearly in his face.

"You will get your wish tomorrow, Doctor. Tomorrow, if your Captain is still obstinate, it will be your turn."

He moved to the door. The guards came back and forced Kirk and McCoy out. They were taken back to the bare little room, and locked in.

Alone at last, Kirk broke down. McCoy held him, trying to comfort him, hiding how much he also needed comfort. At last Kirk pulled himself together.

"Why haven't they put Spock back with us?" he asked, anguish in his voice.

"Spock was right," McCoy said, his voice quivering. "They won't let us live. They've probably killed Spock now, because he's no more use to them."

"I hope so," Kirk whispered. "Because it would mean he wouldn't have to suffer any more." He was silent for a moment, then - "Bones. I've got this far. I can't surrender now. So that tomorrow..."

"It's all right, Jim. I don't blame you, any more than Spock did."

Kirk was silent for a long time. At last, he said, "Bones - how could any race become so cruel...?"

There was a sound at the door. Both men tensed, forcing control on themselves.

Medolla stood there.

"Well?" Kirk asked, no hint of surrender in his manner.

"You have one last chance to save your Vulcan's life, Captain."

"I cannot betray my ship. Besides, you would carry your cruelty to every part of the galaxy. It is my duty to prevent that."

"Isn't cruelty the way of life everywhere?"

"No!" Kirk snapped, revolted at the thought. "Only among uncivilised races. You call yourself a scientist, but you represent the most uncivilised race I've ever encountered!"

Medolla looked at him; then left without another word.

It became colder; they huddled together, deriving both warmth and comfort from the contact. Neither could sleep; after a while, they gave up even trying, and spoke softly together, trying to recall happy memories, and with every word tormented by Spock's absence. At last they heard a sound outside the door, and slid apart as it opened. The guards entered, forcing them to their feet, and took them out, along the corridor - but not to the interrogation room. They went past it, and on, past other doors, up many stairs, until at last they were stopped in front of a final door. One guard opened it; they were pushed in. The door shut behind them. They heard the sound of a key being turned in the lock as they looked round their new prison.

It was small but comfortably furnished. The window was barred. It was still a prison - why the comfort? Screens stood round the head of a bed. They went over to it, and found themselves staring at Spock.

The Vulcan was sleeping. His chest had been tended; they could see the white of bandages showing above the sheets. His face was unmarked.

Kirk touched Spock's face. Gentle though he was, the touch roused the Vulcan. He opened his eyes and stared up at them.

"Spock..." Kirk whispered.

"How...?" McCoy gasped.

"It was a complicated bluff," Spock said. "Captain, Medolla and I had quite a long talk last night - but I was unable to persuade him to let you know the truth until today, though he would not say why... I have a certain amount of sympathy with his...wishes, even though I deplore the...the method he felt he had to employ."

"You do?" McCoy said. "Spock, I know Vulcans never bear grudges, but this is ridiculous."

"On this planet, scientists are...hated. This area is a sort of...reservation...for them. Any who are caught outside the area are killed, mercilessly, by a lynch mob. It is doubtful if the people of the planet remember why, now, but the cry of 'Havi!' is enough to rouse them - that is their name for the scientists, who are, of need, a hereditary group now. The scientists think the hatred is because they are blamed for the destruction caused by the war that destroyed the world's technology."

Medolla, as chief scientist - he knows nothing about science, I may add, although this area has retained some of the lost technology - is simply looking for somewhere where his people can live, free from persecution. But because his people have been subjected to so much cruelty, he believed that the only way to get what he wanted was by cruelty."

"I see," Kirk said. "And something made him change his mind?"

"He now surmises that he used the wrong methods. But what made him realise it, I cannot surmise."

"I put you in a cell where I could listen to your conversation when you thought yourselves unwatched," Medolla said from behind them. "Even when you thought Spock had been blinded, you never spoke of seeking revenge. I was particularly impressed by your willingness to suffer in Spock's place, Doctor. It reminded me of an occasion, many years ago... My father and I were chased by a mob. He found me a hiding place, and went on, drawing the pursuit after him. He was caught, and killed; and he could so easily have escaped by sacrificing me. You reminded me of him..."

Captain. I apologise for my treatment of you and your friends. All I ask is the chance for my people to leave here - to find a world where we can live free from fear and hatred. Is that so much to ask?"

Kirk shook his head.

"I hated what I felt I had to do," Medolla went on. "Do you know why none of the guards stayed? None of them could bear to watch... I think I suffered quite as much as you did..."

"Forget it," Kirk said. "I can't take your people, Medolla, but I can take a representative to the Federation to plead your case. If he is successful, and I don't see why he shouldn't be, the Federation will find you someplace to settle, and take you there."

Medolla stared at him, tears in his eyes. "Thank you, Captain. I...I thank you."

Medolla himself went with them to plead his case with the Federation. Kirk showed him his quarters, then went off to sickbay, where McCoy had taken Spock despite the Vulcan's protests.

He walked in on an argument, and grinned to himself. It was perhaps as well that Medolla wasn't around to hear this. He broke it up easily by asking, "Spock - how did Medolla manage that bluff about your eyes? We heard the burning - and smelt it too."

"There was a piece of meat fastened to the frame beside my head. He burned it. There was a gag across my mouth so that I couldn't speak and so betray the trick."

"As simple as that," McCoy said disgustedly.

"When did you realise it was a trick?" Kirk asked curiously.

Spock hesitated. "When he burned the meat," he said at last, very quietly. And in the hesitation, they read what he had gone through, waiting for the iron. "Captain," Spock went on. "Would you please tell Dr. McCoy there is no necessity to keep me here? I am not seriously damaged - "

"No, Spock, I won't. You'll stay here until he says you can go."

Spock sighed openly. "Captain, that is a worse torture than anything Med-olla thought up."

"That's gratitude for you!" McCoy said. "I'm giving him a few days off - and he calls it torture!"

Spock looked at him - but there was gratitude in his eyes. McCoy smiled down at him. "So if it's torture, Spock, kindly suffer it in silence!" he finished.

Kirk laughed. "You can't win, Spock." He put his hand on Spock's shoulder for a moment. "I'd better get back to the bridge," he added.

As he walked out he heard the argument behind him start again. He smiled to himself. Nothing would ever stop them, he thought...but as long as he knew - and they knew - how much they were prepared to do for each other, it didn't matter.

He was still smiling when he walked onto the bridge.

WHY

Life is not particularly exciting for a girl on Vulcan.

All we can expect is a youth spent in learning and in obeying commands; a womanhood of continuing obedience to our husbnads. Only when we are the matriarchs of our families can we anticipate a position of power - particularly if our families are important - and especially if we are widowed. Consider T'Pau, if you doubt my words.

When I was seven, my mother told me I was to be marriage-bound.

I was not particularly interested. I had known it must happen; that I had no choice in the matter. It was simply another of many obediences. I would have many years to get to know my mate before the final ceremony - if I found him impossible, I could always choose to be fought for - if I could find a champion. And yet, I had more choice than he. He could not refuse.

I know my mother was pleased that Sarek should consider our family suitable to provide a mate for his son. I think my father had doubts. He remembered Spock's Human heritage. Yet Amanda almost always behaved like a true Vulcan. And Spock - if you did not know about his mother, you would never have guessed that his heritage was...doubtful. Part alien. I only really knew that the other boys did not seem to like him. I didn't fully understand why. I still don't.

As I entered my teens, I began to realise that life did not have to be composed of blind obedience. Guile could accomplish much, if a wife were clever enough - though I never saw my mother try to influence my father. What little I saw of Spock, I liked; but it seemed to me, even then, that he would be difficult to influence.

Then he left Vulcan - to join Starfleet Command.

I could not forget him; there was an echo of his thoughts forever in my mind. But for many years he was as a shadow, that need not be considered. Although I was constantly being reminded - you must do this...be that...Spock will expect...

My body began to mature; I knew the pon farr was approaching. I was forced to consider, again, the man my father had accepted for me.

By now he was well-known on Vulcan; almost a legend. First Officer on the Enterprise, highly thought of, highly trusted by his Captain and fellow officers. The boys who had once scorned him for his Human blood now boasted that they had known him. I knew myself to be - yes, envied - by other girls.

But I was not happy.

I considered whay my life would be as Spock's wife.

He was a highly-placed officer in Starfleet. Eventually, no doubt, he would be promoted. I would be well-regarded as his wife. But I could not accompany him. Starfleet regulations made it impossible. I had no skills, no training, to fit me for a place on a starship.

So. I would see him for a few days every seven years. Then he would be gone again. I would bear his children, who would be six before their father ever saw them. He would be a stranger to them. Certainly I would have more power to command my sons than a Vulcan mother normally has. Would the compensate for the subtle insult of a husband who could have a great career on his own planet, but who chose to absent himself? Envied, yes; but I would be scorned too, and by women whose husbands had no importance. Oh, they would hide it well, but I would know.

Nor would Spock be easy to influence. I had realised that long before; now, it seemed to me that it would be almost impossible. For guile to work, time is needed; and time was what I would never have in my dealings with Spock. Not for at least a century. And I was becoming ambitious. There would be no power for me without his presence. I had to work through a man.

I began to look about me for an alternative.

Compared to what I have heard about Earth, Vulcan youth has few recreations. The only place I could find my alternative was at one of the discussion groups I attended. Yet almost at once, I found him.

I had noticed him before, critically. He was excellent at supporting someone else's point of view in a discussion, but he had never put forward any original argument. Now, I realised that he was perfect for my purpose. I could influence him, and through him, Vulcan. I could make of him what he would never be by himself.

And he was free. He had been marriage-bound, but she had died in an accident shortly before, and his family had as yet found him no alternative mate. He was of a family important enough for mine to accept; I knew that, whatever happened, I should not be permitted to marry a nobody.

I waited for Stonn one night. Told him how much I respected his strength in discussion. He knew his weakness - I convinced him that all he needed was a little more experience in supporting others' views and he would find himself producing original arguments. Then I set myself to putting suggestions into his mind. He began to depend on me - although he never realised it.

One night he asked me if I was mated. I admitted it, and explained my doubts. He immediately offered to champion me.

The time came.

I welcomed Spock - I could do no other. I went to my wedding - I could not refuse. I had some compunction for what I felt I must do; but Spock would not be shamed, for if he was defeated, he would die. I think that T'Pol suspected what I intended when Stonn joined us, though she said nothing.

I had doubts, however, as soon as I saw Spock. I had not remembered him as being quite so tall. He looked more powerful than Stonn. Much more powerful. He was accompanied by two friends. Earthmen! If he chose them for friends, his Human heritage must be stronger than I had supposed. Only later

did I realise that, of necessity, he must befriend Earthmen or else be totally alone in the life he had selected.

I began to look for another alternative.

Stonn could not defeat Spock; of that I was sure. I saw myself as Spock's wife, willing or no; or rejected. Yes; he would reject me, if I challenged. His pride would not accept an unwilling wife. His long absence made it clear that he regarded his marriage as a duty, nothing more. He had no real desire to finalise our union - I felt sure he had no real desire to marry at all, only to satisfy the biological craving of his body. And for a moment I wondered what he would do in seven years' time.

Yet there was no other man but Stonn...no, wait. Spock's friends. One of them looked strong. If he should win, he would not want me. T'Pol would not insist. Nor could she - she was Spock's matriarch, not mine. So I would get Stonn. If Spock won, he would reject me, for the combat would clean his blood. But if by chance he did not reject me, and insisted on marrying me - well, he would be gone again, and I would still have Stonn - provided I was discreet - and through Stonn, the power I craved. Stonn would not like being passed over, but I knew I could placate him relatively easily.

And I was right. Spock won, and gave me to Stonn.

We heard later that Spock's other friend, a doctor, managed to revive my champion. I was pleased. He served my purpose well.

I married Stonn shortly after. I am content.

Yet sometimes I lie awake in bed and wonder...did I make the right choice?

WHEN FRIENDS FALL OUT.....

No-one knew exactly what caused the breach between Spock and McCoy.

The first definite indication of a serious quarrel between them was that when Spock entered the rec room one day when McCoy was there, McCoy got up without a word, and walked out, going past Spock as if he wasn't there. Spock, for his part, ignored the incident and moved over to watch Sulu and Chekov playing chess as if nothing untoward had happened.

But that was only the beginning. They continued studiously avoiding each other; and, oddly enough, McCoy also seemed to be avoiding Kirk.

