

ENTERPRISE

INCIDENTS 2

STORIES by SHEILA CLARK

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When I entered two stories and two poems for the Terracon '77 writing competition, the last thing I expected was to win four awards. It was, perhaps, just as well that I was sitting at the front of the hall; I was no sooner sitting down again than I was getting up again...

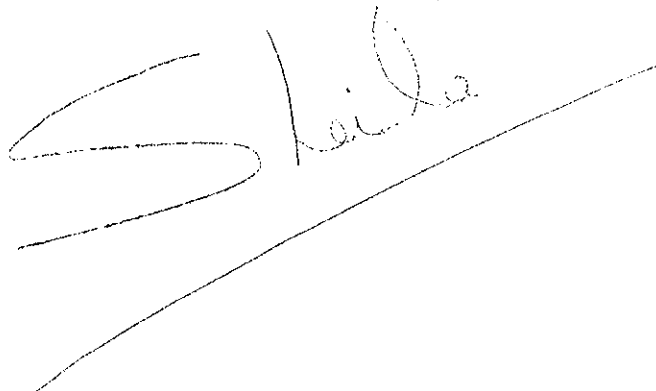
A flattering number of people have asked me since when the winning stories were going to be printed; so it seemed to me that the best thing I could do was put out a second issue of Enterprise Incidents, and put all four entries into it.

The winning story was 'Echo'; 'Trust' was runner-up. The winning poem was 'Love', with 'Meditation' the runner-up. The other stories in the zine - well, two of them, 'Embarcation Leave' and 'Thanks' were my personal attempts at two of our newsletter competitions. 'Duty Demands' and 'Devil's Spawn' were written for Janet - readers of the independent zine Zap! will know exactly what that means. I had hoped to include a Scotty-orientated story too, but space ran out.

My usual thanks go to my mother for proofreading, Janet for running the zine off, and my various helpers who collate.

I hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as I enjoyed writing them.

November 1977

A large, stylized handwritten signature that reads "Sheila". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends across the width of the signature.

Non-members of STAG can obtain information on new and forthcoming zines by sending a SAE or addressed envelope and IRC to

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DUTY DEMANDS...

Captain James T. Kirk straightened himself as best he could, head raised defiantly despite the agony of cramped muscles. Beside him, tied to their respective posts, were the three surviving members of his landing party; Lts. Gilmore and Theral, remaining obstinately silent, and Yeoman Kendo, who was trying to suppress her pain-filled sobbing. All were naked, their clothes stripped from them at capture.

Kirk was glad that his Medical Officer and Science Officer were dead, both killed instantly and painlessly in the treacherous attack that had overwhelmed the landing party; at least they were spared this situation and he was spared the torment of condemning them to a slow and agonising death. Enough that he must hear the three who remained screaming their lives away, one by one, knowing that at last he also must die in the same way under the knives of these barbaric people who called themselves civilised, for he would not - could not - give them the information they desired. The temptation to do so to save the lives of his crew he had suppressed at birth. He could only hope that they would understand why he had to let them die.

The enemy interrogator watched him carefully, intently, a gleam of sadistic pleasure showing deep in the dark eyes, and Kirk knew that the being hoped that he would remain silent so that the information could be tortured out of him. The thought that it would not be clearly did not enter the being's calculations and Kirk shivered slightly; the creature - its sex was indeterminate, and anyway beings of its race could not be called men - was clearly skilled at its work and probably thoroughly enjoyed it; how long could it extend the torture before its victim died? His one hope was that the alien physiology would defeat it and it would accidentally kill them all quickly. It would be easiest, too, if the creature started with the woman; brave as she was, she lacked the obstinate courage of the security men, and it would make his duty the more difficult if she started begging him to speak, so spare them... as she surely would if she had to watch the two men dying first.

His hope was unfulfilled. Almost casually, the interrogator selected Theral. It cut Theral from the pole and lifted him easily to lie on a bench studded with nails that stood in front of them. Then it lifted a metal probe and began to prod, almost gently, at various parts of the man's body. Gentle touch or not, the probe was clearly agonising, for Theral writhed uncontrollably under it, tearing his back and tied arms open on the nails. Soon the being had selected what it considered the most sensitive spots, and applied the probe to these, in rotation, more firmly than before. The guard could no longer bite back his screams. Kirk pressed his lips tightly together. Whatever happened, he could not betray the Federation's secrets...

Theral was a strong man. It took many hours for him to die. When the body lay, limp and motionless, in a pool of its own blood, the interrogator looked at Kirk expectantly.

"Go to Hell!" Kirk snarled.

The creature's lips moved in what Kirk's limited experience of this race told him was a smile, and then it reached for Gilmore.

The girl was openly sobbing now, realising that her death was inevitable. Kirk glanced aside at her.

"Four lives or the entire Federation," he said.

"I... know, sir," she managed.

Gilmore was lucky. Perhaps his heart was weaker than the alien had expected, for he died quickly, within half an hour. The interrogator looked quite disappointed as it reached for the girl.

It examined her body carefully, realising that she was physically

different from the previous two. However, it seemed to reach the decision that the differences were unimportant, and began to run the probe over her body.

Her screams cut through Kirk like a knife. He was more than ever grateful, now, that his friends were dead. They would have fought to spare him as much agony as possible, but even they would have been unable to remain silent under this... What did the probe do, anyway?

He was soon to learn.

Fire shot through his body from the first delicate touch on one nipple. He was unable to prevent the involuntary movement to escape from the biting agony and the sharp movement sent the nails on which he was lying tearing across his flesh. The touch firmed. Lines of fire radiated from it to all parts of his body. His entire nervous system screamed for escape. The probe touched him again and he discovered that he had been wrong - not all his nerves had been affected the first time. His body moved of its own volition and the nails tore great gouges across his back and his arms, adding to his agony. He was rolled on to his face and the probe touched his lacerated back; he writhed, tearing open his stomach and chest. He screamed then, unable to suffer the agony in silence.

"What are the Federation's plans?" The soft voice promised release.

"Go to Hell!" he gasped, then screamed again...

* * *

He regained consciousness in sickbay. His body was still sore, but it was a dull ache that, after the previous agony, was easily borne. He did not recognise the doctor who bent over him. No, of course not, he thought; the ship must have a new medical officer now...

"What happened?" he whispered.

The ship's sensors had searched... searched until they found him. But it had taken many hours... Something in the doctor's attitude warned him that there was bad news too.

"What's wrong?"

"Starfleet... they've ordered a court of enquiry, Captain, because you lost your landing party."

"But I'd no choice..."

"You'll get the chance to state your case, Captain."

* * *

Kirk was still heavily bandaged when the ship reached Starbase, still under doctor's orders. Despite this he was ordered to attend the court of enquiry right away.

It was immediately obvious that he could expect no sympathy here. He had lost his landing party; a highly trained Science Officer, excellent Medical Officer, two top security personnel... and the daughter of a member of the Federation Council. The accusing voices battered him, giving him no chance to speak, to explain, telling him what he could have done, should have done, all suggesting that he should have surrendered to save his men, told the aliens what they wanted to know...

"No!" he cried out at last, cutting in on the babble of angry voices. "I could not surrender! They were evil - I could not tell them. No matter what they did. My duty was to remain silent, and I did my duty! I regret the deaths... but better that than the millions who would have died if I had betrayed the Federation's secrets..."

* * *

"Congratulations, Ensign."

It took a decided effort to bring his attention back from the induced hallucination and he realised that he was lying on a couch, sensors attached to his body. Then he remembered. The final psychology test... He had known it would be stiff, but not this stiff... He found himself hoping that he would never have to face such a situation in real life even as he realised that in real life he would not be accused of cowardice, of negligence, for doing his duty.

"You've passed the test, Ensign," the Academy psychologist continued as he detached the sensors.

Ensign James T. Kirk straightened himself as he headed for the door marked EXIT. He had passed the final test; now he would be assigned to a Starship, and he could begin the career that he hoped would one day lead to his occupying the command chair in reality, not in dreams.

And if the day ever came when he would have to pay such a price for his ambition as the one he had just dreamed... why, he would do that too, without hesitation. He had never expected his chosen career to be easy.

He was smiling contentedly as he left the medical section on his way to join the other successful candidates in a celebration drink.

VULCAN WEDDING

Bonded as children, growing up
As strangers to each other;
Given no opportunity to meet,
To learn each other's weaknesses and strengths;
Knowing the distant touch of minds
Yet never knowing the hidden thoughts
That lie within those minds; and never knowing
What moves the other to silent joy, and less
What moves him to silent sorrow. Never knowing
What things the other likes, finds beautiful,
What ugliness repels him. In that ignorance
We are expected to begin
A life together. There is no divorce.
Yet what if then in helplessness we find
Our natures clash, are not congenial?
He is well known; a legend, now; I think
I do not want to be the mate of such -
It is enough
That I can never hold a worthwhile place
In our society until I am grown old;
It would be worse
Always to be regarded as an adjunct,
An unimportant creature, while the words
"Her husband is a legend" echo round.
No. I do not wish to be the wife
Of any legend. Not while any choice
Remains. There is another man
Whom I know well, although our minds
Have not yet touched; now he, I know
Would be a husband I would want, and he
Wishes to wed with me.
The marriage day draws near; the time is come;
I - CHALLENGE!

EMBARCATION LEAVE

James T. Kirk, newly appointed Captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise, sat in his room at Starbase One trying to read. It was the last day of his embarkation leave; the last day that he could depend on being left alone, and he had decided to take advantage of it. But to his disappointment, he found that he couldn't relax. He fidgetted restlessly, too excited to remain still. To be appointed to a Starship already, after a bare year commanding a Scoutship, was virtually unheard-of; an honour he fully appreciated, even although in his more soul-searching moments he found himself wondering if he really was ready for such responsibility or if, one day, his youth and comparative lack of experience would catch up with him. To lose his command because of a stupid misjudgement... no. Starfleet Command considered him capable, therefore he must be capable. Firmly, he pushed the incipient doubt out of his conscious thought.

It was impossible to sit still, and yet... somehow he still did not feel like company. The thought of the Starbase's well-stocked recreational lounges did not appeal even although he knew he would meet acquaintances there. One or two were jealous because of his rapid promotion, he knew, and he didn't feel like being diplomatic. Not even the thought of a drinking session with Gary Mitchell attracted him; he didn't want to join his new ship nursing a hangover. If in fact Mitchell was feeling like a drinking session - often he preferred flirting with the prettiest girls available and while Kirk normally was not averse from joining him, on this day he didn't feel like that either.

Today he wanted solitude.

He knew, of course, that on the Enterprise he would inevitably be lonely, especially at first, until he learned which of his senior officers apart from Mitchell he could relax with in the knowledge that they would not take advantage. But that was not the same as the desire for alone-ness he was experiencing today. On the ship, solitude would be a rare and therefore extra-precious commodity; a ship's Captain could expect to be on call twenty-four hours a day, even in his off-duty hours, if he had any pretensions to conscientiousness.

A few moments' thought told Kirk what he really wanted to do. He had already paid a number of visits to the renowned wildlife park that formed part of the recreational facilities of Starbase One, and each time he had seen something new. The Federation had gathered here a unique collection of rare and endangered species, both plant and animal, from a dozen worlds, carefully selected for compatibility; creatures from many worlds lived together in harmony, providing a pattern for the intelligent life of those worlds. Protected by a forcefield from the carnivorous species which each lived in an excellent reconstruction of its native world, this 'walk-about' area covered many acres where a man in search of peace could find it. Few bothered; most Starfleet personnel enjoying leave here preferred to spend their time in the base's bars and lounges; and so Kirk knew that it was unlikely that he would meet anyone. If he did, it would in all probability be someone whose mood was in harmony with his own.

Visitors to the park normally wore neutrally-coloured clothes rather than uniform, in order to blend better with the background for fear of disturbing any of the more nervous species living there. Kirk quickly donned an inconspicuous brown shirt and trousers, and headed for the park.

No-one ever walked briskly here. The place demanded a gentle stroll, with frequent pauses to look at things. Kirk strolled and paused, and looked, and slowly started to relax even though his mind still kept returning, of its own volition, to his new ship and to the short official file he had been given listing his officers. It told him so little - their names, and ranks, their service career - nothing else. He wished it had been possible to talk to Chris Pike about them, find out what they were like as people... but he had seen Pike for only a few minutes in the Admiral's office, and that only by courtesy of the Admiral. Their appointments with him had been consecutive,

Kirk arriving as Pike was about to leave, and the Admiral had chosen to let them meet. It had been long enough for an exchange of congratulations and good wishes, no more, and Pike was already away from the Starbase before Kirk's interview with the Admiral was over.

Now Kirk considered their names, alphabetically as he had been given them.

Mitchell of course he already knew, joining the ship as Chief Navigator with Kirk and at Kirk's special request. At least he would have one friend, but at the same time he knew - and knew that Mitchell knew - that he must still tread carefully where his old friend was concerned. It would be very easy to favour Mitchell over any of the others, and that, he must not do.

Piper, the Chief Medical Officer, due to retire shortly. That was a pity - the ship's surgeon was the one man with whom the Captain could always relax, since he was not in line of command. Any friendship formed with Piper would be of short duration and he would have to start over with the new CMO. Better not get too dependent on Piper's friendship.

Scott, Chief Engineer. A long and distinguished career in space, he had been on board the Enterprise since she was launched. Kirk had met engineers like that before - Scott was probably too wrapped up in his engines to take much interest in the people around him.

Spock, serving both as First Officer and as Science Officer. An unusual combination. He must be an unusual man. Spock too had been on the Enterprise for an unusually long time - eleven years. Most senior officers applied for a transfer after several years if they weren't promoted. Perhaps his being Science Officer accounted for it. Just as few Chief Engineers ever moved up to Captain, few Science Officers did either. Both groups seemed to prefer their specialities. Most Captains had moved up through the ranks without specialising, getting experience in all branches of service. Kirk himself had served as helmsman, navigator, communications officer and had also done a short stint in engineering.

Sulu, Chief Helmsman. Three years' service on the Enterprise. He might think of moving on soon, especially if the men who were second and third in command of the Enterprise showed no sign of wanting to move up. On the other hand, if he had decided to specialise, Sulu was already as high as he could go, short of applying for third in command elsewhere.

Uhura, Chief Communications Officer. Joined the Enterprise straight from the Academy with last year's batch of trainees. Young, but must be very capable to be assigned to a Starship and rise to CCO within a year.

His mind not really on his surroundings, Kirk wandered on, barely conscious of but yet appreciating the myriad sounds and scents of the park. A Terran red squirrel scampered across his path and disappeared behind a tree from Altair 6. He barely saw it as he wondered which, if any, of his new officers he would be able to call 'friend'.

His attention was abruptly recalled by the angry snarl from in front of him. He stopped dead, freezing into immobility at sight of the long white teeth of the tiger-cat crouched there, tail-tip twitching spasmodically. How had that got here? It should be safely held by a forcefield in the Barussian section... Slowly, cautiously, he began to back away, knowing that to turn would be fatal. As long as he kept facing it...

But the Barussian tiger-cat was hungry. It had escaped through a faulty forcefield many hours before, and had missed a meal; none of the denizens of the park walking area was large enough to provide it with a worthwhile meal. This two-legged creature, so like the ones who normally fed it, would feed it now. It began to pad forward.

Attack is the best form of defence, Kirk thought. He glanced round, saw a short branch lying there and picked it up with a quick movement. Then he yelled and sprang towards the tiger-cat, stick raised.

Hunger lent the beast courage. It leaped. At the last moment, Kirk ducked, and the tiger-cat overshot him. He whirled, to keep facing it, guessing that the same trick wouldn't work twice. But perhaps it wouldn't need to; someone was coming up behind the tiger-cat at a run, a figure wearing dark grey. But unless the newcomer had a weapon of some kind...

The cat crouched to leap again, its attention fully fixed on Kirk. The man approaching reached the cat before it had time to move and jumped on to its back. Kirk immediately moved forward to help, but his assistance wasn't needed; long fingers found a spot on the creature's neck, and it rolled over, limp.

Kirk drew a long breath as he looked at his rescuer. A Vulcan, to judge from the pointed ears and sloping eyebrows.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "That's some trick you've got."

"A simple nerve pinch," the Vulcan replied. "The animal will be unconscious for only a few minutes. I suggest that we use those minutes to leave its vicinity."

"We must report it," Kirk commented.

"Of course," the Vulcan agreed. As they started off back towards the base buildings, he continued, "I am surprised that anyone else should be in the park..."

"Especially a Human, eh?" Kirk laughed. "I've been to it several times during my leave - it's a very restful place... usually."

"Restful indeed. I have also found it most instructive. There are a number of species there that I have not had the opportunity to study in their own environment."

"I think there are some that are extinct now on their own planets," Kirk said with regret.

"Four species, to my knowledge," the Vulcan agreed.

They finished the walk in silence, neither feeling any need to break it. After they had reported the presence of the tiger-cat in the walking area, Kirk glanced at the Vulcan. He still did not feel like company, and yet the alien's presence was restful...

"Would you care to join me for a meal?" he asked diffidently, wondering how a Vulcan would react to such an invitation. Vulcans were normally very reserved, he knew.

"I would be honoured."

They went to a quiet part of the base, away from the hubbub of the main lounges. The Vulcan selected a vegetable dish, and Kirk, recalling then that Vulcans were vegetarians, rapidly revised his own selection and without much regret for the steak he had originally planned to order, chose cheese. The Vulcan glanced at Kirk.

"Permit me to select a drink for us," he murmured.

Vulcans don't drink alcohol, Kirk remembered. "Yes, of course," he said.

The drink, when it came, was a delicate green colour which a Human would not normally have considered looked drinkable at all. Kirk sipped it a little cautiously, then more enthusiastically.

"You like it?" the Vulcan asked.

"Indeed yes," Kirk replied.

"It is not well-known throughout the Federation," the Vulcan explained, "although most Starbases carry a small supply for visiting Vulcans. We regard it much as Humans regard champagne."

"It's better than any champagne I've ever tasted," Kirk replied cheerfully.

"And I can guarantee that no matter how much you drink, it will not give you a 'hangover', I believe is the expression."

Kirk smiled. "Good."

They spoke quietly over their meal, exchanging thoughts on several subjects and finding themselves remarkably in accord. Finally, over coffee, the Vulcan seemed to sigh.

"I have enjoyed our meal," he said. "Unfortunately, I am due back on duty shortly, and must go now."

"It's been nice meeting you," Kirk replied. "And thanks again. We'll maybe meet again."

"Indeed, I hope so." The Vulcan inclined his head gracefully, and walked away.

Kirk returned to his room, realising as he went that somehow he and the Vulcan had never got round to exchanging names. Pity. However, the man had a face it would be easy to recognise. They would surely meet again.

He slept badly that night, tensing up again at the thought of joining his ship. His ship. The thought sang in his mind. It seemed both too long and too short a time before he headed for the base's transporter room, wearing dress uniform. His gear would be beamed up for him; that was one thing he no longer needed to worry about.

It seemed that he had no sooner straightened his shoulders than he was materialising on board the Enterprise. He looked towards his senior officers, gathered to meet him, wondering if they were as nervous as he.

Recognition was immediate and mutual. As Kirk stared at the tall slim Vulcan in dress blue, he felt an idiotic grin dawning; and although the calm face regarding him remained unaltered, he was sure he saw an answering gleam of something that was a combination of welcome and pleasure.

At the same time, Kirk had the instinctive feeling that to mention last night just yet would embarrass the Vulcan - and he was unwilling to risk the friendship that had, he was sure, begun by causing embarrassment. He stepped down towards his officers.

The Vulcan spoke. "Spock, First Officer, sir. Lt.-Commander Scott, Lt.-Commander Piper, Lt. Sulu, Lt. Uhura. Lt. Mitchell I believe you already know."

