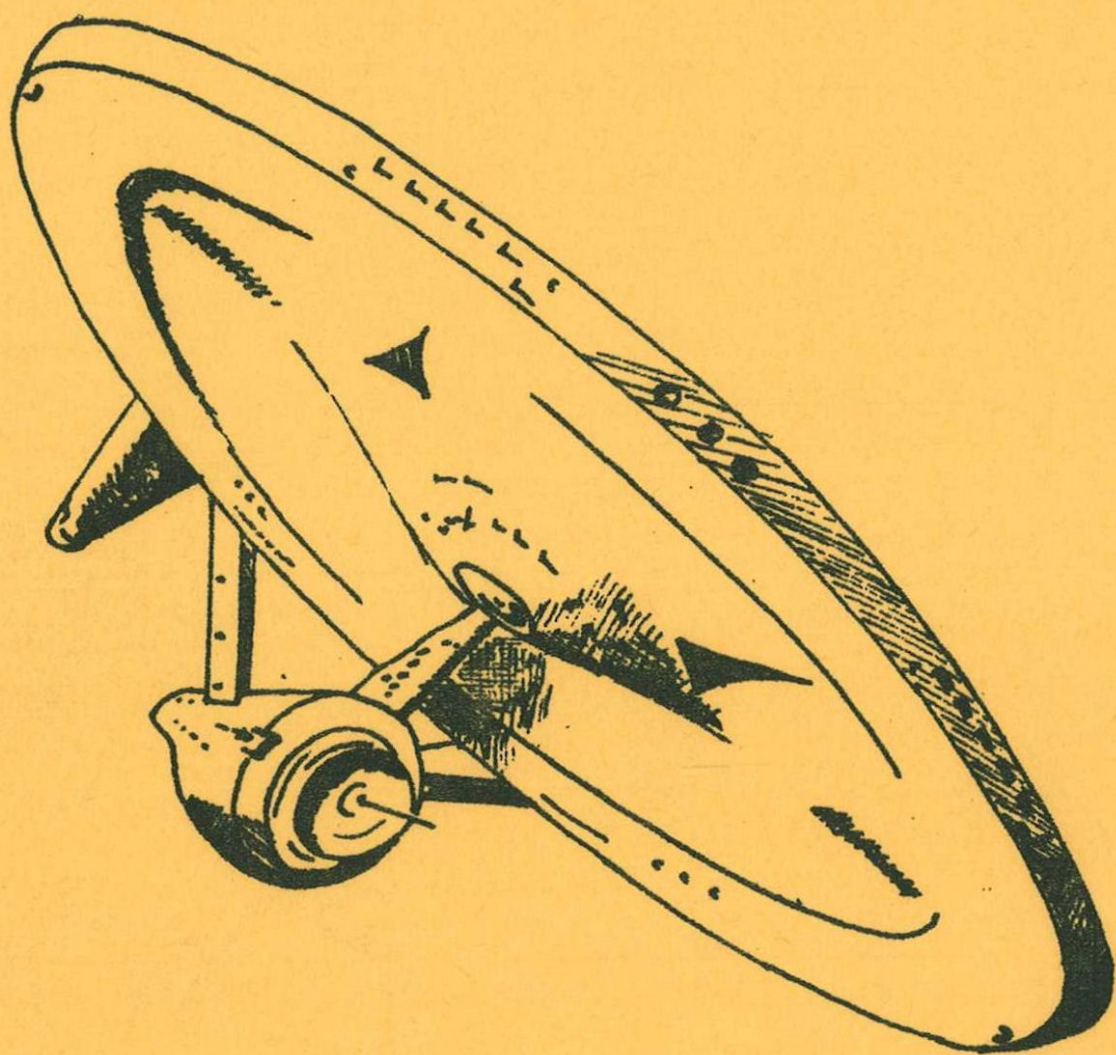




ENTERPRISE

INCIDENTS

a *STAR TREK*
fanzine

3

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS 3

stories and poems by

Lorraine Goodison

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Hello, everyone, and welcome to Enterprise Incidents 3 - the first new zine put out by ScoTpress.

Janet, Valerie and I have one advantage over any other independent group - since we've already been putting out zines for STAG for over five years, everyone knows what sort of zine to expect from us; we hope to continue putting out the sort of zine that it seems most people enjoy.

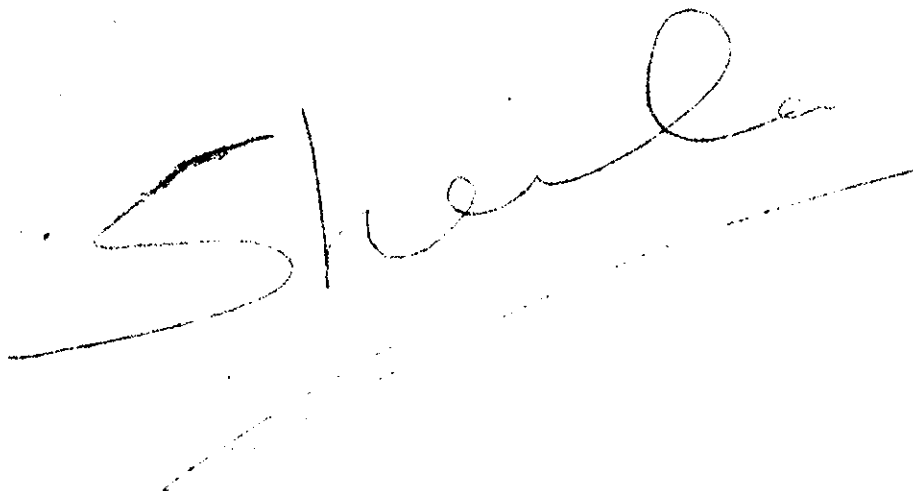
As most of you know, the first two issues of Enterprise Incidents consisted of stories written by me, and originally we did consider that it was 'my' title; however, when Lorraine came up with enough stories to fill a zine (and in fact, I have enough of her stories for another issue) we decided to use the Enterprise Incidents title for any zine put out by ScoTpress in which the contents were all written by the same person.

We plan to have a genzine out in April as well as a novella; I have all the material for it. ScoTpress will be putting out two different genzines; one very similar in type to Log Entries, and the other including material of a more adult or controversial nature, although we do not intend producing a zine which would require to be age-rated. Frequency of this zine will of course depend on the material received.

Although we do have material for at least three zines, we are looking for more. We need stories, and we need poetry. Some general artwork wouldn't go amiss either. We can put out zines without much artwork - and have - but there's no denying some good artwork really does set off a story. Stories should be about the Enterprise crew and in character for Gene Roddenberry's universe. They can be series orientated or movie orientated, and can also be alternate universe.

But enough of me. Lorraine's stories lie before you. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

December 1980



PRISON PLANET

Somewhere high in the purple-leaved trees an unseen bird trilled and carolled its song to the lilac sky. The bronze-skinned boy at the foot of the trees smiled as he listened for a brief moment before moving silently on through the thick forest. The bird-song receded into the background as he concentrated all his senses on the task of hunting his family's meal. Since his father's death he had been the sole hunter in his small family group, and he knew he could not afford to go back to the village without some kind of meat. A t'chaca, the long-necked leaf-eater, would be good, or even a fat shoosne - with some of its eggs - would be a filling meal.

The boy came to the edge of a clearing and crouched low in the bushes, readying his bow. He merged into the purple-black shadows, still as the stones littering the forest floor. He could hear animals moving around him, but kept his eyes on the clearing. Sooner or later, an animal would move across that open space, and then he would fire.

Long minutes passed...then the boy blinked, rubbing his eyes in faint astonishment.

There in the clearing was a shape - no, seven shapes - seven vague, sparkling shapes becoming more solid every second. Even as he watched, the shapes changed from transparent to opaque figures dressed in bright reds, blues and gold. The figures stood still for a second, then slowly moved as if coming to life. One of them spoke, and the boy nearly jumped up in his surprise.

He could understand them! He listened in wonder, trying to guess what some of the stranger words meant, then, as one of the men moved towards his hiding place, he back-tracked and ran fleet as a nareg from the clearing. He made no sound in his flight, and doubted if the strangers had seen him, but he could not take the chance. He must reach the village and warn Nanathe before it was too late.

Back in the clearing, totally unaware of the youth's departure, Captain James T. Kirk surveyed the surrounding vegetation with acute amazement. He listened with half an ear to Spock's report on atmosphere, gravity and life readings, his mind fixed on the amazing fact that in a region frequented by space vessels, this planet had not been found till now.

The Enterprise had come on it quite suddenly without warning, a lush purple planet hanging like a jewel in space where no planet should be. A landing party had beamed down, and now here they were, the first Humans - and Vulcan - to set foot on this undiscovered paradise.

Kirk felt the familiar excitement rising in him even as he stood. There was something wonderful about discovering a new planet, something unique; an emotion he had first felt when still a child dreaming of exploring the stars. Each discovery was new and exciting - it sent the adrenalin racing through his blood. A new world... Of course, he himself hadn't really been needed on this first exploration, but if you couldn't order yourself a little shore leave, what could you do? - Captain's privilege, after all...

"Readings indicate a small settlement 2.06 kilometers from here, Captain," said Spock, studying the readout on his tricorder. Kirk nodded and savoured the peace about them. He wondered if Spock felt the same way when first setting foot on a new planet. Impossible to tell, of course, for the Vulcan revealed nothing, but Kirk had a feeling that somewhere under that enquiring, scientific exterior some very Human emotions were appreciating the peace as much as he was.

Lost in day-dreams, the Captain suddenly realised his First Officer was watching him closely, his expression one of infinite patience, and the look a scientist might have when observing the antics of a creature he was studying. Kirk cleared his throat hastily, rubbing his hands together and trying to look as if he'd been contemplating a matter of great urgency.

"Yes, well - uh...did you say a settlement, Mr. Spock?"

Spock could not quite conceal the look of satisfaction which momentarily crossed his face. He raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Affirmative, Captain. It seems fairly primitive, well-populated...and it is 2.06 kilometers away."

"Good," said Kirk briskly. He rubbed his hands again - all the time wondering why - and looked at Spock. "Right, we'd better head in that direction. Call the others back, will you?"

Spock complied, and almost at once the five crewmembers - a biologist, three security men and a geologist - emerged from the red undergrowth.

"Landing party ready, sir."

Kirk forced his thoughts back to the real reason they were here. Shore leave, here I come... He began to speak, and was interrupted by his communicator bleeping. Automatically he took it out and raised the grid. "Kirk here."

His relaxed mood shattered instantly as Scott's alarmed voice shattered the peace. "Captain, this is Scott! Something is seriously wrong with the Enterprise - all systems are overloading! The engines are goin' haywire! If it doesn't even out, she'll explode!"

"Scotty, what's happening? Explain!"

The sound of a large explosion blasted his eardrums, a woman's scream mixing with the shouts and moans accompanying the afterblast. Scott's voice cut in again, real panic in his words.

"Part o' the main computer bank has just blown up! A fire started in the cargo levels, but we canna get to it now! Sir, power levels are dropping fast! We've only a few minutes left!"

A cold calm came over Kirk as he listened to the nightmare words. "Get out of there, Scotty. Begin Emergency Evacuation Procedure at once."

"Aye, sir. I'll stay - "

"No you won't, Mr. Scott!" snapped Kirk, guessing his engineer's thoughts. "The ship's had it, and she's not blowing up with you on her! Get down to the emergency transporters. That's an order!"

A wave of static drowned Scott's reply. Kirk switched off the communicator reluctantly and looked up to the distant spot in the sky where his ship orbited...

Scott looked up from the silent chair-com and met Sulu's eyes. "You heard him, Mr. Sulu - initiate Emergency Evacuation."

The helmsman pressed the emergency alarm that would operate even when the computer had failed, and nodded to the engineer. "Initiated, sir."

"Then let's get the hell out o' here! You too, Uhura!"

They fled down the emergency stairs, flames and smoke rising to meet them. Crewmembers ran swiftly but in orderly fashion towards the 100-personnel transporters which would carry them to the planet below. Scott ignored them, searching the faces for his best friend.

They ran into McCoy on Deck 7, stubbornly going the wrong way. Scott seized his arm while Sulu and Uhura raced on. "Where are you goin', man?"

"Sickbay! There are patients there! They need my help..." The Doctor pulled vainly against his friend's greater strength as the emergency lights flickered and failed. Orange flames replaced their cold light.

"Think, ye fool! Sickbay's on fire - they haven't a chance. They're dead, and so are you if you go back! Come on!"

Self-preservation replaced self-sacrifice, and McCoy reluctantly followed Scott.

They tumbled into the room as the ship shook under another explosion. Sulu was at the controls. He glanced desperately at Scott. "Almost all the power's gone! I don't know if we have enough - "

"Get over!" yelled Scott, pushing the helmsman onto the platform. He ripped off the cover to the console's inner workings and prayed as he crossed some connections to try and conjure up more power. He frantically set the controls, hurrying to join the others.

Goodbye, my beauty, he thought as the process began.

With little time to set co-ordinates, the fleeing crew had had to beam down randomly, but luckily most groups had arrived fairly close to the original landing party's position, and senior officers were already counting heads as the last group beamed down.

Kirk and Scott locked gazes as the tingling died away, and as one they looked up to where the dying ship still circled the planet in a failing orbit. The end came quickly - an abrupt white-hot glow far up in the violet atmosphere...and she was gone. There would be no more last-minute rescues from the Enterprise. A shallow moan rose from the dazed survivors.

Scotty felt unashamed tears prick his eyes, and saw that his Captain felt the same sorrow. Kirk placed a hand on his shoulder. "She was a good ship, Scotty."

"Aye, sir - the best."

McCoy silently joined them. "Sorry, Jim...Scotty."

Kirk turned to face his friend. "Don't worry, Bones, we'll survive." His eyes met Spock's over McCoy's shoulder, and the empathy between them communicated their feelings. The seconds stretched into minutes, and then Spock abruptly broke the contact. He turned to Uhura, who - like most of the others - was still staring up at the empty sky.

"Lt. Uhura, did you manage to launch the pod containing all ship's logs and relevant information?"

Uhura stiffened into attention, tears still running down her cheeks. "Yes, sir. I sent it just before...before..."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk said quietly. Uhura hurriedly moved away, trying to regain a reasonable amount of control. Kirk broke the silence with an attempt at his normal confidence. "Well, at least that's been done. Shouldn't be too long before someone realises we're missing. When we're late for our rendezvous the alarms will ring..."

"We have to survive till then," said McCoy sourly. "I'll see if I can find my medical staff. There's bound to be injuries."

Kirk watched as he walked towards another group just arriving from where they had landed. Just a question of waiting... He returned his attention to Spock and Scott. "Gentlemen, we have a lot of people to gather together..."

An instant later, Kirk's forced joviality wavered and disappeared as Spock silently indicated the far corner of the crowded clearing.

"We have visitors, Captain. The local natives, I would think."

There were approximately thirty to forty men, each one wearing a loose mauve kilt-like garment reaching to their knees. Their feet were bare, their braided hair alternately copper and pale green. Each held a light, bone-tipped spear, together with a bow and a quiver of arrows.

However, it was not the men who held Kirk's attention but the woman who was now moving through the group, the men bowing slightly as she passed. She stood at least a head taller than the men, dressed in an ankle-length silver robe. She

was thin - perhaps too thin - with parchment-white skin stretched tightly over high cheekbones. Her grey eyes held a haunted look, and her long green hair seemed lank and dull.

McCoy left his organising and moved closer, watching her closely. She looked ill, perhaps seriously, and he wondered what disease was eating at her body.

The woman left her followers and walked towards Kirk. She inclined her head briefly towards Spock and Scott before fixing her cool gaze on Kirk.

"My name is Nanathe. I welcome you to Perani, prison-planet of the Eteran. I hope your lives here will be longer than is usual on this world."

Kirk decided not to ask how long was 'usual'...

Dr. McCoy clicked his tongue as he surveyed the crowded village around him. Everywhere he looked there were Starfleet men and women lying, sitting, crouching or just standing anywhere they could find space. Silent, capable Peranians moved in and out of the strangers, offering food here, administering medicine there. They had had to rely heavily on the native herbal medicines, for although most of the medical staff had managed to seize medical kits, there was not nearly enough medication for everyone. Needless to say, every stage of the treatments was carefully tested by McCoy's staff before being administered. Luckily there were few serious cases - most of the injuries were burns and scratches - though one poor girl had been blinded by a blast from an exploding panel. Nurse Chapel was with her, quietly soothing her.

A deep ache filled McCoy's soul as he slowly worked his way into the centre of the village where he knew Kirk to be. Two hundred and forty eight people remained out of a crew of four hundred and thirty. One hundred and eighty two had died with the ship. Too little power, too little time... A little of every survivor had died along with those poor unfortunates...

"A hundred and eighty two people, Jim," he said, his voice suddenly husky with unshed tears. Kirk sighed, closing his eyes for a moment.

"I know. It was - a terrible waste, Bones. If I could - "

"You can't," McCoy interrupted before the conversation led to an outburst neither could handle at the moment.

"Two hundred and forty eight still live, Doctor," said a quiet voice.

For the first time, McCoy noticed Spock sitting in the darkened corner of the room, his long frame bent into a chair too small for it. The Doctor's righteous anger bubbled up. "Spock, do you realise - " He caught himself in time as he met Spock's gaze. "You're right. Two hundred and forty eight to fight for."

Kirk smiled briefly, some relief pervading his sorrow. If his two friends had argued, that would have been just a little too much for him.

He sat at the Vulcan's side again just as Nanathe came through the curtained entrance. Her robe seemed to glow in the filtered light of the main room, and Kirk frowned as he saw her eyes. Weren't they grey before? Now they seemed to be blue, even bluer than McCoy's.

"My eyes change with my moods," Nanathe said, as if she had read his mind. "It is so with all my people."