The Captain was seriously worried. The whole crew was tired - exhausted. There just weren't enough Starships, Kirk decided; they were long overdue for R & R, but every time they got near a Starbase, new orders sent them off on yet another emergency mission. It needed very little to shatter the morale of the entire crew - there were already indications that nervous disorders were on the increase. In addition, at their last planet-fall, one of the crew had picked up a peculiar fever, which had proved to be highly infectious; over half the crew had contracted it before McCoy found a cure. He was still coping with the aftermath, and since M'Benga had also gone down with it, and was not long back on his feet again, McCoy had been badly overworked. Kirk decided, therefore, not to question the doctor about it but rather to tackle Spock about the situation.

He waited until an evening when Spock had come to his quarters for a game of chess. They played half-heartedly, neither being up to his usual standard, and Kirk won by a rather larger margin than he usually did. Spock's mind, Kirk thought, had definitely not been on the game.

As they began to set the board for another game, Kirk said abruptly, "What's wrong between you and Bones, Spock?"

Spock stiffened. "It is...a private matter, sir."

"Private it may be, Spock, but it's upsetting the ship." Kirk ignored the invisible wall erected by Spock's sudden formal 'sir'. "Everyone knows that you

and Bones disagree about everything under the sun - and thoroughly enjoy yourselves in the process. But everyone knows equally well that this time it's serious. We're all overworked, badly in need of a rest - yes, you too, if you'd be honest enough to admit it - and far too tired to act sensibly; in our present condition, I know it's easy to take offense at nothing - but I'm not having the crew upset by a disagreement between my senior officers. It's giving rise to other quarrels - I broke one up a few hours ago, in fact. The subject - your quarrel with Bones. One man was saying it had to be your fault, the other held that it was McCoy's fault. Since it's reached that stage, I think it's time for me to do something about it. Now - what caused it?"

Spock still hesitated. At last he said, reluctantly, "I made an unforgivable remark to the Doctor, sir."

Kirk looked at him in some surprise. "I won't embarrass you by asking what you said - but couldn't you apologise?"

Spock rose. "No, sir. May I be excused now? I do have some work to do."

Kirk let him go, and sat back to consider the matter.

Since they were avoiding each other, the matter was at least in abeyance. Perhaps, if he let it go for the moment, once they did get a break they would find some way of resuming their normal relationship.

Finally, however, matters came to a head. Spock was in the rec room playing chess with Sulu, who was trying to improve his game. Sulu was losing, in spite of having an advantage of a knight and a bishop. McCoy came in. He swerved to avoid the Vulcan and came over to Kirk, who was watching the game half-heartedly.

"Don't you think it's time we had rooms for Humans only, Captain?" he asked loudly. "I'm sick of tripping over pointed ears every time I turn round."

Kirk looked at him, startled. There was real venom in the doctor's voice. Everyone else turned to look at McCoy too, except Spock, who moved his queen neatly into position, said quietly, "Checkmate, Mr. Sulu. Thank you for the game," then got up and left.

Kirk got up too. "I want a word with you, Bones. Let's go to my quarters."

He said nothing more until both were sitting in his cabin, then he looked over at McCoy. His heart sank. There was a grimly obstinate expression on the doctor's face, one Kirk remembered from years before, from the days when McCoy had been new on board the Enterprise, and regarded the entire world as unfriendly and untrustworthy.

Abruptly he changed his mind about what he was going to say, settling for, "Bones, what is wrong between you and Spock? You've never acted this way before."

McCoy's lips tightened. "He said something I can't excuse."

"You've insulted him pretty freely in the past, Bones, and he's never taken offense," Kirk suggested. "Or doesn't that count? Do you reserve for yourself the right to insult him, but deny him the right to answer back?"

McCoy didn't answer, sitting with his face implacably set. Kirk gave up. "Well, I won't try to force you...just try to remember the times he's proved his friendship, will you, Bones?... Meantime, kindly refrain from speaking slightly of Mr. Spock in front of junior officers. He is still the first officer of this ship, and as such I insist that he be given the public respect that is his due."

McCoy nodded. "Will that be all, Captain?" he said coldly. "I have some work to get on with." He went out.

A useful excuse, Kirk thought, remembering that Spock had used the same one. He sat staring at the door, wondering what had happened. Just what had Spock said? He was unlikely ever to find out. Would they ever get together again?

Next day on the bridge, Spock made one or two slight mistakes. It was so unusual as to be unheard-of.

"Are you feeling all right, Spock?" Kirk asked, thinking that if Spock were ill, caring for him might bring McCoy to his senses.

"Perfectly all right, Captain," Spock replied. "I am a little tired, that is all."

An unusual admission as well, Kirk thought; but of course the strain on him of McCoy's behaviour must be intense, although he showed no sign that it was bothering him at all.

That evening, as Kirk left the bridge with Spock, he suggested going to the gym to practise free-fall combat; it had been some time since either of them had worked out in free-fall. Spock agreed; they went off to one of the gyms, and began a work-out.

Although he had suggested the exercise, Kirk's mind wasn't fully on what he was doing. He had primarily had in mind the wish to show Spock that whatever McCoy was thinking, he wasn't letting it affect his attitude. He was thinking so hard about Spock's problem that he misjudged an evasive action, and hurtled towards the far wall. Spock reached the wall first, at the cost of a badly cut arm as he took a shortcut round a piece of equipment, and managed to stop Kirk from hurting himself badly, although Kirk twisted his back in the process.

Spock, rather grim-faced, helped Kirk to sickbay, where McCoy, in a worse mood than ever, received them ungraciously. He pushed Kirk onto a bed, and made a rapid check.

"Why the devil do you play games with that damned alien, Jim?"

Kirk grinned, trying to make light of the situation. "Why shouldn't I, Bones?"

"Because he'll kill you one of these days, that's why," McCoy growled. "And when he does, I won't be staying on, if he's Captain."

Kirk twisted his head to look at Spock, but the Vulcan had gone. Kirk didn't even know if he'd stayed long enough to hear the exchange. He looked back at McCoy. "Doctor, Spock cut his arm badly, It needs attention."

"If it really needed treatment, he'd have stayed," McCoy muttered. "M'Benga could have treated him." Before Kirk could reply, McCoy gave him an injection that knocked him out.

Next morning Kirk felt surprisingly better. The enforced sleep had done him a world of good, he realised - he hadn't slept properly for ages. His back was still painful when he tried to move, so he lay still, watching McCoy who was busy taping reports at his desk. McCoy was looking exhausted, he thought; and reflected remorsefully that the doctor had been on duty continuously for several weeks. He badly needed a rest; and a rest would surely make him see things in better perspective.

Next moment, however, he had forgotten his concern for McCoy. The surgeon, flicking on the intercom, said harshly, "Spock, if you want to see the Captain, come now while I'm at breakfast, so that I don't have to look at you cluttering up my sickbay." He flicked the intercom off again before Spock had a chance to reply.

Kirk sat up abruptly, grimacing as the sudden movement hurt his back, and said harshly, "Dr. McCoy, I have told you before about speaking to Mr. Spock like that. I will not have him abused in front of junior officers. Either you apologise to him - publicly - or you transfer off my ship!"

McCoy stared at him for a moment, then opened a drawer, took out a form, scrawled an angry signature across it, handed it to Kirk, and swept out. Kirk was still staring blankly at it when Spock came in. It was a transfer request, already made out. He held it out speechlessly to Spock, who glanced at it then handed it back.

"Sir, since it was my fault, I am the one who should transfer."

Kirk glared up at him. "Isn't it bad enough to have Bones acting up without you starting," he asked. "How's your arm?"

"Perfectly all right, Captain," Spock said. "But, sir - "

Kirk crumpled up the transfer form and dropped it in the waste paper basket. "Let's forget it, Spock. A bit of leave might make Bones a little more...inclined to see reason. Has our request for R & R been granted?"

"Yes and no, sir. We must report first to Starbase 11 for some urgent medical supplies for the colony on Urthica, but we will have a week there, and may take shore leave."

Kirk nodded, sighing. "Let's hope that nothing urgent calls us away this time," he said. He hesitated, then looked pleadingly at Spock. "Spock. Isn't it possible for you to apologise? Bones is overtired, and it's made him extra touchy. He isn't looking too well, either."

Spock turned away. His back to Kirk, he said slowly, "I regret, Captain, but I cannot."

"But...but why not? If you started it, surely...?"

"The...situation has gone beyond the possibility of my apologising."

So McCoy's behaviour had finally mortally insulted Spock, Kirk thought. One of them would have to go, for the sake of the ship. But...he didn't want to lose either of them. And at heart, he was sure, they didn't want to lose each other... One of them had to back down. And they were both stubborn men...

Kirk didn't refer to the matter again. Indeed, he had little chance to do so. Spock, apparently trying to avoid exacerbating matters, seemed to be spending all his free time in his quarters - but that he was worried was clear, for he kept on making small mistakes, none of them serious, but the frequency of the errors was increasing. And McCoy spent all his time in sickbay.

They were still two days from Starbase 11 when Spock finally gave in. He had made yet another mistake, and he came down to Kirk.

"Captain, I wish to report myself unfit for duty. I have a disease we call mental debility. There is no cure."

Kirk called sickbay. McCoy didn't seem particularly bothered, saying merely, "Send him down."

Kirk accompanied Spock to sickbay. McCoy regarded the Vulcan with unfriendly eyes and pointed silently to a bed. Spock, equally silently, lay down as M'Benga came in.

McCoy checked him over, watched by M'Benga. At last, he said, "Well, he's not malingering..."

Kirk took a deep breath. "Doctor - " he began, but was interrupted in his turn by M'Benga.

"Doctor, Mr. Spock has an ailment the Vulcans call mental debility. There is no known cure."

McCoy looked at him, his eyes hard. "Isn't that too bad?" he mocked. He turned, watched by the horrified M'Benga, and moved back to his desk.

Spock was beginning to look flushed. M'Benga reached for a hypo and gave him a shot. Spock's eyes closed, and Kirk looked enquiringly at M'Benga.

"The ailment begins with tenseness, mild forgetfulness becoming increasingly serious," M'Benga said. "That is followed by mental lassitude; the patient makes small errors, which increase in magnitude. Eventually, the patient goes into a coma and dies. The more he tries to fight the course of the disease, the longer he tries to continue working efficiently, the more he tries to exercise mental control, the quicker the course of the disease. It's coupled with a drop in the

pulse rate, which means his already low blood pressure drops even more so that the supply of oxygen to vital organs diminishes, causing a drop in physical activity, ending, as I said, in death. I've put Mr. Spock under very heavy sedation, but all that's doing is buying a few more hours of time - perhaps a day. The Vulcans themselves don't know what causes the condition, they can't find a cure despite many years of research, and fifty to sixty Vulcans die from it every year."

Kirk stared at him, looked at Spock, then turned to McCoy. "Bones..." he began.

"If the Vulcans can't find a cure, where do you expect me to begin?" McCoy asked harshly.

"I would at least expect you to try," Kirk snapped. "I don't care what he said to you, it can't have been so bad that you want him to die, for God's sake!"

McCoy turned back to his desk. "I don't care what happens to him," he began.

M'Benga was looking intently at him. He picked up the hypo again, and moved quietly over to McCoy to inject him quickly. McCoy had time to glare angrily at him, then slumped over his desk.

"What - ?" Kirk began.

"Help me get him onto a bed, Captain," M'Benga said. As Kirk obeyed, M'Benga went on. "His behaviour is completely out of character, Captain. There must be something seriously wrong with him. I suggested to him the other day that he'd been working himself too hard and needed a break, offered to check him over, but he insisted that he was all right." He reached for a diagnostic scanner, began to run it over McCoy. "I had no reason to insist - then. But now... I know how much he worries about Mr. Spock under normal circumstances, if he's ill. It would take more than a serious quarrel to make him just not care... Mmmm, yes. There are indications of poison in the blood - just traces, nothing more, about as much as if an abscess were leaking..." He turned the instrument to McCoy's head. Its steady sound altered suddenly. "Ah. There's definitely something..."

The instrument beeped its wildest beside McCoy's right ear. M'Benga put it down and examined the ear carefully. At last, he moved it away from the side of McCoy's head. There, behind the ear, was a fair-sized reddish-brown lump.

"What is it?" Kirk asked.

"I don't know, It isn't like a tumour or any sort of growth I can think of." He moved away, to clean his hands carefully. He checked that McCoy was still unconscious, then swabbed the area round the swelling. He reached for a scalpel, and began, very carefully, to cut round the lump.

It was not particularly deep-set; it cut loose fairly easily. M'Benga lifted it clear, a long, thin 'root' coming after it. He put it carefully into a container then turned his attention to patching up the wound which, though oozing blood, wasn't particularly serious.