Kirk saw from Mitchell's face that he believed he was the main recipient of the Captain's broad grin. "Yes, Mr. Spock. Gentlemen - Miss Uhura."

"She's a great ship, Captain," Mitchell laughed. "You're going to like her."

Kirk chuckled, glad that Gary had used the more formal address. Time enough for informality later. "Speaks the expert. How long have you been aboard, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Nearly an hour," Mitchell boasted.

Kirk could have sworn he saw an answering, appreciative gleam in Spock's eye as he answered solemnly, "Since Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott have both served aboard the Enterprise for a considerable time, I think you must be right. Give me your opinion again when you've served eleven years on her."

"Would you care to see your quarters, sir?" Spock asked.

"Please, Mr. Spock. Gentlemen, Miss Uhura, I'll see you again later."

As he walked down the corridor at Spock's side, Kirk remembered something that had been said last night. Here, without anyone to hear, he could mention it. "We'll be able to test each other's chess skill after all, Mr. Spock."

"Wouldn't you prefer Mr. Mitchell's company in your off-duty time, Captain?" The voice was quiet, even, yet it held a note of... wistfulness?

"Gary doesn't play chess. Besides, I enjoyed our conversation last night. I'd like to talk with you again."

"I would be honoured, Captain."

"The name's Jim," Kirk said, hopefully.

The Vulcan hesitated for a moment. "You honour me... Jim. For myself ... Spock is my given name. My family name... since no non-Vulcan can pronounce it properly, I find it easier not to use it off-world."

Kirk sensed that he had been given a confidence not frequently offered. "I see." They turned into the cabin assigned to the Captain. "Thank you, Spock - for everything."

They looked at each other, feeling again the affinity that had touched them the evening before. Then Kirk said quietly, "It's going to be a good five years."

THOUGHTS ON SHORE LEAVE

To rest is to rest -
To cease using energy; to relax,
Recover from the strain
Of steady work and difficult decisions.
And yet my colleagues,
My Human crewmates, seem to find it hard
To let themselves relax.
To them a rest means using energy...
I've even heard them say,
"Change is as good as rest," - and certainly
For them it seems to work,
And they recover with amazing speed
From tiredness,
Depression, irritation and ill health.

I ask myself
If such reaction could be mine;
I ask myself
If once, instead of sitting meditating,
I were to go with them
And share their restless seeking of intangibles,
Would I indeed know rest?
Or would I find it lacking in the essence
That gives to meditation
The power to relax my mind, and find
Comfort from all the strain
Of living with my dual heritage.
I do not know. And what is more,
I am afraid to try.

MEDITATION



Solitude

Is not the same as loneliness.

Loneliness is forced upon you, solitude

Is choosing to be apart, alone,

And separate, in the peaceful knowledge

That no unwelcome presence will intrude.

And yet...

Once I truly valued solitude - or did I?

Was it not that loneliness through choice

Hurt less than being forced to stand aside, than

Being ignored because I'd alien blood?

I am still different, still one apart,

Not sharing any of the joys or sorrows,

The mixed emotions of the Human race.

And yet...

Almost I understand them;

For I have found a quality I value

Among the Human race.

Among the Human race

I have found friends.

ECHO

James T. Kirk breathed a sigh of relief as his cabin door slid shut behind him. The tension at the formal dinner had been almost unbearable; only the two Vulcans had seemed unaware of it, yet it was they who had caused it. No... not quite they: Kirk was still fuming on Spock's behalf, even although his First Officer had accepted Sepek's icily formal refusal to acknowledge his presence with apparent equanimity. But Kirk, who knew Spock so well, was sure that his friend was hiding a bitter hurt.

The conversation had come round to cross-breeding in animal strains - directed there by Sepek so adroitly that no-one could have claimed that it was deliberate - and he had indicated his disapproval, his utter condemnation, of such husbandry.

"Only the pure thoroughbred gives the most satisfactory returns," he had said. "Crossbreeding weakens both strains." The inference was more than plain.

As always on such occasions, McCoy had jumped to Spock's defence. "Thoroughbreds are often so overbred that they're too delicate to be of full value. New blood is frequently required to improve the strain. The hybrid has greater stamina and more reliable a temperament - and often greater intelligence." His tone just stopped short of being insolent - not that the eminent Vulcan scientist was likely to identify his tone as such. Sepek had refused to listen.

"It is certain that pure-blooded species provide exactly what is required of them. It is an orderly process. Overbreeding is due solely to poor husbandry."

As McCoy opened his mouth to reply, Kirk had thrown him a warning glance, and he had subsided unwillingly. The conversation had languished thereafter, and the 'party' had broken up soon after.

Now Kirk was faced with the problem of getting the man to work with Spock. How he was going to do it, since the scientist gazed through the First Officer as if he didn't exist, Kirk didn't know. Come to that, why had Sepek ever accepted the assignment? As a civilian, he could have refused. Or... could it have been that he had accepted before he knew that Spock was the Science Officer he had to work with? And had then been unable to find a logical reason for changing his mind? But if so, what did the man have against Spock? His hybrid blood, an unpleasant whisper speculated.

Morning brought no inspiration, It did, however, bring his First Officer. On the surface, Spock was his usual imperturbable self, but Kirk could see below the surface now, and read the almost unnoticeable signs of tension. The Captain would in any case have smiled a welcome; now, he expressed his sympathy and the sense of unity that would have embarrassed Spock unutterably if it had been openly indicated by smiling rather more warmly than usual.

Spock sank into the indicated chair. It was a measure of his trust in the Captain that as he did so, he allowed his shoulders to droop fractionally. Kirk knew then that Spock was very, very disturbed by Sepek's behaviour. Well, he could try to make things a little easier for his friend by relieving him of the necessity of mentioning the subject first.

There was, however, no tactful way of saying it. For a moment, he searched for words; then, afraid that if he delayed any longer, Spock would have to say it after all, "Do you know why Sepek doesn't like you?" he asked bluntly.

Spock sighed deeply, and shook his head. "Not really, Captain." He made no attempt to pretend that Kirk was wrong. "We were children together," Spock continued after a short silence. "He did not like me then... but he did not,

then, ignore my very existence. It would have been easier for me if he had ... " His voice trailed off uncharacteristically.

Kirk waited, offering silent sympathy.

"The other boys... they called me an emotional Earther," Spock said at last, very quietly. "Sepek... Sepek was their leader. He is slightly older than I, and at seven years of age was stronger than I, at six... so when I tried to prove myself... It was, perhaps, proving their point when I did something so illogical as try to defeat him physically when it was obvious that he was the stronger..." He fell silent again.

Kirk rose and moved to put a hand on his friend's shoulder. He gripped firmly, sympathetically. "Sepek perhaps was echoing his parents?" he asked.

Spock considered. "It is possible. There were those who disapproved of my mother, and thought that my father had acted unwisely by marrying her - even although, by the time they left Earth for Vulcan, she had learned Vulcan ways and Vulcan manners. But that is now in the past, Captain. There is a more important matter to consider; Sepek's refusal to acknowledge my being, when we are assigned to work together."

"Perhaps his attitude was a kind of test of your Vulcan-ness?" Kirk suggested.

Spock shook his head. "No, Captain. He meant what he said. He despises me as a hybrid - and he is unlikely ever to accept that I can be as efficient in my work as a full-blooded Vulcan. Or even a full-blooded Human."

"Can you think, then, why he should have accepted the assignment?"

Slowly, Spock shook his head again. "No. He must have known, too, that the Science Officer of the Enterprise is Spock, the despised mongrel - "

"Spock, the best Science Officer in the Fleet," Kirk interrupted, speaking very gently. "And the only officer in the Fleet who could possibly combine that position with that of First Officer. Put against Starfleet's judgement - and my own - I don't think much of Sepek's."

He knew, by the fractional relaxation of the stiff shoulder still under his hand, that his words - or, even more, the obvious sincerity behind them - had comforted Spock. Kirk went on. "If necessary, I'll complain to Starfleet and get him taken off the research - and tell them why."

"That won't help, Captain," Spock said. "Too many of his fellow scientists agree with him. Perhaps if I had gone to the Vulcan Science Academy as my father wished... but I knew that I would meet with hostility there, no less real for being unvoiced... I decided that it would be less painful being alone among aliens than being alone among my own people; but of course, the decision simply confirmed the opinion of those who felt my Human heritage to be a fault." He fell silent for a moment. "What I did not expect was that among my mother's people... I would find friends. I had come to believe that friendship was not for me."

"Hostility," Kirk said. "That hardly conforms to the IDIC concept."

"Agreed, Captain. But even Vulcans can sometimes be cruel in their attitudes. Sepek... his dislike of me may be personal or instilled by his parents, as you suggested; he always used his undoubted ability as a leader to gain support in his... persecution. And his behaviour now is a logical extension of his behaviour as a child. It is easier for me to ignore, true... but it is not any easier to endure," he added, so softly that Kirk barely heard him.

There's one big difference," Kirk told him quietly. "Here, he has no-one to back him up. You said it yourself - here, you're the one with friends."

"Yes, Jim, I know. I was grateful, last night, for your sympathy and

McCoy's support. Without you both, I would undoubtedly have walked out, and thus shown him how successful his taunting still was. Knowing I have your support, I can continue to ignore his attitude. But that does nothing to solve the problem of how to convince him to co-operate with me in this investigation. I am loathe to admit defeat, but I very much fear that I will have to refrain from taking any sort of active part in these investigations."

"No!" Kirk snapped. "You're more essential than he is. He's the extra, the outsider, the supernumerary. If we're going to do without someone, then we'll do without him!"

"You can't do that, Captain."

"Try me!" Kirk growled.

"Jim, it could cause untold harm to Vulcan's relationship with the Federation. Sepek's family... Not all Vulcans agree that the Federation is a good thing for our world. Although Sepek is here now, his family is among the more important of those who would like to see a return to the old days when Vulcan stood alone. And Sepek is not above using his family's influence if he feels himself slighted."

And from those words, Kirk realised that he had been correct. Sepek was most certainly echoing his parents' views on Spock.

"What about the success of the mission?" he asked. "Isn't that important?"

"Captain, Sepek does have the ability to lead. He is fully able to direct matters."

"He has the ability to lead Vulcans. What experience has he of Humans? I know you remember the problems you had in your early days of Command, before you learned to understand Human reactions. And you had advantages Sepek doesn't have."

"The situation will not be quite the same, Captain. He would simply be directing scientific investigation. There would be no danger, no difficult decisions, no reason for Human illogic to disagree with him. "

"Wrong, Spock. You know what the ship's grapevine's like. You've said yourself that it's almost telepathically swift. It'll take us three weeks to get to Lambda Aquarii; word of his attitude to you will be all round the crew before today is out; by tomorrow, there won't be a man aboard who'll be willing to oblige him in any way, or co-operate with him."

"That is hardly logical, Captain. Why should the crew be unwilling to work with Sepek?"

"To show him they're on your side. Spock, it isn't just among the senior officers that you have friends. You're well liked by everyone, you're one of us - one of the Enterprise family, that an outsider is trying to bully. The crew will hate him for it. Believe me, I know; after last night, Bones and I both detest his guts. Bones can avoid him. I can't, not entirely, and I'm going to find it very difficult to be civil to him."

Spock thought for a minute. "It might be possible to compromise," he said at last. "I could perhaps handle the routine shipboard research, making it look like nothing more than the compilation of the data, while Sepek handles the ground investigations."

"Yes... yes! It should be possible to persuade him that what he's doing is far more important than what you're doing, too, and we can persuade the men to work with him with the appearance of willingness when they think he's being fooled."

"I can almost find it in myself to feel sympathy for Sepek," Spock said wryly. "After all, it isn't necessarily his fault - you said yourself - "

"It is his fault," Kirk retorted. "He should never have accepted the

assignment when he realised he'd have to work with you. Or else made up his mind that, having accepted it, he would have to make the best of it, and at least treat you with courtesy. He may be a brilliant scientist, but he's behaving like a spoiled brat, not like a Vulcan at all."

Spock sighed, accepting the unpalatable truth of Kirk's observation. Sepek's behaviour was, indeed, not Vulcan at all; it never had been, he suddenly realised. Whereas his Human friends' attitude showed all the compassionate understanding of the difficulties caused by his mixed blood that he would rather have expected from his Vulcan compatriots; for it was logical to assume that a hybrid would have problems. He felt the strangely accustomed warmth of his affection for those Human friends, as he thought how right Kirk was. Here, he had friends to stand beside him, friends who would, he knew, feel privileged to share those problems. He felt a sudden need to express something of how he felt.



"Thank you, Jim. You always understand."

It was, as Kirk had foretold, a most uncomfortable three weeks. Sepek strolled round the ship freely, forever in and out of the laboratories, taking full advantage of the 'freedom of the ship' that Kirk had, from courtesy, extended to him when he came aboard. He seemed completely unaware of the hostility directed at him. It took a direct order from Spock, countersigned by Kirk, to prevent the entire crew sending Sepek to Coventry by the third day. As it was, people avoided him; scientists working on personal research - all had some pet scheme to occupy their duty hours when the ship was on a routine long haul between the stars - found an excuse to slip away any time Sepek came near. Kirk found himself wondering if the scientist was as thick-skinned and unobservant of peoples' attitudes as he appeared, or if he was just passing it off as Human rudeness that he was too polite to permit himself to notice.

At last the ship swung into orbit round the strange little planet whose complex and contradictory readings necessitated this high-level scientific mission. There were dangers here; the star's sole planet circled it at a distance of only fifteen million miles, and while the star was only a dim orange-red emitting little more than 3000 degrees Centigrade, barely half of the heat given out by Sol, and quite low-level radiation, the ship would have to move away at fairly frequent intervals while the shields bled off into the surrounding space the concentration of both that they absorbed.

Spock assigned his chief assistants, Carstairs and Thong, to work with Sepek; Kirk privately added to Spock's instructions, telling them that he was depending on them to make sure that Spock got all the necessary information - he didn't put it past Sepek to 'forget' to pass on to the ship some of the collected information, keeping it to process himself at his leisure. Several junior scientists made up the landing party. One security guard was included, for the sole purpose of satisfying the requirements of the book, since the planet read bare of animal life and only possessed minimal plant life. And this was one of the anomalies - for it had a breathable atmosphere.

Despite his orders to Carstairs and Thong, however, Kirk felt rather

unhappy about entrusting the ground research solely to Sepek's guidance. He had every faith in Spock's senior assistants, of course, but... He tried to persuade himself that he was merely reacting to Sepek's attitude, but he could not rid himself of the conviction that Sepek was not wholly to be trusted. Not wholly. He was too sure of the... innate superiority of Vulcans over all other races? Kirk wasn't sure. But it was in response to this inner prompting that he decided to join the landing party; that it gave him an opportunity to show Sepek the extent of his trust in Spock was something he tried not to think about, feeling it to be a base, underhand motive, telling himself that he was going down primarily to ensure that his men did indeed accept Sepek's authority.

The planet was an unattractive place. The ground had been composed of rock and sandy soil, but it was now fused together by heat into a smooth glass-like substance that covered the surface to a depth of several inches. Below that, the ground's composition could be seen. It seemed as if, some time in the long distant past, the planet had been exposed to sudden extreme heat, possibly in the form of a solar flare - even an incipient nova that had failed to materialise, despite the lack of evidence in the surrounding space that such an event had occurred - it takes a long time for the radiation from a nova to disperse. Long distant - for the glass covered the entire surface and the little world no longer rotated as it orbited its primary but forever kept the same side turned to its sun. Radiation took some heat to the dark side, but there was no way they could investigate it without special equipment - equipment they did not have because the long distance survey that had brought them here had not shown that it would be needed. The landing party was to investigate the sunlit hemisphere, while the orbiting Enterprise garnered data about the far side and investigated the single, faint moon that whirled round its mother world in an almost unprecedented twenty hours. Here and there the solid sheet of obsidian-like material on the planet was broken by the unmistakable crater left by a meteorite; and it was in those craters that such plant life as there was grew. They could only speculate on the distribution of craters between sunward and dark sides - even the ship's sensors, excellent though they were, could not detect more than the largest craters in the pitch-dark obsidian-covered frosted-over world of the sunless hemisphere.

Around their selected camp site mountains rose, low and erosion-rounded, with valleys cutting into them, but the sides were smooth and unclimbable. Most of the research, if not all, would have to be on this plain that bordered what could have been a sea, eons before. For here, and only here on the entire planet, they had detected the existence of ruins buried under the obsidian that they had to break by phaser fire before they could erect their tents.

Sepek, despite Kirk's doubts, showed no desire to retain any of the information they gathered, transmitting it all to the ship. The Vulcan scientist knew his job, Kirk was forced to admit, although he still felt that Spock was the more able, and it wasn't only loyalty that brought him to that conclusion. There was a degree of... not uncertainty, exactly,



but near hesitation before Sepek made his decisions, gave his instructions - a hesitation Spock never displayed. Kirk noted it to include in the log - he was still determined that he was going to report his opinion of Sepek for the benefit of Starfleet.

The first results all concerned the ruins. Little remained but the foundations, but these showed a well-thought-out design. This had once been an extensive settlement, and the very size of it made the lack of discernable ruins on the rest of the planet all the more puzzling, for even colonists settling a new world would not normally begin by building an enormous city. Except... how had these ruins escaped being fused into the general glass covering? Was that what had happened to all the other cities of the planet?

In the centre of the ruins was an open space which they came to use as their meeting-place to compare notes as they worked. There were no recognisable artifacts, although as Sepek pointed out, they might in fact be seeing artifacts but not recognising them as such because of their alien appearance. However, a skeleton is a skeleton no matter how alien its owner, and the discovery of the first ones brought them all running, even the bored security guard, glad of something to occupy a few minutes of this interminable stretch of duty.

The skeletons were humanoid, but in no way Human. Each had a large cranium tapering to a long, thin nose and mouth; the ribcage was enlarged, the legs short and stumpy. The arms, in contrast, were long and must have nearly brushed the ground as the beings walked. That they walked upright was clearly indicated by the angle of the neck and head. The bones lay undisturbed, in a remarkable state of preservation for remains the tricorder indicated were nearly a million years old. Undoubtedly the glass that protected the planet had preserved the bones. But, considering the extent of the area covered by the ruins and the excellent state of preservation of all the skeletons that they found, there were in fact surprisingly few bodies. Most of them were lying in groups, although a few lay singly - a total of only a few hundreds, in a city that must have been able to accommodate millions. The scientists did not bother to break through the protecting glass to reach most of the bodies, but simply recorded them through it. But they were left with the additional question - as with the ruins, why had the bodies not also been fused into the layer of glass?

Meanwhile, the Enterprise had been gathering information on the little satellite. It also had an atmosphere, attenuated now but still breathable - barely. A landing party going down to it would certainly need environmental suits, Spock decided - or at least breathing masks. It was pitted with meteor scars, and had an earth/rock surface completely different to that of its parent, being completely normal for planetary composition; there was no obsidian here at all. Here and there were sparse radio-active readings, almost gone now. One source was fractionally stronger than the others, but still so faint that Spock knew that its half-life was almost gone. The little world had an iron core, and deposits of iron were fairly wide-spread, but that metal was so common throughout the galaxy that it held no value for miners seeking rapid fortunes. Spock recorded the facts, and promptly forgot about the planetoid, turning his attention to the study of the dark side of the main world, and working on the data sent up by the landing party. If he had never known before what frustration was, he learned it in those hours as he studied the reports on items he would never be able to see.

When it was time for the Enterprise to veer away for several hours to lose the accumulation of heat and radiation in her shields, Sepek expressed surprise that Kirk did not return to the ship to supervise the manoeuvre. Kirk stared at him. It was not wholly unexpected, of course, but...

"Sir, I have every confidence in my First Officer. He is more than capable of giving the necessary orders. In addition, it is valuable experience for him, as he will almost certainly apply for a Captaincy one day - and get it." But his thought ran on, unbidden, after I have retired... he won't leave me. He's never said so, of course... but he's never needed to. We both know it.