"Fascinating," murmured Spock, and Kirk grinned. Funny how that one word made him feel so much better. He leaned forward as Nanathe sat down opposite them.

"Nanathe..."

"Queen Nanathe," the woman interrupted. Spock's eyebrows lifted a fraction. Even more fascinating...

"I am sorry, your Highness," Kirk apologised. "I was not aware of your title."

"I gave myself it," she said smoothly. "Carry on..."

More unsure than ever of this strange ruler, Kirk continued. "Queen Nanathe, you said before that this is a prison planet of the...Eteran, if I remember correctly. Can you explain what you meant?"

"Was it not clear enough?" queried Nanathe sharply. She shook her head. "No matter. Since you will remain here the rest of your lives, I should tell you more about your resting place. The Eteran are my people. Etera, my home planet. When a person commits a crime on Etera, he or she is sent to this planet, where they live out their lives in primitive squalor."

McCoy nearly muttered something about this being the best squalor he had ever seen, but thought better of it. Instead, he tried to work out why Nanathe looked so much healthier now than she had in the clearing. He sat forward, a concerned frown on his face. "Excuse my interrupting, your Majesty, but isn't this a harsh kind of punishment for one crime?"

Nanathe's eyes flashed in golden amusement. "You are not an Eteran, Doctor. Neither do you understand the crimes involved. There is no room for prisons on Etera, so what better than Perani? What they do not see, they need not worry over."

"That seems pretty callous."

"As I said before, you are not an Eteran."

Spock spoke then, his satanic features heightened by the flickering brands which illuminated the house. "Queen Nanathe...if I may ask, what was your crime?"

The woman's eyes changed from gold to the fiery red of anger, but her anger was not directed at Spock. "I protested! I spoke out against the social customs of our people - I dared to advocate change! As you can see, they silenced my voice quite effectively."

Kirk nodded sadly. "I have heard of people being 'disposed of' because of their revolutionary views, but banishment to another planet..."

"I still live, Captain," said Nanathe quietly. "I keep my dreams of vengeance close to my heart. One day I will leave this 'prison', and then we shall see who is exiled!"

Kirk swallowed, not at all sure how to go on. "I was coming to that," he murmured. "Your Majesty, within a few days our people will come looking for us. Now, although I sympathise with your plight, we cannot interfere with another race's laws..."

To his surprise, Nanathe only laughed, tossing back her hair. As the peals of laughter continued, the three Starfleet men looked at each other in astonishment. One minute she was vengeful, the next...

The merriment ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Nanathe's eyes were a brilliant green when she spoke again. "You cannot leave here," she said firmly, glaring at Kirk as he made to speak. "Whoever comes here stays, and your people will not find Perani. The computer will stop them."

Both Kirk's and Spock's eyebrows shot up. A computer, here?

His cat-like curiosity thoroughly aroused, Spock began to ask more, but Nanathe suddenly rose and left the room, her gown swirling in a grey cloud behind her. More than a little annoyed with this prima-donna behaviour, Kirk followed, and found her waiting outside for them.

"Come. I will take you to the computer."

With an almost melodramatic gesture, Nanathe drew back the shimmering blue curtain draped across the dark rock passage. "Enter," she said, "and see."

The three men passed through the curtain prepared for almost anything but the

smooth wall of flashing lights and glowing switches which faced them. Almost reverently Spock approached the alien machine, his mind automatically working out the probable function of each control. Alien or not, all machines shared universal origins, even if the final design was different, and Spock had never yet seen a computer he could not decipher.

Kirk smiled as he watched his science officer examine the machine. If Spock was a Human, he thought, he would be jumping up and down with excitement just now. He let the Vulcan savour the possibilities of the computer a little longer before saying, "Well, Mr. Spock?"

To Kirk's experienced eyes Spock was as excited as he had ever seen him, though to the uninitiated he was as poker-faced as ever. "It will take a great deal of time to study it properly, Captain, but it is obviously the product of a highly advanced technology."

"It provides our needs." Nanathe's voice rang out in the high-vaulted cavern. Her dress clung to her like a second skin as she approached. For one moment Kirk had the impression it was alive. "It is provider, god, mentor...and keeper," the queen continued, fixing the machine with a look of leathing.

Kirk walked towards her. "Queen Nanathe, did you or your people build this?"

"What - them? You are a fool, Captain Kirk! Can you not see it is here to keep us on our prison? How could we build it?"

"My apologies," Kirk said hastily. "Forgive my ignorance."

"It is forgiven, as are your insults." With those regal words the enigmatic woman left the cave, leaving the men to make their own way back through the tunnel leading to the cave.

"I guess you got a reprieve," grinned McCoy.

The Captain returned his smile. "With that lady, I count myself lucky. She must be the most unpredictable woman I've met yet!" He called Spock over from the side of the computer, noting the reluctance in the way he left his new toy. "Bones and I are going back to the village," he began, sensing Spock's thoughts were already miles ahead of him. "Do you want to stay here, maybe find out some things?"

"It would be helpful, Captain," Spock replied gravely. "There are a great many unanswered questions about Perani - I may discover some answers, and also knowledge which may be useful to us. The computer -"

Kirk couldn't hold back the grin any longer. "Okay, go ahead, Spock. I know you're dying to tinker with it."

Spock opened his mouth to query his Captain's last statement, and raised an eyebrow at the chuckling Humans. With proper dignity he returned to the computer, immersing himself in the challenge of learning its secrets.

Kirk and McCoy started for the entrance, but McCoy could not resist one last rejoinder. "Don't play too long," he drawled.

Spock looked up in acute astonishment. "Doctor, I never 'play'!"

Captain's Log, Stardate 5930.33.

Two weeks have passed, and there is still no contact from Starfleet. I find this puzzling. Lt. Uhura assures me the ship's log was launched successfully, and as we are situated in the middle of deep space routes, I would have expected some kind of search by now. We were due to rendezvous with the cruiser Miracle three days after the Enterprise blew up - but as yet no-one appears to have found either our beacon or Perani. First Officer Spock has discovered from the computer that there was previously an invisibility screen of some sort round the planet before we found it. Presumably this screen has once again snapped on. If this is so, we can only hope that whoever finds our beacon does whatever we did to make the

computer drop its shield. I do not relish the thought of remaining here for the rest of my life.

Food and water are beginning to pose problems. An environment in balance with so few natives cannot cope for long with our increased demands on it, and already suitable animal life is becoming scarce. The river which supplies all our water is drying up, but the natives do not seem unduly worried. Perhaps this is a natural process for this time of year. If help does not arrive soon, I may be forced to order my crew to break up into suitable numbers for separate settlements further from here. At present the Peranians seem happy enough to let us remain here.

Kirk switched off the recorder and looked down at the crowded village. He could just pick out the ring of security guards patrolling the mix-up of temporary shelters and permanent houses. Nanathe had told him of dangerous carnivores prone to attacking the natives at times, so he had ordered a round-the-clock watch. It gave them something to do anyway. At the foot of the hillside he sat on were small rambling caves much like those of the computer. These housed McCoy's meagre medical supplies and the small amount of equipment they had managed to bring down, plus some of the crew.

Kirk smiled at the thought that some Starfleet officials would say they were in direct contravention of the Prime Directive, but survival was survival, wherever you were.

He glanced up as Dr. McCoy arrived, slightly breathless from climbing the hill too quickly. The doctor sat down heavily at his side.

"Where's Spock?"

"Still at that computer, I think," said Kirk with a shrug. McCoy nodded wisely and studied the Captain closely. A little thinner than he would have recommended, but that was to be expected with the necessary rationing of the food available. A few new worry lines creased Kirk's forehead, and he had an air of despondency which was totally unlike him.

"All this inactivity isn't good for you," the doctor remarked cheerfully. Kirk reluctantly broke his train of thought and brought his attention back to the present.

"You're right," he murmured. "It leaves me too much time to think."

"About the Enterprise?"

"Sometimes. We had some good times on her, Bones."

McCoy nodded silent agreement, unsure whether to let the reminiscences go on or cut them abruptly with a firm comment. He decided to let it go, as long as Kirk did not get too caught up in the 'good old days' and lose touch with the future. He could not fully know what Kirk felt at the loss of his ship, but he knew his own feelings, and he had an inkling of the kind of link there had been between man and machine. Just as long as the momentary sorrow did not grow into depression...

"Jim, there will never be another Enterprise, but there will be other ships."

A flicker of surprise crossed Kirk's face. "Sure," he said. "But not for me."

"Why not?"

"Aw, come on. Can you see them giving me another command after this?"

"Why not?" repeated McCoy. "We'll make them give you one. Hell, I'll build her myself!"

Kirk's depression lifted at once. He grinned widely. "You're a doctor, not a shipbuilder!"

McCoy made his customary grumbles and felt a surge of satisfaction as he saw his friend's worry evaporate and the shoulders lift a little. A drip of water landed on his cheek, and he frowned at the gathering clouds above them. "It's gonna rain," he said unnecessarily.

Kirk followed his gaze. "At last. Maybe it'll help the water situation. We'll - Hey, what's up?"

Across the valley floor the natives were running wildly towards the caves, glancing fearfully at the sky as they leaped over obstacles in their haste to reach shelter. Women seized their children and ran into the caves, while hunters left the forest to join the flight.

"Boy, do they hate getting wet!"

Kirk stood and stared at the darkening sky. "I'm not so sure, Bones. There seems to be a lot of panic over a little wet..." He reeled as a man cannoned into him, stumbling on down the slope. Kirk could almost taste the fear in the air. He made an instant decision, shouting to those crew members nearby.

"Get under cover, all of you! Run for shelter! Hurry!"

The men and women obeyed, slowly at first, but gradually they all joined in the mad rush, ducking into where-ever they could find space. Kirk took out his communicator, alerting the men on patrol.

"This is the Captain. Get under cover, every one of you! Never mind the animals, Mr. Baillie, just find cover! Move!" Then the two senior officers charged down the hillside, reaching the caves just as the heavens opened.

Life-giving water battered down on the thirsty earth, missing the people who peered out from their safe, dry shelters.

Safe, mused Kirk. Safe from what?

He glanced round as one of the natives - a man named Micnah - pushed through the crowd till he reached the front. Kirk made to speak, but Micnah gasped, pointing out into the streaming water.

"One of your people! He has not found shelter!"

Kirk followed the line of his finger and saw a stumbling figure trying to run through the wet curtain. A chill shot through him when the man's screams of agony reached his ears. McCoy started to move out of the cave, and was pulled back by Micnah.

"Stop!" cried the native, his voice almost drowned out by the drumming torrent. "You cannot help. You will die as well if you leave shelter."

"But he... What is it?"

"The Death Rain."

McCoy's eyes widened in horror as he saw the man fall, his skin red-raw and bleeding. His screams intensified as the rain ate away at his body, but the horrified watchers could do nothing.

"Acid," Kirk said finally, sickened by the sight.

"It does not touch plants or wood, but it will eat at man and animal alike," Micnah confirmed quietly. "It is hard to watch, but harder to bear."

The screams died to moans, then even they ceased. Gradually the acid rain stopped, and the people could leave their havens and walk over to where the man had fallen. All that remained was a smouldering heap of sulphur-smelling dust.

Kirk's stomach heaved, and he found he had to look away. McCoy was at his back, equally sickened.

"Any idea who it was?"

"Someone said Ensign Shore," the doctor said sadly. "It sure looked like him."



A slender, brown-eyed girl left the group of on-lookers and approached McCoy. "Excuse me, sir, did you - did you say Ensign Shore? Robert Shore?"

When McCoy nodded reluctantly, the girl shuddered, tears flowing from her tightly-shut eyes. Kirk watched sadly as McCoy tried to comfort her, then he left quickly, making for the computer cave.

He was almost there when Spock came out of the tunnel, his excitement plain to see. He strode quickly towards Kirk. "Captain, I have discovered something very important! This is not the main compu - "

Kirk stared in disbelief at the empty landscape before him. Spock was gone. Before his very eyes, the Vulcan had disappeared!

Completely flummoxed, the Captain ran to the spot where he had just seen Spock, casting around as if the Vulcan might reappear at any minute. The line of footprints in the red dust stopped abruptly, as if their maker had taken wings, but the area was empty of all life bar Kirk's own.

He ran to the cave. Perhaps a transporter accidentally triggered off...a screen of some kind... But the computer only hummed and bleeped as before, and there was no sign of Spock. He walked out into the open air again, scarcely noticing Nanathe walking up the narrow path.

"Spock! Spock, where are you? Answer me! Spock!"

"He cannot hear you, Captain."

Kirk glared angrily at Nanathe, chafing at the nonchalant tone of her voice. Suddenly his frustration at his seeming inability to do anything concise came to a head.

"Where is Spock? Did you have something to do with this?"

The woman's eyes changed from green to scarlet. "Do not use that tone of voice with me, Kirk! Obviously the Eterans have taken Spock, not I. Be thankful it was not you!"

They stared balefully at each other for a few seconds, and Kirk had a distinct impression of power radiating from that frail body. Then the moment was past, and worry superseded anger.

"Sorry," he said. "I am worried, Queen Nanathe, that is all... Tell me, why should the Eterans want Spock?"

A delighted smile touched Nanathe's lips. "He came too close to the truth, of course. He was too near to finding out the answer to the game."

"Game?" repeated Kirk. "I wasn't aware of a 'game', your Majesty."

Nanathe laughed. "It is the game of life, Captain. To survive on Perani, you must play according to the rules."

"And who decides the rules?"

"I do," she said sweetly. "I - and my power." Before Kirk could as much as open his mouth, she had vanished as mysteriously as Spock. Kirk stared at the empty air, his thoughts troubled. Just what was Nanathe? That there was more to her than he had first thought was apparent, but just how much control did she have over her 'prison'?

McCoy went through the whole spectrum of disbelief to anger to worry when Kirk told him what had happened. Scotty, who had been with McCoy, when the Captain arrived, shook his head and sighed deeply. His concerned gaze met Kirk's.

"Just whit is goin' on here, Captain?"

"I don't know, Scotty," Kirk sighed. "I wish I did. It's like she said, a game, but only she knows how to play it. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was controlling this entire planet."

McCoy looked up from his clasped hands. "Is that so impossible?" He glanced from Kirk to Scott and back again. "Isn't it possible that this is the real reason Nanathe was banished from Etera? Not for speaking out against the establishment, but for something far greater - like misuse of her powers?"

The words sank in, and Kirk slowly nodded. "I've had a feeling sometimes of controlled energy when she is around," he murmured. "Your idea would explain a few things, Bones. Her flat denial of any chance of our leaving, the way she rarely tells us anything useful, Spock's disappearance..."

"But why should she make Mr. Spock disappear?" asked Scotty.

"Because he found out too much?" They could practically see the thoughts racing through Kirk's head as he paced the narrow room. "She misjudged his ability to work things out, so she had to dispose of him before he could tell me. Let's hope she hasn't disposed of him for good..."

"I don't think so, somehow," said McCoy. He shrugged at the querying looks. "Don't ask me why, just a feeling I have."

"Aye," sighed Scotty. "But whit did he find out that wis sae dangerous to her? Did he no' say something, Captain?"

Kirk sat down with a thump at Scotty's question; he remained silent for a few moments, running over the scene in his mind. At length he came up with the answer.

"You're right, he did, but I'd forgotten. I was walking to the cave when he came out. He said he'd discovered something very important, then he said, 'This is not the main compu - '..."

"This is not the main computer!" Scott cried excitedly. "It has tae be! He was tryin' tae tell ye it's only a wee one, maybe connected to a central computer!"

"That's it!" cried McCoy, caught up in Scotty's excitement. His face fell after a few seconds. "The trouble is, where is the main complex, and what use would it be?"

"Spock thought it important enough," said Kirk. "That's good enough for me. Scotty, are there any computer technicians or operators down here?"

Scotty frowned, searching his brain. "Mr. Spock kent that since he was head o' the science lot, but I'll have a scout round. There's bound tae be somebody."

"Good. Once you've found them, get up to the small computer and see if you can find out anything to give us a clue!"

"Aye, sir - I'll tak' it tae bits if I have tae!"

"Thanks, Scotty," grinned Kirk. He walked over to the entrance. "Meanwhile, I'll have another word with our enigmatic queen."

However, Nanathe was nowhere to be seen, and the villagers could give no clue to her whereabouts in the days that followed. Scott and his team worked tirelessly on the computer, but they could not even find a way of turning it off. There were no clues as to how Spock had operated it, and no information was forthcoming. Kirk had the feeling he was banging his head off a brick wall, and Nanathe held all the aces.

There was no more acid rain, but neither was there ordinary water, and things were getting worse. A state of lethargy fell over the Enterprise crew, and nothing could shift it.

Four days after Spock had vanished Kirk woke from a restless sleep to find Sulu shaking him. He rapidly blinked away the weariness, wondering why the former helmsman had left his post.

The Oriental looked worried and a little shocked. "Captain Kirk, may I speak to you for a moment?"

Kirk pulled himself upright, shivering in the cool night air. "What is it?"

The young man glanced across at the sleeping figures of McCoy and Scott. "Uh, would you mind coming with me, sir? I'll explain in a moment."

Feeling slightly puzzled, Kirk pulled on his shirt and followed Sulu out of the sleeping village. The reason for the secrecy came clear as Sulu explained.

"It's Mr. Spock, sir. Freeman and I found him wandering in the brush. He's kind of dazed, as if he doesn't recognise us or know what's going on. We thought it best you know before we brought him in."

Kirk nodded. If something serious was wrong with Spock, the last thing they needed were the kind of rumours his appearance would create. Morale was bad enough as it was.

Sulu guided him through the rough grass to a slight depression in the ground. Sitting on its edge were Security Guard Freeman and the familiar figure of Spock. Freeman jumped up as they approached, but there was no sound or movement from Spock.