Once he had put a dressing over the wound, M'Benga picked up the container. Kirk came to look over his shoulder.

The 'root' was being withdrawn; the thing was beginning to move of its own volition.

"It's alive," Kirk whispered.

M'Benga nodded. "Some kind of parasite," he suggested. "It must have been tapping his carotid artery, leaving his brain short of oxygen and nourishment, and its probably its waste products expelled into his blood that caused the traces of poisoning. No wonder he's been acting uncharacteristically lately."

"I wonder where he picked it up?" Kirk said. "Will he be all right now?"

"He should, but he could probably do with a good meal, with plenty of sugar to replace the energy he lost to this...thing." He carefully put a lid over the container, and gave McCoy a further injection. "That will help."

Almost as if he'd heard, McCoy moved, grunted, and his hand went up to his ear. Kirk reached over and held his hand still. McCoy opened his eyes to look up at him. "Jim? What...Spock!" He sat up abruptly as M'Benga came back with the scanner.

"How are you feeling?" Kirk asked.

"Tired, and my ear's itchy." He tried to pull his hand free in order to scratch, but Kirk held it firmly as M'Benga ran the scanner over McCoy.

"You picked up some kind of alien parasite somewhere, Bones. Dr. M'Benga's removed it - you should be all right now, but having it removed is probably why it's itchy."

McCoy glanced at M'Benga.

"It was tapping your carotid artery, Doctor, taking the nourishment out of your blood." McCoy nodded his understanding.

"Bones..." Kirk went on. "Do you...do you feel up to trying to do something about Spock?" He looked at him apologetically, and went on. "I know M'Benga's the expert on Vulcans, but you are the senior doctor...if anyone can find a cure for him, it's you."

"I'll try," McCoy said. He glanced at M'Benga. "Get me a list of all the things the Vulcans have tried to cure the condition."

As M'Benga left the room to consult his own computer, Kirk said thoughtfully, "Bones - you heard M'Benga's diagnosis, didn't you?"

McCoy nodded. "I'm afraid I wasn't paying much attention, Jim, but I heard it - we haven't much time, have we?"

"No. Any ideas?"

"Well...it could be a blood infection, with the brain suffering from lack of nourishment - the way mine was," he added, almost apologetically. "And because the Vulcan metabolism is quite dependent on the brain, you get a vicious circle..."

"Any chance that's it's actually a mental condition, and the physical effects are the secondary ones?"

"In a Vulcan? Unlikely. Their mental training makes every man his own psychologist. They're the most level-headed race in the galaxy...and heaven forbid Spock ever hears me say that."

"Well, see what you can do." He looked unhappily at Spock, then headed for the door. "I'll be on the bridge, Bones. Let me know if there's any change."

McCoy returned to his desk, then remembering something Kirk had said some days earlier, he checked Spock's arms. One of them had a bad cut, unhealed, suppurating, looking very nasty. He tended it quickly and efficiently, wondering that it hadn't healed and feeling guilty that Spock should have had to suffer for so long.

He moved restlessly back to the desk again. "Computer."

"Working."

"Compare case histories of all recorded cases of Vulcan mental debility, and check for any common factors in work, lives or background."

The computer chuckled to itself for a few seconds. "All victims were aged between thirty and fifty Vulcan years. All held positions of authority. All were unmarried."

"Nothing else?"

"Negative."

McCoy leaned back, thinking furiously. M'Benga came in with the list he had asked for; he took the tape, and nodded dismissal. "Doctor - make sure no-one disturbs me - not even the Captain."

"Dr. McCoy, you're not completely recovered yourself yet - "

"That doesn't matter. Spock does, and we've already lost time we can't afford. I can rest after he recovers - or dies," he finished in a subdued tone.

M'Benga said, "Yes, Doctor," and went out.

Now, McCoy thought, suppose Jim were right. Suppose the ailment were mental in origin. What condition could arise in some young, single Vulcans who were in responsible positions? No. Forget about Vulcans for a moment. Think about Humans. What condition could be called comparable? Tension...nervous strain... what kind of Human was quite likely to develop a nervous breakdown? One with inadequate emotional relationships. People with sincere, mature emotional relationships, who were not ashamed to show their feelings, didn't have nervous breakdowns. Emotion was a nervous safety valve among Humans...and other races too. But Vulcans rejected emotion, claimed to have none. Wait, though...historically Vulcans were an emotional, warlike race, who escaped destroying themselves by a hair. The survivors of their final holocaust rejected warfare, built up a culture based on logic, where emotion played no part.

But you couldn't eliminate something as basic as emotion from the genetic pattern of a race simply by deciding it was undesirable. Not without a long and ultra-selective breeding scheme - one that would have to go on for millenia, and even then emotion would remain as a recessive gene. There was no record of the Vulcans ever initiating such a scheme - and although, as McCoy knew, Vulcan parents tended to choose their children's mates, there was nothing to indicate a genetic choice - rather, a social and possible economic reason lay behind it. So emotion must simply have been made culturally undesirable - a thing McCoy had long suspected. Vulcan children were told from infancy that emotion was wrong, illogical and inefficient. Of course they believed it. Some Humans rejected emotion in the same way.

Vulcans with an affectionate nature must exist, and if they had no way to express it without embarrassment...married Vulcans could presumably find emotional satisfaction in their relationship with their wives, but this was denied to the single ones...in Spock the basic conflict would have been aggravated by his Human blood - and his own behaviour towards Spock in the last week or two must have been the final straw. With shame, McCoy remembered just how badly he had behaved...

Somehow he had to break Spock. Force the Vulcan to express the emotion he had been bottling up inside him - even if it meant laying himself open to insult and abuse. Yet...he had been trying to break - or at least crack - Spock's iron self-control for years, including times when the emotional pressure on Spock must have been tremendous, and he had always failed. This time, he couldn't afford to fail - if his theory were right. But he would have to be brutally cruel...

He moved back to where Spock lay, and looked down at him. The sedative was wearing off. Spock's eyes opened; McCoy took a deep breath, but before he could speak, Spock said quietly, "You will soon be rid of me, Doctor."

McCoy choked, fighting a lump in his throat. He knew exactly what he should say; but his heart wouldn't let him. "No," he whispered. "I can't... I don't want rid of you, Spock. I want it to go on like it has for years, with you on one side of Jim and me on the other, with each of us knowing he can depend on the other two till hell freezes!" He fought for a degree of self-control, knowing he would fail. He sat on the edge of Spock's bed, his face buried in his hands, sobbing harshly.

Spock reached out weakly. "Tears...for me, Doctor?"

McCoy half turned, and gripped Spock's arms, ignoring the tears that still ran down his face. "I don't want to lose you, Spock. I've said a lot to you in the past, some of it things I'm ashamed to remember, especially in the past week or two... I knew you didn't mean what you said, I don't know why I wouldn't accept your apology...but I do accept, Spock... I like you, and I don't want to lose you... Spock, tell me you forgive me - give me a word - just one word - of open friendship...please..."

"Bones," Spock whispered, so low that McCoy barely heard him. Then, after a long pause, "We are taught that emotion is...undesirable...unnecessary...we are taught to be ashamed...that affection is a - a personal thing we should not inflict on others. Even when we want to...to show our feelings, we are afraid...afraid of being mocked...scorned... We always rationalise." His voice trailed into silence.

"I won't laugh at you, Spock...or taunt you with it afterwards," McCoy whispered back.

"There won't be any afterwards," Spock replied. "I...regret that. I've never told anyone...even Jim...all my life, I've been lonely. Only here, on the Enterprise...with Jim...and you... but I could never show it. Vulcans are self-sufficient."

McCoy took his hand. He could think of nothing to say...and sat, silent, the tears still running unheeded down his face, willing Spock to say more.

After a while, Spock went on. "I'm tired. Stay...stay with me, Bones... please."

"I won't leave you," he promised.

Spock gripped his hand weakly, then his eyes closed. Sleep - or the terminal coma? He'd reached Spock, but was it enough? The readings on the diagnostic board meant nothing, his own readings were confused with Spock's. He could have moved away, but he preferred to remain where he was.

The intercom buzzed; he leaned over to flick it on. "McCoy here."

"How is Spock, Bones?"

"Sleeping - I think. He's no worse."

It seemed a long vigil. McCoy got stiff, and knew that he would suffer agony from cramp when he eventually moved, but he remained at Spock's side. At last the Vulcan's eyes opened again. McCoy smiled down at him.

"How do you feel, Spock?"

Spock considered the question for a moment. "I can think," he said wonderingly. "I'm better. What - ?" He broke off, evidently remembering 'what'.

"Spock I owe you an apology," McCoy said. "I behaved very badly. I would be well-served if you refused to accept my apology...but I really am very sorry."

Spock looked at him for a moment in silence, seemingly becoming aware that McCoy was still holding his hand. Suddenly embarrassed, and afraid that Spock would reject him, McCoy released Spock's hand, got up abruptly to move away, and collapsed with a cry of pain as the blood flowed back into his legs even as they failed to support him. Spock reached him almost as he hit the floor.

"What's wrong?"

"Legs - cramp."

Spock began massaging one leg as McCoy worked on the other. After a minute, McCoy gasped with relief. "That's better."

Spock said slowly, "You sat there all the time I was asleep."

They looked at each other. Then Spock held out his hand, watching McCoy questioningly as he did so. McCoy gave a relieved grunt, and gripped it firmly.

"Doctor...Bones..." Spock said. "You found a cure... What was it?"

"Emotion, of course - and before you say 'rubbish', remember, it worked!"

"Yes," Spock said. "But I am half Human..."

"You think your Human blood helped? It possibly increased your chances, both of contracting the condition and of being cured. Anyway, I'll report the circumstances of the cure to the Vulcan medical authorities, let them take it from

there...but what was actually said is between you and me."

"Thank you," Spock said quietly.

"Well. Let's go and tell Jim you're fit again...and that we've settled our...our differences."

They smiled at each other, and went out side by side.

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RECANT - AND DIE

Kirk, Spock and McCoy materialised in what should have been a quiet corner, to find themselves face to face with two natives of the planet Straph.

The men stared at them for a horrified instant, then, before the men from the Enterprise could do or say anything, they turned and ran, screaming, "Witches! Devils! Witches!"

"I think," Spock commented, "that we had better remove ourselves from this vicinity. If these people are superstitious enough to believe in witches and devils, they will probably react with violence. And if we simply stun them in order to protect ourselves, it will confirm their fear."

"You're right, Spock," Kirk agreed. He glanced round. "This way." In fact, the direction he chose was purely arbitrary. "If we're attacked, scatter and run for it."

"Wouldn't it be simpler to beam back up and come down again somewhere else," McCoy suggested plaintively.

"This is the main city," Kirk replied. "If we are to contact the leaders of these people, we must remain here."

"All the same - " McCoy began. He was interrupted by the bleep of Kirk's communicator.

"Kirk here."

"Captain, two Klingon vessels have just appeared on our sensors. We think we avoided being seen, and we're holding the planet between us, but if they split up we're going to have to move further out to avoid an incident."

"Do that anyway," Kirk ordered. "We'll be all right down here. Come back in three days - feel your way, in case they're still here. In that case, move out again, and try every twenty-four hours until it's clear. Kirk out." He looked at the others. "Now what do the Klingons want here?"

"Captain," Spock said, "I think we should attempt to find a hiding place. I can hear shouts - I would say that our superstitious friends have a mob raised."

They turned and ran.

Spock, who had been thinking, dropped a little behind the others as they went, although he was probably the fastest runner of the three. He was the real danger to his friends, he thought. He was the unusual-looking one. Without him, they would probably stand a better chance of escape; they might not even be recognised as strangers, without his revealing presence. There was a junction a little way ahead; Kirk, and McCoy at his heels, ran straight on; Spock deliberately took the other turning.

Kirk and McCoy, not realising that Spock was no longer with them, ran down the street. Behind them now they could head clearly the shouts, the voices raised in fear and anger.

They reached a corner. As they rounded it, a yell came from behind. "There they go!"

There were no more side streets. This main street went on and on, and they were forced to keep going. Then in front of them they saw another group. They

stopped, their backs to the wall, preparing to defend themselves; and for the first time, realised that Spock wasn't with them.

They had no time to think about that. Their attackers were on them.

They defended themselves strenuously; but weight of numbers was too great. Several of their attackers lay unconscious when they were at last overpowered, and dragged roughly to where a tall man in black and red robes stood.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "And your companion, the devil - where is he?"

"Where he is, I do not know," Kirk replied. "We thought he was still with us."

"Devils are notoriously unreliable," the man commented.

"Not our devil," McCoy muttered in Kirk's ear.