Did Sepek know that Spock the Science Officer was also First Officer? Kirk had deliberately not said, hoping for a comment that would tell, but he got none.

As the Enterprise passed the little satellite on her way from the planet, an ancient circuit was triggered; relays, almost too stiff to move, creaked shut, sending their message to a machine long buried in dust. A pulsed signal sped silently down to the planet, failing to activate the warning bell that had long since disintegrated into dust, its remains fused into the sheet of glass that covered the surface. But the pulsed signal bounced back; and on receipt of it, the machine whirred stiffly into performing its function.

When the small red sun was only a pinpoint of light, Spock held the ship in position until heat and radiation levels were back to normal. For the first time in a month, the Vulcan relaxed. It was pure self-indulgence, of course, but he knew he would have liked Kirk to be present, with his aura of friendship and the never-failing trust that had done so much to help Spock's self-confidence over the years. Only the First Officer knew how artificial and brittle his Vulcan calm and self-assurance really were; the constant reassurance of Kirk's approval and faith had done much for him, so that now only Spock remembered the unsure moments of near-Human response that he had shown during Pike's rule and in the early days of Kirk's. He realised fully now that Sepek and his friends had nearly destroyed him by their behaviour so many years ago; had they realised just what they were doing to him? Probably not... yet Sepek, now, was just as sadistic... and now, as an adult, he must know, surely, how cruel he was being. Although he had not said one word to Spock, Sepek radiated dislike, disapproval, disdain; Spock's telepathic mind could not miss it, any more than it could miss McCoy's concealed affection. Only now he had a defence that as a child he had lacked; the simple fact that men whom he trusted, trusted and believed in him.

They needed to remain away for only a short time; Spock took the ship back towards the single planet, and swung back into orbit.

"Lieutenant, contact Captain Kirk and inform him of our return."

Uhura flicked switches; looked around with a bewilderment that was not yet alarm. "There's no response, Mr. Spock."

"Strange. What about the other members of the landing party?"

"Trying them now, sir... "

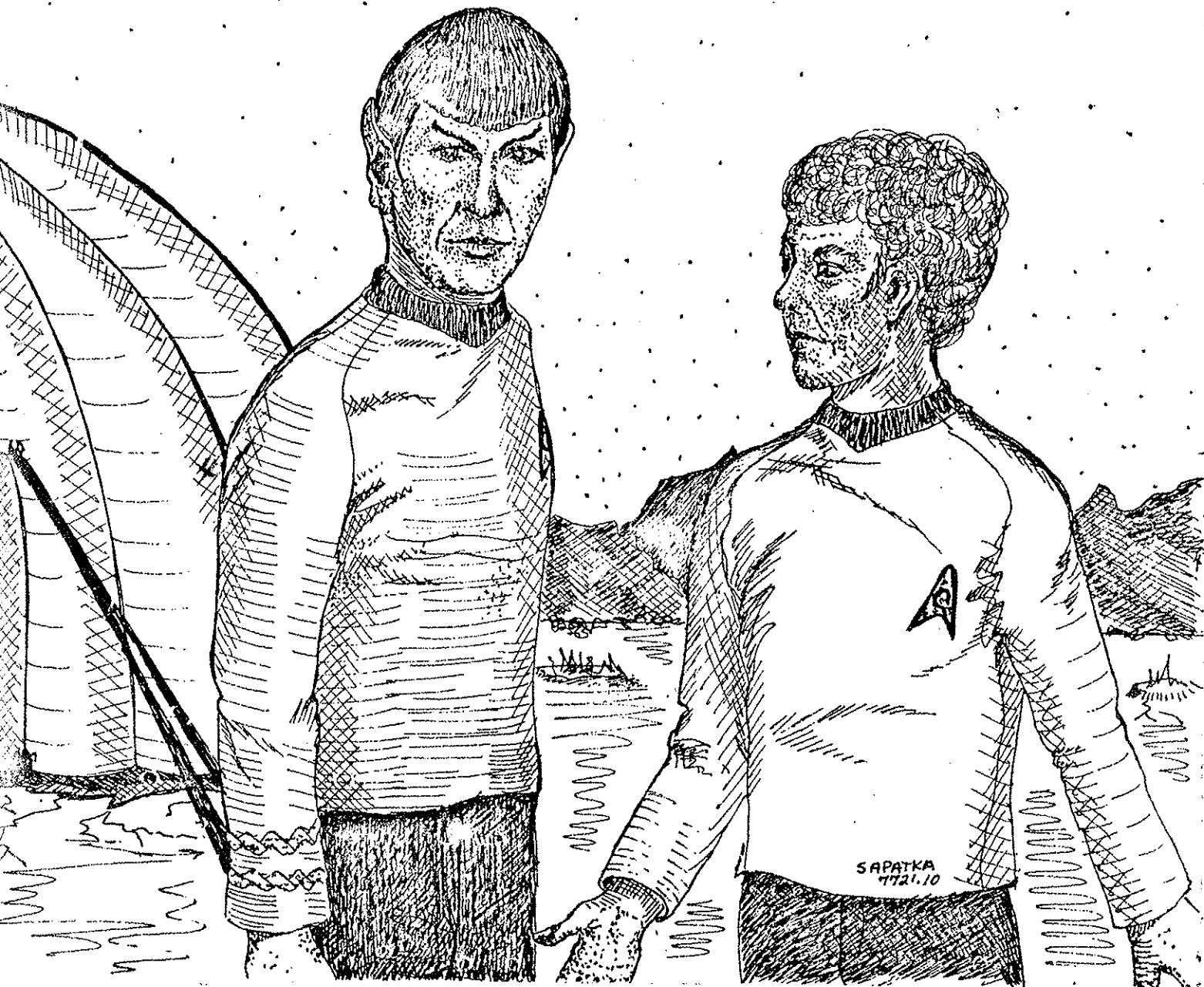
"... Enterprise! Thank God you're back, sir!"

Spock recognised the voice as that of the security guard. "Report, Mr. Mancini."

"Everyone else has disappeared, sir. One moment they were here - the next, they'd all vanished... except for their tricorders and communicators. But the Captain, Mr. Sepek, all the scientists... they've all gone!"

Taking a squad of security men, Spock beamed down to the camp site.

The tents stood in an orderly group, waiting patiently for their occupants to return to them; but of those occupants, only one stood waiting for



them. Mancini, the puzzled and frightened security guard who had accompanied the scientists.

"Report, Mr. Mancini."

The guard looked at Spock as if he had suddenly sprouted horns. "Just what I told you already, sir," he said. "One minute everyone was there, the next - they'd all gone. But their tricorders and communicators are still there, sir; they didn't disappear like the men."

Sure enough, the communicators and tricorders were lying there in a scattered cluster as if their owners had simultaneously decided to drop them before vanishing.

"Was there any particular reason for them being in this area, Mr. Mancini?"

"Not really, Mr. Spock. It's a sort of central area; a kind of clearing among the ruins. The scientists have been using it as a meeting place. They were just gathering to compare notes on what they'd found before we broke off for a few hours. I was over here - " he indicated a spot not far from where they were standing " - as there wasn't any need for me to go over - I didn't have anything to report."

The man was very nervous. Spock could, in part, guess why; the Security Chief would certainly have a few words to say to one of his men who lost his Captain and an entire landing party.

Although he had no hope that he would discover anything, Spock swung his tricorder all round, examining every point of the compass. He might as well have saved himself the effort; the sensor showed absolutely blank; there was no trace of life whatsoever within scanning range.

The search party was despondent as it returned to the ship. While none of them had been anxious to discover bodies, at least that would have been something. This puzzling blank was an enigma that depressed them all more than the discovery that something unknown had killed the missing men would have done. None of them was superstitious; perhaps it was just as well.

Spock ran the readings from the tricorders that had been left behind, but this also provided no answers. All of them had been switched off prior to their bearers heading into the area that had swallowed them up. It was further proof, if any had been needed, that whatever had happened had been completely unexpected.

The Vulcan First Officer turned command over to Scotty, then headed straight for his quarters, leaving orders that he was not to be disturbed for anything less than a message in Code Factor One - unless the missing men reappeared. This riddle, merely bewildering to his men, was his to solve - if he could.

Fingers steepled, Spock submerged his mind into his subconscious, there to consider the facts, few though they were. He lost all awareness of his surroundings as he pondered, sinking deeper and deeper into a state of meditation so intense that few Vulcans ever dared it, for it carried the risk of losing all track of reality and entering a catatonic state where nothing mattered except the subject under consideration, so that the absorbed mind forgot to sustain the body so dependent on it and the victim died shortly thereafter. But for Jim Kirk, Spock was prepared to risk even that.

After the Enterprise left, the landing party continued their research as usual, for a short time. Then, as the arbitrary time they had decided on should be their working day came to an end, Sepek called them together for a last comparison of their results. Kirk moved nearer to listen; only Lt. Mancini remained among the ruins, waiting until they joined him before returning to camp. There was a feeling of dizziness that lasted for a brief moment, and the air around them seemed to shimmer; then the faint dancing haze cleared, and they found themselves standing in darkened surroundings.

A huge moon hung in the sky above them, casting a faint light on the surrounding terrain. They could make out few details. Kirk glanced automatically towards the Vulcan, ready with the accustomed "Evaluation?" even although he was well aware that this Vulcan was not Spock; and the question was choked off unasked. Sepek was shaking his head in obvious disbelief, and Kirk was conscious of a momentary impatience. Spock, now...

Kirk shook his own head sharply, reminding himself that in this puzzling situation he did not have his Science Officer with him to advise him. He had a group of able scientists, true, but none had the experience - or, with the doubtful exception of Sepek, the logical intuition of Spock. Sepek was, in this situation, a completely unknown quantity. He had the intelligence, the scientific ability - but completely lacked experience in facing the entirely unexpected. Kirk looked around, trying to form his own evaluation, from his growing breathlessness already aware of the thinness of this world's atmosphere. There was not the gravity to hold the atmosphere; if the apparent age of the system was anything to go by, they were fortunate that any air at all

still remained. The air was slowly bleeding away, and in a short time - geologically speaking - the planet would be an airless ball.

So they were no longer on the main planet; they could not be, unless some sort of time warp had pushed them forwards for eons and the 'moon' was in fact the almost-dead sun. But Kirk could not accept that; no, while all probabilities seemed equally remote, the most likely one was that they were actually on the planet's small satellite. And indeed, this guess was quickly substantiated as the moon, in their sky, over the next hours, became gibbous, then half, then quarter, as it shot across towards the horizon. And it was very cold.

"This... isn't possible!" Sepek gasped.

Kirk couldn't resist the opportunity to get back at Sepek for at least some of his treatment of Spock. "Illogical, sir," he said, in Spock's exact intonation. "Since it has happened, it is clearly possible."

Sepek glanced quickly at him, catching the irony, then apparently decided to let it go, accepting the stupidity of his statement, realising that he, the superior full-blooded Vulcan, had reacted foolishly.

"Can you pick up any signs of life, gentlemen, or - " Kirk went on.

The question recalled the scientists' wandering attention, and Carstairs reached for his tricorder. "Captain - my tricorder's missing!"

"So's mine..." came in a muttered chorus.

With a sinking dread, Kirk reached for his communicator. "Did anyone retain his communicator?" he asked, knowing that the answer would be negative.

"Sir - Mancini isn't here!" Thong exclaimed.

Now how... Kirk rubbed his hands over his face tiredly. Then, with an unfamiliar hopeless feeling, he turned to Sepek.

"Vulcans have better night vision than Humans," he said. "Can you see anything that might account for this, sir?"

Sepek gazed around. He could see nothing but rocks and arid soil... and...

"There is something white over there," he said slowly, indicating. Kirk headed in that direction, the others close behind him, the exertion increasing their breathlessness.

A group of skeletons grinned mirthlessly up at them, skeletons identical to the ones they had found among the ruins. These ones also looked as if they had simply lain down to sleep but never wakened, a group of at least several hundred. Some must have been very young - tiny skeletons that lay with a long, protective, many-fingered hand and arm round them. It was mute testimony to a tragedy long past - even more poignant, somehow, than the ones they had discovered on the world below.

"Were they brought here the same way we were?" Kirk said softly. "And if they were - did they know how they got here?"

"Whether they were or not, Captain, we are likely to meet with the same fate, and soon," Sepek said quietly. Kirk glanced at him, aware that it was a very Spockish statement, but also aware that Spock himself would have qualified it with "unless..." Unless what? Unless we can discover how to get back, unless we are found...

"Why?" Kirk asked bluntly.

"The air is thin," Sepek replied as bluntly. "We - none of us - can survive the sparcity of oxygen indefinitely. We can manage for a short while, but lack of sufficient oxygen will kill us. I estimate that you Humans will be unconscious within ten hours, dead within a further hour. I am accustomed

to a thinner atmosphere than you; I believe that I may have double the time that you have. Not more, however."

The Enterprise would soon be back, Kirk knew; it should not take too long for the unwanted heat and radiation to dissipate. But then... Spock would search, of course, but unless they could find some way of attracting his attention, the First Officer was unlikely to think of searching the satellite. After all, how could they have got to it? But there was no way... unless... Kirk looked thoughtfully at Sepek.

"Sir, I know you don't like Spock, but you're both Vulcan and therefore telepathic. Our only chance of survival is for you to try to attract his attention telepathically and let him know - " He broke off, for Sepek was already shaking his head.

"It is not possible, Captain," he said matter-of-factly. "It would be a simple matter if there were a full-blooded Vulcan aboard the Enterprise, but your Science Officer is only a hybrid and as such lacks the ability to communicate over a distance."

"I've seen him communicate over a distance," Kirk said sharply.

"A distance as great as this?"

"Well, no, but - "

"He cannot receive my thoughts, Captain."

"He felt the death of the Intrepid - " .

"Over four hundred minds broadcasting together, Captain. A single mind is vastly different."

"Sepek, do you honestly think he can't receive your thoughts - or do you despise him so much you won't believe he can? If you disbelieve hard enough, you'll make yourself right! Or do you simply hate him so much you'd rather die than be dependent on him?"

The Vulcan was silent for a moment, then -

"I know he has not the full capacity of a true Vulcan," he said quietly. "As a child - "

"He's an adult now! An adult with a brilliant mind! There isn't another man in Starfleet who could combine a Science Officer's duties with a First Officer's, but he does and doesn't even consider himself worked to his full capacity!"

"The ability to read minds is innate. His ability is minimal."

"You just won't believe, will you. You won't believe because you don't want to believe. Well, I believe in him. Humans don't have much telepathic ability, and as far as I know I'm almost psi-null, but Spock's melded with me several times and I believe he'll sense my mind if I concentrate hard enough. And when he does - will you admit then that he is Vulcan?"

"He will not sense your mind, Captain. He has not the ability."

"I don't care, Sepek. I believe - and I'm going to try it. There's nothing else we can do."

The thought that touched Spock's mind was so faint that for a moment, he thought he had imagined it; barely a thought at all, only a failing echo of one. But, faint as it was, the touch was one familiar to him.

*Spock... I need... help... *

*Jim... * He reached out with his mind, groping for the source of the thought. *Where are you?*

*Spock... * It was only a repeat of the previous appeal, and he reached out further.

I hear you, Jim... Where are you?

Spock...?

Where are you, Jim?

*Help me... *

Jim! It was a mental shout, pushed from his mind with all the force of his indomitable will. He strained for a reply, knowing that if there was none, he had failed his Captain... for the first time. And, also, probably, the last, for there had been the first touch of death in Kirk's desperate appeal.

*Moon... Hurry, Spock... No air... *

With a tremendous effort, Spock pulled his mind back into consciousness. He was trembling with sheer exhaustion as he reached for the intercom.

"Spock to bridge; scan the satellite. I believe the Captain and his party... to be there." Then, forced by necessity, he sat back and, breathing steadily, concentrated on regaining a measure of relaxation.

It was several minutes before the intercom bleeped. "Spock here."

"We've pinpointed the landing party, sir. Beaming them aboard now."

"Get Dr. McCoy to the transporter room," Spock ordered.

When Spock entered the transporter room, McCoy was already giving tri-ox injections to the Humans in the landing party. The Vulcan ignored Sepok, the only one who was still fully conscious, and crossed to McCoy.

"Doctor?"

"We were in time, Spock, but only just. A few more minutes..."

Kirk grunted, and stirred. Spock turned to assist the shaken Human to sit up.

"Oh, my head!" Kirk groaned.

"Headache, Jim?"

"And how!"

The hypo hissed again. "That should help."

Kirk grunted his thanks as McCoy turned to Spock. "We thought you'd gone crazy," he admitted. "What made you think to try the moon?"

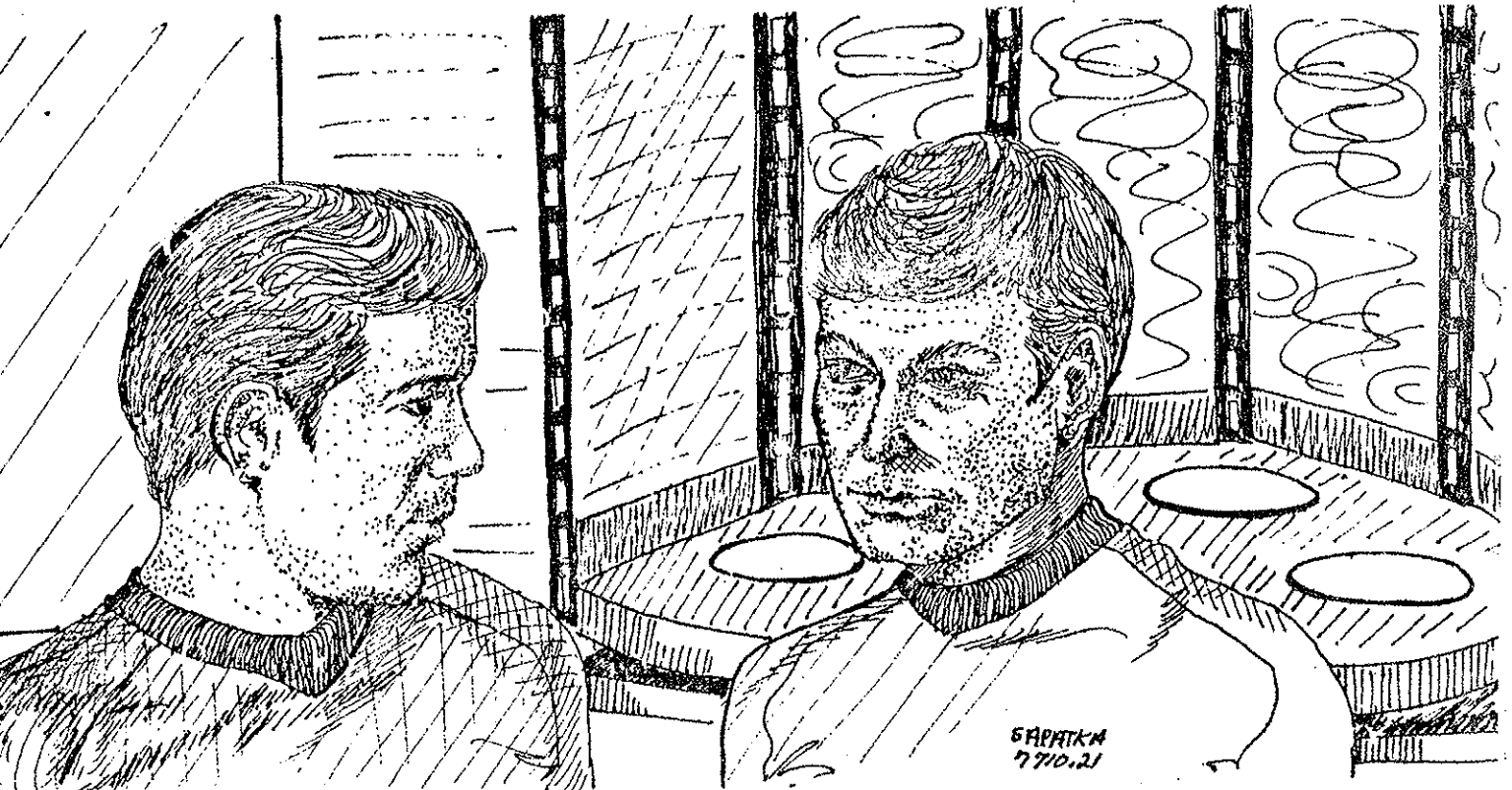
"The Captain told me he was there."