Consternation growing with his every step, Kirk hurried to the Vulcan's side, only to be met by a blank, unseeing stare. Kirk looked deeply into the alarmingly empty brown eyes. "Spock, can you hear me? It's Jim - Jim Kirk."

Spock continued to stare soundlessly at his friend, and nothing Kirk said or did would make him do otherwise.

"He's been like that since we found him, sir," said Freeman, watching his attempts to communicate with Spock. "He won't talk, won't look at you, won't even move..."

"Could he be in a trance?" Sulu suggested doubtfully. Kirk shook his head.

"No, I don't think it's that. Freeman, go and get Dr. McCoy. He's the one we need now." He called after the man had gone a few yards, "And try not to wake anyone!"

"Yes, sir."

Freeman returned after a few minutes with the doctor, and Kirk looked beseechingly up at him. "Help him, Bones."

"That's what I'm here for," McCoy muttered testily, but he squeezed Kirk's shoulder lightly before turning to Spock. He had brought along what equipment he had, and now he thoroughly examined the Vulcan, who sat like a limp doll the whole time. McCoy's frown grew deeper as he checked his instruments, and finally he turned to Kirk.

"Physically there's nothing wrong with him..."

"Nothing wrong?" snapped Kirk, worry highlighting his emotions. "Bones, can't you see..."

McCoy waved his hands. "Hold on a minute! I said, physically! Listen, will you?"

Suitably chastened, Kirk fell silent, one hand reaching out to touch Spock's.

"He's fit as a fiddle," McCoy continued. "Too thin, but he always was. No, whatever happened to him only affected his mind."

"Can't you tell what?"

"Not without a brain scan and a study of its activity, all of which is impossible down here. All I know is that something has made him forget everything except how to breathe. He just won't - or can't - respond to outside stimuli."

"Can he hear us?"

"I don't know for sure. I expect so."

Kirk looked at McCoy's worried expression and moved nearer to Spock, speaking directly to him. The shadowed eyes never wavered from their chosen line of vision.

"Spock, I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, then listen." He paused for a second, still shaken by what was happening. Then he continued, having decided what he would do. "We're going to take you back to the village now, and Bones will take care of you. I'm going to find Nanathe, and I'll make her tell me what she's done to you, I promise. Just - just don't give up hope, huh?"

He might as well have shouted at thin air for all the response he got from the silent Vulcan. Seeing his friend like that caused a wave of despair to engulf Kirk, but it was immediately replaced by a deep, deadly anger. He gave Spock's hand one last squeeze before rising and climbing out of the hollow.

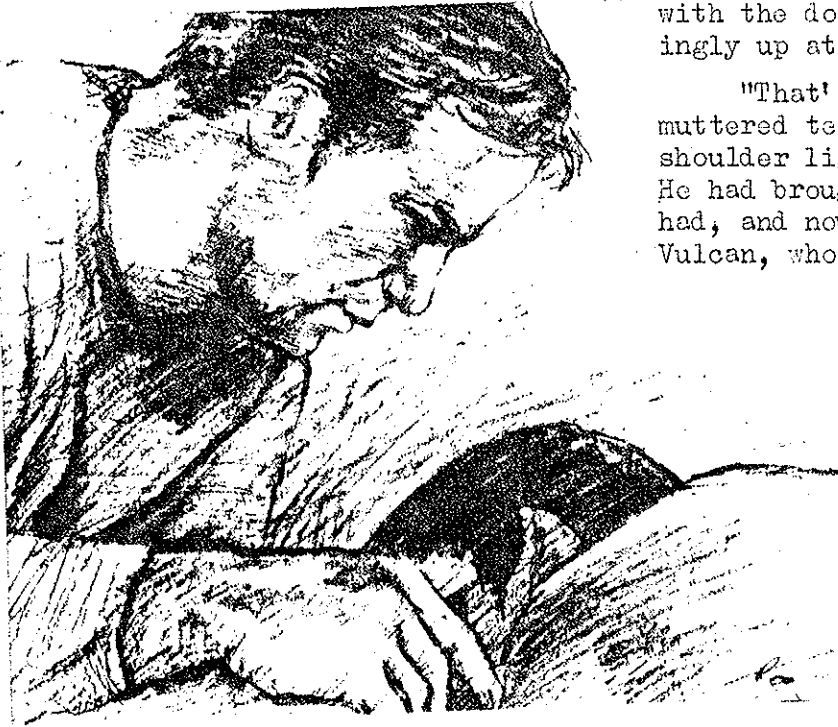
"Jim..."

Kirk unwillingly looked back at McCoy's call, but he did not return to Spock's side. McCoy watched his friend worriedly. He could not see Kirk's features clearly in the darkness surrounding him, but he did not need to.

"Where are you going?" he asked quietly.

Kirk's tone was tight and low, almost menacing. "I told Spock. I'm going to find Nanathe if I have to squeeze her whereabouts from the villagers."

McCoy began to speak, but reconsidered. Instead he nodded once, tightly, well aware of what Kirk felt now. The Captain turned on his heel and left, the silver moonlight playing on his head and shoulders.



Sulu and Freeman waited for McCoy to repack his hypos and scanners, then stood back while he explained to the unresponsive Vulcan that they were leaving now. Like a dumb automaton Spock stood - and was thrown to the ground as an enormous rumbling explosion shook the earth beneath their feet.

The shock-waves continued for some minutes, dying out in intensity until the ground moved no more. The men cautiously climbed to their feet, expecting the ground to shake again any minute. Without a word McCoy pulled Spock up from where he lay, his mind refusing to assimilate what might have happened.

"What...what was that?" Freeman whispered, still badly shaken.

Sulu shook his head, looking back at McCoy. "It came from the direction of the village," he said slowly. "Doctor, do you suppose..."

"Let's find out." Brusquely McCoy pushed past them, Spock in tow. As he pushed through the rough bushes his thoughts were at once fear for the crew's safety and hatred for Nanathe, whose doing this must certainly be. He did not need to look at Spock to see that blank gaze, and the dark landscape in front seemed terribly empty. God, if Jim had been caught up in that...

Silently they walked on, searching in vain for the dark blocks and flickering lights which had signified the presence of the village before. The moonlight showed up huge clouds of dust and earth slowly settling down, and somewhere in the forest an animal howled mournfully. Where once had been houses and rough shelters surrounded by protecting purple and red trees was now a flat plain of chewed soil.

McCoy strode grimly on, his heart leaping at the glad sight of a stocky figure standing at the edge of the turmoil and ruin. The man spun round at their approach, one hand automatically reaching to push back the unruly lock of hair across his forehead.

"Bones?"

"The same. Jim...what happened?"

A soul-weary sigh escaped Kirk's lips as he tiredly surveyed the deserted space. "An earthquake...explosion of some kind...the ground just folded in on itself. Everything just...just crumpled up..." His voice died away, and he barely registered the fact that McCoy had quickly pressed a hypo to his arm before making him sit down. Then reaction set in, and Kirk quietly shuddered, the grief for all that had happened finally coming to a head. He did not notice Sulu and Freeman quietly slipping away to look for survivors, nor did he truly register McCoy's comforting arm around his bowed shoulders.

Minutes passed, and he looked up, meeting McCoy's steel-blue gaze. "Bones, they're all dead - every one. Scotty, Chapel, Chekov...every last one..."

McCoy's eyes closed for a brief moment, then he reopened them, pushing his grief away for another time. "I know."

They looked at each other for a long time, then Kirk seemed to remember what had happened in the last hour. The worry in his hazel eyes intensified. "Spock... Is he okay?"

"Same as before," McCoy said flatly, looking over to where Spock sat motionless, apparently oblivious to everything.

"He'd be better off dead."

"Don't be damned stupid!" barked the doctor, quenching an urge to shake Kirk. "He's alive, and when we get off this hell-hole, I'll make him better!"

Relief flooded him as he watched Kirk cope with the sudden loss and rebuild his composure. By the time Sulu and Freeman returned, he was almost back to normal.

The two men had brought someone with them, but it was not one of the Enterprise crew. The moonlight illuminated the man's copper hair, glancing off his long nose and full lips. Micnah gravely bowed to the Starship captain, but Kirk looked instead at Sulu, who shook his head at the unspoken question.

"We couldn't find any survivors, sir. No sign of the other guards or any of the villagers. We met Micnah here coming from the direction of the caves."

"I was in the computer's cave," Micnah explained. "The noise frightened me so I hid until it was quiet again. Where are my people?"

Kirk could not meet his eyes. "They're all dead, Micnah. All of my crew were killed too."

"I grieve with you."

The simple statement gave some heart to Kirk, and he and Micnah embraced, each knowing the other's pain.

After a moment's silence, the native said, "What will you do, Kirk?"

A wan smile touched Kirk's lips. "I don't know... Micnah, do you know Nanathe was probably responsible for this?"

To his surprise the Peranian only shrugged. "It is possible. We knew she had great powers when she first came here, but even her magic could not tear down Perani's invisible bars. She could not even make the computer work for her."

"Then her story about this being a prison planet is true?" asked McCoy.

Micnah nodded. "Yes, though for many years no more people have been sent here. I was born on Perani, as were my parents, and only the old ones could remember Etera. They said it was very crowded; too many people, too little food. We preferred to remain here."

"But Nanathe doesn't," added McCoy. A sudden thought came to him, and he grabbed Kirk's arm. "Jim, remember what Spock said about the computers? Supposing Nanathe knows where the main one is... She may be on her way there now!"

"That computer is our only remaining hope of rescue!" Kirk said, thinking furiously. "If Nanathe does something to it, we might be trapped here while she goes off scot-free. I'm sure that machine holds the key."

"Machine?" echoed Micnah, looking at them with astonishment. "Do you mean the great controller in the mountains?"

McCoy seized his shoulders. "You know where it is? Why didn't you tell us?"

"I did not know you wished to see it. You saw the small one, so why see the other? They cannot be used for anything."

Kirk posed the all-important question. "You say Nanathe knew nothing about the computers before, but what if she somehow got the knowledge from Spock?"

"Then you must stop her!" cried Micnah. "I will guide you."

Perani had few mountain ranges, its land surface being curiously flat across most of the globe, but here and there splinters of rock had stubbornly pushed through the planet's crust, quietly defying the elements. The largest of these escarpments formed the mountains Micnah had referred to - great forbidding piles of stone sitting astride the main south continent. Like huge red giants they crossed the horizon, their jagged summits seeming to tear at the gentle sky. Each morning the bright young sun rose above them, bringing brief daytime to the land below. When it rose this morning it shone full on the faces of five men steadily walking towards the distant red cliffs.

They had left the remains of the village just as the sun rose, carrying what little food and water they had together with the medical supplies and tricorders. Sulu and Freeman still had their phasers, but their power was depleted, and would not be much use if any large animals came by.

Kirk led now, Micnah close behind. At their backs McCoy walked by Spock's side, relieved that at least he did not have to teach the Vulcan how to walk. Some of Spock's former confusion seemed to have evaporated, and now he walked steadily,

if a little haphazardly. Sulu came directly behind them, then Freeman. No-one spoke, each lost in his own memories and thoughts.

Kirk strode steadily through the knee-high grass, his gaze fixed on the mountains so far ahead. When they first started out, his mind had run circles round itself, but now it had centred on one decision, and nothing would make him change it. Somehow he would get them off this planet, if it cost him his life. And, no matter what, Nanathe would pay for what she had done to his ship, his crew - and his dearest friend. She would pay dearly.

Micnah tore his eyes from the resolute gold-shirted back ahead of him and glanced nervously around him. All his people disliked being so far out in the empty plains. It was safer in the forests, for none of the far-ranging monsters could get in there, and there was a comforting closeness about the trees. Out here was too open, too far from cover.

He shivered, though the sun was hot on his head; and then his eyes widened in terror. No! It should not be! Trying not to panic, he caught up with Kirk, pointing in mute fear at the tall, bulky shape ranging across the grassy plains.

"Dangerous?" Kirk asked, trying to gauge how far the animal was from them.

"I think it is a kermark, a meat-eating creature with poisonous fangs and claws. If it sees us..." The Peranian did not tell him that the kermark should not be there at all. Could he be losing control?

McCoy caught up with them, keeping one eye on Spock at the same time. "Something wrong, Jim?"

Kirk indicated the huge creature. "One of our local monsters," he said. "Point is - has it seen us?"

His question was quickly answered, for as Sulu and Freeman joined them the far-off kermark turned their way and began loping easily across the plain. Micnah was almost beside himself with fear. He clutched at Kirk's sleeve.

"It sees, it sees! We must run for our lives!"

Kirk needed no second plea. Taking one more glance at the approaching animal, he shepherded the others on before running himself. He looked ahead to the mountains. They were fairly close now; could they reach the rocks in time, and would it do any good if they did?

The gap between the outlying hills and the men was narrowing, but so was the distance between them and the kermark. The animal's long-sighted eyes had spotted them for sure now, and it hurried to catch its prey.

Micnah and Sulu had reached the first slopes, and Kirk was thankfully putting on a last spurt, when he heard McCoy call out.

"Spock! Come back, you damned fool!"

Not quite believing his eyes, Kirk saw the Vulcan break away and head off in an entirely new direction - towards the kermark. Instantly, Kirk sped after him, narrowly missing McCoy who had also veered after Spock.

"I told him to run," gasped the doctor. "Not try to...break the...land speed record!"

Kirk waved one arm at him, reluctant to slow down or waste breath speaking. "Go back, Bones! I'll get him!"

"Damned...if you'll...leave me..." gasped McCoy, stubbornly, but his body could not take him any further and he had to stop and watch as Kirk tried to catch Spock.

The kermark was very near now. He could see its huge slaver jaws and large grasping paws with yellow poisoned claws. The six enormous legs thudded into the soft earth, and as the long sinuous neck bent down Kirk threw himself at Spock, pushing him down into the grass.

The Vulcan struggled to rise, but Kirk firmly shoved him down again. He put his lips close to one pointed ear. "Stay down and don't move a muscle!"

Spock obeyed instantly, lying face-down beside Kirk. The Human could hear the kermark close by, but he dared not look to see what it was doing.

High above their heads the dim-witted beast carefully surveyed the plains. Only a moment ago its next meal had been running towards it, another group of the same kind of creature running away. Now they had all disappeared, and nowhere in the rustling grass could it see them. The kermark shifted uneasily, its feet - had it known - narrowly missing Kirk and Spock. Wide nostrils flared, searching out the unique smell of the bipeds. They were here somewhere...

A few yards away a large orange nareg, too terrified to wait any longer, broke cover, speeding towards the shelter of its forest home. The kermark's eyes fixed on it at once; grunting softly, all thoughts of its former prey forgotten, it moved swiftly after the nareg. It would catch it easily; it always did.

With a sigh of relief Kirk cautiously stood, watching the kermark's retreating back end. "Now that's what I call a close shave!"

A totally unresponsive stare met his joking grin, and with ice-cold clarity Kirk remembered his friend's state of mind. He sobered up instantly, and held out a hand. "Come on. We'll go find the others."

Quietly, like a trusting child, Spock took the offered hand and docilely followed Kirk back to where McCoy anxiously waited.

Dr. Leonard McCoy stared disgustedly at the rock face in front of him and muttered quietly, "Do I have to climb that?" he asked sadly.

"'Fraid so," Kirk told him, smiling at the doctor's reluctance.

"The computer is at the top of this cliff, Doctor," Micnah said seriously. McCoy threw him a disgusted look and searched the rock for likely handholds. "Here goes nothing... Ow!"

He glared at the offending rocks and then at his grazed hands, muttering a few choice profanities. "I'm a doctor, not a..."

"Mountaineer!" Kirk finished with Sulu echoing him. McCoy grinned sheepishly and gestured at the cliff.

"Come on then, you know-it-alls!"

Somehow they managed the climb, the same way as they had scaled the mountain-side so far, with determination, strength and perhaps more than their fair share of luck. Kirk watched Spock anxiously, but the Vulcan climbed steadily, ignoring all else around him. McCoy was having a little trouble, but since Sulu had once taken up mountaineering as yet another hobby, he had enough confidence to guide the doctor while hanging on himself. Freeman was coping admirably and, surprisingly enough, so was Micnah. Kirk glanced ruefully upwards and wondered for the umpteenth time why the Eterans hadn't made a pathway to their computer-jailer. If it was to discourage visitors, they'd done a pretty good job.

The sun sank lower in the sky, but the fresh wind which sometimes threatened to pluck them from the rock showed no signs of abating. By the time they reached the top of the last hurdle, there was a coldness in the wind, and the thin air revealed the altitude they had reached. Kirk scrambled over the edge and looked around the mountain's summit. A large portion of the red stone had been sliced away, leaving a smooth, flat platform before a sheer wall. There was no sign of a cave or anything else which might hold a computer.

The scuffle of feet told him the others had arrived, and he spoke without turning around. "Well, we're here. Where is it, Micnah?"

No-one answered, and yet another unexpected development of Nanathe's game slapped him in the face as the Peranian walked round him to the mountain wall.

The copper hair lengthened, turning slowly to green as the man's body grew tall and slim, his short kilt changing to a silver robe. The green eyes laughed at him, and the thin lips twisted into an expression of contempt. Micnah had been Nanathe all the time.

There was a kind of strangled groan from Sulu, but Kirk remained silent, watching Nanathe with narrowed eyes.

"Well?" he said menacingly at last. "What plans do you have for us now?"

"None for you, dear Captain," Nanathe said smoothly. She lifted a hand to encompass the whole platform. "Thank you for escorting me here, together with my key to freedom. It saved me a great deal of trouble."

"Glad to be of assistance," Kirk said drily. "But what is here, Nanathe? It's nothing but a platform on a mountain..."

In answer, Nanathe nonchalantly lifted one arm. An instant later a section of red stone melted into nothingness, revealing a passageway brilliantly lit by glowing yellow stones. The woman smiled at them all, the taste of sweet success on her lips. "I found the main computer long ago," she said sweetly. "I did not know how to use it then. I do now... I shall say goodbye, Captain. Your help has been most useful. I shall think of you when I destroy Etera."