Kirk's lips twitched, then he went on. "I am James T. Kirk, and this is Leonard McCoy."

"Where are you from?"

"We are from another world like this one," Kirk began. He got no chance to finish.

"Heresy! Black heresy!" the man declaimed. "There are no other worlds! God made the world for Man, and the Heavenly bodies to give us light and heat. Where are you from?"

"God made the world for man," Kirk agreed. "But He made several such worlds, and we're from one of those others." The man seemed stunned into silence by his insistence, and he went on. "God gave us knowledge, and with it we built a great vessel capable of sailing from star to star, and we have come to speak to your leaders -"

"And lead them astray, and through them, the entire world!" The robed man had recovered his voice now, and held forth volubly. "If you are indeed from another world, then it is a world made by the devil; and your knowledge comes from the devil! The devil who accompanied you to this place, and who has now deserted you! Renounce him, renounce him, and gain for yourselves the mercy granted to repentent sinners! Renounce him, and permit us, in our love, to grant you the mercy of death before your bodies are burned!"

"Burned?" McCoy said blankly.

"Your sin is heresy, witchcraft, and consorting with a devil," the man said. "Could you expect less?"

They were eventually hustled to a small, dark, smelly room and locked in, minus their phasers and communicators. The men who took these handled them gingerly, apparently terrified of these symbols of satanic power.

"Let's hope the phasers are beyond them," McCoy said grimly. "If they destroy something with one, they'll call that our fault too."

Kirk nodded. "I think they regard them as proof of our evil," he said. "You saw the way those fellows handled them. They were scared some of the evil would affect them." He grinned. "Maybe even call up our personal devil to tempt them."

"You know, Jim, if they do catch Spock, he's in for a pretty rough time," McCoy said seriously.

"They'll probably kill him on sight," Kirk agreed soberly.

"If he has got away, his chances of rescuing us are pretty slight."

"He won't throw his life away," Kirk said. "If he sees there's no chance of helping us, he has enough sense not to try."

"You say that, but you don't mean it. We both know he'd step right through

the gates of hell if he thought it would help us."

Spock ran down the street, round a couple of corners and dropped to a walk, unwilling to attract more attention than necessary. His keen hearing told him that he had outstripped the pursuit, and he was beginning to realise that it might not have followed him at all. If that was so, the others were in danger - but without his damning presence, they might not be identified as the suspicious strangers. He went on, keenly aware of the danger of his appearance, but could think of no way to cover his ears. Nor was there any way by which his eyebrows or betraying colour could be disguised.

Soon the houses began to thin out; he was near the edge of the town, and would soon be in the country. He carried on. He could return once it was dark, with the friendly night to hide his betraying appearance.

He wasted little time now in guessing at the fate that must have befallen Kirk and McCoy. The first optimism, that without him they might be all right, had given way to a more realistic attitude. The pursuit had not followed him - therefore it must have followed them. Capture was inevitable. The only question remaining was, how long would it be before they were killed. His memory of the history of witch-hunts, from several planets, made it certain that this would indeed be their fate.

There was a small wood ahead of him; he could hide there until dark.

Then, just as he reached it, a boy of about nine stepped out from it and faced him. He stopped, unwilling to hurt the child, unsure of what would be the best thing to do.

The boy looked at him, completely unafraid. "The mob has caught your friends," he said. He sounded very mature for his years. "The people are still aflame for blood; eventually someone will realise the way you have come. My people will hide you. Come." Without stopping to see if Spock was following, he stepped back into the wood.

Spock hesitated only for a moment. There was nothing to be lost by trusting this boy; he moved after him.

The boy was now wading down the centre of a small trickle of water. Since it would have been easier to have retained dry feet, Spock realised that this must have some purpose, and splashed after him.

Soon, the boy stopped under an overhanging tree, and swung himself into its branches. Spock followed, pulling himself up easily. This brought them level with the top of a high bank of jumbled rocks; the boy made his way cautiously from rock to rock. Spock, following, quickly learned why the boy was so careful; many of the rocks were loose, and moved under their feet; one unwary step might have resulted in a broken limb.

They made their way slowly and carefully over the rocks, gradually climbing higher. Spock paused once to look back. Over the trees he could see the roofs of the town and part of the road he must have come along to get here. All round he could hear birds calling, but he could see no sign of any living creature. And still the boy went on.

When at last he stopped, they were quite high. Looking back again, Spock saw the town clearly, and the road leading from it; he could even make out the spot where the boy had waylaid him.

"In here," the boy said, ducking between two boulders.

Inside there was a spacious room, made partly from piled-up rocks and partly from wooden planks. Whoever made it first had made fair use of the natural lie of the land; the whole construction showed great ingenuity.

There were several people inside, all young. Many were little more than children. Their ages seemed to range from about eight to one woman who looked to be in her middle to late twenties. It was she who came to meet him.

"Thank you, Tavi," she said. The boy grinned at her triumphantly, and ducked out again. She looked after him indulgently, then turned to Spock. "I am Feorah," she said, "the leader of our group."

"I am Spock. Who exactly are you?"

"We are the Rejected," she replied, and smiled at his puzzled appearance. "I know. You are a stranger to our world - "

"You know that, and yet you do not cry 'witch'?" Spock said.

"We do not cry 'witch'," she agreed. "We ourselves are in danger of being cried as witches; we will not willingly accuse others." Spock raised his eyebrows. "I saw you and your friends in town," she added. "I would have spoken to you then, but that the cry was raised too quickly."

He looked at her. "Why did you want to speak to us?"

"I saw you appearing out of nowhere, and I wanted to know where you came from."

"Your fellow Straphians would tell you soon enough," Spock commented.

"Do you really think we are one with the superstition-ridden morons of the city?"

"...No. I apologise. Go on, please."

"We - our people - are priest-ridden. The priests have all the power - yet still they want more."

All children are tested by them at eight years of age - tested for intelligence. Those the priests deem suitable are taken to be trained as priests, regardless of what their parents may want, regardless of what they themselves might wish. Some prove unsuitable for training; those with imagination, or initiative, or who dislike...bullying...others; and there are always some whose instincts for kindness cannot be destroyed by training in selfishness and inconsiderateness. The failures are simply returned home. A few children develop their intelligence late, too, and are missed by the check. But to be intelligent and not to wear the robes of a priest is to be living under a perpetual sentence of death. To the masses, to be intelligent is a mark of the devil, unless the devil has been tamed by the church and subordinated to its will; the robes are the outward sign of that taming. It is the conditioning of generations. Priests are to be obeyed; anyone else with intelligence, initiative, originality, imagination, is a creature of the devil, to be denounced as a witch.

For those who are returned home, for those who develop late, there is a life of hiding their abilities, their potential, until at last they betray themselves, and are burned."

"And you were unsuitable for training?"

"Yes. I had too much imagination. I dared to suggest that there might be other worlds like ours...of course, such a thought was heresy. I had the sense to word my thoughts more obliquely than that - but for my thoughts, I was Rejected. I knew, of course, that I had to be careful...what I didn't expect was my parents turning against me. They were afraid of me, couldn't understand what they had done to have a devil's child... I've learned since that my experience is common. They may not want the priests to take us, at first, then they realise that the church has saved them the trouble of caring for a child of evil...many of the Rejected are denounced by their own parents after they return home..."

I realised in time that I was in danger from my own parents, and left home. I sought shelter where I could, and at last came here. One day I got the chance to help another Rejected who was being chased, and so our group was begun. We began to look for others, and as we gathered more, we extended the shelter, and as we gathered more it became easier to gather more. Tavi, who met you, is our newest recruit, although he is not the youngest; this was his first proper duty for us, and he's gone off full of pride that he accomplished it successfully."

"I see," Spock said. "Can you tell me - what has happened to my friends?"

"They were captured. That much we do know. Some of the children are trying to learn more."

"I would not have children run any risks for my friends - nor would they."

"We run these risks for ourselves, also. It is good training for the children, who are our main spies. One day our group may be strong enough to defy the priests. But we can only become strong by running risks, for only thus can we gain recruits."

Spock nodded, accepting her rationale. "Feorah - this idea of yours about other worlds. Was it entirely your own thoughts?"

"Yes."

"Tell me your reasoning."

"I watched the stars. Some are bright, some dim; it seemed to me that as with torches, the brighter ones were nearer, the dim ones far off. I saw that some of them moved, approaching the setting sun and then disappearing; and a few weeks later, new ones appeared before the rising sun. I wondered if these stars actually moved round the sun as our moons move round us; and I wondered if the stationary stars were as big as the sun and also had moving stars going around them. It seemed possible that if these stars were as big as the sun, they might have worlds like this, with other people sitting watching the stars, and wondering, as I did..."

"You were right," Spock said. "There are other worlds. I am from one of these; my two friends, from another."

"If your friends tell that to the clerics, they are condemned for heresy as well as witchcraft," Feorah said slowly.

"And they will be burned?" Spock said harshly.

"I am sorry."

"Is there any way in which they might be rescued?"

She shook her head. "Everyone watches. All those we have rescued were rescued before they were denounced. Afterwards - there is no chance of escape. And you - your appearance betrays you. You would never get near the prison. If the mob catches you, you will be torn apart for being, not a witch, but a devil."

One of the younger girls brought in food and put it on a table made from two planks set across two rocks. "Are you hungry?" Feorah asked.

Spock shook his head. She looked at him, moved to his side. "Starving yourself will not help your friends."

"I am not starving myself. There is no logic in doing so. You asked if I am hungry; thank you, but I am not." She continued looking straight at him. After a moment, he felt compelled to go on. "You need not think that I will react to my friends' capture and imminent deaths as you would. My race has no emotions."

"No?" she said softly. "If you truly had no emotions, you would not be searching your mind for a way to rescue them, even at the risk of your own life. If you truly had no emotions, you would not call them 'friends'. You would not understand the meaning of the word. If you truly had no emotions, you would be useless to any society, for you would not understand loyalty, co-operation, truthfulness, bravery, kindness - much less the need for them. Each man of your race would live entirely for himself, like the lizards."

There was a long pause. "You see deeply," Spock said quietly, at last.

"Another reason I was unacceptable to the priesthood."

"Feorah - when are they likely to be killed?"

"In six days. There is always that period of grace - to give time for repentance and confession of sin."

"In the history of their race there was a period of witch-fearing. There was much cruelty. Are they likely to be tortured?"

"Not physically, though it is unlikely they will be given food. However, they may be tortured mentally. It depends on who are duty priests for this period."

"And those who repent?"

"Are given the privilege of a quick death before they are burned," she said drily.

Spock turned away. He moved back to the door, and stood gazing out towards the town.

Kirk and McCoy were left in comparative peace. Every day they were visited by one or more priests, who, in varying manner, urged them to deny their devil and renounce heresy. Even under these conditions, Kirk tried to persuade the priests of the existence of other worlds, in accordance with his instructions from Starfleet; but all the result his attempts had came from one priest, who had a gentler manner than most. This one said quietly,

"Do you try damn us all with you? Your devil has deserted you, gone back to the darkness from whence he came. Do you, even now, believe in his false words? We have angels to follow, to guide us the way we should go."

After the priest left, McCoy said, "That sounds as if Spock got away, wherever he's hiding."

"Yes." Kirk's mind was obviously elsewhere. "Bones, that priest said they have angels to follow, who guide them."

"Mythology?"

"What are the Klingons doing in this sector?"

"Jim - you don't think the Klingons have landed, somehow made contact with the priests? That isn't their usual method - "

"Bones. Suppose they got here first...weeks, months ago. Somehow were quick-witted enough to strike the right note - and told the priests that anyone else arriving as they did was evil...and it was set up for the priests by those men seeing us materialising..."

"You could be right, Jim. The priests do seem to have a lust for power - and if the Klingons promised them more power - or better means of exercising that power - by insisting that we're from another world, we're positively identifying ourselves as the Klingons' enemies."

"Pure speculation, of course. And what would the Klingons hope to gain?"

"A planet? Manpower, already in a state of passive obedience?"

"More than that, Bones."

"What did the Federation hope to gain by contact?"

"I don't know. Mineral rights, eventually, perhaps - that's usually what they want when they contact a primitive culture."

As he looked out over the town, Spock thought of the Enterprise. It would be two days at the earliest before she could return; but if the Klingon vessels were still in orbit, she would leave again without trying to contact them. It might be more than six days before he could get in touch with her...by which time it would be too late to help Kirk and McCoy.

However, he accepted that there was nothing he could do for the moment to help

them. A child had brought back word that they were held in the church prison, and that it seemed to be mostly relatively humane priests who were the duty priests for the moment.