"Huh?"

Kirk glanced towards Sepok. "Well, sir?" he challenged.

"It would appear... that I was mistaken," Sepok confessed. He looked straight at Spock. "You accomplished something I could not have done," he admitted. "I could not have detected a non-Vulcan's thoughts at that distance. I have believed all my life that you are less than a true Vulcan. It appears that you are more. I ask forgiveness for my previous behaviour."

"It is forgotten," Spock said quietly, then added, "I must admit, however, that there are only two men whose thoughts I could have detected over the distance." McCoy looked sharply at him, but having said so much, Spock would not say more. And at heart, the surgeon was grateful for his reticence.



"It is still more than I could have done," Sepek said. Kirk breathed a silent sigh of relief, feeling a hard knot of tension inside him loosen.

"Have you any idea of how you reached the satellite?" Spock asked.

"Mancini!" Kirk exclaimed. "He - "

"Is here, Captain."

"Interesting," Sepek commented. "He was not affected at all by whatever carried us off?"

"Not at all," Spock replied.

"Well, sir, I'll leave you and Mr. Spock to see if you can work out how it happened," Kirk said, crossing his mental fingers. The two Vulcans looked at each other.

"Will you work with me now - after I refused to work with you?" Sepek asked, a little diffidently.

Spock's face lightened. "It is illogical to dwell on what is past," he said. "I would be honoured to share your studies."

They left the transporter room together, already deep in discussion. Kirk glanced at McCoy and grinned. "Somehow, I don't think we'll see much of Mr. Spock for the rest of this mission," he said.

McCoy grinned back. "Probably not," he agreed. "Does it matter?"

"No," Kirk said. "We were there when he needed us - just as he'll be there when we need him. After all, isn't that the most important part of what friends are for?"

Commander Spock has never seen much fun
In what the Human crew call recreation.
He's fully cognisant of how it's done -
He lacks the necessary application!

THANKS

The natives were surprisingly sophisticated for the general level of their culture. They had accepted Federation technology, introduced when the mining operations were started on their world, with no shock at all, yet their own culture had not suffered in any way. Those of them who worked at the mines, providing unskilled labour, returned at night to their homes with no apparent desire to adopt the aliens' ways.

The time came when the Enterprise called at the planet to let McCoy carry out the annual physicals for the miners. Since it was so peaceful a world, Kirk gave permission for shore leave; each watch got twenty-four hours - the physicals would take four days. The only ones to miss out would be the unlucky medical staff who would simply have a day added to their accumulated shore leave, to be taken on some more auspicious occasion.

Spock beamed down with the second party.

Unlike everyone else, however, Spock had no intention of using the time to relax... as Humans understood the word. He had heard of the surprising resilience of the culture, and he planned to spend his leave in studying it. Which, to him, would be a rest.

He wandered away from the mining camp, which they were using as a beam-down point - and 'wandered' was the word. He was in no hurry.

There were several natives around; one or two were clearly occupied in gathering plants. He paused to watch, appreciating their obvious knowledge of the flora. They knew exactly which plants they wanted, and selected them unerringly from among others so similar that Spock knew that he would have been unable to differentiate without a tricorder. After a few minutes, he moved on.

The further he got from the mines, the more natives he saw. They seemed to lack curiosity; few of them so much as glanced at the stranger, and those who did seemed not to notice that he was physically different in any way from the miners. He stored the fact in the back of his mind to be considered later.

The further he got from the mines, too, he noticed, there was a change in the way the natives dressed. Where the ones near the mines wore a kind of sarong made of brightly coloured cloth, there had been a fairly sudden change, and the cloth sarongs had become grass ones. This data also he stored away for later consideration.

His wandering led him to follow the sound of running water. Soon he came on a river, running cheerfully over rocks, hiccuping over tiny falls, splashing its banks with a fine spray. He heard shouts and laughter upstream, and moved that way.

A group of children was playing there. As he approached, he noticed that the sound of falling water was becoming louder, and realised that they were employed in the universal game of all young intelligences, playing where it was dangerous and no doubt forbidden; for they were playing at the base of a very healthily sized waterfall, swimming close to the falling water and running the over-present risk of being beaten under by the force of that same water. He paused, not wanting to alarm them; and even as he did, the accident that any adult would have foreseen overtook one of the bolder boys. He disappeared under the falling water. His head reappeared for an instant, then vanished again. Spock hesitated no longer. He ran forward, and dived in.

Once in the pool, he realised how utterly foolhardy the children were, for it was a maelstrom of conflicting currents that tugged him this way and that but continually forced him closer to the falling curtain of water. Something seemed to be constricting his movements too; he refused to take time to discover what, but swam on. He dived under the surface, trying to see the boy, but the myriad air bubbles prevented him from seeing anything. Something hit against him, and clutched at him, and he realised that, unlikely as it seemed,

the boy had been swept against him. He caught the child in a firm grip, and fought his way back to the surface.

From there it was comparatively easy to regain the bank. The child was quite surprisingly calm, relaxing and letting him pull him in to the side. As they reached it, a child came running, followed by several adults, who slowed as they saw that the stranger had things well in hand.

On dry land again, Spock realised what was restricting his movements. His clothes, unshrinkable though they were meant to be, had already begun to shrink quite alarmingly; he realised that he would be better to remove his shirt, at least - it was already beginning to restrict his breathing. A few words from an adult, and a child ran off again, and the adult then spoke to the Vulcan.

"Our thanks, stranger. Our children are ever foolhardy, and require a fright such as they have just had to make them realise the true danger of the river. I regret that your own clothes have been rendered useless by your kindness; something about river water makes all cloth shrink in size. I have sent my son to get clothing for you."

"I thank you." Spock already suspected what clothes would be brought, but there was no quick way to get back to the Enterprise; he would have little alternative to wearing native clothes.

He was right. The boy brought a grass skirt, but now at least Spock knew why the natives here wore grass rather than cloth sarongs. It was a relief to remove the last part of his tightening clothes, and don the loose, and surprisingly comfortable, grass skirt.

He also felt it would be ungracious on his part to refuse the invitation he was given to visit the natives' village; quite apart from the fact that it was an unparalleled opportunity to see the culture at root level.

Life in the village was clearly peaceful; the natives operated a simple way of life that ensured that everyone had everything they needed; if one man had more of anything he required, he gave some to a neighbour. Even as he sat talking to his host, a group of men arrived who were wearing cloth sarongs and carrying bundles. These they put down in the centre of the village, then they moved to join the group of villagers sitting talking to Spock. It transpired that they were from a nearby village, one far enough away from the river not to be affected by its peculiar properties, and had brought with them a load of the grass used for making clothes in this village. There was some talk, a lot of laughter, and no mention of trade; after about half an hour, the visitors left. Spock asked about it.

It was simple, he was told; this grass was left over from something the visitors had been doing, and rather than waste it, they had brought it here. One day, perhaps soon, perhaps next year, they would be given something back, but it didn't matter if it weren't; things always evened out, and this village might give something to a third village that in turn paid the debt by giving something to the men who had just brought the grass.

At last, Spock rose. "I must go," he said. "My friends will be wondering what has happened to me."

The villagers rose with him. "We will go with you," said his host. So Spock, despite his protests that it wasn't necessary for them to put themselves out, found himself being escorted back towards the mining camp.

On the outskirts of the camp, the villagers stopped. The mother of the boy he had rescued reached up, and put a brightly coloured flower in his hair. "It is all I can give you," she said. "But we always pay our debts."

"You could pay it by helping my friends in the mines," Spock said gently, knowing now that payment at third hand was accepted as normal.

She shook her head. "They are not your people," she said. "Your people

are the ones who come from the sky wearing blue, yellow or red."

"Then I thank you," he replied. "I know a way of preserving it, and will keep it in memory of my friends here."

She smiled, and he realised how much he had pleased her. The boy came forward too, carrying a string of brightly coloured beads. "These are my good luck beads," he said. "I would like you to have them, with my thanks for saving me."

"Thank you," Spock said solemnly, as he lowered his head to let the child slip them round his neck.

The father came forward last, carrying something that Spock did not at first identify. "If ever you are in need of help, blow this," the man said. "It will summon our gods to your aid."

Spock stared, fascinated, at the small, but clearly operative, wooden trumpet. "I will remember," he said. "And I thank you."

He walked into the camp, head held high, aware of the stares of the miners he passed but refusing to let them bother him. His one hope was that McCoy would not be present anywhere near the transporter room...

But he was there. Spock learned afterwards that a quick radio message had been sent to the Enterprise, McCoy had been on the bridge reporting to Kirk when it was received, and he and Kirk had come to meet Spock.

The Vulcan materialised in his native splendour, to stare with dignity at his two friends and the stunned Lt. Kyle.

"Did you... enjoy your leave, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Very much, Captain, and I have amassed an amazing amount of data on the natives here. Now if you will forgive me, I must change back into uniform, and take steps to preserve the flower before it wilts."

"But where did you get it, Spock?" McCoy asked, recovering his voice.

"From a lady, Doctor." He looked at the stunned expression on McCoy's face, then, satisfied that he had made sufficient impact, added, "A respectably married lady." He inclined his head politely, and left, his dignity unimpaired.

Kirk and McCoy stared at each other. "What do you suppose happened, Jim?"

Kirk grinned. "He'll tell us when he feels like it, Bones."

"Yeah... You know, Jim, only Spock could beam up like that - and get away with it."

"Oh, I don't know - it's amazing what you can get away with if you do it with a straight face."

"And no-one has a face straighter than Spock's."

Kirk grinned. "You know, in a way it reminds me... There was once..."

The closing door cut off his reminiscence. At the transporter console, Kyle shrugged philosophically. He would never know 'what happened once'. But then, he was used to it; he frequently heard the beginnings of intriguing conversations. Or, just occasionally, the end of one begun before beam-up.

He set the controls to neutral, and settled down to continue with the book currently in his viewer.

THE DEVIL'S SPAWN

"I'm afraid I can't take you down with the landing party, Mr. Spock," Kirk said seriously. "You know the history of this colony - it was originally set up by adherents of a particularly strict religious sect, and as far as we know, their descendants are still as narrow in their outlook as their forebears. As a Vulcan, you unfortunately bear a strong resemblance to the drawings of the devil that imaginative artists put in early ecclesiastical works. The colony's been out of contact for nearly a century - this first re-contact is going to be tricky enough without compounding the problem with superstitious complications."

Spock said, "Yes, Captain," in his normal quiet voice; but Kirk knew his friend well, and detected the trace of disappointment. He fully understood the Vulcan's regret; although mainly of interest to a sociologist, the conditions existing on this world were intriguing to any scientist, and Spock had undoubtedly hoped for a chance to study the situation at first hand. Kirk truly regretted having to deny him the opportunity.

Spock's eyes lightened momentarily in a half-smile as he silently acknowledged Kirk's silent message of sympathetic apology.

"Be careful, Jim," he said, so quietly that Kirk knew that no-one else in the seven-man landing party could have heard, for even he barely did. Then Spock stepped back, and punched the control to open the hangar door. He watched the seven make their way to the Magellan with mixed feelings of envy and concern - envy that they should be able to see the results of what the scout ship that found the lost colony had estimated to be an arrested culture, worry for their safety - and in particular for the safety of Kirk and McCoy. He watched the shuttle doors close; then he closed the hangar door. He took three deep breaths to steady himself, then headed for the bridge.

Kirk looked round his picked crew. McCoy, Philips, Lindstrom, Dravo, Becket and Yeoman Seemar. All good men... well, men, metaphorically speaking.

"Remember that this colony has been out of touch with the Federation for so long that it's almost a Prime Directive contact," he reminded them quietly. "Be very careful what you say - they may have any number of religious observances that we don't know about. Lindstrom, that's your first job - identify as many as possible of these observances. Yeoman, be as unobtrusive as possible with your tricorder. Philips, general observations. Dravo, stay with the shuttlecraft at all times. Keep the door shut if any natives are about. Becket, don't take action if there's trouble unless it's a matter of life or death. We don't know how they'll react to our instruments, and we don't want to cause bother unnecessarily."

There was a scattered chorus of "Yes, sir." Kirk looked at McCoy.

"You and I do the socialising, Bones," he went on. "Keep an eye open for any diseases and so on they may have - you know the drill."

"Sure, Captain," McCoy might be cheerfully informal with Kirk under most circumstances, but here, in front of mostly junior officers not of the bridge crew, he preferred to retain a degree of formality.

The external doors of the hangar slid open, and the Magellan lifted gracefully and swooped down towards the planet below.

Although they landed in an open space some distance from what sensors indicated was probably the main town, a curious crowd soon gathered. Curious - yet strangely silent; almost apprehensive. Kirk watched the gathered natives through the port, an expression of growing puzzlement on his face.

"Opinion, Mr. Lindstrom?"

"They could simply be afraid of something unknown," Lindstrom said doubtfully. Kirk nodded, equally doubtfully.

"Let's go and see," he suggested.

Becket opened the door; Kirk stepped out, McCoy at his heels; the others followed close behind. Dravo stood in the doorway, curious enough to half overlook Kirk's order.

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise," When there was no response, Kirk went on, "Who is in charge here?"

No-one seemed anxious to reply. Various members of the crowd shrank back; others looked round, mainly in one direction. Kirk looked over in the same direction.

A group of horse-like animals was approaching. Their riders wore dark robes trimmed with silver thread. The robes were hitched up where the men straddled their beasts, showing that under the loose flowing garments they wore dark breeches. The crowd shrank slightly further back, leaving the riders space to approach.

The beasts came to a halt in front of Kirk. The Captain looked thoughtfully at the riders, his first awareness of them being their smell. They stank of dirt and stale sweat; and as he looked at them, he realised that their robes, that from the distance had looked so magnificent, were stained and shiny with greasy dirt. Their hair was likewise greasy, and hung, long and lank, over their shoulders, framing their dirt-encrusted faces. They looked unattractive, unsavoury specimens, and Kirk felt his flesh creep. At least the members of the crowd were clean, and he wondered why they should accept such unpleasantness in their rulers. Behind him he heard McCoy mutter, in a passable imitation of Spock's voice,

"Insanitary, Captain!"

His lips twitched involuntarily. Firmly, he repressed the urge to chuckle, helped by the need to control the nausea caused by their stench.

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk, of the Starship Enterprise, representing the United Federation of Planets, from which your ancestors came," he repeated. "Who is in charge here?"

One of the riders, who looked even dirtier and more unpleasant than any of the others - if that were possible - stared down at him with the expression of a man faced by a hitherto unseen but known to be highly dangerous species.

"Father Paul, Chief Apostle of God," he replied. His teeth were black and rotten.

"Your ancestors colonised this world from Earth over a century ago, Father Paul," Kirk said. That he might be repeating the obvious, the known fact, was probable, but he had to establish his right to be there. "We do not know why contact was lost, but it is only recently that the continued existence of your colony came to the notice of my superiors. I have been sent to discover if we can help you in any way."

Father Paul shook his head decisively. "We require nothing of you or any other heretic," he said shortly.

"Our people think it unethical to leave colonists entirely to their own resources," Kirk said. "There is much that we can do for you. We can give you improved help for your sick - "

"That is why our ancestors left their home world!" Father Paul thundered. "Do you still defy the will of God? Sickness is sent by God to punish sin. Would you have sinners escape punishment in this life, to suffer unending torment in the next?"

Kirk glanced back at McCoy, warning in his eyes. He recognised at once

that the caution was unnecessary. McCoy clearly understood that this was the first religious observance they had to treat delicately. His every instinct warred with his common sense; but he had the experience of Capella, where they believed that the sick should die, to reinforce his common sense.

Two of the riders, whose clothes were slightly cleaner and less ornately trimmed, were patrolling the edge of the crowd. Their mounts' feet thudded uncomfortably close to the feet of the silent, watching populace, and the people shrank further back. A child who could have been little more than four or five tripped and fell; a heavy hoof thudded down on an unprotected leg and the child screamed in sudden agony.

No-one in the crowd, not even the child's mother, moved to protect the youngster; Kirk took a half step forward; McCoy several more; Dravo, nearer than any of the others, with memories of his own child's infancy strong in him, left the shuttle without a second thought and ran to the child. Before he could gather the child into his arms he was stopped by a strong hand gripping him and a knife-point pricking his throat. Kirk caught McCoy's arm at the sight, holding him back, even as he turned fiercely on Father Paul.

"That child's hurt!" he exclaimed unnecessarily.

"It is the will of God," Father Paul intoned sonorously. "The child must be punished for his secret sins."

"What sins worth mentioning could a child of that age commit?" McCoy asked harshly. Momentarily it flashed through Kirk's mind that that was exactly the sort of question that Spock would have asked.

"A child is born in sin, and the devil has many lures for even the youngest."

"That may be good theology, but it's damned inhuman!" McCoy snarled.

"Bones!" Kirk's voice warned urgently.

"We think of the child's immortal soul. Physical suffering in this life..."

Kirk let the unctuous voice wash over him only half heard. He was not a particularly religious man, but he was devout enough in his own way, and this terrible twisted perversion of religion horrified him; perhaps even more than some strict religions, some of them involving human sacrifice, that he had found on one or two other planets, for these religions had not been a cruel corruption of one he respected. Grimly he set his teeth and thought of how to be conciliating.

"Your pardon, Father Paul," he said quietly when the impassioned diatribe at last showed signs of ceasing. "Our ways are different; to our eyes, to allow such an injury to go unaided is a waste of the possible potential value of the child to the community." Even as he spoke, he hated himself for his hypocrisy.

"God knows best," the priest repeated. "And if the child is crippled for life and his possible use to the community lost, it is a sign that we, as a community, have erred."

There was no arguing with the man. "I think I understand, Father Paul," he said quietly.

The priest looked at him, sensing reservation; Kirk forced himself to meet the man's eyes, masking the disgust he felt.

"You will stay in our guest quarters tonight while we talk," Father Paul went on. His eyes strayed round the crew, lingering for a moment on the yeoman, and Kirk blessed the impulse that had made him order her to wear a special uniform with a skirt much longer than usual. "Whose wife is she?"

Uh-uh, Kirk thought, angry with himself for not fore-seeing this. He dared not say she was no-one's wife, he realised. "Mine," he said steadily.

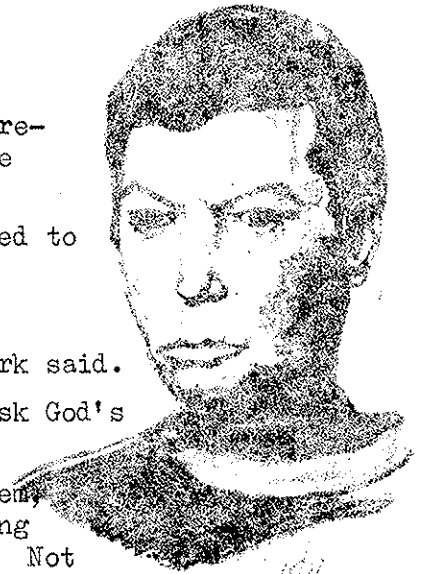
Father Paul stared at him for a moment then appeared to accept the statement. "Come, then."

There was no offer of mounts for the visitors.

"I want one of my men to remain with our ship," Kirk said.

"It is not necessary. None of our people would risk God's wrath by touching aught that was not their own. Come."