It was then Kirk found he could not move. His feet felt as if they were embedded in the mountain rock, and his arms refused to lift an inch. He could not even turn his head to check on the others, though they were undoubtedly in the same predicament. His eyes shifted back to Nanathe, and then widened as Spock left McCoy's side and walked towards the entrance.

"No..." he groaned. "No, Spock, don't go with her! Fight her!"

Nanathe turned back at his cry, her eyes shining with triumph. "You waste your breath. He will not hear you."

Kirk struggled against the spell, desperately calling out to Spock, but both figures were gone, swallowed up in the tunnel's glow.

"What the hell is she?" muttered Freeman.

"A gery powerful lady, Mr. Freeman," said Kirk angrily, still struggling against his invisible bonds. The cold wind bit into him, and he knew none of them could survive a night up here.

"No," said McCoy from behind his left shoulder. "Not that powerful, not any more."

The Captain automatically tried to face him, and found he could not. Instead he spoke to the empty air before him, concentrating on McCoy's disembodied words.

"What do you mean by that, Bones? As far as I can see, she's been responsible for everything that's happened to us here."

"Exactly, and to do that she uses power. I think she's used too much, spread herself thin. Haven't you noticed, Jim? Do you remember how she looked when we first saw her? Thin, drawn... I would have bet my last credit that she was seriously ill."

"Yet she looked healthy enough afterwards," murmured Kirk, catching his drift. "The way she disappeared for long periods of time...recharging her batteries?"

"It's possible. Think of it - what if she somehow controls this planet, even created the villagers - she must be tired. How long can she control Spock and Porani and us?"

Mentally Kirk nodded. "You're right. She can only do so much. If we concentrate on trying to move, we might just break free..."

For ten long minutes they still stood motionless, every fibre of their bodies straining to move as the wind blew stronger, its icy tendrils working into them. Evidently Nanathe meant them to die of exposure, unable to move from the platform.

Despair was beginning to grip his heart, when Kirk thought he felt his right foot move slightly. Was it working, or just his imagination? He concentrated even harder, and was relieved to feel his whole leg bend easily. A few seconds later the leaden feeling drained from his limbs, and he slowly walked a few steps forwards. One by one his companions freed themselves from Nanathe's dying spell, and they ran into the mountain tunnel as the wind developed into a howling gale.

The tunnel ran smooth and deep, cutting steeply into the heart of the mountain. Kirk, McCoy, Sulu and Freeman ran, swift and silent, alert for the slightest sound from ahead. A sharp corner loomed up, and brilliant light spilled round its curve. Kirk cautiously came to a halt, signalling the others to stay back while he sidled forward.

Round the bend lay the great cavern which housed the central computer, four whirring, flashing walls, and Nanathe's last barrier from freedom. Spock silently walked along each of the walls, expertly gleaning information from the banks of data. For a moment Kirk could not see Nanathe, then he noticed her sitting in a shadowed corner. She looked spent, her features haggard and drawn in the yellow-green light. She did not seem to have noticed him, and he took the chance of calling to Spock.

"Spock, it's Jim. Don't look round, just listen. Keep on fighting her control. Keep on - "

With a scream of rage Nanathe leaped up, her power surging back to project again the image of lustrous youth. Her eyes fixed on Spock, who had stopped his work as soon as Kirk spoke. The woman drew herself up to her full height, pointing imperiously towards Kirk.

"Kill Kirk! Kill him now!"

Spock obeyed, turning to view Kirk with a chilling detachment as he advanced to do her bidding. Relying on his present advantage of independent thought and action, Kirk delayed his flight, appealing directly to his friend.

"Listen to me," he said urgently. "Do not obey her! Fight it all the way! We'll help you. Just don't give in, Spock!"

The Vulcan lunged at him, and Kirk barely managed to dodge away. Spock was not as slow as he had thought he would be. The Human backed slowly away, still talking in the same firm, controlled voice.

"Spock, you've been taken over before - you won those times...don't give up now! She's weakening, she can't hold on to your mind much longer... For our sakes, for the sake of the Etorans - fight her!"

Concentrating as he was on breaking the spell, Kirk did not notice he was steadily being backed into a corner. He stumbled over a rut in the floor - fell against a smooth metal panel. A shriek of victory came from Nanathe as she sent Spock in to kill his captain.

Desperately, Kirk fought off the relentless Vulcan, fending off the hands which reached inexorably for his vulnerable throat. He kept on talking, trying not to believe that his life could end now. No! Not here, not like this!

A familiar voice echoed dully in the wide chamber. "Spock! For God's sake, don't!"

McCoy's panic-stricken cry broke Nanathe's concentration for one vital second and Kirk saw a flash of life in the previously blank eyes. At that moment he knew for sure Spock was fighting Nanathe's control - and winning.

Nanathe stood in the centre of the cave, her plans in ruins. She looked fearfully from the approaching men to Spock. Which ones should she use her power against? Which ones? So weak... Her eyes merged from the green of power exercised to the light purple of indecision. Suddenly, before her unbelieving gaze, a new factor came into play.

There was no sound, no unusual light. Only a slight thickening of the air

as a figure formed a few feet in front of the computer. It was a man of Nanathe's own race, a tall dignified man dressed in a multi-coloured robe of changing hues. His shadowed eyes alternated from colour to colour constantly, and as they alighted on Nanathe they became a deep crimson. He pointed a bony finger at her.

"Nanathe..." The deep voice reverberated round the cave. Nanathe's reply was weak and frail in comparison. "Kotorak, I..."

"You do wrong, Nanathe."

"I do wrong!" For a second she seemed to regain something of her former glory then it was gone, leaving the pathetic wreck she had become. "You speak of wrong, Kotorak!" she spat. "It was you who did wrong. You left me here to die!"

"We all die," Kotorak said reasonably. "We gave you a planet to live on until your life was ended. You could do what you wished with your powers here, live as a princess if you liked. Instead, you chose to play with lives as you played on Etera." He turned and bowed to the Starfleet men. "I deeply regret what you have gone through, gentlemen. There was a malfunction in the computer screening system. You should never have found Perani. No matter, you are safe now."

"Safe?" shrieked Nanathe. "No-one is safe on my planet, Kotorak! I will kill you all!"

They felt the mountain move about them, dust and pebbles fell from jagged cracks in the roof, the wind outside howled and shrieked, and the native animals of Perani moved uneasily in their lairs. Kotorak waited patiently, deep pity and sorrow in his grave expression. The mountain stood still again, the winds died down and Nanathe moaned as she felt her powers draining away. Her eyes widened as she suddenly felt them return full force; then she realised what it meant.

"The sands run out, sister," Kotorak said quietly. His eyes turned opaque, refusing to acknowledge Nanathe's agony.

"It's eating her up," murmured McCoy. "Burning out her body."

Nanathe was a shattered hag now, her hair gone, her eyes sunken and dull. Even as they watched her skin shrank, bones jutting obscenely through their wizened covering. She collapsed on the floor, too far gone even to ask for help.

Unable to stand any longer, McCoy stepped forward to help, but Kotorak stopped him with a gesture.

"You can do nothing."

The next instant it was over. Nanathe was dead, killed by her own wild power. Kirk looked up from the pitiful remnants of what was once a beautiful woman, and was just in time to see Kotorak make a complicated gesture with his hands. All at once his vision blurred, and a moment later the cave was empty save for the computer and a small pile of grey dust. The winds of Perani, freed now from Nanathe's influence, crept into the cave, a small breeze lifting the dust and scattering it along the tunnel.

Thud...thud...thud... Dark unconsciousness reluctantly let go of his brain, and he realised he could hear again.

Thud...thud...thud... A strange, almost mechanical sound. Rhythmic, soothing ... His heartbeat, magnified by the machine above his bed.

Light touched his eyelids, sounds coalesced - awareness returned. A signal sped faster than light from brain to nerves and muscles. Slowly he opened his eyes.

Kotorak moved over and smiled down at the young Human. Kirk frowned, trying to figure things out. Wasn't he in sickbay? No, that was impossible, yet...

He sat up, taking in the welcome sight of standard Starfleet medical equipment. A nurse hurried by, and Kirk blinked. No - it couldn't be. Nurse Chapel was dead! He glanced hurriedly around, saw McCoy, Sulu and Freeman regarding him from three beds to his left, Spock regarding him from the bed on his right. They looked at

each other for a moment, then Kirk finally found his voice.

"Spock? What is..." His voice trailed off uncertainly and Kotorak laughed.

"I am sorry, Captain Kirk. In your weakened condition, the process of teleporting you to your ship put some strain on you. However, Nurse Chapel assures me you will recover quickly."

"Nurse Chap... My ship?" He looked incredulously from one to the other, his brain as yet unable to take it in. Spock lifted one elegant eyebrow in silent amusement and looked at Kotorak.

"Kotorak, if you would be so kind...?"

The alien smiled again, sitting on one edge of Kirk's bed so that the colours of his robe seemed to merge with the muted beige of the bed covers. He took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts. At last he spoke, and both Kirk and Spock could hear the sorrow in his voice.

"Nanathe was my sister. She was born on Etera, and possessed the powers which all our people have. I do not know what names you have for them, but there is very little we cannot do with only a thought. From birth we are taught to control the powers, channel them for the good of the planet, but with my sister, something...went wrong.

Nanathe's mind became warped, and her thoughts alien to our lifestyle and potentially dangerous. I tried to help her conquer the madness, but it was no use. She wanted absolute power over people, and I could not stop her. She - she killed our parents, attacked the Supreme Leader. From then on she was beyond help."

He paused, his eye colours settling into a pale, pearly grey. They waited in silence until he continued.

"She was too dangerous on Etera, too wilful and unpredictable. We abhor killing, even of one as dangerous as she, so it was decided to exile her. I chose this planet. I was the one who sent her here..."

"So she's been here ever since?" asked Kirk.

Kotorak nodded. "We built the computers - seven subsidiary and one central - to keep her contained and hide the planet. Thus others were protected from her evil, though we could do nothing for the natives she created to serve her here. Unfortunately the screens failed for a short, vital time, revealing Perani to your scanners. I deeply regret the ordeals you have gone through."

"It wasn't your fault," Kirk assured him. He glanced at Spock, making sure he was there, unharmed. Spock nodded slightly as if he had read the Captain's thoughts, and Kirk turned back to Kotorak with a lighter heart. "Kotorak, I... saw my ship explode, my crew died on Perani...What...I mean how, did you...?"

"Once again, I regret what you had to endure. Nanathe was unlike us in that she would kill without mercy, but we discovered the malfunction in time to stop her. At the time she was still too powerful for us to stop without innocents being harmed, but we found it relatively simple to save your crew, making it seem they had perished - a simple matter of teleportation, even with your ship. Unfortunately, to make Nanathe believe she was still in full control, we had to create the images of death in your minds also. The explosion, your crewman's agonising death - all were illusions, projections of our minds."

Kirk looked at him with a lop-sided grin. "Pretty powerful illusions."

"They had to be. Your pain had to be real... However, you need not worry about the effects, Captain. All memories of the illusions have been erased. Your crew remembers the planet, but little else. Only you two know the full story; even your other friends here are not aware of what happened, of what I have been saying. Ensign Shore is in excellent health, and the girl who was apparently blinded is at this moment hard at work. It is regrettable we had to go to such lengths, but we had to wait until Nanathe had used her strength trying to control too much at once. Only then could I come to your aid, Captain. I am sorry."

"You saved my ship at the expense of your sister's life!" cried Kirk, disturbed at Kotorak's humility. "If anyone should apologise it should be me. It was mostly our fault for beaming down there."

"Nevertheless, I apologise. From my heart..." Kotorak stood, bowing deeply to Kirk and Spock. The air about him wavered, thinned, and in an instant he was gone, on his way back to the mysterious Etera.

Kirk lay back on his pillows, suddenly tired. He was going to have one whale of a time explaining their two-week disappearance... He closed his eyes thankfully, opening them again as a peevish voice spoke.

"What's going on here? Jim, who was that?"

Kirk groaned, and looked mutely at Spock. A faint smile touched the corners of Spock's mouth.

"Shall I explain, Captain?"

"Please do, Mr. Spock."

As Spock patiently began explaining everything to the confused doctor, Captain James T. Kirk quietly fell asleep.

NIGHT

It is night on the Enterprise.
They say night is silent;
The only time a ship is at peace,
But I think not.

As I walk the passage on seasoned tread
I feel her vibrant new life.
The life given to the new-born child that is
Mine.
My ears hear every creak, every hum, every cough
From the bridge to below and beyond.
I pass a door,
Hear soft harp tones...
And smile as I perceive their meaning.

An outside viewer...
The awesome sight of infinitnity.
My soul expands to encompass that wonder,
But in vain.
I reach inward, and see her in my mind.
My ship, my phoenix, my beauty,
My love.
Like a space-borne dove she flies the dark majesty
And only I - only I can feel her heart beat this night.

Lost in silent contemplation
I nod to another who
Measures his life in thoughts of solitude.
The throb of her imprisoned wildness fills
The walls about me...The wildness I have
Longed for these past years.
Sleep, silent night, for I have returned...
The dream is ended.
Reality begins.

MAILBAG BLUES

"Ouch! You twit, I'll...I'll..."

The rest of the agonised cry was lost in soul-scorching cursing as Lt. Bob Mearns finally lost the fragile hold on his temper. A few yards away Uhura grinned and edged past a pile of bags reaching almost to the mail-room's ceiling.

"Something wrong, Bob?" she asked sweetly. The communications man blushed slightly, trying not to swear at the pain in his bruised shinbone.

"Um, I didn't realise you were there. Sorry..."

"It's all right," laughed Uhura. "I've heard worse. The Captain comes out with some real beauts when he thinks no-one can hear. What happened, or dare I ask?"

An anguished expression crossed Mearns' face. "That idiot Robinson dropped this blasted crate on my leg. Add to that the sack he christened me with earlier and the anti-grav unit he wrecked before that, and you will know why I'm swearing."

Uhura nodded sympathetically. "Yes, he is a little ham-handed. Whatever happened to the others who were detailed to help?"

There was a derisive snort. "They all slipped off, didn't they... Put down their names for leave and got away before the Chief spotted it. Right now they're probably enjoying the delights of the base's stripclubs."

"Aww, shame..." cooed Uhura. "Poor little Robert is left all alone to help me sort the mail."

"I might as well be for all the help Robinson is."

Uhura was about to return to her bag counting when the size of the aforementioned crate registered fully. She spun back, amazement in her eyes.

"What in all the universe is in there?"

Mearns lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "I hate to think. It's addressed to Sulu, so it could be anything from a ten-ton boulder to an Aldeberan winkle-cat. Either way, he can come collect it himself. No way am I transporting that up to deck four."

His companion smiled and dutifully returned to her work.

Every time the ship called at a Starbase, mail was dropped off to be forwarded and waiting bags were collected, resulting in a transport shuttle service neither communications nor security looked forward to. It was one huge headache for both departments, and the longer the Enterprise had been away, the larger the piles of mail. It was amazing, Uhura mused, just how many people still used the age-old method of pen and paper to keep in touch. True, Starfleet communication channels could not afford to be inundated with short endearments, but there were still voice tapes. It was also amazing how many people continued to address things wrongly and send parcels with inadequate wrappings. There would doubtless be the usual number of 'dead correspondence' in this load, and Uhura was not looking forward to hand-sorting the mail the computer could not make head nor tail of. She cursed the luck that had landed her this duty. Oh for a nice bridge crisis...

On the edge of her vision a burly red-shirted figure was apparent, and she knew who it was before she looked up. Scotty had been back and forth between engineering and the mailroom ever since the first bags arrived, an anxious look on his face. Uhura decided that look was becoming decidedly strained.

"I ken I've asked before," Scotty began defensively, "but is there anythin' for me? A parcel, maybe?"

Before Uhura could answer, a shout came from Mearns' direction. "Parcel coming over!"

Even as the communications officer realised what that meant, a large package sailed over the growing mound of bags, neatly missing her outstretched hands to crash noisily on the floor.

"Oh shi-" began Mearns before he spotted Mr. Scott. "...Shucks..." he finished lamely. "Hope there was nothing breakable in there, sir."

Scotty looked as if he had swallowed one of McCoy's most potent medicines. He gulped convulsively, unable to believe his eyes. Slowly he sank to his knees, picking up a dripping, soggy parcel now full of broken glass. He gazed speechlessly at it as the unmistakable aroma of Saurian brandy replaced that of dry mailbagw... Uhura and Mearns exchanged worried glances, the young man trying to decide what to say.

Scotty looked at him, looked at the parcel, gave a little moan and wandered from the room in an unbelieving daze. A stunned silence lasted until the corners of Uhura's mouth began to curl upwards, accompanied by an inevitable giggle. They looked at each other again and promptly doubled up with laughter.

"I don't think I've ever seen him so shocked, even when the engines nearly blow up," spluttered Mearns.

Uhura giggled helplessly, dropping the clipboard in order to hold her middle against the laughter. It was some time before she found breath enough to speak.

"Oh dear - I hate to see a grown engineer cry!"

"He can't complain - it wasn't marked fragile."

Uhura tried to look stern and reproofing. "Even so, you really shouldn't throw parcels. Especially when I'm not ready for them. Let's just hope there are some technical journals in this lot to console Scotty."

"Yeah," agreed Mearns. "How about some helpers for us, too - think you can magic them up?"

"I wish I could."

Bob Mearns looked dolefully at the mountain which was reaching Everest proportions. If only they could get some help, by hook or by crook...if necessary... The thought sparked an idea in his mind, an idea he liked the more he thought about it. A cunning glint entered his eye.

"Uhura, our worries are about to be solved for good. I am about to procure us some help, and there'll be no fear of them running off until this is done, either."