It was partly to keep his mind occupied that he offered to teach the group the rudiments of astronomy and science. He found them remarkably quick of understanding and quick to see where his instruction was leading - he realised that these people had great potential, if only they could be freed from the bonds of ignorance that the priesthood was determined must remain secure.

Day after day passed with no word from the Enterprise. On the evening of the fifth day, he became very restless.

"Spock," Feorah said gently. "Logically, you can do nothing for them."

"They are my friends," he said hopelessly. "I know that to try to rescue them would be suicide, which is irrational; but still I hope to think of a way by which they can be helped, even though it means my death... I do not know why I am telling you this..."

With startling suddenness, the communicator at his belt beeped. "Spock here."

Uhura's voice came through. "What's happening, Mr. Spock? We can't raise the Captain."

"He and Dr. McCoy are prisoners," Spock replied. "I escaped. But they are condemned to die tomorrow unless we can rescue them before that."

"Will we beam down a rescue party?"

"No." Feorah said. Spock glanced at her. "The mood the mob is in, any strangers would be killed on sight. But I have an idea."

"What?"

"I saw how you appeared, apparently out of nothing. Do you return to your... your ship, the same way?"

"Yes."

"Then go you back to your ship now. Leave your...your..." she indicated the communicator "...device with me. In the morning, I will go to the Square. If I can get close enough to your friends I will signal to you. You can retrieve them."

"It is not right that you should run my risk."

"All my life is a risk. And you cannot go. You would die and benefit them nothing. I will not be suspect until it is too late for the priests to stop me. There are always some women who crowd to the front, eager to watch the victims' agony in every detail."

He looked at her, unwilling to let her take the risk, yet knowing that she was right. "Enterprise."

"Yes. Mr. Spock."

"Beam me up in ten minutes."

"Aye, sir."

"Feorah - this is how the communicator works." Rapidly he showed her. "Keep it in your hand, open, but hidden. We will keep the beam locked onto it. Then all you need do is say 'Now' when you are beside them. You'll beam up with them, and we can return you to here easily afterwards."

She nodded.

"Stand back from me," he went on. "They'll be picking me up in a moment."

She stood back; and they watched in some awe as he shimmered out of existence.

In their cell, Kirk and McCoy waited, knowing they were condemned to be burned, not knowing when they would be taken to be killed.

Time dragged. They knew the Enterprise couldn't have returned yet, for there would surely have been some disturbance caused by a rescue party, for example. They discussed the situation over and over, knowing that any conclusions they reached would be so much academic knowledge, speculated about the Enterprise and the Klingon vessels, and worried about Spock.

Then, on the morning of the sixth day, the priest arrived accompanied by several guards.

"This looks like it," Kirk said quietly. McCoy nodded.

They were led out. Neither considered immediate resistance. The guards were too watchful and too well-armed. They were led through a yelling mob to an open space.

In the centre of the space was a huge stake, piled round with brushwood. They looked at each other. The guards hustled them forward.

"No sign of Spock," McCoy said softly.

"He'd never get through that crowd."

"I'm surprised he hasn't tried, though."

"So am I, but he probably doesn't know the position we're in."

A priest came forward, holding a blazing brand. Several women edged forward avidly.

"Look at them," McCoy muttered disgustedly. "Vultures."

"History is full of them."

"You are condemned to die as witches," the priest intoned. "You have refused to repent your heresy. Yet even now, in our mercy we give you a last chance. Will you repent, and deny the devil, so that your bodies and souls may be spared the final torments of Hell?"

"We cannot deny the truth," Kirk said firmly. McCoy nodded his agreement.

"So be it. You have chosen. And as you have chosen, so let it be." He thrust the blazing brand deep into the brushwood and stepped back. An ugly gloating sound echoed through the crowd.

Kirk strained one hand to touch McCoy's. "Sorry, Bones."

"It's all right, Jim."

They fell silent as the flames licked higher.

Feorah left the cave early with several of the boys. They made their way carefully through back streets towards the Square. Then ahead of them they saw a group of four men. Two were strangers. The other two...

To the Rejected, the other two were easily identifiable. The chief priest and his immediate subordinate. What were they doing with these strangers?

They moved closer, Feorah trying to give the impression of an overworked woman burdened with a family of underdisciplined brats, trying to get a good look at the strangers.

They were fairly easily identifiable from Spock's tale. These men must be of the race inimical to Spock and his people - the Klingons. From what Spock said, Feorah was convinced that their presence boded no good to her planet.

They dawdled past, Feorah seeming to be trying to hurry her brood, but in actual fact delaying as much as possible, as much as she dared, an expression of blank incomprehension on her face as she heard the priests talking in the special church language the common people had no chance to learn. They couldn't delay

for ever; but they heard enough to know that the priests were betraying their world for the promise of more and still more power.

Safely past, Feorah looked at her followers. "Boys. Start a witch cry. Lead the hunt here. These strangers look alien enough to be called devils too. It will be...interesting to see what happens."

They ran off, and she hurried on towards the Square, aware that these events had delayed her terribly. She reached the edge of the Square in time to see the brand being pushed into the firewood.

The heat from the fire was becoming unbearable. Their clothes were singeing, although they were as yet untouched by the flames. The fire was burning unevenly; some parts were blazing fiercely, other parts had barely caught alight yet, but were smoking badly. A cloud of smoke blew across their faces; Kirk choked and coughed.

Then from the crowd another woman pushed her way forward to join the group clustered as near the fire as they could possibly get, so near that it was a wonder that they weren't burned too. But this one didn't stop. She pushed aside one woman who was in her way, and jumping onto the piled wood, scrambled her way up to Kirk's side.

She raised one hand to her mouth. "Now, Spock!"

They materialised still tied together, their clothes singed brown, a hole burned through Kirk's trousers revealing a burn on his leg.

Spock took the steps in one, and tugged at the knots.

"Well done, Feorah!" he said, and for the first time Kirk realised that the young woman who had materialised with them held a communicator. She was looking rather white.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said. "But for a minute, I thought I wouldn't get through the crowd in time." She reported on the cause of the delay, and then, taking the communicator, went down to the cave to find out from her group what had happened.

It was some time before they reported back.

Their disappearance had caused a sensation.

Because of the church's teaching, no-one in the crowd found it possible to believe that the disappearance had been caused by devils. The people had been taught too well that devils abandoned their gulled believers at the first sign of trouble. So these men must have been guided by an angel, despite his demonic appearance.

At the same time, the witch-hunt that Feorah had started after the Klingons had caught them - and the chief priest as well. The enflamed crowd had hustled the strangers to the Square, the chief priest with them, their alien appearance condemning them immediately as supernormal - and there had been no help forthcoming for them. They had burned.

Now the people were puzzled, not knowing what to do, what to believe.

"Right," Kirk said. "Bones - Spock. We're going back down. We can work through Feorah's group, leave them running the planet - with Federation help, of course."

Later, as the Enterprise headed away from the planet, Kirk looked at Spock.

"You're very quiet, Mr. Spock."

"I hope Feorah will be all right," Spock said softly. "Captain, at last I understand why my father married my mother. For we have just left behind a girl that I could love."

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THE HAGGIS

The group in the rec room was discussing strange creatures they had seen on a variety of planets. Scotty, coming in with McCoy, listened for a minute, then put in a word.

"Have any of you ever seen a haggis?"

There was a brief silence, then someone said, "No."

"Of course," Scotty went on thoughtfully, "there are actually several different species of haggis, and some of them are quite rare."

The one you'll see most, of course, is the common haggis. It's the one you'll find kept on haggis farms, the one that's sold in butcher's shops; it's the one we usually eat. Oh, you'll find them wild, too, but they've been trapped so much they're terribly timid; folk just walking about among the hills aren't likely to see any. They breed...they breed like tribbles, nearly, because they have a lot of natural enemies, like wild cats, or foxes, eagles and buzzards.

The only haggis more timid is the water haggis. I don't know why it's so scared of everything, it's only semi-edible, so predators don't bother it much. If they think there's any danger about, they dive into water - you'll never find them far from the stuff. They're so timid that they can even be frightened to death by loud noises - "

"Aw, come on, Scotty," Sulu put in. "Nothing could be frightened to death."

Scotty glanced at McCoy.

"It could happen," the surgeon said, a little doubtfully.

"Aye, it does, wi' wee furry animals," Scotty maintained. "Now the next most common species of haggis is the flying haggis. It's the one you're most likely to have heard of. To look at it, you'd think it's too big and heavy to fly far. But its wings are very, very strong, though it never flies far. It's like the bumblebee - aerodynamically, a bumblebee shouldn't be able to get off the ground, but it manages fine, just the same way as a flying haggis. Flying haggises always have one leg shorter than the other, so they can run round a hill-side easily, and land and take off almost anywhere, provided there's a slope, of course. There are two sub-species; one lot always travels clockwise, the other anti-clockwise, depending on which leg is the short one."

He saw the doubtful look on Sulu's face and went on quickly before the Oriental could raise any objections.

"All the other types of haggis are rarer, and some are very local. The best one to eat is the lesser conbuncular haggis. It's widespread, but quite rare. It's almost a gourmet item, and it's far dearer to buy than an ordinary common haggis. It's a nocturnal beastie, and it's really clever at dodging traps; so it has to be shot, and it's not easy shooting haggises in the middle of a cold winter's night - it's so rare there's a close season during the summer. The hunters have to be specially trained."

Then there's the greater conbuncular haggis. It's the second biggest of the lot. All the smaller haggises eat grass, heather, and so on, but the greater conbuncular haggis is a scavenger. It eats carrion. It isn't a hunter, though; it wouldn't thank you for fresh meat. The only haggis that goes hunting and could be called dangerous is the largie.

It's the biggest haggis of all, and the only one that is a predator. Luckily,

it's very rare; it's a man-eater if it gets the chance. Oddly enough, if it does attack people, it only attacks men - it's never been known to attack a woman. And it only attacks men who are on their own. There have been a few unexplained disappearances over the years, men out on the hills who have vanished without trace - we can only guess that they fell victim to a largie. It's a bit of a coward; there aren't any stories about largies attacking groups of two or more men.

Then there are the aries. They're about the rarest and most local breed of all. They're almost intelligent, and have a definite tribal culture; they're the only species of haggis known to have a 'civilisation'. They actually have a chief - called Aulderarie. He's the one who's reckoned to be the wisest and most mature of the entire race. It's the youngeraries who tend to be irresponsible, and when they can, they slip away from the tribal land to the nearby Loch Brandy; now if you or I drank from it, we'd think it just water, but to the youngeraries, there's something in it that's intoxicating - and a drunk youngerarie is a nuisance in anyone's language. The olderaries do keep a watch on the young ones, and go after them when they realise the youngsters have slipped off for a drink. An arie always knows when he's grown up and ready to take on adult responsibilities - he stops slipping away to Loch Brandy for a surreptitious drink.

There's just one other haggis, and it's both quite affectionate and a little dangerous. That's the mutonis. It's sometimes kept as a pet, but its bite is poisonous. Oh, it never bites on purpose, unless you manage to scare it out of its wits, but it does sometimes give its owner an affectionate wee nibble. If you milk its fangs every two or three days, you'll keep it harmless. It's a right easy pet to feed, it loves grass and maybe an odd carrot for a treat."

"If it just eats grass, why is it poisonous?" an anonymous voice put in.

"For defence, laddie," Scotty said patiently. "Just for defence."

He got up again and moved to the door. "You've kept me talking too long," he went on. "I'm due back on duty five minutes ago." He went out.

The members of the group left looked at each other.

"Doctor," said Sulu, "you know Scotty well. Was he telling the truth about all that?"

McCoy shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "He's never spoken about any of that to me before this, and I've never been to Scotland."

Scotty grinned to himself as he walked away down the corridor. They didn't believe him, of course. Not really. But as he didn't have a reputation as a joker, they didn't know whether to disbelieve him either.

It would be interesting to see for how long they would go on discussing the subject.

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Kirk: Would you like a bite of my apple, Mr. Spock?

Spock: Why Captain, I understood that I was the one who was supposed to look like Satan.

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Favourite quote -

McCoy: Medical men are trained in logic, Mr. Spock.

Spock: Really, Doctor, I had no idea they were trained. Watching you, I assumed it was trial and error.

Flavius: Are they enemies, Captain?

Kirk: I'm not sure they're sure.

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PREJUDICE by Sheila Clark

The Enterprise was on her way to Starbase 12 with a load of medical supplies when she received a distress call from the research vessel Mendel.