Reluctantly, Kirk motioned his men, Dravo among them, to follow him, mentally cursing the man for not remaining out of sight inside the shuttle as he had been ordered. Not that he wholly blamed the man for his humane impulse. He glanced back towards the child as they went. The crowd was following them, careful not to come too close; they parted as they reached the fallen body, leaving a distance between it and themselves as if afraid that close proximity to it would infect them with the child's sin. No-one seemed to care; and he was forced to walk away, pity in his heart, helpless to act. How McCoy felt about it he could only guess.



They were about a mile from the city. Fortunately, the horse-beasts did not have a fast pace and they were able to keep up without too much distress. There was no attempt at conversation from Father Paul; he rode ahead, majestically ignoring everyone and everything; the visitors were placed walking behind him, and his entourage behind that, carefully separating them from the following crowd.

Kirk's mind was in a turmoil as he went. These people were even narrower and more bigoted in their outlook than he had been led to expect - or was it a case of a narrow and bigoted priesthood holding in subjection by ignorance and fear a population that was ready, emotionally and psychologically, for release? He wished he could have spoken to some of the crowd...

Suddenly, behind him, he heard a cry of "Evil!"

"Evil!"

"Accursed!"

He stopped and swung round, in time to be struck by a thrown stone. Becket groped for his phaser; half-drawn, it was knocked from his hand by a well-aimed - or luckily aimed - stone. The girl was already on her knees, arms flung up to protect her head. Kirk reached for his communicator, but before he could touch it, he was struck down, half stunned, by a blow from behind. As he struggled to rise again, he realised that the crowd had joined the priest's escort in attacking them, no longer silent, either. The yells of terrified hatred rose to an ear-splitting crescendo had he been knocked flat again by a hail of blows that rained viciously down on him. Feet kicked and trampled; in the melee, as he struggled vainly to protect his head, he was aware only of noise and pain. Then both faded as he lost consciousness.

Spock glanced anxiously at the chronometer, knowing as he did so that his sense of time was perfect and that the Captain was indeed late in reporting in.

"See if you can raise the shuttlecraft, Lieutenant," he ordered.

"Aye, sir... There's no response, Mr. Spock."

Spock's lips tightened, and, not for the first time, he found himself silently and futilely cursing the pointed ears and slanting eyebrows that marked him as alien on so many planets. If he had looked like a normal Human, he would have been there, with them, not sitting here helplessly wondering what had

happened to them, completely overlooking the fact that if he had been with them, he would have been in difficulties too. He realised afresh that friendship is a two-edged weapon, infinitely satisfying but also infinitely demanding.

What should he do? What could he do? As Kirk had pointed out, to go down himself would be to ask for trouble and might even compound whatever danger his friends were in. Yet how could he send down another landing party without more data? The first group must have done something wrong... how could he order another group down without warning them what not to do, without breaching the Prime Directive? Even although these people - presumably - knew of spaceflight and something of the Federation's technology, they had their beliefs, which must not be upset...

"Mr. Chekov - scan the proposed landing area. Is anyone there?"

"... Negative, Mr. Spock. The shuttlecraft is there... there is a crowd of people about halfway between it and the city we detected earlier... heading towards the city... one or two individuals between the crowd and the Magellan also going in the direction of the city..."

No help there. Possibly the landing party was accompanying the crowd... though why hadn't Kirk reported on what he was doing? And why hadn't he left someone with the shuttlecraft, as he had certainly meant to do? There were only questions. And each question in turn gave logical rise to other questions.

Kirk regained consciousness slowly, dragging his mind up from merciful blackness to pain-filled awareness. Every fibre of his body ached and his head throbbed unbearably. He raised his hand to his head and caught his breath as the movement strained his bruised muscles. The air smelt stale and foul.

"Jim."

McCoy's voice. It also quivered with pain and he opened his eyes...

To utter blackness.

"Bones?" His voice trembled. Why couldn't he see?

"How do you feel?"

"Pretty lousy. Where are you, Bones?"

"Lying against a wall. I wish they'd left us some light."

Kirk drew a deep breath that might have been of relief, and winced at the pain from his trampled ribs. "What about the others?"

"Here, Captain."

"Here."

"Here."

"Here."

All masculine voices. "Yeoman?"

"I tried crawling around to find everyone and couldn't find her." McCoy said. "She might not have been put in with us. Or maybe she's in a corner where I missed her, still unconscious. You got it worse than any of us, Jim, but when they first started throwing things at us, she seemed to be the focal point of their hatred."

"But why?" Kirk asked blankly. "We didn't do anything."

His head felt a little clearer now. He groped for his communicator, knowing as he did so that it would be gone. "We were just walking," he went on. "None of you did anything else, did you?"

Philips said slowly, "Yeoman Seemar stopped to pick up something - I didn't see what. It was as she picked it up that they attacked us."

Kirk frowned. "That doesn't seem reason enough... unless they thought she planned to attack their Father Paul - "

The door crashed open. The light that shone in, dim as it was, hurt their eyes. Then a torch was carried in. Father Paul strode behind the torch-bearer. Kirk pushed himself painfully to his feet.

"What is the reason for this attack?" he asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"You consort with an evil one, an emissary of the devil." It was less of an answer than an accusation, indictment and sentence in one. "You even claim the evil one as your wife - "

"Now wait a minute!" Kirk exclaimed.

"There can be no penance for such a sin. I should have seen when you attempted to claim the injured child - aye, I admit your cunning, for you made me overlook your evil suggestion then - but your succubus betrayed you before it was too late and you corrupted us. The sentence is death."

"Succubus?" McCoy asked blankly.

"What of my yeoman?" Kirk snapped.

"The succubus will be destroyed as befits her demoniac origin."

Father Paul turned and strode out. The torch bearer followed him; last to leave were the guards that stood just inside the door. The door crashed shut again.

"What the devil," McCoy asked, "is a succubus?"

They were left for only a few minutes. Then the guards returned. They were dragged from the unlit cell with an utter disregard for their bruises and marched at knifepoint along a dim corridor and into a room which, while still fairly dim, was better lit than the corridor. Torches were thrust into holders all round the walls; a fire glowed redly in the centre of the room. Iron bars lay partly in the fire. Tables and benches stood around, all with manacles at each end. Three brawny men, stripped to the waist, waited, their bodies shining with sweat. Father Paul sat, several of his escort around him, on a raised chair overlooking the entire room. There was an expression of avid expectation on his face.

The six men were forcibly stripped and fastened by wrists and ankles to the benches. Ratchet wheels were operated; their arms and legs were drawn taut, then the wheels turned once more.

The strain on their joints would have been painful anyway; added to their bruised muscles, it was agonising. All six struggled against any outcry.

The men must already have their orders, Kirk realised, as the torturers advanced on Dravo, McCoy and himself. The other three had made no obvious attempt to succour the injured child; their sins must be accounted less.

The wheels operating the three racks were tightened once more. A gasp hissed from Dravo's gritted teeth; McCoy drew in his breath sharply. Kirk remained obstinately silent, grimly determined that his screams of agony should not add to the perverted priest's enjoyment yet somehow knowing that the torturers would not rest until he was screaming.

All three torturers turned to Kirk. One of them handed the other two a length of rope. Then, steadily, in unison, they brought the ropes down in vicious blows across his biceps and thigh muscles. Already bruised, strained against the pull of the rack, the muscles screamed protest at the thudding torment of the knotted ropes.

After what seemed an eternity, the steady beating ceased. It gave little

respite; his tortured nerves continued to feel the rhythmic blows in sympathetic throbbing.

The already familiar, already hated voice of Father Paul spoke. Kirk heard the words without the meaning penetrating. The torturers moved away from him, back towards his men.

"No!" he gasped. "They've done... nothing wrong!"

"Then you admit that you have?" The insidious voice was avid, gloating.

"None of us... has done anythin wrong."

"By your own customs, perhaps not," purred the voice. "But here we do not condone evil; we root it out. Is it not better to suffer now, in this life, a few days of pain, than to endure an eternity of agony?"

"Must religion be a matter of fear... and pain... and hatred?" Kirk gasped.

"The fear of God - " Father Paul began.

"What about the love of God?" Kirk exclaimed fiercely.

"God can only love those who obey Him."

"Surely even an all-powerful God prefers to be obeyed from choice than from fear?"

"Man is sinful. Only fear keeps him from sinning... "

Kirk shut his ears to the droning platitudes. There was no reasoning with this man. His mind lacked any spark of originality, initiative or humanity. Perhaps he was what his culture had made him... perhaps he was as he would have been however he had been reared. Only here he could exercise his sadistic narrowmindedness with complete impunity.

A sudden sharp cry of agony roused him abruptly from his pain-filled semi-consciousness. He struggled to lift his head, and saw that the torturers had turned their attentions to Dravo. Sorry as he felt for the man, he was conscious of sudden relief that the victim was not McCoy... yet. He could not see what the torturers were doing, and for that he was grateful.

At last Dravo's screams cut off, and he knew his officer had lost consciousness at least. He swallowed dryly. What next?

He soon learned. The padding footsteps approached him again. He looked at the torturer drawing nearer and noted the red-hot iron in his hand. He gritted his teeth.

The heat from the iron was unbearable as it was moved closer to him; then it pressed firmly against his chest. He felt it burning into him but stubbornly refused to utter a sound, strangely grateful for the bonds that, agonising as their grip was, kept him from moving. At least that sadistic devil would not get the pleasure, the satisfaction, of seeing him squirm. By the time the iron was lifted, he thought he would feel its heat and pressure for the rest of his life - short though he expected that to be.

The iron was returned to the fire; the torturer was returning. Now what?

The man placed a flat piece of wood over Kirk's stomach. Something pricked him, and he realised that the wood was studded with something sharp... nails? A weight was placed on the wood, and the points pressed down. Then the torturer moved away again, to be replaced by Father Paul.

"Do you repent your evil?"

"What evil?" Kirk gasped. "We have done... nothing!"

"You consort with a demon, a succubus from hell," Father Paul snarled. "She is not even a cunning demon - the mark of her evil origins is plain for

those to see who have the strength to look beyond an attractive face."

Just what had the yeoman done, Kirk wondered. "Where is my yeoman?" he asked, knowing he would not get an answer that meant anything to him.

"She is with those who may yet persuade her to reject her master," Father Paul said. "But you - think of your own immortal soul, my son. Repent your association with the devil's spawn!"

Kirk shook his head. It was a gesture of utter bewilderment, but Father Paul chose to take it as a negative. He signed, and the torturer placed another weight on the flat wood pricking Kirk's abdomen. Then all three torturers approached again, wielding their ropes, and Kirk set his teeth once more, determined to suffer in silence.

The woman, and the man carrying the crippled child, made a slow journey back towards the city. They dropped further and further behind the crowd.

They saw the sudden uproar, heard the yells of hate and fear, and exchanged glances. There was no need to speak; this was an old, old story to them - they had taken their own part in such mobs in the past. But now, for the first time, in their lives, they felt direct sympathy for the victim, for they knew now what it was like to suffer themselves. They were God-fearing people who lived in complete obedience to the Church's teaching; what evil could their child have done? Yet he would never be able to walk properly again, for the leg was sure to heal crooked, and their son would be marked for life as a sinner God had chosen to punish directly. He would never be able to lead a normal life; no matter where he went, he would be shunned, pointed out as an example of a punished sinner...

They delayed to let the mob move on. With the mood that had now arisen, they were liable to be attacked also because they were helping a punished sinner - with no-one choosing to remember that the sinner was their own child.

When at last it was certain that the crowd was moving, they followed, keeping a safe distance. They paused when they reached the place where the crowd had stopped; the child was heavy enough for his father to need a rest every so often. So it was that they saw the communicators and the battered tricorder. They stared at the artifacts in awe; kept ignorant by a power-hungry priesthood, they still knew legends of their ancestors' arrival here, refugees from a Godless Galaxy. That these were tools that their ancestors knew, they realised; the woman reached out tentatively and picked up a communicator. She turned it over and over in her hands, wondering how it worked; and when they moved on, she took it with her, a souvenir of a hope for a better world in which children were not condemned as sinners from birth that had not even had time to materialise.

At last, Spock decided that he could wait no longer for any sign of life from the landing party. First he sent down a reconnaissance party to the deserted shuttle. Their report was wholly negative; he ordered them to make a cautious scouting trip towards the city. Before long he received a report on the finding of a damaged tricorder and six communicators. Six - not seven. Interesting. Where was the missing communicator? Spock set Uhura to call the missing landing party in the hope of getting an answer.

The woman sitting beside her injured son fingered the alien artifact, wondering what it was for. Suddenly it began giving out a sharp bleeping sound. Startled, frightened, wondering what she had done to cause this, she jumped and dropped the thing. The lid popped open. Then - horror of horrors - a voice spoke from it.

"Doctor, what has happened to your party?"



She whimpered in fear. "No!
No! I repent!"

"Yeoman?"

"I didn't hurt your servants!
Spare me!"

Spock stared in blank amazement at the communications console for perhaps two seconds, then he realised something of what must have happened. He punched the command chair intercom.

"Security detail, meet me in the transporter room immediately. Lt. Uhura, pinpoint that signal in case it is cut off before the transporter room can lock on to it. Mr. Scott, you have the con."

He was gone before Scotty could acknowledge the order.

The woman, staring in terror at the communicator, too frightened to touch it, shrank back with a strangled scream as the six figures began to materialise. As they solidified, and she saw the pointed ears and slanting eyebrows of the blue-clad figure who stood out if only because of the different colour of his shirt, she cowered back, her arms raised as if to protect herself.

"God protect me!"

Spock looked helplessly at her for a moment, recognising her almost hysterical fear. Normally he would have taken time to try to gain her confidence, but the silence from the landing party made him too anxious for the safety of his friends for finesse. He caught her hands and pulled them down; stared intently into her eyes, willing her to trust him, realising that a mind meld might terrorise her into insanity.

"We aren't going to hurt you," he said quietly. Even as he spoke, the door opened, and a man rushed in. He stopped dead at sight of the strangers, recognising the clothes as being similar to those worn by the other men - the ones who had shown sympathy for his son. He hesitated at sight of the blue-clad man with the pointed ears; the man who turned to him immediately.

"We mean you no harm," he said quietly. "We only want to learn what happened to our friends."

The man swallowed. 'Friends', the devil said. 'Friends'. Not 'servants'. And indeed, his powers must be slight if he did not know what had occurred.

"We don't really know," he said nervously.

"Tell me what you do know... please."

The man related what had happened, as far as he knew, and added, "We don't know why. They must still be alive - if they'd been killed, their bodies would have been left."

"Then where have they been taken?" Spock asked, concealing his impatience.

"The Church Authorities will have them," the man replied reluctantly.

"Where will they be held prisoner, then?"

The man hesitated; Spock correctly divining the reason added quietly, "You can leave here with us, if you are afraid of what might happen to you for helping us, and find a home in another Federation world. And in any case, we will tend your son's leg so that it heals straight."

"I will... take you there."

Spock realised the man's courage with gratitude. "My thanks, sir."

Spock ordered the woman and the child to be beamed up to the ship, having first called one of the nurses down to see if the presence of another woman would help to calm the native's terror and reassure the man of their good faith. Then the party set off.

No-one attempted to molest them as they went. Many who saw them shrank back in fear of the devil, and there was no need for the guards to make any use of their drawn phasers.

The native guided them to a large, impressive building. Impressive - yet gloomily threatening. The doors, massive and ornately carved, held firm against Spock's attempts to open them. He drew his phaser, and calmly burned his way through.

Their guide dropped back as they entered, but followed gamely, almost as if he was afraid to leave their protection. Life must have indeed been hard for the man, Spock thought, if he was so ready to trust someone who so closely resembled the mythical devil he had been taught to dread.

There was nothing to indicate which way to go. Spock kicked open the first door that they came to. Inside was a dirt-encrusted, smelly figure who cowered back, muttering superstitiously. Spock ignored the dirt and the smell. For this man he had no sympathy.

"Where are the off-worlders your colleagues captured?" Spock asked sternly.

An incoherent gobbling was his only answer. Spock felt an unaccustomed rage mix with his accustomed patience for illogic. The rage was directed mainly against the culture that could reduce a man to this level, but the hapless priest bore the brunt of it. Spock lifted him bodily to his feet while the frightened, but now impressed, native who had led them here watched in fascinated awe.

"Where are they?" Spock's voice was very soft.

The terrified priest pointed, any resistance that might have been in his mind destroyed by the nameless menace in the Vulcan's voice.

"Take us there." The quiet voice threatened unheard-of punishment for disobedience. Even the security guards, who well knew the normally gentle nature of their senior officer, felt the touch of fear, mingled with relief that they were not the recipients of his unvoiced anger.

Spock took only a second to grasp the significance of the scene in front of him, and three more to reach the three torturers attending to Kirk. Two of them went flying, tossed aside with an effortless, almost casual gesture. The third took one look at the cold face of the Vulcan and shrank back.

Until this moment, Spock had not realised that it was Kirk suffering under the priests' torture. Now, realising, his rage mounted to a level he had not believed himself capable of. But his face was gentle as he carefully lifted

the weighted board from Kirk's stomach and tossed it aside. Then with a quick flick he released the wheel that controlled the rack.

Kirk lay still, unable to move his arms or legs, but relieved that the strain was gone. Two of the guards moved forwards to release the others; one of them came to where Spock was gently massaging Kirk's arms.

"Mr. Dravo's dead, sir. There's no sign of Yeoman Seemar."

"They have her... somewhere else," Kirk managed. "Get her!"

Spock nodded. "When you're safe, Captain."

"No... now!"

"Go on, Spock," gasped a voice at the Vulcan's shoulder. "I'll manage to see to Jim."

For the first time since entering the torture chamber, Spock thought consciously of McCoy. The surgeon looked drawn and moved stiffly, but appeared to be unhurt. "You should be resting also, Doctor."

"Just get us beamed up and then go and get the girl."

The Vulcan hesitated only a second longer. Sickbay was better equipped to deal with Kirk's injuries than he... He gave the necessary orders to the ship, then turned his attention to the priests. It took him only a moment to identify the leader.

"Where is the woman?" he asked coldly.

"She is safe from your influence, demon." Father Paul was frightened - but he was upheld by his beliefs. Bigoted he might be; cruel and sadistic, enjoying the suffering of those who were deemed heretic by his bigotry; but still he was sincere in his beliefs.

Spock took the few steps that separated him from the unappealing man, barely controlling an unheard of but almost irresistible impulse to send him flying with one well-placed blow. This single-minded unimaginativeness was the result of his culture - the utter dependency of a basically weak man on an artificial support. A stronger man might be truly devout but remain more flexible in his thinking, less inclined to enjoy using force to persuade others of the rightness of his beliefs. What this man had, sincere though it might be, was not religious devotion but slavish dependence.

"I have the ability to draw the information I require from your mind," Spock said quietly. "It would, however, be more pleasant if you were to give me the information voluntarily." He did not say for whom it would be more pleasant.

"I defy you!" Father Paul spat.

The native, who had remained unnoticed in the shadows all this time, came forward. "Sir - the Holy Sisters will have her."

Spock hadn't entirely forgotten the man, but he had dismissed him to the back of his mind; now he swung round in genuine surprise at the native's daring, knowing from the expression on Father Paul's face that the man was right.

"Can you take us there?"

"Yes, sir."

They left the priests fastened to the racks, securely but without straining their limbs; Spock suspected that they might have some way of communicating with the 'Holy Sisters', and preferred to minimise the risks. With luck, it would be many hours before the priests were found; let them experience for themselves a little of what it meant to be a prisoner here.

They wasted no time at the ornate door of the slightly less impressive building that housed the Holy Sisters, but burned it open without delay. The stench from the building was no less than from the men's; the place was as dirty.

"I would have thought that women would have preferred to keep their surroundings a little cleaner than this," Spock said, his voice showing some disgust.