The Bantu woman looked unconvinced. "Unless you can make some clones, forget it, chum. No-one will give up their precious leave time gladly."

He waved a finger at her, grinning from ear to ear. "Don't ask, merely wait for my return. Within fifteen minutes I will have gathered a willing team to assist. Just rest those lovely legs of yours and I will return!"

Sadly shaking her head, Uhura sat upon the nearest bag to do as he suggested. It was more than fifteen minutes before he returned, but Uhura didn't care about that. What took her attention was the line of six 'volunteers' following dolefully behind the exuberant communications officer.

"I give up," she said finally. "How did you do it?"

"I prevailed on their sense of duty and honour," was the smug reply.

"He threatened to shop us if we didn't help," Kyle translated sourly.

At Uhura's uncomprehending stare, Sulu explained further. "He said he would accidentally on purpose talk about a few things within the Captain's or Spock's hearing."

The blackmailer innocently ignored the accusing looks. "Can I help it if my security friend knows about certain overlooked and generally unknown incidents which have escaped the Captain's attention? Silence has a price, you know."

"If I find out who your security friend is, I'll..." began Kyle.

Uhura interrupted before bad feelings got out of hand. She smiled brightly, guiding the extra hands towards the pressing work. They would be a big help, but

it would still be several days before everything was properly sorted and handed out.

Her eyes fell on an official-looking bag which prompted an inward groan. Nudging Mearns in the ribs, she wandered over to it. "I bet you ten to a hundred credits that is full of official forms and memos for the officers, and at least a quarter of it will be exclusively for our two commanding heroes. I predict bad moods for the next week or so."

"How so?"

"If you haven't seen the Captain after he gets his mail, then take my advice and vamoose from sight for a while. He detests paperwork, and he's going to be like a bull with a sore head until it is finished with."

There was a knowledgeable groan from Sulu's direction, so Mearns made a mental note of the warning.

"How long do you think this will take?" Sulu asked of Uhura.



"Years, sugar, years..."

The helmsman let out a hollow moan. "I can see it now... We'll grow old and die here - forever sorting mail in the afterlife..."

Sulu's morbid prediction seemed to be coming true, for next day the mail mountain looked as high as before and the weary expressions grew worse with every bag emptied. Still, some of the mail was being slowly sorted into its appropriate piles, and while some heaps remained relatively small, others grew at an alarming rate.

Uhura gazed worriedly at the miniature mountain reserved for Kirk. "The Captain is not going to like this at all..."

"Never mind, this will cheer him up," said Sulu, waving a coloured envelope under her nose. Uhura took one end and breathed deeply. A lush, exotic perfume wafted past her nostrils.

"Phew...pretty overpowering."

"There's more where that came from. Different perfumes each time, too."

Uhura rolled her eyes. "How many?"

Sulu shrugged. "I lost count after a while."

"There can't be that many," Uhura said firmly, but they exchanged a knowing glance. Whatever was in those letters might just soften the Captain's mood enough to make life bearable.

"First class, Mr. Sulu?"

"What else, Ms. Uhura?"

Uhura turned to be met by an anxious young ensign nervously clutching a large bag as if his life depended on it. For a second she absently wondered what Mearns could possibly have blackmailed him with, then remembered it was Robinson. She assumed her best capable lieutenant expression.

"Can I help you, Ensign?"

Robinson blinked. Somehow an enquiry from the wondrous Lt. Uhura made his mouth dry in seconds. It took a while for his brain to begin functioning enough to produce words.

"Um...Lieutenant, sir, this bag is - ah - is full of holiday brochures. Should I give one to everybody, or..."

"Let's see," interrupted Uhura. She delved into the expansive bag, coming up with gaudily coloured magazines splattered with words which came close to making her lose her famed cool.

"What the... 'Holiday on Sunny Omicron Ceti III! Relax in pleasant surroundings, assured of perfect total peace and happiness throughout your vacation...' I'll bet! Sulu, Bob, come look at this! "

The two men hurried across, unable to think what could be wrong. Uhura thrust a brochure at each of them. "Read that!"

Looks of puzzlement turned to disbelief and then anger as they each read the bright promises.

"Who the hell wrote this?" cried Sulu.

Uhura was studying the inside and back covers. "I don't know, but whoever it is has some cheek..." She trailed off, jaw hanging open. "Sulu, you'll never believe this. Remember Cyrano Jones?"

"I have heard, yes," murmured Sulu, who had been temporarily off the ship during that unfortunate incident. "You don't mean he - "

"Uhuh. I think the Captain had better see these. How they ever got here is

beyond me."

"Then I don't give every crewmember one?" Robinson asked blandly.

Uhura eyed him suspiciously, decided he was not trying to be funny. "No, Ensign, you do not," she said coldly. "Now, if you would be so kind as to pick that up, we are going to see Captain Kirk..."

Mearns watched them go, then looked around him. "Well, looks like we're getting on pretty well, huh?"

Sulu, who was determined to remain gloomy until his enforced duty was done, shrugged. "You wait. Spock might carry out one of his efficiency checks for something to do."

"Is that bad?" Mearns asked. "I've always been off duty when he's checked communications."

Sulu whistled. "Then you are one lucky man. If you think Spock is super-efficient normally, you wait until he really gets started. If you're not on the ball then..." He rolled his eyes expressively, making Mearns glance worriedly at the door. Maybe he had better clear the floor of empty bags and torn labels, just to be on the safe side, of course.

Kirk squinted through one eye for a second, then did the same with his other eye. He followed that by peering through his spread fingers, but it made no difference at all. It was no use, the mound on his desk looked just as formidable and horrible whichever way he looked at it. A hollow groan expressed his feelings exactly, and he could only watch numbly as a tendril of packets slowly slid from their precarious perch to join another small heap on the floor.

In the silence a small gurgling sound insistently reminded him of his stomach's needs. James T. gritted his teeth, knowing full well that if he left it now he would find himself various important things to do until he could honestly tell himself he was too tired for paperwork. Still, a medium rare steak would go down rather well...

Visions of the varied menus the computer could provide danced before his eyes, dissolving his half-hearted determination to carry on working.

"Weakling," he muttered, but it didn't stop him from pushing back the chair and averting his eyes from the pile. Unfortunately, it was not his night. The door buzzer went just as he rose. Kirk sat down again with a slight feeling of panic.

It was Spock who entered, his expression at its blandest yet. In his hand was a bundle of letters - mostly pink, Kirk noted. The Vulcan looked over the overflowing mound as if it was a normal sight in the Captain's office. In some ways it was, the only difference being the all over size.

"A number of letters addressed to you seem to have been mistakenly included with my correspondence, Captain," he explained, holding out the bundle.

Kirk reached for it, frowning at the aura of perfume about it. He glanced at the very feminine envelopes with an expression of absolute dread. Oh no, not again...

"It is fortunate I noticed them," Spock continued, savouring Kirk's face. "They may be important."

"What, these? Oh no, not very important really," Kirk said with forced joviality. "They can wait... Thanks for bringing them along, just the same, Spock."

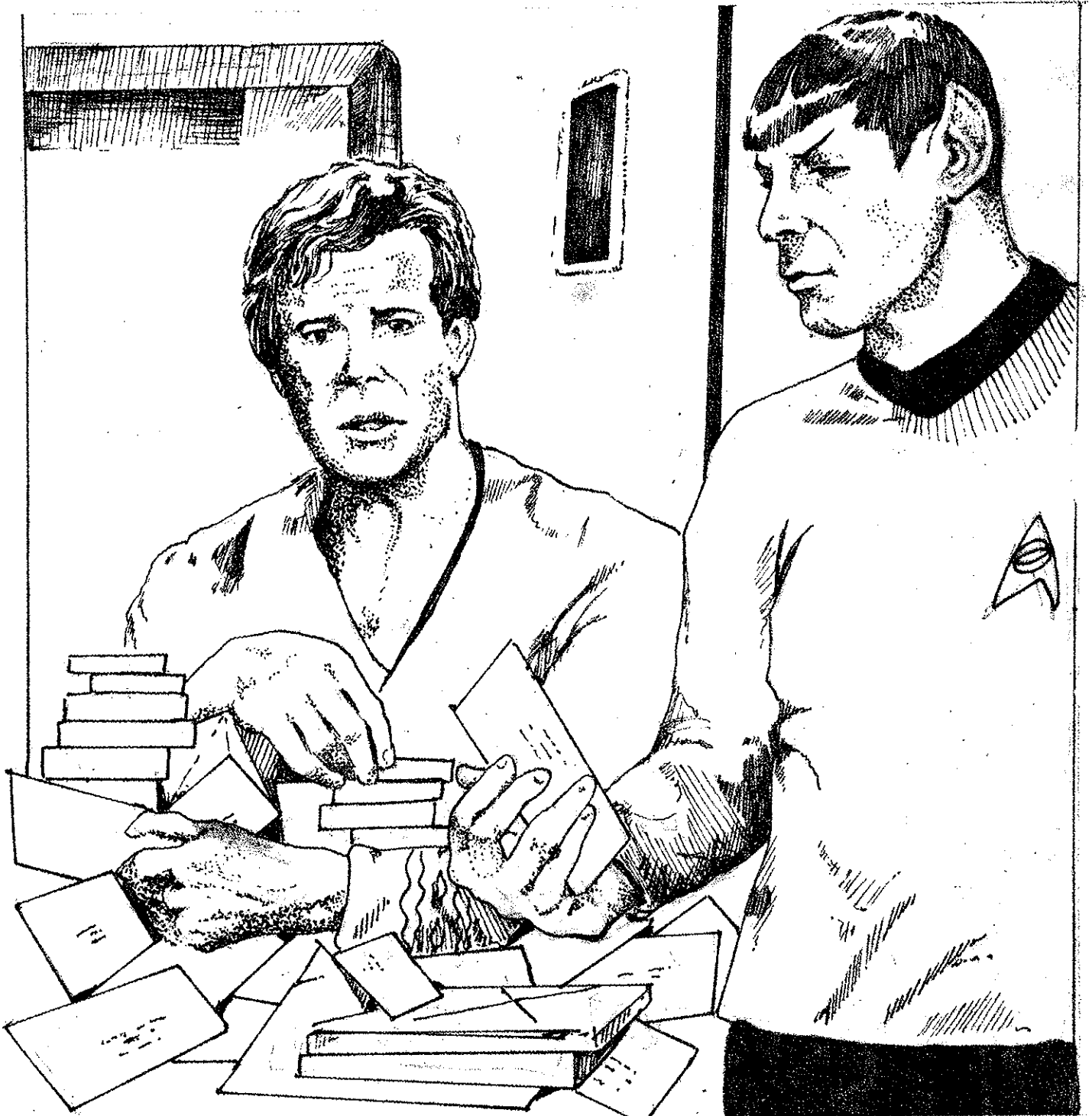
As he hurriedly secreted the offending letters in a drawer he caught a glimpse of a barely raised eyebrow, but it was down again by the time he lifted his head. He coughed politely, determined to change the subject.

"Ah... I got the usual mountain of mail again, as you can see. I hate to think how long it'll take to get it sorted."

"Approximately three point nine weeks, I should say," Spock said helpfully, eyeing the mail. .

Kirk wondered sourly if that was a Spock-type joke or not. He sincerely hoped it was. Like Mearns before him, his momentary depression was brightened by the glimmerings of an idea. His voice took on an air of courageous dejection, which he linked to a hang-dog expression. It really would not be fair, but if Spock fell for it...

"Yes, I had to cut my shore leave short for this lot. Pity," sighed the down-trodden Captain. "I'm not complaining, of course - all part of the job, after all - but it would be nice to get away from it for a while, even a few hours. If only I had someone to sort it out..."



He resisted the impulse to sigh again and glanced sideways at Spock. Maybe he had laid it on a bit thick. Was that a look of pity in the Vulcan's eye? He waited hopefully as Spock nodded with complete understanding and sympathy.

"It is unfortunate," Spock murmured. He paused for a second then continued, "However, there is a saying that the sooner something is tackled, the sooner it is finished. Which reminds me of my own mail. If you will excuse me, sir..."

Kirk ground his teeth together. Spock had known from the start what he was up to! That Vulcan was getting too good at reading Humans! As the door closed, he glared glumly at the small mountain, wondering for the umpteenth time who had invented letters and important packets. Whoever it was, if a certain Starship captain ever got hold of him...

A chorus of hearty guffaws and wolf whistles attracted Uhura's attention, and her ears pricked as she heard Chekov's name mentioned. She glanced up to where the men had gathered in a small group, the taller ones peering over shoulders at something Bob Mearns held. Uhura put down her clipboard and wandered slowly over to satisfy her curiosity.

"Where did he get hold of that?" asked Kyle.

Mearns raised his eyebrows. "I wish I knew... He refuses to give me the address, either."

"Dirty old man..."

Sulu craned his neck, squinting past Kyle's ear. "Hey, I didn't see that page properly; flick it back. Hmmm. Uh, on second thoughts, never mind that page. I don't think I'm old enough..."

Uhura moved quickly up, standing on tiptoe to see past them. "Can I have a look?"

There was a flurry of pages as Mearns hastily closed the magazine. The other seven looked suitably embarrassed and abashed, and Uhura noted Robinson had turned an interesting shade of pink.

Undeterred by the air of confusion and with characteristic determination, Uhura edged closer, glancing curiously at Mearns. "Come on, give me a look too. Why should you lot have all the fun? Tell me what it is, at least."

Varying tones of red and pink had begun to colour Mearns' neck and cheeks, and for some reason he had developed a close interest in the floor. He carefully held the magazine just out of Uhura's reach.

"It's nothing much really, Uhura. Just some magazines on - ah - " He glanced desperately at the others for inspiration.

"Biology," blurted Sulu anxiously. "A parcel came untied; we were just putting it back together..." He finished uncertainly, knowing full well Uhura didn't believe a word of it.

She smiled sweetly, aware of what aspect of 'biology' it was. The imp in her prompted her to ask, "Biology? Human or alien? Is it both sexes, or just one?"

She waited expectantly while Mearns spluttered nonsense and the helpers exchanged glances. As Bob came to the end of his hurried answer Uhura took pity on them.

"Idiots!" she laughed. "I know perfectly well it's a 'men-only' type magazine! Nothing to be embarrassed about - I am past my innocent days, you know. Now, would one of you kind gentlemen help me with these personal message tapes, or I'll never get them sorted out..."

Gradually with the help of the 'volunteers' the mail room was cleared of its bags and boxes, the eagerly awaited mail duly delivered to the impatient customers.

Overnight the rec room was filled with engrossed letter-readers, some already composing replies which might take as long again to reach their destinations.

Finally Uhura and Bob Mearns ceremoniously folded and laid down the last empty mail bag, both heaving a heart-felt sigh of relief.

"Thank God that's finished."

"Seconded," murmured Uhura. "Poof... There was a lot, but at least no wrongly-labelled bags meant for other ships turned up. I remember the time we got half of the Hood's mail - hoo boy!"

Mearns shut his eyes and stretched luxuriously. "Ah well, now I can relax. Uhura, would you care to join me in - "

Through the door a harassed figure came hurrying in, a large, full bag grasped in each hand. Both lieutenants stared at Robinson and then at the bags in growing horror.

"Look what I found next door," began Robinson. "I thought they were those brochures, but they're really for Captain Stevens of the Columbus..."

Uhura and Mearns looked silently at each other, then moved as one. Without a murmur, they lifted a bag, carefully emptying it over Robinson's head. Letters cascaded downwards, a parcel bouncing off the confused Ensign's shoulder. The other bag followed suit, then Lt. Mearns bowed to Uhura.

"Ms. Uhura, would you do me the honour of joining me in the rec room for a celebration drink?"

The Bantu woman curtsied delightfully, placing her hand on Mearns' readied arm. "Sir, I would be honoured to do so."

With careful dignity, they departed, leaving Robinson to gaze worriedly after them. He looked down at Captain Stevens' mail and slowly picked himself out of the middle of it.

"Oh dear," he murmured. "Uh, Lieutenant, sir..."

STARSHIP DESTINY

You were born to be here,
And I at your side.
To explore the heavens,
To reach deep inside...
This is your destiny.

You revel in it
As you move like a dancer
Through its intricate dreams
And know peace and harmony
And hope.

Space is your home,
This starship your body,
You embrace its planets
And beautiful peoples.
Star child in motion.

Life and hope,
Both are entwined
In your soul, and so
Am I, as companion,
brother and guardian.

You live by your instinct,
I by my laws.
But you have extended my life.
I thank you for that,
For we are as one,
And you rescued my soul.

MISSION TO A CONTRARY PLANET

James Kirk couldn't help smiling a little as he stepped from the transporter pad. All things considered, there was little else Nogura could have done, but it was nice to have things straightened out. There had been a few rumblings in Starfleet Command about his 'taking off' with a brand-new Starship, but Kirk had saved Earth and he let them know it. Politely, of course.

For an instant he wondered at himself. There had been a time when the use of his rank privileges would have been unthinkable, but those days were behind him. Sure, he had changed, but he preferred to think of those changes as good ones. Only time would tell, of course.

Lt. Rand received a dazzling grin as he left the dark room, and then he was out in the corridor, sensing the vibrant life in this new Enterprise. He pondered over his instructions as he waited for the turbo-elevator to arrive. The fact that he was here on trial irked considerably, but it had taken enough argument to get the Enterprise captaincy at all, never mind another mission. There had never been a case of a Starship captain returning to his ship after his five-year mission, even though that captain had returned with his ship and crew almost intact; an unheard-of thing. Some were not at all sure of his ability to continue coping with the constant stresses inherent in a deep-space voyage, especially after his time on Earth.

Kirk squared his chin at the memory of their doubtful expressions and the arguments he had used to change those doubts. Hadn't he proved with the V'ger affair that he was as competent as ever? A man never lost his ability to command, and he would prove that.

"Um, Captain Kirk? Sir?"