The Mendel's position was such that the Enterprise didn't have to be diverted far in order to reach her. She was operating short-handed; at her last planet-fall, there had been a race inimical to strangers, and the landing party had been attacked without warning. Only the vigilance of the Captain had prevented a massacre; but in the confusion, the ship's nurse had been killed, trying to help an injured man who had also died. Many of the crew were hurt, some badly, and they were so short-handed that even the injured were having to take their turn on duty. The badly hurt were in a particularly bad way, as the Mendel now had no medical staff - she was such a small vessel that she only carried a nurse, albeit a highly qualified one.

Kirk transferred several men to assist the decimated crew, took the most severely injured on board, and left Nurse Chapel with the Mendel to see to those who, though injured, preferred to remain aboard their own ship. He was forced to leave the Mendel to her own resources thereafter, as the supplies he carried had to be got to Starbase 12 as soon as possible, but the Mendel's Captain was certain that he could manage, with the men Kirk left him, to gain port under his own steam.

At Starbase 12, when they eventually reached it, was a surprise for McCoy. His daughter was there; waiting for transport back to Earth. She had finished a tour of duty on a survey ship, and was now going back to Earth for advanced training - she had her eye on promotion.

After the first joy of reunion, McCoy turned to Kirk and Spock, who were waiting, more or less patiently, for McCoy to remember they were there. Kirk especially was intrigued; McCoy had said very little about his daughter even to them, and he was glad of the opportunity to meet her. Spock, little less curious, hid it better.

"Jim - Spock - my daughter Joanna. Jo, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. I've told you about them in my letters."

Kirk smiled welcomingly at her. "Hello, Jo. I may call you Jo?"

She ignored the question. "Hello, Captain," she said coolly. "Mr. Spock."

Spock looked at her, vaguely disturbed by something in her attitude, wondering if, in the manner of many Earth people, she was shy. "You must be happy to see your father again after so long," he said.

"Yes, it has been a long time," McCoy said. He was conscious of a degree of awkwardness, and then realised that it must be difficult for these people that he loved, meeting as strangers, to match his happiness.

"When are you going to Earth, Jo?" he asked.

"I have to wait for transport," she said. "I don't know yet."

"Well, we'll be here for a few days," Kirk put in. "Bones, we'll not need you while we're here - see as much of Jo as you can. It may be long enough before you see each other again."

He turned away. "Coming, Spock?"

They moved away, leaving McCoy and his daughter alone. Joanna promptly unfroze.

"Dad, it is good to see you," she said.

He looked at her. "Jo...what was wrong there?"

She didn't pretend not to understand. "I know they're your friends, Dad; but I didn't like them."

"Why not?"

She hesitated. "No real reason...except...I've a friend here, who used to know Captain Kirk. She said he's a real wolf...always chasing up girls. Well, I'm not going to be a ~~another~~ trophy on his wall."

McCoy shook his head. "Oh, he does flirt a bit - what man doesn't? If he gets a 'come-on' from a pretty girl. I do myself. Of course, Spock wouldn't recognise a 'come-on' if it jumped up and bit him," he grinned, trying to change the subject. But Jo wasn't amused.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said again. "I've nothing against Vulcans in general, either, but...you've made him out to be so...so..." She broke off, unable to put her feelings into words.

McCoy looked unhappily at her. "Jo, they're the best friends a man could hope for. Loyal, trustworthy... They've both saved my life at the risk of their own, more than once. I hoped you would think of them as friends too. Give them a chance, Jo. Don't let yourself be blinded by prejudice. Please."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'll try, but..."

"It's all you can do."

Meanwhile, Kirk and Spock, unaware of McCoy's problems, were making their way to the Base Commander's office, where orders might be awaiting them. The Commander was an old acquaintance, having been there some years.

"Hello, Jim...Spock," he said. "Don't tell me that you've left McCoy behind somewhere."

Kirk laughed. "No, Dick. I bet you know as well as we do that his daughter is here. We left him talking to her."

"Well, he'll get plenty chance to see her in the next few weeks, Jim. Starfleet's being generous and humane for once. Your orders take you back to Earth for a refit - there are some improved components they're fitting to Starships, and you're being ordered back one by one to get them. And since you're the first ship going back to Earth from here - you take Nurse McCoy."

"Are these components really improved, or are they still being tested?" Kirk asked, his experience with M-5 still fresh in his mind, even although many months had passed since that ill-fated experiment.

"Really improved. You're the fourth ship to get them - none of the other Captains has complained."

"Well, it'll make a change for the crew to get shore leave on Earth," Kirk commented.

"They'll get quite a good leave, too. The refit will take several weeks because they're taking the opportunity to check out everything, and from what I've heard, Starfleet will be quite happy if only the non-Humans in the crew are left on duty."

"I know one officer who won't go on leave until he knows his precious engines are safely back in one piece," Kirk laughed.

The commander laughed with him; even Spock's face relaxed slightly, although only someone who knew him as well as Kirk did would have noticed it. Then the commander added,

"Oh, by the way - Spock, there's a package for you. Came to be sent on to you as soon as possible."

Spock took it with a nod of thanks, but didn't open it. It was almost as if he already knew what was in it.

They went back to where they had left McCoy. He and Jo were no longer there, but inquiry elicited the information that they had gone to the canteen for a meal. Kirk and Spock followed. Not that there was any real urgency, but Kirk wanted to let McCoy know as soon as possible that Jo was to accompany them back to Earth. Yet, when they eventually ran McCoy to ground and told him, he seemed strangely subdued about it. After a moment, though, he seemed to get over what was bothering him and said heartily, "Starfleet must have a heart after all."

Kirk and Spock went back to the Enterprise straight away, leaving the McCoy's to finish their meal. Spock excused himself as soon as they boarded, and went off to his own quarters.

He did indeed know what was in the package he had been given. He opened it, studied the letter it contained as a cover for the other contents.

"... as you know, you are a beneficiary under the terms of the will of your grandfather, Alexander Grayson. There are certain difficulties in arranging the transfer of property, since you are a Vulcan national. We would be obliged if you would study the enclosed documents at your leisure, and..." It went on as he knew it would. He had been expecting this for some time, ever since he heard of the death of his Human grandfather almost a year previously. It had, however, come at a reasonably propitious time. He could afford time just now to study these legal documents; he was sure they would not be easy to follow, even for him; and then get time off during the refit to visit the lawyers. And since McCoy's daughter was aboard, Kirk would have other things to think about in his spare time than chess; McCoy would have other things to think about than their perpetual verbal duelling. He would miss the chess and the arguing, and Kirk's and McCoy's company, he admitted to himself, but that couldn't be helped either. These documents, had to be studied. And understood.

For a few days after the Enterprise set course for Earth, everything appeared to be normal. Kirk missed seeing Spock and McCoy around, but he didn't think much of it at first; until one day he happened to be passing sickbay when the door opened - and Scotty came out, laughing. From inside, Kirk could hear McCoy and Joanna laughing with him. As he reached Kirk, Scotty said cheerfully, "Morning, Captain," and passed on.

Kirk hesitated a moment. Should he go in or not? Normally he wouldn't have hesitated - but he couldn't help remembering how distantly polite Joanna was every time he spoke to her. Yet she laughed with Scotty...

He went on.

He was conscious of a nagging feeling of discontent which was rendered all the more disagreeable for being totally unfamiliar. It seemed ages since any of his friends had said anything to him but 'hello'. And Joanna - why was she being so distant? Why was McCoy apparently keeping her away from him? After the first night aboard, McCoy and Joanna had eaten in their quarters...as if McCoy was deliberately keeping her to himself. Kirk hadn't really thought about it - until now. Scotty had been welcome. He wished he could mention it to someone; but one of the two people he could discuss it with was involved, and the other was keeping very much to himself for some reason unknown. With a surge of uncharacteristic impatience, Kirk found himself thinking that Spock had had plenty of time to study whatever had been in the packet he had been given. So why was he still haunting his own quarters? Or was he? Was he also welcome in sickbay?

Well, he wouldn't be petty about it. He could wait until they had recovered from their absorption; he wouldn't let them see that he was bothered.

He stayed on the bridge that day long after his usual watch was past; it wasn't unusual, and the crew who relieved Sulu, Chekov and Uhura didn't know how long Kirk had spent on the bridge. Next day, finding himself wakeful very early, he went on watch early - again, a not unusual occurrence. His usual watchmates

did not know how short a time he had been away from the bridge; and within a couple of days, Kirk found himself spending almost twenty hours a day on duty. In the intervening hours, he lay on his bed, unable to sleep properly, his mind rehearsing over and over possible reasons why his friends should have rejected him...and rejecting all the notions that occurred to him.

Did McCoy not trust him enough to let him share Joanna? McCoy had seen him flirting with several girls; passengers often expected a mild flirtation with one of the officers, and who more flattering to pay them attention than the Captain? But surely McCoy knew that Joanna would be like a daughter to him as well?

The sense of hurt grew; but his pride wouldn't let him go directly to McCoy - or to Spock, whose preoccupation with his parcel was beginning to irritate Kirk in a way unthinkable to him in his normal frame of mind.

It couldn't last, and he knew it. But he was unable to break free from the pattern that had developed in his mind. He stayed on the bridge until he could hardly keep his eyes open; stumbled to his quarters, hoping to be tired enough to sleep, and forget for a few hours the misery that was now overwhelming him; and lay awake, unable to sleep, when he eventually did lie down. Next morning, a repeat of the pattern; and the next. He could have broken it any time; a word would have been enough; he knew it - but he would not say that word, and sat in his command chair, forcing himself to behave normally so that Spock would not notice anything wrong, and yet bitterly hurt that Spock didn't notice.

He got more and more tired. It was as well that the flight was completely routine; he felt that his judgement was hopelessly gone, and that in an emergency he wouldn't be able to make the right decisions... He knew he would have to speak to Spock soon, but he didn't want to. He wanted Spock to speak to him about it... no. He simply wanted Spock to speak to him...

That night, he found himself stumbling badly on his way back to his cabin, almost falling in his exhaustion. Ahead of him, he heard McCoy's voice, Joanna's, Scotty's... Pride stiffened his back in a way nothing else could, he walked erect, firmly, as he passed them, and even managed to smile. He didn't see McCoy turn after he had passed, to look at him, a slight frown on his face.

"What's wrong, McCoy?" Scotty asked.

"I'm not sure. Jim's looking tired... Spock mentioned to me this afternoon that he thought Jim wasn't keeping too well. Maybe all he needs is some leave; but I think I'll get him in tomorrow for a checkup, just in case."

The effort to behave normally had been too much for Kirk, however. He entered his cabin - and inside, lost his balance and fell heavily, awkwardly, against the waist-high shelving that acted as a partial partition. His head banged off the shelf; he bounced, and hit his left arm off another part of it; and slumped to the floor, unconscious.

When he didn't show up for duty next morning, Spock called him on the intercom. Receiving no answer, Spock went to Kirk's quarters, and found him still lying on the floor, still unconscious. He promptly called McCoy.

McCoy checked Kirk where he lay.

"Broken arm...several broken or cracked ribs...and a head injury. It could have been worse..."

Since Christine Chapel was still aboard the Mendel, McCoy decided that, as he needed the help of a nurse, Joanna might as well be that nurse. It was as good a chance as any to try to reconcile her to Kirk. He set the broken arm, and gave her the job of cleaning and dressing the gash on Kirk's head where he had hit it off the shelf.

"I wonder what happened?" Spock said, once he was assured that Kirk's injuries, though nasty, weren't too severe.

"He was looking tired when I saw him last night," McCoy said slowly. "I meant to get him in for a checkup today. I'll keep him in for a day or two, give him a chance to get a rest. He needs one - he works harder than any of us."

Spock nodded. "I'll leave you to get on with it, then."

Although he was anxious about Kirk, McCoy decided to leave Joanna to watch him. It would, he thought, give her a chance to get to know Kirk - and the patient-nurse relationship once set up, might solve all his problems. So when Kirk regained consciousness, and realised that he must be in sickbay, it was Joanna he first saw on opening his eyes, and not, as he had hoped, McCoy.

His heart sank. Why wasn't McCoy there? Didn't he care? Kirk had reached a point of depression where the slightest thing had the power to hurt him. He wanted McCoy...or Spock...not Joanna. But again, his pride kept him from asking for them.

"How are you feeling, Captain?" Joanna asked, her voice distantly polite.

He considered the question. How was he feeling? He was feeling unhappy. But he couldn't say that. That wasn't what she was asking.

"My head...aches," he managed slowly, shocked at how difficult it was to say even that without breaking down.

"Have you a headache, or is it just where you banged it that's sore?" she asked impersonally.