The man looked at him, already beginning to understand the gulf between his culture and that of the strangers. "It's holy dirt, sir," he said. "The priests never wash - they say that God wants them to be in a natural state, and that to wash off His Holy dirt is a sin."

"How many priests die when there is illness in the city?" Spock asked drily.

"Quite a lot," the native answered seriously. "They die to save the people."

Spock was saved from trying to answer; guessing that this building would have the same general plan as the other, he had headed in the same direction, and now they found themselves at the door of the torture chamber.

The unfortunate yeoman was fastened to a frame while two robed women were flogging her. Like the men, she had been stripped; her body was a mass of open wounds. She was moaning steadily, too weak even to scream.

The priestesses retreated as the devil advanced; and watched in terror as his party, including the freed prisoner, faded from their sight.

M'Benga ordered all of the original landing party, and the child, into bed, obstinately shutting his ears to McCoy's claim that he was all right. However, he did put McCoy in with Kirk, separate from the others, and once his colleague had gone, McCoy struggled up to go to Kirk on stiff legs.

"You shouldn't, Bones," Kirk said weakly.

"I just want to be satisfied that M'Benga's patched you up properly... yes, you'll do," he added at last.

"So lie down again."

"I'll be better moving... best thing for stiffness. That's all that's wrong with me."

"Your arms and legs were strained too."

"I'm all right, Jim... I must admit, though, I'd like to know why they suddenly decided to attack us like that."

"You should be in bed, Doctor," a quiet voice broke in.

"That's right, Spock," Kirk chuckled. "You chase him back to bed."

McCoy capitulated - at least temporarily. Spock saw him settled, then turned to his Captain.

He bent over Kirk, his face gentle. "How do you feel, Jim?"

"I'll be all right." Kirk smiled up at him. "Thanks, Spock. You probably gave those priests down there the shock of their narrow-minded lives - and the fact that you didn't hurt anyone must have made the people think. I don't really know what to recommend, though... I wish I knew why they turned on us." He sighed. "Whatever it was, it seems to have been sparked off by the yeoman, but she didn't do anything that we could see."

"As to that, Captain... I had a word with her. The 'Holy Sisters' tested her. She didn't understand it, but she could tell me the result. She could

have told them herself without the test. She's left-handed, Captain."

"So?" demanded McCoy. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"As I recall Terran history," Spock said, "during periods of extreme religious fervour, left-handedness was regarded as evil - a sign of the devil."

"And that was why...?" Kirk exclaimed.

"Yes, Captain. I should have remembered that before you ever went down - but I failed to associate the yeoman's left-handedness with my own appearance as being dangerous. I apologise."

"Not your fault, Spock - I should have remembered too," Kirk said, not wholly truthfully. He tried to move, and winced. Spock carefully eased him into a new position.

"I sent a pilot to retrieve the shuttlecraft," Spock said.

"Good." Kirk recognised Spock's desire to turn the conversation to a less emotional subject. But he could not resist one last expression of his feelings.

Their eyes met; in Spock's, Kirk saw a reflection of the affection that he felt, mirroring the gratitude and affection that Kirk himself felt.

"You should sleep now, Captain," Spock said quietly.

Kirk closed his eyes obediently. Spock waited for a moment, glanced across at McCoy, lifted a hand in a silent gesture of farewell, and left.

McCoy looked over at Kirk. The Captain seemed to be sleeping. McCoy relaxed, and settled down to sleep as well.

He would never tell him, of course, but Spock was a handy devil to have around.....

ENTERPRISE LAMENT

They are all so lonely... the men who love me.
 Yet there is nothing I can do to ease their pain,
 No balm that I can offer. Ostensibly secure,
 Strong, self-possessed, self confident; and yet
 Within, each one is crying out
 For understanding, comfort, reassurance.
 This they could give each other; but they will not
 Save superficially, for fear of being mocked,
 Their caring misconstrued. While I
 Cannot give anything of what they seek -
 My makers thought I would not need a heart.

LOVE

Love.....

A strange word, with many meanings;
 Illogical, like all the Human race.
 There are so many things they mean
 By it - and all are alien to me.

A passing sexual interest, quickly gone -
 (An attitude unknown to Vulcan-kind) -
 A selfish grasping of a fleeting moment
 Of irresponsibility and thoughtlessness -
 They call that love.

Husbands and wives have duties to each other.
 She rears his children, fills his life
 With comfort; in exchange, does he
 Provide for her, give her security -
 They call that love.

A child respects his parents - they say love.
 A parent rears his child, to give
 The best upbringing for content and health,
 A life of usefulness to the community;
 But they say love.

Brothers and sisters complement each other,
 Sharing each other's triumphs and successes,
 Helping each other, learning to co-operate
 Since no man who can not is worth respect;
 That too is love.

And friendship - what is that?
 Respect for one who shares some common interest,
 Congenial natures finding satisfaction
 Exchanging thoughts, views, attitudes, opinions...

Illogical. Why should it also be
 Concern for safety, worry, sacrifice,
 The willingness to die that he might live?
 If this was love, then I might understand it -
 But
 They do not call it love.

TRUST

It was a huge underground complex. Corridors mazed the area, corridors lined with bank after bank of silent, motionless machinery. Doors opened to right and left, doors that separated the huge machines to reveal enormous rooms filled with other complicatedly incomprehensible machines. In all this vast mechanical jungle, there was no life, no movement.

Dust lay thickly over everything... the dust of millenia. There was no quick way to remove it; it was fortunate that the tricorders worked perfectly adequately despite the accumulated debris of the centuries during which the machines had waited patiently for their masters to reactivate them.

But those masters, too, were long gone, and it had been sheer chance that led the Enterprise's landing party to this mechanical graveyard. The planet's surface was dry, parched; here and there ancient ruins still showed above the soil that had long buried most of them, low walls that erosion had left barely recognisable as the products of a civilised world. Spock estimated that fully half a million years had passed since intelligent life ceased to exist here, although simple, primitive forms might have continued for ten, twenty, fifty thousand years before the continuing lack of water destroyed them.

This same lack of water had prevented the huge metal doors that closed off the great cave from the outside world from rusting solid, so that they opened easily enough to the landing party's investigation. Inside, despite the passing of the years, some form of ventilation system did seem to be still operative; the air, although musty, was fresher than Spock would have expected, and the layers of dust showed clearly that fresh, dust-filled air had been drawn into the place, at least until reasonably recently.

Now the Enterprise's scientists were exploring avidly, recording data as fast as their tricorders would work. A Federation Study Group would certainly be assigned here, and gathered data would help to decide who should be included in it.

There had been no real reason why Captain Kirk should have accompanied the landing party. Science had never been his speciality, although he had, as a matter of course, studied some science at Starfleet Academy and had learned more as an immediate result of his close friendship with his Science Officer. His senior officers, however, encouraged him to accompany these trips, well aware of the strain of command and the way he drove himself, knowing that even an hour of undemanding landing party participation in circumstances such as these gave him a rest.

He did put the time to some use, however, by watching the performance of his men - he liked to know the general standard of efficiency at all times, and implicitly as he trusted Spock's judgement, he still preferred to form his own. Now he drifted idly around, careful not to get in anyone's way, apparently examining things with idle curiosity.

Spock came round a corner, intent on a report, and bumped into him. Kirk sat down with a considerable thump.

"My apologies, Captain." Spock pushed himself upright from the console he had fallen against, and reached down to help Kirk up.

"My own fault," Kirk replied cheerfully. "You're busy, I'm not. I should have been paying attention. How's it going?"

"We're progressing extremely well. Another twenty-four hours, and we should have completed the initial compilation of data for Starfleet."

"Good." Kirk moved away, absently rubbing his hip. Not that it was sore,

exactly - but he was pretty sure that he would soon be sporting a huge purple bruise.

He moved on down the corridor, and soon realised that he had come to an area none of the scientists had yet reached; the dust lay undisturbed all around. He stopped, attracted by one of the machines.

Smaller than any he had so far seen, it looked strangely familiar, although he was quite certain that it was completely unknown to him. It consisted of a large screen, with a console containing relatively few controls below it. As he watched, it seemed to him that lights were shining behind the screen, moving in an ever-changing pattern. He put his hands on the console, leaning closer to the screen as he attempted to focus on the movement. One hand pressed a switch.

For a moment, he felt giddy; then he straightened up. He threw a disgusted look at the screen, convinced that something psychedelic in the varying light rhythms had caused the dizziness, and determined not to risk a repetition. He headed back towards the area where the scientists were working, wondering why this one machine, out of all of them, should apparently still be operating.

The landing party was gathering as he came in sight of them. He nodded to himself, not surprised; they had been here for over ten hours, and he had been wondering how much longer Spock would keep them down. He moved across to the Science Officer.

"Packing up, Mr. Spock?"

"The landing party has been on duty for ten hours, thirty eight minutes, sir," Spock replied rather stiffly. Kirk stared at him in some surprise; it was unlike Spock to answer so defensively, as if he was expecting some objection.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Spock. Carry on." Puzzled, Kirk decided to wait and see if anything transpired to explain Spock's unusual response.

The group of scientists headed for the great doorway; Spock delayed to bring up the rear and switch off the lights they had installed. Kirk half hesitated, then decided not to drop back beside the Vulcan, who quite clearly was not, at this moment, desiring his company. Surely... he couldn't be worrying about having knocked Kirk down so recently?

Once out of the cave, the landing party began to group ready for beamup. Only five men moved into position; as Kirk wondered who the sixth should be, Lt. Carstairs said, "Aren't you coming, sir?" and he realised that, strange as it seemed, they expected him to return with the first group.

More puzzled than ever, he moved into place. He looked over towards Spock as the transporter hum began. The Vulcan was looking almost contemptuous.

On board the Enterprise, he received a further shock. Kyle saluted - a piece of routine Kirk had long since dispensed with - his face expressionless. Sheer amazement kept Kirk from responding; the transporter chief dropped his hand and remained standing to attention, his face unaltered. He obviously did not expect a response.

Kirk nodded curtly. "Carry on, Mr. Kyle." Without waiting for the rest of the landing party to be beamed up, he turned and strode out of the transporter room.

He made his way to his cabin, where he sank gratefully into the chair at his desk; then he stiffened. This was not his chair. He rose again, and studied it carefully. It looked right... but it felt wrong. The subtle hollows formed by a chair's normal occupant were in the wrong places. Slowly, he sat down again, remembering the dizzy spell he had experienced, remembering a previous occasion when he had felt giddy after materialising after transportation. There was only one possible explanation.

Somehow - he had yet to discover how - he had been transferred to another universe. Spock's behaviour - Kyle's behaviour - suddenly began to make sense. The Kirk of this universe must be far more of a stickler for discipline and going by the book than he was. Kirk shivered involuntarily as he remembered Spock's facial expression while the first group was dematerialising. This Spock clearly did not regard his Captain with any affection.

And yet that in itself seemed strangely... unlikely. Even in the sadistic universe of the E.S.S. Enterprise, Spock had evinced some regard for the vicious, scheming intriguer Kirk's counterpart there had been. Even if this Kirk was a martinet, surely his First Officer must have some feeling for him... and yet all he had shown was incipient scorn. What was this Kirk like?

He sat thinking for some time, then sighed. He was beginning to feel hungry - better go and eat. And the reactions of the rest of the crew to him might tell him a great deal. He headed for the mess.

Spock was sitting at a table with McCoy, and they were deep in conversation. Picking up his tray, he decided to join them.

As he crossed the room, Kirk noticed a significant difference in the attitude of these men to the one he was accustomed to. There was a degree of animation in both their faces; here, these men were clearly and openly close friends.

He was halfway across the room when they became aware of him. Both faces altered instantly, assuming a wooden mask of what could only have been a false respect. It brought to his immediate notice that everyone in the room wore a similar expression. There was clearly no relaxation in this Captain's presence and Kirk shivered as he thought how lonely his counterpart must be. There was an empty table beyond Spock and McCoy, and for a moment he considered passing them and going to it; then he chose to follow his original design. He stopped beside them.

"May I join you, gentlemen?"

"Certainly, sir," McCoy replied evenly. His face expressed mild surprise; now was that surprise that he should join them, or surprise that he should ask permission?

Kirk glanced towards Spock. The Vulcan's eyes were veiled as Kirk had not seen them since the very early days of his service aboard the Enterprise.

An awkward silence fell; neither Spock nor McCoy seemed to have anything to say now, but ate steadily. To break the silence, Kirk said,

"A most interesting planet, wouldn't you say, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, sir. Most interesting." The response was flat; Kirk had the sudden conviction that if he were to say 'It's raining in here', Spock would agree as automatically.

Kirk was now actively regretting joining them. Spock's response had been polite, nothing more; he clearly had no desire to pursue the matter. Or any other, come to that. Yet this Spock was not an unsociable creature who held everyone at arm's length; he had, quite obviously, been enjoying his exchange with McCoy.

Both men had finished eating now, but were waiting for the Captain to finish. Kirk suddenly felt sorry for them, forced, from courtesy, to remain at the table with a superior officer with whom they clearly had no rapport. He was certain now that their own Kirk would probably not have joined them anyway - at least, not unless he was either extremely thick-skinned or so desperately lonely that even this masochistic suffering was preferable to sitting alone.

"If you have duties to attend to, don't let me keep you, gentlemen," he said stiffly.

They glanced at each other; both rose.

"Thank you, sir, I do have today's results to check," Spock said politely and formally.

"I have some reports to finish, sir," McCoy added, equally formally. "Excuse us, please."

Kirk nodded. He watched almost sadly as they left, then, his appetite completely gone, turned his attention back to his half-eaten meal.

Kirk passed a restless night wondering what to do about the situation, although in fact he knew what he must do. He must go back down again, find the machine he had been examining, and try to re-create the conditions responsible for his transfer. He was pretty sure he'd depressed a switch on the console - but he was not certain, and he certainly didn't know which switch... and from what he remembered, the console, while not so complicated as those of the other machines, had still a fair number of switches.

Should he confide in Spock, he wondered... and then decided against it, feeling that in all probability he would not be believed. This Spock so clearly had very little respect for his Captain - at least, as a man, whatever he might think of him as a commanding officer. There was so very little time, too; twenty four hours longer, his own Spock had said. After that, there was very little point in even trying to get back; the other Kirk would no longer be anywhere near the transfer point.

Surprise showed on Spock's face when Kirk entered the transporter room; surprise, masked so rapidly that he would have been believed had he denied feeling it. But Kirk knew he had not imagined it; he knew his own Spock's expressions too well, and this Spock seemed very similar.

"I've decided to come down again, Mr. Spock," Kirk announced with forced cheerfulness.

"Yes, sir." The answer was polite, apparently respectful - no-one could have faulted Spock's tone in any way - and utterly discouraging. It was very clear to Kirk that he was not welcome, and he wondered if his counterpart was as sensitive to these nuances as he. If he were, he must be a miserably unhappy man... Kirk glanced round the assembled scientists, conscious of a stiffening in their attitudes too, and thought he could guess why. They were seeing this as an indication that their Captain did not trust them to get on without top supervision. The realisation chilled him afresh. This was not a happy ship, although it was, in all probability, an extremely efficient one.

Kirk waited until everyone had beamed down and had scattered to continue their work, then made his way back to the small machine that had caused all the bother. He examined it carefully.

It looked dead today; or... was the one in this universe inoperative? Was it only the one in his universe that was working? If that was the case, he might well be trapped here. He faced the prospect with growing unease; while he could make changes here - or try to - what would his counterpart be doing? How unhappy would his counterpart be making the crew of that other Enterprise? And most important - what would that other Kirk be doing to Spock's trust and friendship?

It was, of course, probable that Spock would realise, as he had realised when faced with James Kirk of the Empire Starship Enterprise, that an exchange had somehow happened... but on that occasion he had been unable to do anything except restrain the strangers. This time... it seemed to Kirk, faced with the silent machine, that there would be no escape for him unless Spock found it. But would Spock, even if he guessed the truth, realise that too? Dispiritedly, Kirk turned away from the machine.

He was about halfway back to the others when the explosion sent him

staggering backwards. Clouds of dust filled the air. He regained his balance, pushing himself away from the console that had stopped him from falling, and plunged forward, choking on the dust, aware of the smell of burning. His men! That they were not, in fact, his, never occurred to him.

He nearly bumped into a young scientist who leaned helplessly against a machine, coughing.

"Are you hurt?" he snapped.

"I don't know."

The man was clearly in shock. Kirk gripped his arm. "This way."

He gathered several more as he went, and led them in the approximate direction of the huge gates. There, he checked how many there were. Ten. That meant six were still in the place - and Spock. He barely remembered that this was not his friend; that this Vulcan had no affection for his Captain. It was still Spock...

"Stay out here," Kirk ordered. "I'll call on you if I need you."

Not noticing the astonished stares, he plunged back into the cavern. Almost at once he found three of the missing men groping their way out; four still missing, including Spock. His lips set in a grim line as he remembered that he did not know what part of the cavern Spock was in. And he had to find him...

The dust was in no hurry to settle, either, powder-fine as it was. Kirk groped his way along the murky passages, barely able to see. Was it his imagination or were the lights they had fitted in the place failing too?

Ahead of him he heard coughing, and a moment later he came on two more of the scientists. One was limping badly, helped by the other. Kirk paused.

"Do either of you know where Mr. Spock was?" he demanded.

"He was beyond where we were... sir," the uninjured man replied. There seemed to be surprise in his voice, and Kirk suddenly realised that his behaviour was not characteristic of his counterpart. In that case, no wonder his men had little respect for him as a person!

"You're on the right way out," he said encouragingly, and went on past them. Then he hesitated.

The smell of burning was getting stronger. He looked back. "When you get out, contact the ship, and have half a dozen men with breathing masks and fire extinguishers sent down. And McCoy - if Mr. Spock is still alive, he may require medical attention." He went on without waiting for an answer.

He carried on, peering into the gloom, trying not to breathe too deeply, fighting the urge to cough since that, he knew, would only serve to draw more dust into his lungs. Then, ahead of him, he saw flickering and knew he had reached the seat of the fire.

Two bodies lay there, pinned down by fallen beams. He stopped at the first one. It was the missing scientist; from the gaping wound on his forehead, he must have died instantly. Kirk moved to the other man - Spock, held down by a beam that was already beginning to burn.

The Vulcan's eyes were closed, and for a moment, Kirk thought that he also was dead. He had to be sure, though, and bent over to touch him. At the touch Spock opened his eyes and looked up. Surprise showed clearly, even in the dim light.

"Are you hurt?" Kirk asked.

"No, sir, but I am unable to move." The voice was even, unemotional, although Spock must have known how close he was to a terrible death.

Kirk stood, and examined the beam. He soon saw how it was jammed, and

also that leverage from the top of it would probably shift it relatively easily. Unfortunately, the top was burning.

He looked down at the Vulcan. "Be ready to pull yourself clear," he said. Then without hesitation, he caught the burning part and pulled.

Pain shot through his hands; he gritted his teeth and continued to apply pressure. The beam shifted slightly; encouraged, he threw all his weight against it. It gave abruptly; a moment later, Spock caught his arm.

"All right, sir - and thank you."

"Let's get out," Kirk replied hoarsely.

Together, they stumbled towards the exit. Halfway there, they met the fire-fighting team, and Kirk hesitated as if to go back.

"No, sir," Spock said with unexpected firmness. There was a new note of respect in his voice. "Your hands need attention."

So Spock knew... well, he would have been stupid not to, Kirk realised.

Fresh air had never been so welcome. McCoy, waiting there alone, hurried over to them, his face questioning.

"Captain Kirk burned his hands," Spock said quietly.

"Let me see them, sir."

Unwillingly, Kirk held them out. Both Spock and McCoy drew in a sharp breath as they saw the damage, and McCoy reached for a hypo.

In sickbay, where McCoy had hustled him to get his hands properly seen to, Kirk faced his counterpart's two most senior officers.