Kirk came out of his self-congratulatory thoughts and back to reality. He suddenly realised that the lift had not arrived yet and there was a nervous young technician hovering at his side.

"Yes, Ensign?"

The youth nervously indicated the tightly-closed doors. "Er...turboshaft eight is non-operational at the moment, sir. Minor repairs. If you'd like to use shaft seven..."

Probably his first tour of duty, thought Kirk. He smiled.

"Some things never change, Ensign," he said lightly. "Even in a new ship. Thank you."

The ensign watched him stride away with round eyes and a slightly dazed expression before turning back to his assigned task - putting an 'Out of Order' notice on the door.

As luck would have it, Spock was entering the lift as Kirk rounded the corner. The Vulcan kept the doors open until his commanding officer had entered, then looked quizzically at him. "Bridge, Captain?"

"Bridge, Mr. Spock."

As the lift gathered speed, Kirk unobtrusively watched Spock, comparing the Vulcan now to the utterly different alien who had arrived on the Enterprise nine brief days ago. He seemed much more relaxed, but stronger too. Strong within himself, Kirk realised. He's come to terms with his dual personality, and he's accepted it.

The shadowed brown eyes looked in his direction, a faint note of curiosity sounded in the voice. "Was your meeting with the Board satisfactory, Captain?"

"Very satisfactory, Mr. Spock," replied Kirk, unable to hold back a grin any longer. "I have command for a trial period only, but it won't be long before they lose their doubts about my abilities."

Spock raised one eyebrow, an act which added to Kirk's exuberance. "I admire

your confidence," he said coolly.

Kirk only grinned wider. "It's got me this far."

Spock lifted the other eyebrow, well aware of the word game they played. Strange how such an illogical way of speaking could add to one's feeling of 'belonging'.

"Our first job is to transport an Ambassador to a planet name of Gairm. Another diplomatic job, it seems," Kirk continued. He made a face. "Light duties first..."

"They know your tendency to attract trouble," Spock observed drily. The lift doors opened before Kirk could reply, and the Captain bounced down the steps to his chair. Spock continued at a more dignified pace to his.

Uhura correctly interpreted her captain's happy expression. "New orders, sir?"

"Correct," beamed Kirk. He pushed his chair round, resisting the urge to spin it around full circle. "Navigator, compute a course for Starbase 16, and the most direct route from there to Gairm, Delta Capporum system."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Sulu, prepare to leave orbit."

With her increased warp-drive capacity and brand new engines, the Enterprise made short work of the journey to the Starbase, and it was not long after their departure from Earth that Kirk and Spock were waiting patiently as Ambassador Shondar beamed aboard.

Kirk straightened his shoulders as the figure materialised through the sparkling beam. He had heard before of Maria Shondar, and knew of the many peaceful missions credited to her name. If anyone could sort out the troubles on Gairm, she could.

Kirk stepped forward to greet his passenger. "Ambassador Shondar, welcome aboard."

She took his hand in a confident, firm grip. "I'm happy to be here, Captain. I've heard a great deal about your adventures."

"All good, I hope."

"Of course!"

Ambassador Shondar was a small, middle-aged woman, and she wore an orange and cream outfit, stylishly cut to fit her slightly plump figure. Long blonde hair was left to hang down her back, and sparkling brown eyes etched with laughter lines revealed a sense of humour uncommon in most diplomats. Above her eyes her eyebrows arched slightly, an inheritance from Vulcanoid stock generations back in her family line. She looked from Kirk to the tall Vulcan waiting unobtrusively at his rear.

"Captain?"

"Oh. My apologies...Ambassador Shondar, my second-in-command, Mr. Spock."

They nodded to each other and exchanged pleasantries, then Kirk claimed the Ambassador's attention again. "Ma'am, your quarters are all ready for you. Would you like to freshen up, perhaps change, or would you like to see round the ship first?"

A gleam came into Shondar's eye. "I know I sound like a little girl, but could I see the ship first? I don't often get the chance to tour a completely up-to-date Starship."

"I understand the feeling," smiled Kirk. "I felt like that when I first arrived on board. Everything was completely -"

"Bridge to Captain!"

"Excuse me..."

They waited while he answered the urgent call and returned from the console, shrugging philosophically. "I'm sorry, Ambassador, I'm needed elsewhere. I will have to leave you in Mr. Spock's capable hands. He is an excellent guide."

Shondar nodded understandingly. "That's all right, Captain. You're a busy man."

"Unfortunately, you're right," grinned Kirk. "I'll see you again later, I hope."

"I should think you will," replied Ambassador Shondar. She waited until the door had closed behind Kirk, then turned to Spock. "Well, Mr. Spock, lead on. Perhaps on our travels we can discuss our mutual heritage, though I think I am further removed from Vulcan than you are..."

At 1600 hours, ship's time, Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Scott met with Ambassador Shondar to go over the delicate situation on Gairm. As Shondar went over her notes it soon became apparent just how sensitive the situation was.

"The Gairmites are a touchy race, given to frequently changing their minds at the drop of a hat. They themselves have lost count of the number of international wars through the ages.

The planet consists of nine separate island states ruled by the High King and their own representatives in the High Council. At the moment High King Vorda is in power, and for the past fifty years has quite happily done business with the Federation, trading in minerals, artifacts, general things of that sort."

"A mining company set up business near the capital not so long ago, didn't it?" asked Kirk.

Shondar nodded. "That's correct. The Centurian Mining Corporation, run by Mr. Andrew Meersham. They mine Pertimite, which Gairm has in plenty. Gairm used to trade with the Klingons, and it's a sign of Vorda's faith that he let the company onto the planet. As you no doubt know, he changed sides when he inherited the throne and after a lot of argument managed to get his own way. Now we're on the way to keeping Gairm on the right side of the neutral zone."

"If I am correct," commented Spock, "a sudden return to dealing with the Klingons would put a considerable strain on the other Federation planets in that area."

"Security would have to be stepped up," Kiri mused. "It could cause quite a lot of repercussions over a fairly wide area."

"Exactly," agreed Shondar. "The trouble is, Vorda may not be able to sway Council opinion much longer. His son Menon'ar is pushing for change. Recently, there's been some bother with the miners - general ignorance of local customs, rowdiness, that sort of thing. The Gairmites have stood it well enough, but a few weeks ago a group of men destroyed a shrine."

"Let me guess," said McCoy. "They're highly religious too."

"Very. They worship their ancestors, and this particular shrine belonged to Vorda's family. That, as far as the Gairmites are concerned, was the last straw. Ignorance they could accept, but not the desecration of a shrine. There have been murmurings of driving out the alien devils, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if a few Klingon agents haven't been sniffing out the land."

"A ticklish problem in diplomacy, Ambassador," murmured Kirk.

"But not an unsolvable one, I hope," replied the woman.

"We refuse to be intimidated!" cried the young Gairmite, his lime-green crest rising in anger. "You come here wishing to fool us, to trick us, but we will not

be taken in by your lies!"

The elderly alien seated behind him blinked his double eyelids impatiently. "Menon'ar Neeth Krel, be silent!"

As the heir-apparent to Gairm's throne angrily subsided, Vorda settled himself further into the hammock-like arrangement that served as a seat on Gairm. He looked sideways at the group waiting before him.

"I seek forgiveness for my son's brashness. He knows little of etiquette, and ignores what he has learned."

Ambassador Shondar bowed respectfully. "The impulsiveness of the young is common to all races, High King. There is naught to forgive."

Vorda clicked shut his beak and glanced at Menon'ar. A few seconds passed, then the youth spoke reluctantly. "You are generous in your forgiveness, Ambassador. I hope I am worthy of such generosity."

Seemingly satisfied by this token apology, Vorda looked back to Shondar, and behind her Kirk and Spock traded looks. It was obvious where Menon'ar's sympathies lay, and they would have to guard against giving him any ammunition for his arguments.

To prevent any awkwardness or misunderstandings with the difficult Gairmite language, all four Federation representatives wore small, compact translators, and it was into this that Shondar spoke. Vorda listened intently, perceiving her words in the clicking, gurgling speech of his people.

"High King, we come not to intimidate you or trick you, but to help our people and yours to understand each other. There have been too many unfortunate incidents in the past. We wish only to smooth out any animosity caused by these insults and create harmony between us again."

"In truth, I wish it to be so," sighed Vorda, "but sometimes I fear the voice of trust is not heard by my people, or by yours. Why else do you come in numbers, in a great ship which can destroy our world?"

"Majesty, the Enterprise is a tribute from the High Council of the Federation. She is the finest ship in her fleet, and before all other duties, she was sent here." As Vorda digested the meaning of her statement, Shondar pointed at the three men behind her. "These men are heroes. They have fought injustice many times, and respect the customs and honour of other races."

The High King fixed the heroes with an unnerving stare, then Menon'ar spoke from his corner. "They are..." then a sharp gurgling click the translators could not deal with. Vorda struck him across the face, sending him reeling.

"May your feathers be oilless! Boorish lout, how dare you insult our visitors thus!"

"I beg forgiveness," Menon'ar muttered sulkily, but his father had had enough. He came to his feet, crest raised to its full glory, one withered hand pointing imperiously down the long hall.

"Begone from my sight!"

The young prince hurried away, his small, useless wings twitching against his broad feathered back. He disappeared through the main door as Vorda resettled, his crest bobbing up and down in agitation.

"Ambassador, gentlebeings, my most humble apologies are offered to you," he said anxiously. "My son...there can be no excuse for his behaviour."

"We accept your apology, and already forget the matter," the Ambassador assured him. "He is doubtless upset by the desecration of your shrine."

"Ah yes..." Vorda's eyes clouded and the three claws on his right hand flicked in and out again. "My shrine... The leader of the miners, Mee'am, promised most faithfully to deliver to me the culprits of this most insulting deed. This has not been done."

Kirk stepped forward. "High King, I assure you that when we have spoken with Meersham, we will find the culprits."

The alien's double eyelids slid up, and his topaz stare settled on the Enterprise's captain. "It would not go well if you did not, Kirr'."

Fifteen minutes later, a rather disgruntled Andrew Meersham found himself giving audience to three Starship officers and a persistent, if not hard-headed, Ambassador. He sighed, rubbing his chin as he prowled round his office desk.

"You mean I have to hand over my men for them to do with as they please because of some stupid high jinks? Christ, I offered to pay for the damage!"

Maria Shondar moved into his path, fixing him with her direct stare. "Mr. Meersham, I am sure you must be aware it is not only a matter of a damaged shrine, though that's bad enough. To Vorda it's a matter of honour and pride to punish the desecrators of his ancestors' tombs."

Meersham dodged round her and walked into Spock, who gave him an unfathomable look as he backed away and finally sat down. "Yeah," he said. "But who would have thought a lean-to with a pile of stones and evil-smelling plants was a royal shrine?"

"This is an alien planet," Spock pointed out. "Customs are bound to be different."

Kirk sighed and leaned on the desk, his hands gripping the edge. "Meersham, why don't you give up the men? I don't know what the local punishment for this crime is, but I'm sure Ambassador Shondar will be able to ask for leniency, since it was done out of pure ignorance of the customs."

"Otherwise," put in Shondar, "you might not have mining rights here for much longer."

Meersham drummed his fingers on the chair arm for a moment, then threw up his hands in disgust. "Okay, okay, I'll do it if it will keep the peace."

"It'll help, at any rate."

They left the office in silence, with Meersham's promise that the culprits would be found and sent to the palace the next day. Kirk glanced at Ambassador Shondar, who was deep in thought.

"That ought to placate Vorda a little," he said.

"Let us hope so. Captain, were you thinking of going back to the ship just yet?"

"If there is nothing else we can do," Kirk answered. "Would you prefer - ?"

Shondar shook her head. "No, just the opposite. I think I'll go on to the palace, tell Vorda what's happening. If I go myself, he may speak a little easier about the situation. I think he's frightened of losing his hold over the Council. With luck, I may be able to quell any doubts he may have about backing us."

Kirk grinned, "It might just work. You have your communicator?"

She raised an arm to reveal the wrist-band beneath her long sleeves. "All present and correct! I'll call the ship when I want to beam back, Captain. Until later, gentlemen..." She walked swiftly away, and McCoy took the opportunity to tease Kirk a little.

"Just your type, eh, Jim?"

"Who, me?" Kirk protested. "Bones, I may like women who know their own minds, but I don't go chasing after every one who proves she can charm a High King or two. Besides, she's married!"

McCoy harrumphed loudly, pleased that their friendship was as strong as before. The fact that he had been pulled willy-nilly from his comfortable civilian life

rankled a little even yet, but for now he was reasonably happy. Perhaps he would reconsider his life's route in the near future, but until then he was Leonard McCoy, ship's doctor, and that suited him fine.

Like a well-fitting glove, Kirk thought as they walked back to the beam-up point. That's their friendship. Always dependable, strong... I should have listened to Bones then. Why did I throw this away?

He thought back over his years as chief of Starfleet operations. They had been empty years, he realised. He had been half alive, the vibrant, questioning part of him submerged under planet-side pleasantries. This was where he belonged; in the contrasting alienness of Starfleet life where the bitter-sweet taste of danger was always present.

And what of Spock? What did he think of as they walked together in the same close companionship that had held them secure throughout countless trials?

He thought of the past, and of the future; his future, on the Enterprise. He felt more at peace now than he had ever been, even after the deeply cleansing meditation of Kolinahr. The trials, the doubts...it had all become a dream which finally ended when he was given his answer. There was a certain amount of irony in the way he had found the truth.

"Hey, you! You Captain Kirk?"

The harsh voice broke into Spock's thoughts, and his head lifted as Kirk halted in answer to the call. He confirmed his identity, his gaze stonily cool and forbidding towards the miner who had shouted.

A small, wiry man wandered over, looking Kirk up and down with an insolence that spoke of habitual bravado. His breath reeked of the local equivalent of beer, the source of his sudden courage.

"Thought you were him," he said at last. "I wanna talk to ya. Name's Norsen - Kurt Norsen. Me an' the boys are wonderin' what's goin' on."

"I don't follow you," Kirk murmured, eyeing the miners drifting towards them.

Norsen spat on the floor, wiped his hands on his trousers. "We heard the guys who broke up that shrine are bein' handed over to the Gairmites. What're you gonna do 'bout it?"

"Mr. Norsen, I will make sure they are handed over."

"Zat so?" Norsen swaggered closer to Kirk, but stopped uncertainly as Spock moved very slightly forward. He said nothing, but managed to convey a great deal. Norsen shuffled back. Kirk folded his arms and stood with a deceptive calm which bothered Norsen even more. He looked towards his fellow workers, but found no support there.

"Uh...we don't want no trouble," he said at last. "It's just..."

"Don't worry, Mr. Norsen," Kirk assured him. "The men responsible will be defended by Ambassador Shondar and myself. There will be no trouble."

"Yeah. Well, thanks," Norsen mumbled, walking uneasily away, while keeping an eye on Spock. The other miners drifted away as quickly as they had gathered, and the Starfleet men left the planet unhindered.

"The local spokesman, it seems," McCoy remarked as they rounded the corner.

Kirk nodded. "All mouth and bluster, but dangerous just the same. Somehow I don't think the trouble will end with the punishment of these men."

"Knowing Human nature," said Spock, "I suspect it may just be beginning."

The very next day, Meersham kept his promise and - to both the prisoners' and Kirk's relief - Shondar persuaded Vorda to let them off with a light sentence. This consisted of three Gairmian years in their squalid prisons and a light whipping of fifty lashes. When one of them protested at the sentence, Vorda eyed him

critically. "Be glad you receive this little, Human. In the old days, offenders had their feathers shaved off and their wings cut from their shoulders. They were then blinded... Since you have no wings, the Council wished your hands cut off - I persuaded them to reduce it to the whipping. You are indeed fortunate."

The miner subsided rapidly. Unfortunately, Mr. Meersham did not; probably because he was not under the piercing gaze of the High King.

"You said he'd be lenient, Kirk!" he roared, thumping the desk in his anger.

"He was," Kirk said pleasantly. "For a Gairmite."

"Surely you realise that in order to live on this planet you must be prepared to abide by its laws," Spock put in.

Meersham glared at him. "But three years, dammit! That's the equivalent of ten Earth years! Four of my best men incarcerated in their dirty little prisons..."

"It was the best Vorda could do," Kirk said firmly. Meersham leaped to his feet, ready to hit Kirk before he remembered who he was. Angrily, he sat again, breathing heavily.

"The men will be angry..."

"Then you had better keep them calm. Mr. Meersham, perhaps you don't realise just what is at stake here. If your men anger the Gairmites too much, they may leave the Federation, and that would have repercussions all the way across this sector. The Klingons are just waiting to get a toehold in here again, and if Vorda says he wants them, there's nothing we can do. Perhaps it would have been better if the men had been tried by a Federation court, but that would have insulted Vorda even more. You see my point?"

The mine owner grudgingly agreed. "Okay, I'll do my best to calm them down, but don't expect too much."

Kirk breathed a quiet sigh of relief. "Just stop them from insulting the natives," he said. "That's all I ask."

Kirk and Spock left the mine slowly, walking along the busy street outside. Both noticed the respectful, if wary, looks the Gairmites gave them. The bird-like people admired the obvious trappings of wealth displayed by rich merchants and the like, and to them the crisp, well-cut uniforms signified a great deal of wealth behind these strange aliens. Traders watched them hopefully, but they showed no sign of stopping to examine their wares, so the Gairmites turned their attention back to their own kind.

"Captain..."

Kirk came to a sudden halt and followed the Vulcan's gaze. Across the dusty road a familiar figure was just leaving a tailor's shop, swaying slightly as he did so. His thin, sinewy body was covered in a suit made of venkr, an expensive fabric made on Gairm for those who could afford it. The tailor watched from the shop door as his customer wandered away, his clawed hand still clutching a wad of money.

Kirk frowned at the sight. "I wouldn't have thought he could afford clothes like that."