"Where I banged it?" he asked stupidly. "Both, I think." This was terrible. Where was McCoy? Or even Nurse Chapel? Oh yes, on the Mendel... He would give anything for a friendly face, a sympathetic voice, not this distant cool competence. He shut his eyes again, to shut out the sight of her professionally calm face. If only he could sleep! Sleep, and wake to find everything back to normal. He shut his lips firmly to hold back the cry that rose to them for McCoy.

He slipped back into unconsciousness. Joanna called for McCoy.

"He came round for a few minutes," she said. "He complained that his head was sore - a headache as well as the pain from the injury, he said - then he lost consciousness again."

McCoy studied the diagnostic board. "He's probably just asleep," he said. "The readings are normal." He glanced round as Spock came in.

"How is he, Doctor?"

"Well, he came round for a minute," McCoy said. "He's asleep again, which is probably a good sign since the readings are normal. You'd better not come down much - if you're here, he'll start asking about the ship, and I'd rather keep him absolutely quiet, with that head injury."

Spock nodded. "I understand, Doctor."

"Don't worry. I'll let you know how he's getting on."

"There is just one thing, Doctor," Spock said. "We'll soon be coming within range of the research colony on the planet Earthmen call Hades. The personnel there will be requiring their annual checkup - For which your services will be required."

"I wasn't forgetting," McCoy told him.

"You will be able to leave the Captain?"

"I think so. Jo can stay with him, monitor his condition. If there's any drastic change, she can call in M'Benga."

Spock left to return to the bridge. McCoy looked at his daughter. "I'd like to take you down to help with the physicals," he said, "It'd be good experience for you, if you're going up for promotion, since you'll be authorised

to conduct these routine physicals on small planetary colonies once you're up a grade. But I daren't leave the Captain without an experienced nurse in attendance, not yet. Not till I'm quite certain he's on the mend."

Joanna nodded, not very happily. She would rather have accompanied McCoy; she had no desire to remain here, watching over a man she didn't like, but she was too professional to say so.

It was several hours before they came within reach of Hades. During that time, Kirk lay unconscious. After a time, he began to toss slightly. Joanna called McCoy.

By the time he came - a matter of seconds - Kirk was tossing restlessly.

"How long has he been like this?" McCoy asked.

"Just a few seconds," Joanna replied nervously. "I called you as soon as he began to fidget."

McCoy shook his head. "I've never seen anything like it before," he said. "Not quite like this..." Joanna drew a relieved breath - she had never seen anything quite like it either, and had been worrying in case she had missed anything. The readings were normal, yet... McCoy made a few more checks.

At last - "He seems to be thinking about something, even in his sleep," McCoy said. "Probably he's just worried about the refit - the last time we got some new equipment, it nearly destroyed the ship - and four others along with her."

He beamed down alone to Hades to conduct the physicals.

He was not long away when Kirk regained consciousness again. He kept his eyes shut, not knowing whether McCoy was there or not, but dreading finding that he was not.

Joanna knew from the readings that Kirk must be awake, and wondered why he didn't open his eyes. She felt a slight twinge of guilt; her expression, when he looked at her before, couldn't have been very encouraging, she knew; she had been briskly competent, but not humane. She had behaved more as she would towards a malingerer, and she knew that Kirk was not malingering. But she also knew that if Kirk opened his eyes now, her expression would be just as coolly discouraging. Deliberately, she moved away. He was awake. If he needed anything, he had only to ask. She sat at McCoy's desk, watching the diagnostic board.

After a while, Kirk summoned up the courage to open his eyes. No, McCoy wasn't there. He was disappointed, even though he hadn't allowed himself to hope. Joanna was watching the board rather than him, but after a moment she became aware of his eyes on her.

"How is your head now?" she asked.

"Better," Kirk lied. Someone was pounding his brain with a sledgehammer. And he felt so tired...physically and mentally. He shut his eyes again. That helped a little. McCoy...where was McCoy?...and Spock...where was he?...did neither of them care? A thread of rational thought assured him that they did, but his weakness made it difficult for anything to exist in his mind but the feeling of rejection...he was so lonely for them... With an effort that left him drained, he held back the tears that threatened. Joanna... He must keep control in front of her. He didn't know her well enough to relax in front of her...

Hades was an uninviting planet, hence the popular name. Its atmosphere was thinner than Earth's and in addition the oxygen content was less, while the gravity was slightly higher. The temperature might have been comfortable for Spock, but McCoy found it enervating. There was, McCoy knew, some native life;

there was a race that, while not intelligent, probably would become so, one day. Because of this race, the planet had not been colonised; even although not inviting, it was livable. All that the Federation had done was set up a small research station, which had been there for some six years. McCoy had never visited it before, and wasn't sure that he even wanted to visit it again.

While he conducted the physicals, he carried out the usual casual conversation with his patients that was designed to let them know, obliquely, what was going on in the Galaxy outside, as well as whether or not any personality clashes were occurring. Starfleet knew as well as any other official body that personal animosities are often hidden in the interests of keeping the quarrel 'within the family'.

Nothing of interest emerged this time - he was hardly surprised, as the profiles on these people had indicated a high degree of compatibility. However, the leader of the group did mention that there had been some disturbance outside the station perimeter during the last few nights.

"It's odd," he went on. "Every year at about this time, there's approximately a week of disturbances among the native creatures. Then everything quiets down again. We've investigated, and found nothing. Yet there must be some reason. Is there any chance of the Enterprise monitoring the area tonight?"

"I think I can say yes to that," McCoy said. He pulled out his communicator. "McCoy to Enterprise."

"Enterprise, Spock here," came the familiar voice of the First Officer.

McCoy passed on the request, and the reason for it.

"Yes, we'll do that," Spock confirmed. "I'll beam down as well, and you and I can investigate from the ground, too."

"Wait a minute, Spock... I'm not sure I like leaving Jim all that long," McCoy protested.

"I checked with sickbay a few minutes ago," Spock said. "Nurse McCoy reports that the Captain has regained consciousness and claims to be feeling better."

So, against his better judgement, McCoy stayed, to be joined by Spock. He did, however, make his own check with Joanna. She told him that Kirk was sleeping again, not quite so restlessly, and that the readings were still all normal.

They set off just before it got dark, heading towards an area where, the research leader said, the disturbances had been very marked the night before. They hadn't got very far when a heavy weight crashed against both of them from behind. When they were allowed to scramble to their feet again, they found themselves facing a group of primitive beings, who looked vaguely baboon-like but were obviously not of anthropoid origin. For one thing, they were not mammalian. The creatures were armed with stones and broken-off branches; there was a cunning look about them - not quite intelligence - yet. But not far removed from it, either. One of the baboons had their phasers and communicators. It handled the things gingerly, as if it were afraid of them.

Another of the creatures, which seemed to be the chief, grunted several times. The baboon with the phasers put them down on a flat rock.

The chief baboon then turned to Spock and McCoy. It grunted; and they found that, while it 'spoke' to them direct, they could understand it.

"In this week of the year, we test our young," it said. "Your people have come to live here, but they have never undergone the testing. This time you have come to us. You will undergo the test. If you succeed, your people will be free to stay. If you fail, your people must go. Go or die."

Spock and McCoy looked at each other. To what extent had the disturbances been bait, to lure someone out to undergo the test? It seemed, too, that they

must also re-think their opinion of the intelligence of the natives.

"What is the test?" Spock asked, looking directly at the chief as he spoke.

"You must survive the night in the forest, without weapons," the chief replied.

Spock nodded. "Very well," he said. "But I alone will undergo the test. Let my companion go."

"No. You must go together. It is the rule. One alone has no chance. We know this. It is a test, not a killing. At least two must go together."

"Come on, Spock," McCoy said. "Let's get started."

A lane opened for them between the natives, a lane which led them in to the open forest. From the darkness beyond came the snarling yelp of some wild creature. McCoy shivered. From what the research personnel had told him, some of the animals here were not the sort of things it was advisable to meet on a dark night.

As they entered the trees, the half-light abruptly faded. The moon would not rise for some time yet, and even when it did, its light would barely be able to penetrate the deep shadows of the forest where, even at noon, the light was dim. It would create small patches of brightness which would disturb their vision, be even more distracting than no light at all.

McCoy found he was having difficulty in breathing and moving, felt as if he was wading through knee-deep water. He knew this was because of the higher gravity and thinner atmosphere...strange that a high gravity planet should have such a thin atmosphere, he thought. Vulcan was much the same.

"How're you doing, Spock?" he gasped.

"It is rather like Vulcan," Spock said, echoing McCoy's thought.

"So you're having no difficulty? I'm glad one of us is O.K."

"I didn't say that, Doctor. On the contrary, I am finding that I have lived for so long in Earth's gravity and atmosphere that I am experiencing a little difficulty. However, I should be able to re-adapt quite quickly."

After a short while, they stopped. "Do we have to keep moving?" McCoy asked. "All they said was survive."

"I suspect that to survive, it is necessary to continue moving," Spock commented. "This planet has several unpleasant carnivores. If we remain still, it would be easy for one to creep up on us."

"And if we move, we might blunder into one," McCoy finished.

Suddenly, both were aware that it was getting subtly lighter. They could at least see faintly where they were.

"The moon?" McCoy asked.

"It must be," Spock agreed. "But how its light can be so effective is beyond my experience." They moved on in the slowly increasing light.

Suddenly the ground gave way beneath McCoy's feet. As he fell, he threw himself backwards. Spock caught at him, just managed to grab his shirt. This steadied McCoy long enough to let him grasp at the edge of the pit into which he had so nearly fallen. Spock changed his hold to McCoy's arms, and pulled him up.

With McCoy on solid ground again, Spock leaned forward over the hole. Beneath, he could just make out two spots of light shining up at him, and shivered, despite the clammy heat that was still in the air. There was some kind of 'trap-door' carnivore below; sheer luck had saved McCoy from becoming its dinner. McCoy knew it too; but the situation was too serious for thanks - at least, just yet. They moved cautiously past the hole, and went on.

After a while, they stopped again for a short rest - something that had

become vital, even for Spock. The Vulcan sat on the ground, leaning back against a tree stump, in such a manner that he was going to have to push against the stump to get up again. McCoy crouched at his feet.

Suddenly the Human stiffened. "Spock...don't move."

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

"A snake of some kind."

It was beginning to loop its way over the stump against which Spock was leaning, its forked tongue nearly touching Spock as it flickered back and forward. It stopped, its head blindly turned towards Spock, who couldn't move without touching it. It began to lean its head towards him.

McCoy stood cautiously, held out his hand. Spock took it.

"After three," McCoy said. "One...two...three...now!" He pulled with the strength of desperation - a strength he didn't realise he could produce in this gravity. Spock lifted to his feet.

The snake paused, tongue flickering where Spock had been. Then it seemed to accept that its prey had gone, and flowed on...and on... and on...

"It probably was not poisonous," Spock said. "But it would have undoubtedly been capable of swallowing me whole. Thank you, Doctor."

They went on, even more watchful now. "I can understand why they insisted that we go together," McCoy said.

"Yes," Spock replied, simply.

When McCoy's return to the Enterprise had been delayed, Joanna hadn't worried too much. But when time went on, and no word came, she risked leaving sickbay to find if there was any word.

What she learned horrified her. McCoy - and Spock, which didn't worry her - had disappeared. They could not be contacted. Even sensors could not detect them.

She managed to retain her self-control until she was back in sickbay. She checked Kirk - he was still sleeping, more restlessly again. Then she sat at the desk, crying, in spite of her attempts to control herself.

After a while, she pulled herself together, and dried her eyes. She got up to go and wash her face; but just as she got to her feet, Kirk moved. Professional concern forced her to move over to him.

Kirk had lain for some minutes again, gathering his courage to open his eyes and face the absence of McCoy. When he did, he looked up into Joanna's tear-streaked face. Forgetting his own troubles for a brief moment, he asked gently,

"What is it?"

She hesitated. Kirk was still very weak. She was sure he was still in pain. McCoy had seemed sure of his affection; if this was accurate, it would only worry him to be told that McCoy was missing. Spock, too...wasn't Spock supposed to be his friend too?

"What is it?" Kirk asked again. He was beginning to look agitated; and she decided that he was probably better to be told.

"Dad...and Mr. Spock...they're missing."

"Missing!" Kirk felt his heart miss a beat. "What happened?"

"We're orbiting Hades. Dad had to go down for physicals..." So that's where he was, Kirk thought, with a slight feeling of relief. "...There was

something going on, and he asked Mr. Spock to go down. They left the research station...and that's all we know. They haven't been heard from since."