"You are not Captain Kirk," Spock said abruptly. "You resemble him closely, but you are not he. Captain Kirk would never have risked his own safety for me... or for anyone."

Kirk sighed. "I am Captain Kirk," he replied. "But I'm not the Kirk you know... Mr. Spock, Doctor, what do you know of the theory of parallel universes?"

They looked puzzled. "There is the theoretical possibility that they exist..." Spock began.

"They do exist," Kirk replied. "Occasionally a doorway opens between two universes. When that happens, personnel in those universes can be transposed. This is the second time it's happened to me. We also were exploring an underground cavern full of machinery, and I accidentally managed to activate one of the machines. Your Kirk may have been doing much the same..."

"He did wander off on his own," Spock remembered.

"And when I materialised in this universe, it was beside a machine similar to the one I had touched. Personnel in the two universes seem to be the same, although their backgrounds and personal characteristics can vary, and two people who know each other in one universe may never have met in another because of the different circumstances. As a positive example of these differences - here, you serve under Captain James Kirk, but you have no liking for him; in my universe, both Spock and McCoy are my very good friends - my closest friends, in fact."

"Our Captain won't let anyone like him," McCoy said. "He seems unable to trust anyone on a personal level. I don't know why. He's a good enough Captain... even although I'd say he's afraid of seeming inefficient, which is why he insists on all the trappings of discipline, and always goes by the book -"

"Covering up a lack of self-confidence?" Kirk suggested.

"It could be," McCoy said. "His personality profile doesn't indicate it, but it could be. You see, now that I'm actually listening to you, I can tell the difference. Your voice is more... more..."

"More relaxed," Spock supplied. "More relaxed, and yet more decisive, sir,"

McCoy nodded. "That's it exactly."

"Don't get too used to me," Kirk warned. "I want to find the doorway back to my own universe."

"Would you not consider staying here?" McCoy asked.

"I'm sorry," Kirk said quietly. "But you two aren't my Spock and McCoy, even although you resemble them closely; and you're used to coping with your Kirk... they aren't, and I don't like to think how he might be reacting to them. And what worries me most... If events there today have been the same as events here, and there was an explosion, what happened to my Spock?"

* * * * *

James Kirk pushed himself upright. What had made him so dizzy? He should get Dr. McCoy to check him... but what if McCoy discovered something seriously wrong with him - or said he did, to get rid of him?

He went slowly back towards the rest of the landing party, his mind a confused jumble of conflicting thoughts. If he was ill, he should seek medical help... if he sought medical help, McCoy might...

A scientist glanced round as the Captain approached, and grinned cheerfully. "We're getting on well, sir."

Startled by the man's unaccustomed friendliness, Kirk nodded. "Good."

He went on. The party was beginning to gather now, and Kirk approached it.

"We're more than half finished, Captain," Spock said. "The men have done well."

"Yes... yes, Mr. Spock." The cheerful friendliness in Spock's voice utterly confused Kirk. His First Officer had never sounded so informal... Kirk was aware of a sudden pang. If only Spock would always be like this! But why... why? What had made him suddenly act so... so amicably?

Indeed, the whole landing party was behaving oddly; there was a... a relaxed efficiency about it that was wholly unlike anything he had ever seen before; but he recognised instantly that it was exactly how he would always like his ship to run. He watched carefully, trying to decide what had caused this. But he got no indication as the landing party, its members chattering cheerfully, headed for the exit. Spock fell into step beside him.

Spock, wanting his company?! He glanced sideways at the Vulcan, grateful that Spock did not seem discouraged by his silence. If only it could always be like this! he thought again, the memory of utter loneliness vivid in his mind. Why had Spock never made such a move before? His old dread of betrayal stirred, and he resolutely pushed it back, telling himself that Vulcans were loyal - they were, they were known for it. But then he had trusted Gary Mitchell... and Mitchell had completely betrayed his trust. Dared he trust anyone again?

As the party gathered to return to the ship, Kirk realised that, strange as it seemed, they expected him to wait until last to beam up. He watched the first two groups beam up with a new feeling of... of what? Responsibility?

Spock was speaking now.

"... leg all right, Captain?"

"My leg, Mr. Spock?" The question confused him.

"You hurt your leg when I bumped into you."

Spock? Bumped into him?

"Oh - yes, it's all right. I'd forgotten about it." He was glad to see that Spock accepted his answer without further question as they moved into position to beam up.

Kirk was still wondering about Spock's query when they materialised and he received his next shock. Kyle, at the transporter console, made no attempt to salute. Kirk bit back an instinctive order; Kyle's attitude, strange as it seemed, was in no way disrespectful.

When he left the transporter room, he headed, as usual, for the bridge. There, he found a similar situation. The personnel greeted him with a cheerful, respectful informality; Scott rose easily but unhurriedly from the command chair as Kirk moved forward.

"Everything normal, Captain," Scott announced.

Why was everyone calling him 'Captain' instead of 'sir'? What had happened? He had to have time to think about this.

"Carry on, Mr. Scott," he said abruptly. He left again, and this time headed for his cabin.

There, he looked around. Everything looked normal... He sank into his chair, reaching for the report he had been preparing before beaming down. He would have to add to it...

He glanced over it, reminding himself of what he had written, and found himself staring blankly at it before he was halfway through.

THIS WAS NOT HIS REPORT!

It was very similar, but the wording was subtly altered. He was still trying to make sense out of the situation when the door buzzer sounded.

"Come."

The door slid open to admit Spock. The Vulcan was looking faintly puzzled.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Captain, are you sure you are all right?"

"Why do you ask?" Suspicion and distrust rose involuntarily to Kirk's mind, overwhelming the momentary pleasure that the apparent concern gave him, and he spoke sharply.

"Your behaviour since you rejoined the landing party has been... unusual, as if something is worrying you. In the transporter room you looked at Mr. Kyle as if you were angry at something, although you said nothing; you visited the bridge, for no apparent reason other than to check if Mr. Scott was doing his job properly; also... Captain, you cannot have forgotten that I bumped into you. When you left me after it, your leg was clearly paining you."

What was Spock playing at? Was he trying to manoeuvre Kirk into a situation where he could get McCoy to declare the Captain unfit for duty on the grounds of a failing memory? Spock had him either way, if he committed himself to an answer; if he admitted to remembering something that had never happened, Spock would accuse him of imagining things; if he insisted that it had never happened - and it had - or even if Spock continued to insist that it had - he could be accused of forgetfulness. Either way, whether he said yes or no...

"Mr. Spock, are you trying to get me declared unfit for duty?" He no longer even thought of trusting the Vulcan; the momentary urge to do so swamped by the fear of betrayal that had inhibited his relationship with others ever since Gary Mitchell had deliberately left him to die. Only sheer chance had saved him, not the action of anyone who cared for him...

"No, Captain, but the fact that you think I am confirms my belief that you should see Dr. McCoy."

"No!" It was an instinctive, almost panicky negation. McCoy could have him declared unfit for duty... unfit for command...

"Captain, I do have the right to insist... and so does Dr. McCoy." Spock's voice was colder now, almost as icily formal as usual, the concern gone, and the change, the reversion to normal, sent a cold shiver up Kirk's back.

"Mr. Spock, I assure you I am perfectly all right." In self-defence, his own voice automatically resumed the habitual cold formality that had so successfully kept everyone at arm's length and gave him the illusion that his loneliness and apartness were completely voluntary.

Almost, Spock seemed to flinch. His face set in a mask even more than customarily expressionless, he said, "Sir, I insist that you see Dr. McCoy, under Starfleet Regulations, paragraph - "

"You always did want my job, didn't you, Commander?" Kirk broke in bitterly. "Do you see this as your chance?"

Without waiting for a reply, he marched from the cabin, and headed for sickbay, sick at heart. For a few moments he had dared to hope that Spock did, after all, like him; for a few moments he had dared to hope that he need no longer be so utterly, hurtlingly, alone. And now Spock had slammed in his face the door that he had apparently opened, leaving Kirk with nothing but the bitterness of a renewed betrayal. Spock followed him silently.

McCoy's examination was thorough; at the end of it, he glanced from one man to the other. "You're perfectly fit, Jim - I can't think what's got into Spock."

Jim??? Kirk's original bewilderment welled up again. No-one had called him 'Jim' since... since Gary Mitchell.

"I am, of course, gratified to know that, sir," Spock said formally.

"Very well, Mr. Spock." Spock at least had returned to normal... but what had got into McCoy?

Kirk returned to his cabin. He was feeling hungry now, but he couldn't face the crew. Not after the cheerful, casual, "Evening, Captain," from the lowly ensign he passed on the way. What was making them all behave like that? He couldn't be going mad; McCoy would have known. Unless...

Was he going mad? Had McCoy lied to lull him into a false sense of security?

He sank into his chair, remembering the report, and studied it again. It was definitely his - and yet not his.

After a time, he put it down, and moved wearily to his bed. As he did so, for the first time he consciously saw the carving standing on the shelf by his desk.

WHERE HAD THAT COME FROM?

Trembling, he reached for it and studied it carefully. It was his - he couldn't mistake it, for it had been fashioned specially for him by that wood-carver on Rigel... but he had given it to Sam for a wedding present, and not even he knew where Sam was now. No-one on the ship even knew that he had a brother... so how had it got back here???

He sat down again, and began to consider facts.

First, Spock's initial attitude. Although it hadn't lasted, it had been friendly to start with. Secondly, the crew's attitude. Relaxed, disciplined in spite of it. Thirdly, McCoy's behaviour, informal without taking advantage. Fourthly, that report, subtly altered. And finally, the carving that shouldn't have been here but was.

He remembered the dizziness he had suffered down on the planet. Had some-

thing happened then that caused these changes? There was only one way to find out. He must go back with the landing party tomorrow, and see if he could discover anything. He felt a momentary urge to confide in McCoy, remembering the surgeon's attitude, or even Spock, remembering the Vulcan's seeming concern, but fear of ridicule killed it. For if something had happened to him, why was it manifesting itself in uncharacteristic behaviour from everyone else?

Next morning, Spock was quietly, but not coldly, formal when Kirk joined the landing party. The Captain was half expecting Spock to give some indication that this was unexpected, but the Vulcan seemed to accept it as perfectly usual. Kirk added a sixth item to the list of his puzzles.

Once on the surface Kirk did not delay but headed straight for the cave, the scientists at his heels. Behind him as he went, he heard the transporter hum as it announced the arrival of the next group.

Kirk headed in the general direction of the machine he had been examining the previous day, wishing as he went that he had paid a little more attention to his surroundings; yesterday he had simply wandered off, more to pass the time than because he was really interested, not really watching where he was going; the cold, distant, polite formality of the scientists he had approached had disturbed him even more than usual. He had felt so desperately unhappy that he had had to get away from everyone and their subtly insinuated dislike. At heart he knew that they were only reflecting his own attitude... but he was afraid, terrified, of trusting again and being betrayed again.

Now he had to try to find a machine whose site he had never actually known. Soon he realised that he had lost his way in the maze of passages. A momentary panic threatened him; he forced it down, and moved steadily back the way he had come, following his own footprints in the dust.

Spock was still trying to make sense out of the Captain's strange behaviour. From the way Kirk had gone with the first group of the landing party, the Vulcan suspected that he was not yet forgiven for insisting on a medical examination for the Captain. Spock gave no open indication of trouble, however, despite his inner hurt. Kirk had gone off on his own again, too - a bad sign in the normally gregarious Captain. On any other day Spock would have followed, seeking to help, but on this day he decided to wait.

He moved towards a fresh machine and began to take readings. He was interrupted by a tremendous explosion, sent staggering by the force of the blast.

What had happened? He stumbled forward, choking and coughing in the dust-filled air. Within moments he had encountered the first of the scientists, three of them helping a fourth, who was limping badly.

"What happened?" Spock asked.

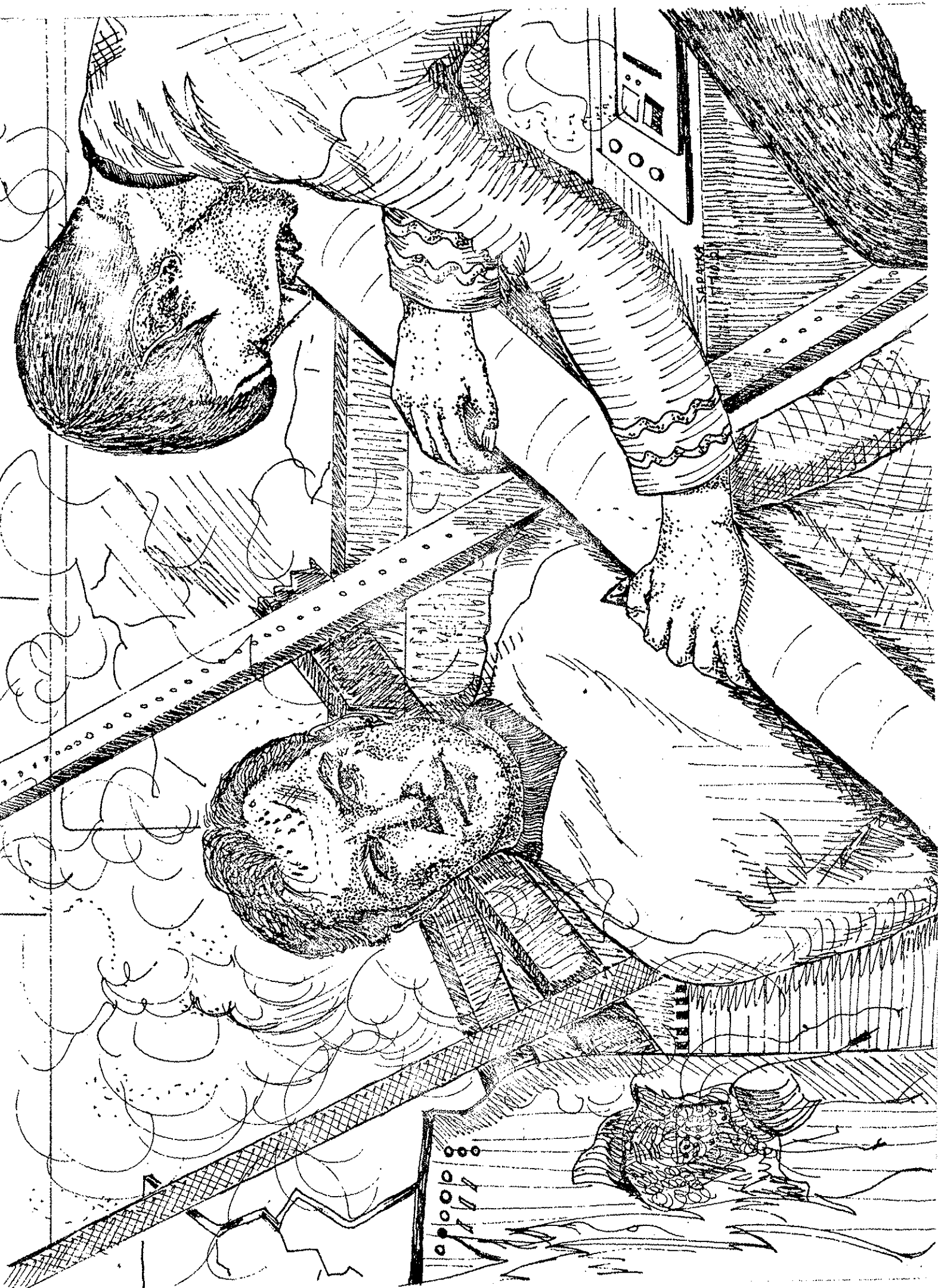
"We don't know, Mr. Spock. The explosion was beyond us - in the area we haven't checked yet, near where the Captain was yesterday."

"All right. Get outside and contact the ship. Tell them what happened and to send down a medical team and a firefighting squad in environment suits."

"Yes, Mr. Spock." The four men moved on. The Vulcan headed further into the dusty depths of the cavern.

He saw no-one else, and could only hope that everyone had been able to reach the open air. For himself, he had to find out - if he could - what had happened. Flickering flames attracted his attention; he headed for them.

Then in the dusty haze he saw Kirk, lying pinned down by a long thick bar of metal. The Captain lay staring fixedly at the flames as they licked closer and closer to him.



"Jim!" All Kirk's strange behaviour was forgotten. He hadn't thought of the Captain coming back here, where he had been exploring yesterday; he had automatically assumed that Kirk would have gone to another part of the cave. Now, realising his mistake, he hurried forward.

The Captain turned his head to look towards the voice. There was naked terror in his eyes, a desperate pleading, but he said nothing. He didn't want to die like this, but he was even more afraid of asking for help and being refused. If he died here, Spock would gain the Captaincy. The Vulcan must know that.

Spock checked the metal bar carefully, noting where it was jammed. Leverage would free it... He caught the end of it furthest from Kirk, ignoring the pain as the heated metal burned him.

It gave suddenly, and he staggered back. Kirk scrambled to his feet as the Vulcan regained his balance.

"This way!" Spock led the way unerringly. They had not gone far when they met the suited figures carrying fire extinguishers. Spock paused long enough to give them directions, then continued on his way to the exit, Kirk at his heels.

Only McCoy was waiting for them, just outside the doorway. He took one look at the brown scorch mark on Kirk's shirt, and asked, "What happened?"

Almost reluctantly, Spock told him, once it became clear that Kirk intended saying nothing.

"Let's get up to the ship," McCoy said. "I'll check you both there."

Spock hesitated for a moment. "The men?"

"All safely out." McCoy opened his communicator.

Kirk was very quiet as they made their way to sickbay. He was still stunned by the fact that Spock had sacrificed his chance of promotion in order to save him. It gave him a strange feeling of... warmth? that someone should do something for him... unlike Gary Mitchell, who had been his closest friend, yet who had deserted him, leaving him to die. Spock had burned his hands, too, doing it. He should say something... but what do you say to a man who does not like you but has just saved your life?

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," he began. He hesitated, then with an effort went on. "Would you tell me something?"

"If I can."

"Why did you do it? I know you don't like me, and if I'd died you would have become Captain..."

Both men stared blankly at him; then Spock said quietly, "Who are you?"

"Who - ?"

"You are not Captain Kirk." Unconsciously, he was echoing his counterpart's words. Kirk seemed to stiffen as Spock continued, "You resemble him closely, and you have acted your part well enough, even although some of your behaviour during the last twenty four hours has not been characteristic. However, you have now made one major mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"You just claimed that I dislike you."

"Don't you?" The question was bitter.

His hearers both caught the bitterness, and glanced at each other as Kirk went on. "I know no-one likes me!"

"Our Captain would never say that," Spock cut in quietly. "Our Captain knows that we are his friends. So I ask you again - who are you?"

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk," he insisted. "You know that. I've been Captain of the Enterprise for nearly two years now, and - "

"That's wrong!" McCoy stopped him. "Captain Kirk has commanded the Enterprise for nearly three years - "

"Wait, Doctor," Spock interrupted. "He could be telling the truth."

Both Kirk and McCoy stared at the Vulcan for a moment, then McCoy exclaimed, "Yes, of course! An inter-universe exchange!"

Kirk looked at him. "A what?"

"There are many alternative universes," Spock explained quietly. "These are all co-existing. Occasionally, however, something goes wrong, and a man in one universe changes places with his counterpart in another. It would appear that such an exchange has occurred in this instance. You are here - and our Captain is in your universe, wherever that is."

Kirk was silent for a moment as he tried to assimilate the information. Then he nodded. "Yes," he said slowly. "It would explain... certain anomalies."

"Have you any idea of when the exchange might have happened?" Spock asked.

"Yesterday - in the cave - I felt dizzy. It was after that that everything seemed... different."

"Then we must return to the cave, if we are to attempt to restore the proper balance."

"Wait - " said Kirk. "Must we?"

"I am afraid I do not quite understand, Captain."

"I would like... to remain here."