"It is unlikely," agreed Spock. "A month's pay from the mine would buy only a metre of venkr, yet Norsen has a complete suit. He is also drunk, and to become that intoxicated takes a great deal of money."

"It depends what you're drinking..." Kirk said absently. "However, it may be worth finding out where Mr. Norsen got his sudden riches."

It was easy enough to follow behind Norsen, and the miner never noticed his two shadows until he was firmly hustled into an empty doorway. Worriedly, he looked from one to the other, his eyes widening as he recognised them. Kirk let go his arm and pushed him against the door, while Spock loomed silent and foreboding over the unfortunate man.

"What...what do you want?"

Kirk looked at him with an expression of complete innocence. "Why, nothing, Kurt. I can call you Kurt, can't I? We just noticed your fine outfit from across the street, and wanted to see it closer at hand..." He lightly fingered the neatly-stitched material, standing back to admire the cut. "Fine work, fine work. Hand-tailored, of course. Must have cost quite a lot."

Norsen could not resist a little bragging. He looked down at himself proudly. "You bet it did! 2000 kquatas!"

Kirk whistled, shaking his head in wonder. "2000... Let's see, that must be 900 credits, at least. I never realised miners were paid that much. You must be favoured, Kurt."

"Yes, well, I do have..." Norsen trailed off as he realised what he was saying. "Er, that...that is... I saved up for it! Yes, that's what I did. Saved up. Quite easy if you..."

Spock fixed him with an unnerving stare. "Fascinating."

"Wh...what is?" asked the miner, swallowing nervously. He was rapidly sobering up.

"The fact that you were able to save so much from what is obviously a low-paid job. Did your diligence not interfere with your drinking habits?"

Norsen shook his head in bewilderment and Kirk moved in for the kill. "Come on, Kurt. Are you trying to tell us that a low-grade worker like you saved up enough money to buy clothes only nobility can afford? Where did that money really come from?"

"I saved it, honest I did!" wailed Norsen. "I'm very thrifty that way..." His knees began to quiver as Spock moved menacingly closer. Kirk turned slightly away, examining his fingernails minutely. He spoke in a nonchalant tone as if he was discussing the weather.

"Kurt, you may have noticed Mr. Spock here is a Vulcan... Now I don't know if you have met any before, but I'm sure you've heard of their great strength, at the very least."

Norsen nodded furiously, and Spock raised an eyebrow very slightly at his captain.

"Good," Kirk continued in the same tone. "Did you also know that Vulcans have a very barbaric past? I didn't think so... You see, Kurt, the point is, as a Vulcan Mr. Spock knows many ancient techniques used for punishing wrongdoers. Now those can be quick and painless, or they can be the exact opposite. You get my drift? It's been a long time since Mr. Spock had a chance to practice..."

"I...I thought Vulcans were peaceful!" Norsen gulped, trying unsuccessfully to edge further away from Spock.

"You don't want to believe everything you hear, Kurt. Whoever told you that?"

"Stop!" Norsen shrieked. "Stop, for pity's sake. Don't hurt me, please..."

"Where did the money come from?"

A new fear came into the miner's eyes. "I can't tell you. They'll find out and -"

"Who will find out?" snapped Kirk.

"I don't know for sure. They send money...tell me what they want done... Don't kill me!"

By this time the miner was almost on his knees, and curious Gairmites were pausing slightly as they passed, eyeing the three aliens. It was unlikely that Norsen would say any more, torn as he was between fear of injury now or later, at another's hands.

Kirk took pity on him and stood aside. "Go on, get out of it."

Hesitantly, Norsen edged past them and hurried away for the safety of his

quarters. Kirk watched him go, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "It sounds as if someone is deliberately trying to stir up trouble," he said. "The Klingons, for example..."

"It is likely," Spock agreed. He was about to go on when Kirk's wrist-com beeped demandingly. The Captain answered it at once, and listened with a sinking heart.

"Scott here, sir. Uhura's just intercepted a message from Gairm. It's a wee bit garbled, but by the sound o' it there's a fire at the royal palace!"

As Kirk replied and switched off he looked at Spock. "Ambassador Shondar may still have been visiting Vorda. If either of them is hurt..."

The palace was surrounded by a milling crowd, and over their heads Kirk and Spock could see wisps of grey smoke still emerging from windows. The Enterprise men weaved slowly through the curious aliens, but were brought to a halt at the main gates by a royal carriage leaving the palace. It stopped as it reached them, and Prince Menon'ar glared menacingly from his seat.

"Kirr'!" he bellowed, angry at his inability to pronounce the Human's name properly. "Now you show your true colours, as I knew you would!"

Kirk glanced worriedly at Spock, then bowed respectfully. "Your Highness, I --"

"Do not patronise me!" interrupted the prince. "You and your people have planned this from the beginning. You hoped to kill my father and myself and take over our planet, but you have failed! We now have proof of your treachery and I will stand by no longer."

"Prince Menon'ar..."

"Silence! I hear no more lies. I go now to the High Council to tell them of this deed. We shall belong to the Federation no longer!" The carriage lurched away before Kirk could utter a single word of self-defence.

"He does not seem to want to listen to reason," observed Spock.

"No, more's the pity," Kirk said grimly. "Let's hope he cools down before he does too much damage. Come on, we'd better find out what's happened."

Getting into the palace was not as easy as Kirk thought it would be. As soon as they entered the large entrance hall a line of royal guards appeared from nowhere and surrounded them, weapons levelled at their chests. Several tense moments passed, then Vorda's chancellor came up and explained who they were to the guards, who then, grudgingly, let them pass.

Neemarr led Kirk and Spock through the smoke-filled corridors to Vorda's private chambers, where the High King waited for his visitors. In the midst of carefully draped cloths and jingling windchimes the aged Gairmite lay in his bed, blinking irritably at the flustered administrations of his physician. When Kirk and Spock entered, he pushed the doctor away, muttering that he was not a weak nestling to be cossetted. Ambassador Shondar, who sat at Vorda's side, smiled in welcome to them, but said nothing.

Vorda sat up as Human and Vulcan approached and bowed respectfully. "Captain Kirr'! I wished to speak with you again, but I did not mean it to be in my bedchamber!"

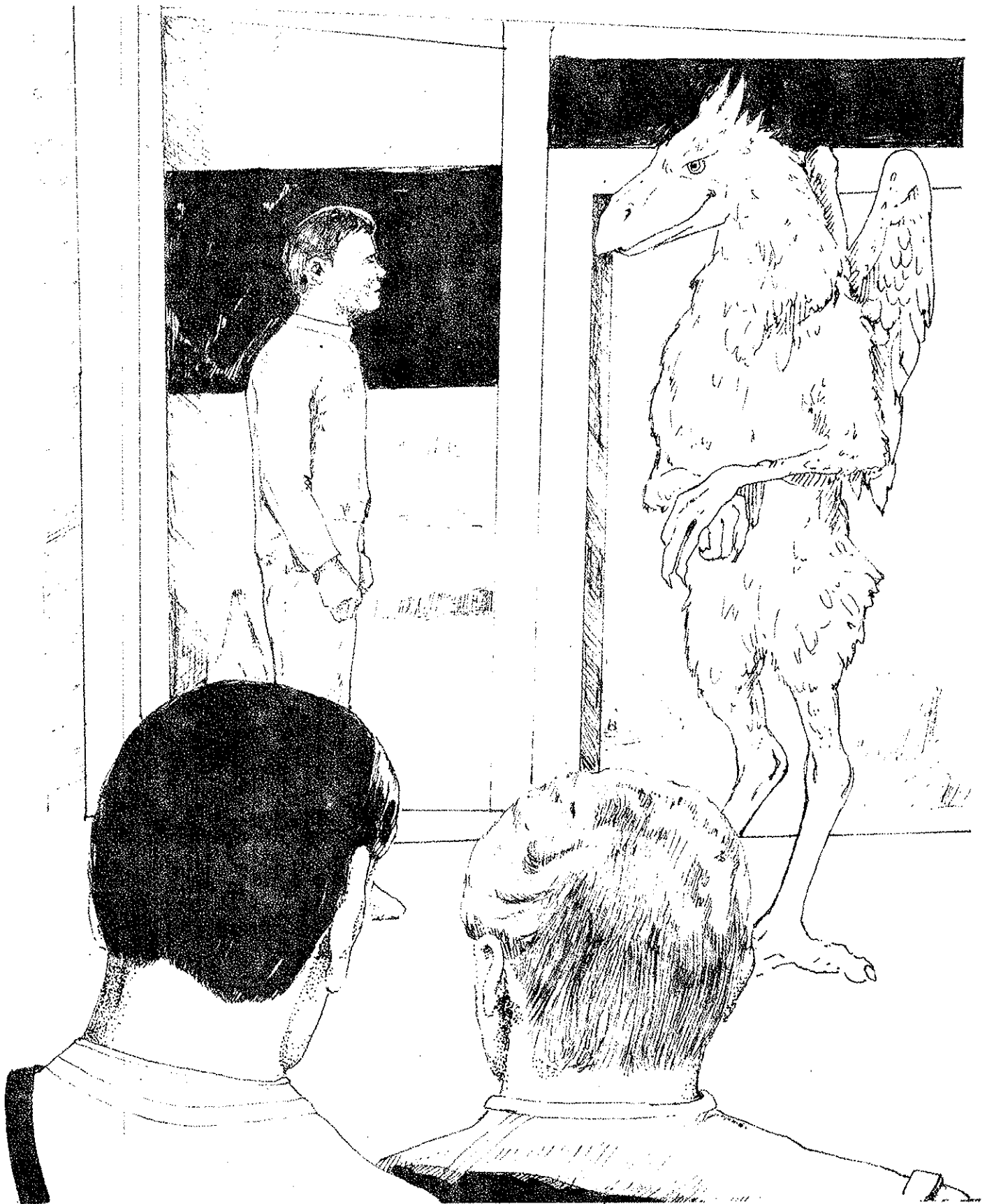
"We are both glad to see you are well, High King," Kirk answered, relieved to hear no trace of anger in Vorda's voice. "The message we received gave no indication of your welfare."

Vorda tossed his head, raising his crest a little. "I am well enough, though my foolish doctor will not believe me!"

Kirk grinned. "I know a doctor very much like that too, your Majesty."

"May we ask what happened, High King?" asked Spock.

The crest rose imperceptibly higher. "Treachery, Mr. 'ock, most despicable



treachery! A fire was begun deliberately in the throne hall but a short time ago, and had my son not seen the culprit leaving the palace, I would be dead!" He clicked his beak sharply and lay back, waving a hand at Shondar. "Ambassador, you continue, please..."

Ambassador Shondar nodded and carried on with the story. "His Majesty and I were in a small room next to the throne hall, but we didn't know anything until Prince Menon'ar rushed in with the news that a fire had started behind the throne. Luckily we had enough time to get out, but it was a close thing. If he hadn't seen a miner leaving by a side door and become suspicious, we might both have been trapped. There was only one door to that room, and that led into the hall."

"A miner?" echoed Kirk. "That sounds bad."

"The trouble is, there's proof he did it." Shondar rose and handed Spock a blackened round object. "That was found where the fire began."

Kirk looked to Spock for an explanation, and the Vulcan obliged. "A K7B localised incinerator, Captain. Occasionally used to burn off pockets of inflammable gas found in pertimite mines. It can be set to a timing device, which this one obviously was."

Now Kirk understood Menon'ar's angry words. This was a deliberate attempt to harm the High King, and would very likely cure any doubts about leaving the Federation. The miners would never be accepted on Gairm now.

Vorda pushed himself upright again, absently smoothing down his feathers as he did so. He cocked his head at his visitors. "I know what you think, Kirr'. Menon'ar goes to speak with the High Council, and I will join him in wishing our planet rid of the Federation. I will not."

All three looked in surprise at him. This was not the reaction they had expected.

"Majesty?" Shondar said hesitantly.

"I will not deal with the Klingons!" Vorda cried resolutely. "I distrust their sly ways, their silent lies... I will not be ruled by such as they! Let the High Council shriek and moan - my word must be given to such a decision, and I will not change my mind. I may agree to the miners going, but I will not desert the Federation!"

Kirk's gaze met Shondar's. There was hope for peace on Gairm after all, but would the members of the Council accept Vorda's ruling?

As things turned out, they did not, but the High King's word was still absolute, and they could not change planet policy without his consent. Arguments raged fast and furious in the Council chambers, but Vorda would not be moved. The Ambassador stood up for the miners, fighting a losing battle against the hatred stirred up by the shrine desecration and now by the fire; Councillors called for the imprisoned men to be executed at once, but that notion was firmly squashed by Vorda, and the men were left to serve their sentences. However, there was no way Meerham would be allowed to continue mining on Gairm, and Vorda ruled that all excavations should stop immediately. Meerham refused.

Both Gairmites and Humans were at loggerheads when the mysterious saboteurs struck again, this time at the mining plant.

"There is no proof that this was done by the Gairmites," said Kirk, looking through the office window at the chaos outside.

"What proof do you need?" cried Meerham. "Dammit, Kirk, it's revenge for the fire! They want us out of here, and they think blowing up my computer will do that. They'd better think again. I sank all my money in this place, and I'm not giving up now!"

Kirk nodded grimly, able to see the mine boss's viewpoint as well. If he could just find out who was really behind all this - give both sides some positive proof either way. Relations on Gairm were as bad as could be, and if he didn't

find Norsen's 'benefactors' soon...

"Where's Kurt Norsen?"

Meersham looked up in surprise at the unexpected question. "Norsen? I don't know for sure. Why?"

Kirk left the window and crossed the room. "Because a few days ago he was flashing money around like it was out of fashion. From what he told Spock and me, he was being paid by someone for work other than mining. I'd like to talk to him again."

He did not see Meersham's eyes narrow slightly at his words. So Norsen had been opening his mouth too much, huh? The mine boss shrugged carelessly. "Norsen's a small fish, a nothing. Who would pick on him to do dirty work?"

"That's what I want to find out. Where is he?"

"I'll send one of the men to get him. Excuse me...." Meersham left the office, and Kirk walked back to the window. The mine's main computer lay directly across from where he stood, a large area of grey flooring between him and the group of computer experts brought down specially from the Enterprise. Spock was among them, of course, carefully replacing a panel he had removed moments before. Kirk watched him, confident of his ability to have the computer working again within a short time.

The Vulcan stood, writing something on the clipboard he held, and Kirk's eyes shifted to take in the rest of the group working around and in the wide machine. Something about one caught his attention, and he ignored Meersham's return to the office as he focused on that shadowy figure. The man was crouched in a darkened corner, his back to Kirk. He moved stealthily, glancing over his shoulder as he edged slowly away from the corner.

Kirk left the window, heading for the door. He crossed the wide floor, his thoughts going over the furtiveness of the man's movements, that suspicion of something wrong. What had he been up to? Even as the only possible answer came to the fore, he saw Spock begin to walk towards that deserted corner.

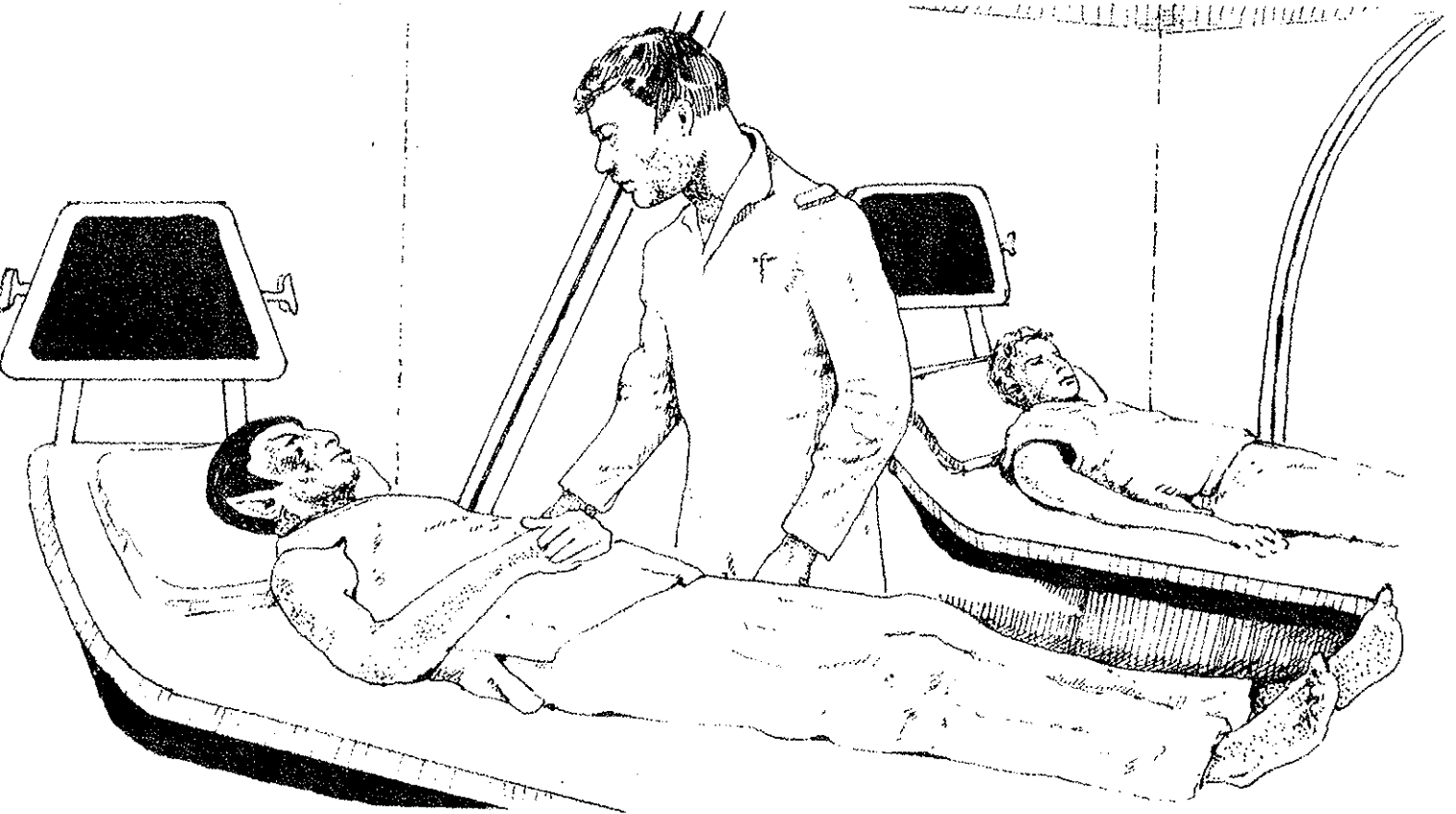
"Spock!"