"They're together?" Kirk wanted confirmed. She nodded. "Then it's not quite as bad as it might be," he went on reassuringly. "Spock'll look after your father...and Bones'll look after Spock," he added, more to himself.

He struggled to a sitting position. "Where are my clothes?"

"Clothes?"

"You don't think I'll leave them down there without going to look for them?"

"You can't go!" she exclaimed. "You've a head injury, broken arm, broken ribs - you're not fit! You could easily kill yourself!"

"I'll manage. But they may be in danger...needing help...I can't leave them."

"Send down a search party! Dad would never forgive me if I let you do this!"

"If I know Scotty, there's already a search party down there," Kirk said. "But one person might succeed where a party fails. Get me my clothes, nurse. That's an order."

"Medical orders take precedence - "

"When given by a ship's Chief Medical Officer. Which you are not."

She gave in. Slowly, she got his clothes, helped him to dress.

"There's just one thing," she said. "I'm coming with you, Captain."

He shook his head.

"I must. You're ill. I would be failing in my duty if I let you go alone. Besides - it's my father who's lost."

Kirk looked at her, knowing how dangerous this trip could be. She was right, of course; on both counts, she was right.

"All right, nurse," he said. "You can come." He chose not to risk calling her 'Jo' again; she hadn't seemed to like it, and this new rapport was too fragile to risk.

Kyle was not very happy about beaming Kirk down, either; but he had to obey the Captain's orders. They materialised on the edge of the forest. Kirk swung round the tricorder he had brought.

"This way," he said. He led the way through the trees. They also were surprised by the amount of light that the moon gave. It was almost as if the trees were rendered transparent by the moonlight.

After a while, the reading on the tricorder began to get confused. There was no longer any clear indication where Spock and McCoy were. All Kirk knew was the approximate direction.

"This must be why the ship's sensors couldn't find them," Joanna suggested,

Kirk nodded. "I've never seen anything like it," he said.

They moved on. Kirk called, "Spock! Bones!" They stopped, and listened, but they heard nothing.

Spock and McCoy stumbled on through the trees, tired now and hardly caring what happened. It was nearly day; their ordeal would soon be over - officially. Yet they still had to find their way back out of the forest. In actual fact, their ordeal would not be over until they were safely back on the Enterprise.

McCoy moved into the lead as the strange, unearthly light of the moon began to be replaced by the warmer light of day. The light was treacherous; more so

than it had been. There was an open space ahead of them; McCoy speeded up slightly as he saw it. It would be good to get out from under the trees for a few moments, to see the sky above them.

A dozen paces into the open meadow showed him his mistake. He felt himself beginning to sink.

"Stop, Spock! It's a marsh!"

Spock pulled up at the edge of the quagmire. McCoy tried to turn, to wade back, but he was sinking fairly quickly. He was already knee-deep; as he put his weight on one foot to lift the other, the first foot sank more quickly.

Spock waded out, trying to reach him.

"No, Spock! Don't risk it!"

Spock came towards him a little way, but his greater weight caused him to sink almost immediately. He also tried to turn back - and failed. He was trapped too, and McCoy was still beyond his reach.

Suddenly, Spock lifted his head. "Listen!"

McCoy strained his ears, but at first could hear nothing. Then -

"Bones! Spock!"

"It's Jim!"

"A logical assumption, since only he calls you 'Bones'. But when we last saw him, the Captain was not fit to stand, let alone come in search of us on a planet with such a high gravity."

"Jim would have to be dead before he failed us," McCoy said.

Without answering, Spock turned his head towards the direction from which the call had come. "Here, Captain!"

"Spock!" There was horror in McCoy's voice.

Spock glanced round at him. He was looking towards the side. Spock looked over that way. A huge cat-like carnivore was standing there, its tail-tip twitching; looking at them. As they watched it, it put a cautious paw onto the surface of the marsh, then drew back.

"It probably lacks the intelligence to realise that it will not be able to reach us," Spock commented, "but it will be there, waiting, when the Captain comes for us."

Kirk was getting hoarse. He had been calling for hours, or so it seemed. There had been no answer, no sign even from the search party he knew must be about somewhere, but he refused to give up. The pain in his ribs, the ache in his head, were getting almost unbearable now. He saw Joanna checking the medical tricorder once, and knew that she was getting more and more concerned about him as a patient.

"Captain," she interrupted at last. "Nothing I can say will stop you. I realise that. But I can stop you killing yourself in the search. Here." She held up a hypo.

"What...?"

"A painkiller and stimulant."

Kirk submitted. Sure enough, the pain subsided a little; it was now bearable. He went on.

"Spock! Bones! Spock!"

At last - at long last - he heard an answer. "Here, Captain!"

It was distant, but not too far so. With renewed vigour - the knowledge

that they were alive was a better stimulant than any drug, he thought - he went on. With renewed vigour, Joanna followed him.

They came out of the trees into sight of the great marsh, just behind the huge cat beast.

Quiet as they were, it heard them. It whirled, and sprang.

Kirk had time - barely - to push Joanna out of the way. Then it crashed against him, standing as he was where the girl had been only a second before.

Joanna, a highly-trained Starfleet crew-woman, didn't panic. She pulled out her phaser; she didn't dare use it on a kill setting - Kirk was too close to it as it crouched over him - but she fired on stun setting. At that range, she couldn't miss. The beast collapsed, half on top of Kirk, who gave an involuntary yelp at the new agony from his already maltreated ribs. Joanna sprang to help him, hoping as she did that a rib hadn't been driven into a lung, satisfied when she saw that Kirk wasn't coughing up blood. She hardly heard McCoy's "Well done!"

Helped by Joanna, Kirk staggered to his feet. She made him stand still while she checked his condition. He protested, but McCoy, now waist-deep in the evil-smelling mud, called, "She's right, Jim. Let her check you."

There was no additional damage. Though the cat's body was large, it had also been fairly soft, as was the ground at the edge of the swamp.

"Captain," Spock said. "Miss McCoy only stunned the beast. May I suggest that you now kill it? When it regains its senses it will surely attack again."

"Kirk nodded. "Yes, you're right, Spock." He killed the beast, rather regretfully, then reached for his communicator. "We'll soon have you out of there." He felt his belt, frantically. "My communicator! It's gone!"

Joanna felt for hers. "So has mine, Captain. They must have been jerked loose when the cat attacked."

Kirk drew a deep breath, then wished he hadn't. "We'll just have to do this the hard way, then," he said.

He turned back into the forest, looking for a long branch. There were none, however. None of the trees, large as some of them were, had branches of the size that he needed; they were either too thick and long, or too thin.

He looked at Joanna. "Hold my hand," he said. He began to wade slowly out towards Spock.

He was handicapped by not being able to use his left arm; however, Spock could use it to pull himself out. He stopped when he was within Spock's reach.

Spock leaned over, managed to grasp Kirk's body, and hauled himself out of the marsh's embrace. Kirk gritted his teeth as the pressure hurt his ribs. As soon as he could, Spock transferred his weight to Joanna's hand. All three were covered with the obnoxious mud before they again stood on dry land. Kirk hissed with pain as the mud went into new scratches he had received from the great cat's claws - scratches that until that minute he hadn't known he had.

Then, without giving himself time to think about the pain, he turned to McCoy.

"You won't be able to reach me, Jim," McCoy said. "That's how Spock got trapped."

"I'm the lightest," Joanna said. "If Mr. Spock goes in a little way...and I go past him...I should be able to reach Dad; and then Mr. Spock can pull us both out."

Spock waded back into the morass, and braced himself. He was near enough the edge of the moss for Kirk to reach him if necessary, but he had no intention of calling on Kirk if he could possibly avoid it. Joanna moved on past him, her lighter weight keeping her on the surface longer. She caught Spock's hand,

and moved as near McCoy as she could.

With her outstretched hand she could reach McCoy - just. He leaned over towards her, and grasped her hand. Then he began to pull himself out. She gasped with pain as the strain from the double pull tried to wrench her arms from her shoulders. Spock leaned back, trying to add to the pressure pulling McCoy from the noisome mud, and with a sucking sound McCoy came free. They scrambled, trying to help each other, until they reached solid ground, Kirk trying to help too.

Once they were all back on dry land, Kirk let himself sink to the ground. He was finished, and he knew it. McCoy leaned over him, snatching up Joanna's abandoned medical tricorder. Joanna left him to it, and turned her attention to finding at least one of the missing communicators.

"What happened to you two?" Kirk managed.

Spock began telling him about the test, but McCoy interrupted him. "Not now, Spock! There'll be plenty time for that after we get back to the ship. But the sooner we get Jim back, the happier I'll be. Whatever possessed you to come looking for us, Jim? You should still be in bed. And why Jo let you come..."

"She tried to stop me," Kirk said.

Joanna came over with one of the missing communicators, and McCoy grabbed it from her.

Their first priority on returning to the Enterprise was to get cleaned up. McCoy was particularly worried about the mud now plastering Kirk's claw wounds. Joanna left them while she got washed; but it was obvious that Kirk needed help to wash the mud off. In the end, McCoy decided that he would need Spock to help too, so they stripped off and washed together, Spock supporting Kirk while McCoy washed him.

Kirk lay on a bed in sickbay again, while McCoy carefully and very gently began to clean the last of the mud from the deep scratches - a thorough wash had not been sufficient to get it all out. Spock stood watching.

Kirk lay back, strangely content. It was good to have McCoy tending him, and he relaxed happily.

Joanna delayed returning to sickbay, although she knew she should get back as quickly as possible. She was thinking rather hard as she cleaned herself.

She owed Kirk an apology; she admitted it to herself. She owed Spock one too, really, but especially Kirk. She had treated him badly, on the grounds of a tale told her by another girl - no, not just that, she thought. She had been jealous of Kirk - and of Spock.

She made her way slowly back to sickbay, and went in. She stopped just inside the door, looking at them.

McCoy was bending over Kirk, with Spock standing by, watching. There was an aura of happiness in the room - she felt it plainly. She was more than ever reluctant to go over - her presence would shatter the silent understanding that existed here.

Then Spock looked over and saw her. "Nurse McCoy," he said.

She went over to the bed.

"At last!" McCoy said. "Where on Earth have you been? Well, never mind, you're here now. Finish cleaning out these cuts, Jo."

She saw Kirk's anxious look as McCoy turned away, and guessed the reason for it. Kirk didn't want to be left to her impersonal ministrations. But McCoy only crossed to the table for a hypo. He came back adjusting it, and gave Kirk a shot.

"Isn't that rather a large dose, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"Yes, it is, Dr. Spock," McCoy replied. "Jim's physical condition is poor, doing all that down there on top of his previous injury. He can't have much resistance. I don't know if the alien bugs in the mud can harm us - but I'm not taking any chances."

Kirk watched him as he returned the hypo to the table, but he came back.

"Captain," Joanna said abruptly. He looked up at her. "I - I owe you an apology. When I first came on board, I...I didn't like you. I'd no real reason for it, except that...Dad had told me a lot about you in his letters, and I was jealous. I was a bit jealous of Mr. Spock too - " she glanced at him " - so I really owe you an apology too, Mr. Spock. But I kept Dad away from you both, and I...I'm sorry. After what happened down there...I know I was wrong."

Kirk glanced at McCoy. There was a relieved smile on the surgeon's face.

"It's all right, Jo," Kirk said. "Don't worry about it. And you know - I was a bit jealous of you. I'm sorry about that."

She flushed. "You had reason to be. I hadn't."

"Let's just forget about it, shall we?" Kirk asked.

She smiled. Then she said, "There is just one other thing, Captain. Thank you." She glanced at Spock. "Thank you both."

"Well, if that is all, Captain, Dr. McCoy and I have a duty to perform. We must return to the planet's surface and let the natives know that we survived the night in the forest - the future of the research station depended on our success. Then we must resume our course for Earth."

Kirk watched them leave, an affectionate smile on his face. Then he lay back to let Joanna finish cleaning out the cuts the great cat had given him. The rest of the voyage was going to be all right.

He closed his eyes, and relaxed in the first good night's sleep he had had for many nights.

BEAUTY - FOUR VIEWS by T.G.Z.C.

Beauty is a lovely lady
Moving graceful as she goes.
She is mine, I'll never leave her,
My beloved Enterprise.

Beauty is found in the eye of the looker;
So many things that are lovely I see;
But a fine healthy body, no need for my art -
That is the essence of beauty for me!

Beauty is a set of engines
Purring, busy, beating time,
Warp power drive and antimatter
That will get us there on time!

Beauty is found where ever you seek;
In balancing figures, and data unique.
Beauty is found in the calm sense of logic,
In skill in your work...and the smile of a friend.