"Captain," Spock said quietly, "we want our Jim Kirk back. And you - why are you unwilling to return to the world you know?"

"Here... here, you're all friendly. In my own world, no-one likes me. No-one in my world would have tried to save me, back there." His eyes were fixed on Spock's hands. "My Spock... does not even respect me. He obeys me because I am his Captain - nothing else."

"Are you sure of that?" McCoy asked. "This isn't the first time we've encountered another universe; the last time - it was a cruel, vicious, blood-thirsty universe where treachery was normal - and that Spock, alone of all the men on his Enterprise, was loyal to Kirk."

For a moment Kirk remained silent, thinking. "I... think I'm sure. He has never given me reason to believe that he does other than despise me. McCoy, too. They're in league to have me declared unfit for duty so that Spock can become the Captain."

"I cannot believe," Spock said slowly, "that any Spock would prefer Captaincy to his scientific duties, or would be anything less than completely loyal to his commanding officer."

"I know of Vulcan loyalty," Kirk replied. "But... I seem to be incapable of inspiring personal loyalty." There was renewed bitterness in his voice.

"Don't you trust your Spock?" McCoy asked, in wonder.

The pain, suppressed so long, surged against Kirk's defences. "In my universe... I don't trust anyone. I daren't. I couldn't bear... having my trust betrayed again. Here... I believe that I could trust you two, at least."

Spock and McCoy looked at each other once more. Then McCoy said gently, "Because one man let you down, it doesn't mean that everyone will."

Anguish showed on Kirk's face. "Do you think I haven't told myself that? But I can't help it, Doctor. Because it's been proved to me, over and over, that no-one will do anything for me. No-one likes me enough."

"Lack of trust causes lack of trust," Spock said. "If you truly believe that no-one - "

"I trusted Mitchell implicitly, and he left me to die!" Kirk broke in.

"Mitchell," Spock asked. "Gary Mitchell?"

"Yes."

"Mitchell... In this universe, Mitchell had a strongly selfish streak; a hunger for power that eventually showed itself," Spock said. "He was trustworthy - up to a point. But in the end, he would have betrayed the Captain, the Enterprise, the Federation itself, to gain the power he craved. Yet it was not his fault. The energy barrier at the edge of the Galaxy changed him.~ "

"Energy barrier? Changed him? Not in my universe."

"What did happen in your universe?" McCoy asked gently.

For a moment, they thought he wasn't going to answer. Then Kirk said slowly, "We were on Dimorus... "

He hadn't thought, consciously thought, of the incident for years.

As senior lieutenant, he had been in command of the landing party. Sensor reports had shown no signs of advanced life forms; incipient intelligence only had been detected. Still, the presence of a developing sentient species had dictated caution; the Prime Directive was currently being very strongly enforced since a recent unfortunate incident where a pre-sapient race had shown signs of contamination after an unwary contact some years previously by a ship's surgeon, who had helped an injured individual, believing the being unintelligent enough to forget quickly. However, the next survey ship that passed reported the setting up of an extensive religion based on misunderstood healing techniques. It had to be due to the unfortunate doctor's action; and nothing could be done about it without worse interference.

Kirk's landing party, therefore, knew it had to act with caution. He was joined by two scientists, two security guards, and he had taken Mitchell along as well.

At first everything went well. Several times they saw native creatures and hid; sensors indicated the presence nearby of the **near-intelligent** life forms, but they had no clue as to which of several species it might be. Under the circumstances, Kirk preferred to take no chances.

The survey neared completion; suddenly there was a shrill whistling sound, a hiss, and a scientist fell, clutching at a small dart embedded in his throat.

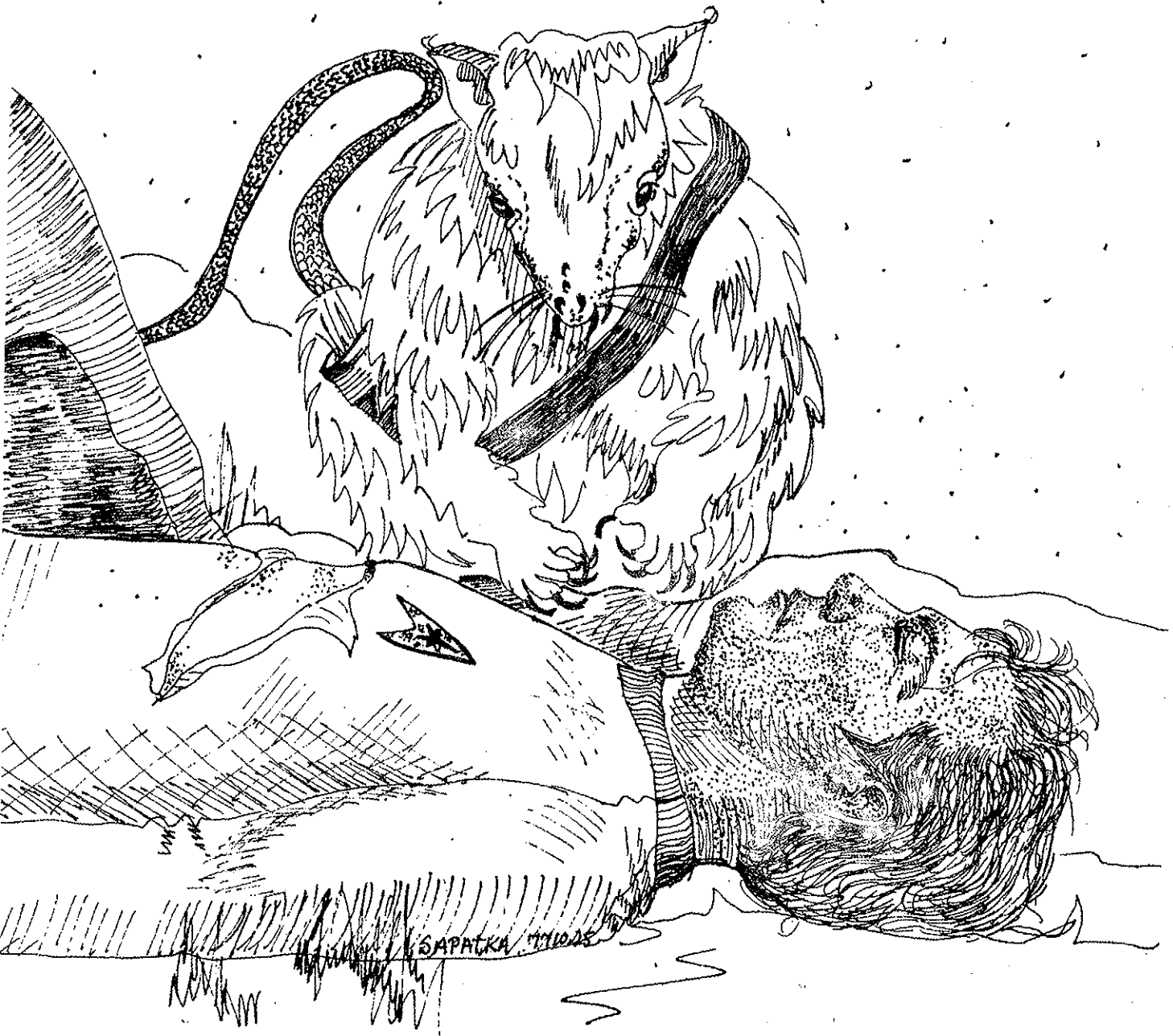
"Take cover!" Kirk snapped. As his men scrambled for the dubious shelter of some rocks, he ran to the fallen scientist. There was nothing he could do. The man was already dead. Kirk snatched up the tricorder and turned for shelter.

Only the abruptness of his movement saved him; the dart intended for his throat hit his shoulder. Fire shot through him. He staggered, still trying to head for the rocks, sensation rapidly leaving his limbs.

Then he saw Mitchell, looking out from shelter.

"Gary!" he gasped, fully expecting his friend to come to his aid.

For answer, Mitchell flicked open his communicator. "Mitchell to Farragut



- four to beam up." As Kirk collapsed, he saw his friend's body breaking into a shimmer of light. The last thing he was aware of was the triumph on Mitchell's face. Kirk lay, paralysed, now completely numb, the physical pain only a memory - but the mental pain was growing, strengthening, as he considered how Mitchell - Gary Mitchell, his friend, his closest friend - had not only deserted him but had done so deliberately, knowing that as next senior officer he would now gain a more important position on the Farragut. Kirk's mind seemed more than usually active as he lay; he remembered things, little things that of themselves had meant nothing, but cumulatively... and he realised that Mitchell had never been his friend. He had pretended friendship so well that Kirk had been completely fooled; but Mitchell had only been using him, using a friendship with someone of more seniority in order to advance his own career. And now Mitchell clearly felt he didn't need Kirk any longer...

There was a patter of feet and a body moved into his line of vision. Vaguely rat-like, it moved in a semi-erect position, one paw clutching a dart ready to throw. It was followed by others. A hunting pack... and he, and the dead scientist, were clearly their intended meal.

The first one was close enough now to touch him. It bit at his arm. He felt no pain, but then watched with a horrified fascination as blood ran from

his arm and the creature chewed on the piece of flesh it had bitten from him. The others moved closer. He tried to cry out, to frighten them away, but found himself unable to utter a sound. He couldn't even close his eyes, and knew that he would have to watch these little horrors eating him alive...

A harsh squawking noise sent the rat creatures ~~scattering~~ for cover, uttering shrill squeaks clearly identifiable as fear, as a shadow covered the sun. There was a flapping sound as something settled on the ground nearby. Kirk tried desperately to lift his head, to look, to see what was happening, what had come now, but he couldn't move...

He regained consciousness in sickbay, still paralysed. It took several days for the paralysis to wear off. He learned afterwards that only his bleeding arm had saved him from being declared dead... and only the Captain's fear that leaving two bodies and their equipment might somehow cause a breach of the Prime Directive had caused him to retrieve both as soon as the sensors showed that the semi-intelligent rodents had moved away.

Mitchell came to see him once, probably hoping that he could fool him again; but Kirk remembered the look on Mitchell's face only too well. He greeted the man coldly, and the other, realising that he had betrayed himself as well as Kirk, did not press the point. He had transferred away soon after.

But the damage had been done. Kirk had never been able to trust anyone on a personal level again. He had learned only too well how easily he could be fooled by a clever, unscrupulous, ambitious man...

As his voice ceased, Kirk remained staring vacantly into space, his face showing clearly the horror that he was re-living. Spock and McCoy glanced at each other, the same thought uppermost in both their minds.

They wanted Jim Kirk - their Jam Kirk - back. But somehow, could they help this Kirk... lonely, unhappy, tortured by a horrible memory as he was. Spock realised the terrible loneliness, for that had been a facet of his own existence for almost all his life, but McCoy knew from personal experience the pain of a betrayed trust... remembering a period, now long past, when he had been afraid to trust again...

And yet, how could they help him? Mere words would never serve to overcome such a terrible disillusionment; actions were what was needed... and their actions would only, at best, persuade him to trust them - not their counterparts. And... would their anxiety to get their own Kirk back utterly destroy whatever slim chance this Kirk had of learning to trust again?

* * * * *

The three men studied the machine carefully.

"It appears to be completely inert, sir," Spock said. "You are certain that this was the one - ?"

"Quite certain, Mr. Spock." Kirk looked at it consideringly. "The one major difference is that in my universe it looked as if it was working. The screen - " he pointed " - had moving patterns of light and shadow. Faint - very faint - but it looked as if it was still working."

"Whereas this one appears inoperable. Interesting." Spock pressed a switch. It remained unmoving.

"I can't help thinking," Kirk said, "that it's the one in my universe that was responsible for the transfer. If so, I'll have to depend on them realising what's happened and trying to get me back."

"Are they likely to realise?" McCoy asked.

"I think so. Last time... Spock knew right away. Certainly the differences between the universes were more marked on that occasion, but Spock knows

me better than anyone else in the universe. It might take him an hour or two - but he'll know. And he'll do something about it."

His companions looked at each other. "It would be very pleasant... if our Captain trusted us as you do your Spock and McCoy," Spock said quietly.

"Perhaps you can help him," Kirk suggested. "You don't dislike him?"

"No - he just won't let us - or anyone - like him," McCoy replied.

"You respect him as a Captain?"

"He goes a lot by the book, but yes - he's competent," Spock answered.

"Then let him see that. Seek him out - be friendly. Never mind if he brushes you off at first. Something must have made him untrusting - you have to convince him that whatever it was doesn't apply to you, even if it's by letting him trample all over your feelings. That's not easy for you, I know - but if you can persevere... I think you'll find it's worth it."

"If he does come back - we'll try," McCoy promised.

They turned back to the machine again. Kirk poked at the control switches idly.

"Look!"

Kirk and Spock raised their eyes from the panel. McCoy was staring at the screen.

Flickering shadows moved on it. Remembering his previous actions, Kirk leaned forward; he raised his hand to press down on the switches, then paused.

"If this works, and we exchange again... good luck, gentlemen." Firmly, he leaned on the board.

He staggered dizzily; hands caught him, steadying him. He took a deep breath, and looked up into two concerned faces. The expressions were sufficiently different to tell him all he needed to know.

"Thank you, gentlemen. It's good to be home."

"Welcome home, Jim," McCoy replied warmly. Spock said nothing - but his eyes were welcoming, and Kirk felt renewed sympathy for his lonely counterpart who had for so long denied himself the warmth that he could have been given by his own Spock. He would never know, of course... but he hoped that somehow that other Spock would find the strength to teach his Kirk how to trust him.

"It's good to be back," he said again.

* * * * *

Something was wrong! Kirk stared round the empty blackness with a whimpering terror, desperately trying to see - something, anything! The transfer had begun to work... but it had only partially worked. He was no longer in the alternate universe, but he had not returned to his own universe either. Why had he listened to the other Spock and McCoy? The trust he had begun to feel for them faded into oblivion. He had been safe there... but he had risked this because they had seemed so sure... the pain of betrayal, the worst of which he had held at bay for so many years by rejecting all emotional involvement, surged over him afresh and he caught his breath in a harsh sob as he fought to control panic.

Was his counterpart also caught in this limbo of nothingness? He called out, desperate for Human contact for the first time for almost longer than he cared to remember.

"Is anyone there?"

There was no answer.

Spock and McCoy had watched with resignation as the Jim Kirk who was so different to their own flickered out of sight, to be replaced a moment later by his double. Spock took a step forward, meaning to utter some words of welcome - he wasn't sure what - but then stopped. Kirk, leaning against the console, stared round blindly, terror on his face.

"Captain?"

But the Captain clearly didn't hear - or see - them. His breathing was harsh, uneven.

"He's almost crying," McCoy whispered. "Spock - what's happened?"

"The transfer may have left him disorientated."

"Not this disorientated, surely," McCoy protested. "He's not aware of anything."

"Is anyone there?" The desperation in Kirk's voice made both men shiver.

"McCoy and I are both here, sir," Spock replied. There was no change in Kirk's tense attitude.

"He doesn't hear you," McCoy said.

Spock nodded. "I suspect that he may be trapped inside his own mind," he said.

"He sounds so... lonely."

"He probably is," Spock replied, almost sadly. "I can understand, Leonard; I was lonely as a child, because I was different and the Vulcan boys would not accept me. I can understand what it is to have no friends."

"But it's his own fault; he's always held everyone at arm's length."

"Since meeting that other Kirk... I find myself wondering why. You seem to be much the same in both universes, from what Jim Kirk said; I seem to be much the same. So why should he be different?" Spock was looking straight at Kirk. The Captain was showing increased terror, and Spock realised that unless they could do something quickly, Kirk might go mad from the sheer sensory deprivation of psychological blankness.

McCoy realised it too. "Can you do anything to reach him, Spock? Would that mind meld you showed me get through to him?"

Spock hesitated. "It might. It is unethical to link with someone without their consent - "

"He isn't in a state to consent! If he was, it wouldn't be necessary!"

"I know. I must try it, ethical or not. Leonard, if it does not work - If I am trapped in the labyrinth of his mind - you will know by my very silence and my actions, which will parallel his. If it happens, pull me away from him; hit me until I regain my senses."

McCoy nodded. "I'll do that."

Spock took a deep breath. Then he took the single step that carried him to Kirk's side, his hands reaching up to Kirk's face.

Kirk stood motionless, staring into the darkness, his eyes straining to see, his ears to hear. Somewhere far away was a soft whispering murmur, like the sound of branches rustling in the wind or the distant friction of breakers rushing up a sandy beach. The sound, faint though it was, gave sufficient reality to the situation to calm him slightly.

He remained silent now. If he did share this limbo with anyone, they had not answered his call; he would not give them the satisfaction of hearing him ask again.

Somewhere there must be a way of escape... but where? Now that the first shock was over, he could think more rationally. The Spock and McCoy of the alternate universe could not know of his predicament unless their own Kirk also had not returned; he could not depend on their help. His own Spock and McCoy? Any of his own crew? Did they even know of the exchange? If they did, did they know of the attempt to change back again? But how could they help him anyway? Would they even want to? Long ago he had made it so clear, so horribly clear to everyone that he couldn't trust their offered friendship... until they had withdrawn the offer. He knew now, too, that he had wanted to accept it, could have accepted it if they had somehow managed to overlook his attitude until he had stopped being afraid of them. The thought caused the suffocating waves of loneliness to wash over him even deeper, intensifying the desolation that had been his constant companion since Dimorus.

What was that?

A faint light was shining in the darkness. He reached out towards it, and touched something solid.

"Captain... "

"Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

"But... but how... ?"

A hand gripped Kirk's firmly. "There will be time for explanations later. This way, Captain." The voice was very gentle. "Trust me, Captain."

Trust... Could he? He could at least try.

It was a long, dark twisting tunnel and Kirk could see only the faint light as he was led along it. But he followed without hesitation, finding it surprisingly easy to trust. Someone - Spock - had actually come to look for him, and he was carried along on the reassurance of that thought.

The light was brighter in front of them; suddenly Kirk found himself out of the blackness, standing in dim light in front of a machine... and Spock was holding his hand, and McCoy was standing there too, grinning like an idiot in unconcealed relief.

Kirk looked from one to the other as Spock released his grip. "What happened?"

"You know you transferred into another universe, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock - and I got lost coming back."

"Not exactly lost, sir. Your body returned - but your mind retreated into itself, possibly because you were unwilling to leave the other universe."

"How do you know that?"

"There is a Vulcan technique - Captain. I was able to form a telepathic link with your mind, to lead you back to consciousness. I... read several things there, Captain, that among them. I was not attempting to spy on your thoughts, sir, and what I learned... will not be divulged to anyone."

"He had to do it, sir," McCoy put in. "Otherwise you'd have gone mad."

Kirk was silent for a moment as he thought about it. Then -

"What was... he... like?" He had to ask.

"He was the man you could be, Captain - if you could bring yourself to trust us," Spock replied honestly.

Remembering, Kirk looked down at Spock's hands. "Was there an explosion here?"

"Yes. Your counterpart burned his hands to save me."

Kirk's face twisted slightly, and with sudden insight Spock knew what must be said. "I was grateful... but even so, you are my Captain, and I am glad ~~that~~ you have returned."

Kirk looked straight at him; Spock met his Captain's eyes directly, allowing the respect he felt for the other Kirk to show clearly. As he had hoped, Kirk interpreted the expression as going with the words. A tentative smile appeared on the Captain's face.

Both men relaxed. There was still a long way to go, and they could guess that Kirk would need constant reassurance to overcome his uncertainty, especially at first. But perhaps the way would not be as difficult as they had feared, for Kirk was clearly willing to meet them halfway.

Kirk himself knew that it would not be easy; the demon of self-doubt would still plague him at times, and would have to be overcome; but for the moment, he felt a peace he had not known for many years.

Content, strangely happy, he said, "Let's get back to the ship, gentlemen. There are some changes I want to make... "