The Vulcan turned in surprise as Kirk strode quickly towards him. In the dark corner, something began to glow, lighting up the area about it. Kirk broke into a run, calling to Spock even as his disbelieving eyes saw the glow flare into brilliant orange. His legs carried him the last few feet, then the room exploded into shards of red light. Something - someone - caught him, but his mind continued into the black crevasse opening at his feet...

Dazed, his ears still ringing from the blast, Spock found himself flat on his back, a heavy weight sprawled across his chest. He blinked rapidly, trying to focus his eyes while easing the weight away so he could push himself up. A few seconds passed before his eyesight cleared enough for him to see the limp form of Kirk.

Fearfully Spock edged himself from under Kirk, his eyes taking in the badly-out face and torn uniform. There was blood spattered over Kirk's side - a sliver of metal had been hurled by the explosion into his side. Spock slowly eased the torn cloth away from the wound and rolled the Captain onto his uninjured side. Drops of green blood mixed with the red on his uniform, and Spock suddenly realised that the side of his face was raw and bleeding. He dismissed the pain without another thought.

As if in a dream he heard others run up, their exclamations sounding like so many mice to his blasted eardrums. A voice replied; calm, steady - his voice. He had no idea what he was saying, for his world had shrunk to the sight of a pale white face and a cruelly-torn side. He remembered Jim's cries, the lunge to save his friend... Was this how it ended? Had he found peace only to have it torn away so abruptly?



An eternity passed - or was it only a minute? A hand firmly gripping his shoulder. A gentle, well-known voice speaking to him from somewhere miles from where he crouched. Jim? No. No. McCoy. Only McCoy... Disjointed words drifted through the haze.

"...shock...there may be...help me get him on..."

Babbling voices echoed behind the familiar tones. Slight pressure against his upper arm. Jim's face blurred, and then the voices followed.

When Spock woke to find himself in the sparkingly clean sickbay, he sighed resignedly. A part of his mind wondered at the intricacies of fate which had put him here twice in so short a time. He said as much to McCoy when the doctor strolled over to check his readings.

"Believe me, it's a situation I wish I could remedy," McCoy said drily, but his heart was not really in it. Not long before, he had operated on Kirk, and Leonard McCoy had been brutally reminded of the continual dangers in this life. He felt that until now he had been playing a game of 'let's pretend', going through the motions of a return to his old career. He had forgotten the ever-present wings of death.

He shook himself from the morbid thoughts and returned his attention to the readings above Spock's bed. The Vulcan watched him steadily, undecieved by the doctor's jocular manner.

McCoy, he thought, has come back to earth with a thump. He raised a mental eyebrow at his turn of phrase. Human sayings were catching.

"Well," McCoy said cheerfully, "you'll live, thanks to my excellent care and careful nursing. You're still recovering from shock, of course, and you might find your hearing acting up a little, but that will pass. There are enough cuts and bruises to last you a lifetime, but they're no problem. Even the mess the blast made of your face will heal soon. Tell me if you have any headaches."

Spock lifted a hand and gingerly touched the plasti-skin covering one side of his face. "Vulcans do not have headaches, Doctor," he said, suddenly weary of the

conversation. His eyes met McCoy's. "The Captain...Jim..."

"I had to operate, but he's recovering well enough," McCoy reported non-committingly. He pointed to the patient in question, lying asleep a few beds away. "He should be coming round soon."

The ward door opened and Ambassador Shondar entered. She raised a quizzical eyebrow at McCoy as she approached Spock's bed. "Is visiting allowed, Doctor?"

McCoy shrugged. "Sure. He'll be trying to get up in a minute anyway."

The woman smiled and turned her attention to Spock. "I was sorry to hear what happened, Mr. Spock. How do you feel?"

"Well enough, Ambassador," Spock replied, ignoring the quiet snort from McCoy. "How is the situation on Gairm?"

Shondar shook her head sadly. "Bad. The miners want revenge for the loss of wages while the computer was out of action, and Meersham is not trying very hard to talk them out of it. On the other side, Menon'ar is crowing about the damage and is saying it's a sign from his ancestors that the Humans must go. Tempers are running high down there, and all it needs is one more incident to spark off a riot."

Spock nodded in agreement, then sat up, heedless of the dizziness caused by the sudden movement.

"Oh no you don't," McCoy said firmly, pushing him back. "You will stay in that bed if I have to strap you down!"

"You may have to," the Vulcan replied with equal determination, "because I am getting up."

"Not in my sickbay."

"In yours or anyone else's, Doctor."

They glared at each other, eyeball to eyeball, then looked round in surprise at the stifled laughter from Ambassador Shondar's direction. The dignified diplomat giggled like a small plump schoolgirl, trying in vain to hold back the laughter.

"I...I'm sorry..." she spluttered at last. "This isn't really the time to laugh, but you...you looked so funny. Both of you so determined to have his own way, no matter what. If you could see yourselves...!"

McCoy harumphed loudly and looked back at Spock, whose eyebrows were lost in his fringe.

"In retrospect, our argument is slightly illogical, Doctor," the Vulcan said at length.

McCoy waved him to silence before he could continue. "Spare me the whys and wherefores... At least you'll be out of my way down there. Let me tell you, Ambassador, there is no worse patient in this universe than a Vulcan. Especially this Vulcan."

Shondar returned his world-weary expression with a knowing grin. "I'll wait for you in the corridor, Mr. Spock," she said.

They watched her go, then McCoy made to find a medikit. "If you're going to argue the toss with Meersham or Vorda, I had better come along."

Spock stopped him with a hand on his wrist. "McCoy, I have only recently regained my only friends. I would not wish to lose both again so soon...perhaps permanently. It would be better if you were to remain here with Jim."

Their eyes met, then the doctor nodded understandingly. "Okay...but you be careful. That explosion was pretty close, and it may still be affecting you."

"I shall take all due care," Spock answered solemnly.

Spock gazed steadily about him at the silent mining plant, his stony visage giving no indication of the momentary disorientation he had experienced after beaming down. He walked away from the main entrance, aware of the decreased sensitivity of his hearing and a light, throbbing pain down one half of his face. He could do nothing about the hearing, but brief concentration took care of the pain, and the stiffness in his limbs would soon pass.

Mentally he made a note of the time. He had arranged to meet Maria Shondar at the palace in one hour, where he would help her argue the Federation's case with the High Council. It would be difficult at best, impossible at worst. The councillors were past persuading.

Ahead and to the left lay Meersham's office and the computer block, where a few technicians were still repairing the explosion damage. Spock veered away from there, heading for the deserted mine shafts and tunnels. Work could not be done while the computer was inoperative, so there was no-one to stop the Vulcan as he entered the first levels.

If asked, he could not have said exactly why he was in the mine, but some instinct had guided him there and he found no need to give himself a logical reason. He would know the answer when he saw it.

The lighting was still on, illuminating the narrow tunnels with a dull yellow glow which reflected strangely against the bright green rock. These first diggings were played out, but here and there Spock could see traces of the pertimite Meersham's men mined. He continued deeper into the mine, his thoughts on the jigsaw puzzle their mission to Gairm had become. The shrine, the palace fire, the computer explosion, Norsen's sudden fortune - it all added up to deliberate trouble-making which was succeeding famously. The Klingons were the obvious suspects, but their direct intervention was unlikely. It was easier to bribe men like Norsen to do their work for them, but it would take a lot of money to make the miners throw away their jobs. There had to be more to it than that; what?

Black on green. Dull ebony running crookedly through the pertimite where none should be. Spock turned back to the anomaly his subconscious had noted and examined the minute vein running along the green wall. His mind sifted through all the possibilities and came up with tirthanum, a rare mineral occasionally found in pertimite. One finger traced the black line thoughtfully. There had been no reports of tirthanum here, even though Meersham must know such a find must be filed at once. Once purified, tirthanum was a much desired ingredient in numerous drugs and antidotes to rare diseases. It was rarely found, and all deposits were only mined by Federation-owned companies. Doctors would pay a small fortune for a minute sample, and black marketeers were always on the lookout for fresh supplies.

Amongst a pile of water-worn rubble at the foot of the tunnel wall lay a few reasonable-sized rock pieces with traces of the black mineral, and Spock collected them into a pile on the floor. It took only a few seconds to contact the Enterprise and have the rocks beamed up for the geology section to analyse.

The transporter effect had barely faded when a phaser beam sliced through the air, stunning Spock even as he registered the sounds from behind. Three men walked forward to surround the unconscious Vulcan - Meersham and his two most trusted men, M'Buto and Kneale.

M'Buto slipped off Spock's communicator, handing it to his boss. "What do we do with him?"

Meersham's expression hardened. "We can't be sure what he's found out, and we can't afford any mistakes. No way am I giving up this close. Take him down to Level 12."

M'Buto looked dubious.. "You sure about that? There'll be awkward questions."

"I'll handle them," snapped Meersham. "With the Gairmites being so unfriendly his disappearance will be easy to explain away. Kirk will never know. Just do

it, M'Buto." He dropped the wrist-com, carefully grinding it into small pieces with his heel.

The quiet clinical silence of the recovery ward was broken by an almost inaudible sigh, the patient responsible shifting his position and grunting softly. Duty Nurse Spence noted his movement and briskly checked his condition before going to the doctor's office.

"Dr. McCoy, the Captain is coming round now."

McCoy nodded, put down his pen and went into the ward. He picked up a prepared glass and strolled across to Kirk's bed. His patient blinked blearily up at him, still dozey from the anaesthetic.

"Bones, I feel terrible. I can't... What happened?"

"Someone set off another bomb. You got in the way," McCoy said briskly. "Here, drink this."

The anaesthetic had worn off enough for Kirk to be wary of the seemingly innocent glass. "What is it?"

"Don't be so suspicious. It'll clear your head, and it's good for you. Drink it down like a good Captain."

Kirk downed the liquid in one gulp, launching into a coughing fit as soon as it was down. "Phew!" he spluttered. "It clears more than your head! What poison extract did you get that from?"

"If you're gonna insult me, I'll leave," McCoy said self-righteously. "That is your reward for being a hero."

Kirk smiled, wondering at the same time about the injuries he was becoming aware of. The drugs dulled the pain, but he could still feel a familiar numbness about his side. He would find out more in a minute. Right now...

McCoy saw his concerned glance over the beds and anticipated the question. "Spock's okay, thanks to your fool stunt. He got off relatively lightly and is already back on Gairm trying to smooth things over."

Kirk's eyes widened in joking astonishment. "You let him go? That isn't like you, Bones. You're losing your touch!"

"He's more determined since he did that Kolinahr stuff," McCoy replied. "However, just because he walked out does not mean you can go just when you feel like it."

"Would I do that?"

The intercom interrupted their bantering, and McCoy kept a medical eye on Kirk as he answered. It was Chekov enquiring if the Captain was awake. Kirk was throwing back the covers even as McCoy replied. "Uh, that depends... Is it important, or can someone else handle it?"

"Mr. Spock has not reported in for over two hours," the security chief answered. "Neither has he kept his meeting arrangement with Ambassador Shondar. She has seen no sign of him. If the Captain is not well enough I will..."

"I'm all right, Mr. Chekov," Kirk said firmly, pushing past his angry friend. "What's this about Spock?"

"Will you get back to bed?" cried McCoy. "Scotty can deal with this - he would have to if you were still under. Now will you - "

"Bones."

The doctor's mouth snapped shut and he stood with arms folded, glaring at Kirk's back. The Captain sighed, returned to the screen. Chekov continued as if nothing had happened.

"Three hours ago, Mr. Spock beamed down to Gairm to speak to Mr. Meersham.

He sent up a rock sample soon afterwards, but he did not arrive at the palace as arranged, and he has not called us since then. There is no reply from his communicator, and it is virtually impossible to trace him on Gairm because of interference from the pertimite.

Kirk digested the information, only partly aware of the growing pain in his side. "Chekov, do you know what the sample consisted of?"

"No, sir, but geology will know. Will I have Uhura put you through?"

"Please do."

Moments later the basset-hound face of Lt. Mannings replaced that of Chekov. "You were enquiring about the sample sent up by Mr. Spock, Captain?"

"Yes. What was so special about it?"

Manning's expression became a mixture of disbelief and excited curiosity as he replied. "All the rocks have traces of tirthanum, sir, which is strange. There have been no reports of any traces on Gairm, although tests were carried out. If Mr. Spock has found an unreported source..."

"It is a possibility, Mr. Mannings," Kirk answered, "Thank you."

He turned round deep in thought and almost bumped into McCoy. Blue eyes met hazel.

"Bones, I have to go down."

The doctor shook his head. "Not if I can help it."

Kirk sighed. Why wouldn't Bones understand? Spock was obviously in trouble of some sort, or else why the silence? He had to be there himself, find out what was wrong and piece together the puzzle that was so near to resolving itself. If Spock had discovered the final vital pieces, he could be in danger from whoever blew up the computer. Kirk dodged around McCoy.

"Spock hasn't reported for two hours - it may be because he found out something he wasn't supposed to. He may be in danger."

"So might you," McCoy said stubbornly. "Look, the metal splinter I took from your side a few hours ago was damn near piercing a lung. You have barely come to, yet already you want to rush off and damn the consequences. I won't let you risk internal bleeding when Scotty and Chekov can go instead."

Kirk rounded on him with characteristic determination. "I couldn't sit here waiting, you know that. No matter what you say, I'm going. If the wound starts bleeding, that's a risk I'm willing to take. Something is wrong down there, and I have to find out what."

McCoy stared at him, sighed heavily. "I might have known I was fighting a losing battle. I don't know why I bother... Just hold on till I get a kit, will you?"

"You don't have to."

"It's partly my responsibility for letting Spock leave here," McCoy told him wearily. "You know, he said he didn't want to lose both of us. I'm not sure we could stand losing him."

Kirk nodded, gripped his arm lightly, then went for his uniform.

It was a while before Spock came round; a phaser on heavy stun was not easily shaken off. The vibrating gongs assaulting his ears quietened to the drips of water they really were. After a moment he rolled onto his back and sat up, testing the rope binding his wrists. It was thin and should have been fairly easy to break, but his arms lacked their customary strength and he could not snap the rope.

Attributing his weakness to the phaser stun, Spock put aside the task of

getting free and looked about him instead. His eyes had adjusted to their limited night vision, and through the darkness he could make out the rough cut walls closing in on three sides like a tomb. It looked like a small cave or perhaps the end of a tunnel left when the seam ran out. Dirty water ran in rivulets down the stone, collecting in small puddles on the dirt-strewn floor. In the middle of one of the pools a body was sprawled in the anonymity of death. Spock pushed it lightly with his foot, but no foul smell arose. Apparently the body had not been there long enough to begin decomposing. The man had also been bound, but he had suffered physical abuse before he was left in the dark to die. Even so, he was still recognisable as Kurt Norsen. He had outlived his usefulness.

Spock strained against his bonds again, but they still refused to break. He took a deep breath, intending to stand up, but was overtaken by a choking fit that left him weaker than before. Waves of nausea and dizziness washed over him, then another bout of choking worse than the first. His lungs struggled for air, but somehow he managed to control his breathing long enough to come to his feet. There did not seem to be enough air in the cave...

Ahead lay a narrow tunnel barely two men wide. Spock stumbled along it, his senses reeling. The ground seemed miles away, his legs curiously leaden. He laboured for every breath. In the distance he could hear the roaring surge of his blood, a regular thumping that was his heartbeat. Then the tunnel floor leaped up to meet him and he slid without warning into unconsciousness.

Kneale threw open the office door, quiet fear in his eyes. "Mr. Meersham! Kirk's here with a load of his men! If they search..."

"Keep your mouth shut!" ordered Meersham. "Get out of here and keep out of sight. I'll deal with Kirk."

He arranged himself at his desk, a prepared look of complete surprise on his face when Kirk and Ambassador Shondar entered. The jovial greeting died on his lips as Vorda and Menon'ar followed them in. One hand adjusted the translator at his throat. "Well, well, quite a distinguished group, I see... I certainly didn't expect to see you here, High King."

"It is not my wish, you can be sure of that," Vorda answered sourly. "I came only at Kirr's request."

"And I thank you for doing so, your Majesty," Kirk murmured diplomatically.

Dr. McCoy slipped quietly past Menon'ar, taking up a position behind Meersham. The mine owner eyed the small box in his hand, fought back the compulsion to demand what he was doing there, and turned on the charm instead.

"Well, I'm sure you all have a good reason for being here, so I won't waste time. What can I do for you, Captain?"

"More than you think," Kirk replied. "For a start, where is Spock?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Meersham said blandly. "He left quite a while ago; I thought he was going back to the Enterprise."

Kirk's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "He spoke to you recently?"

"For a while. Sorry I can't help you further. Is something wrong?"

"No, not really..." Kirk told him just as blandly. "Maybe you can help us in something else, though. Have any of your men ever found tirthanum in the mine?"

Meersham was taken aback for a second, but recovered quickly. He made a pretence of thinking deeply about the question. "Tirthanum... It is likely, but no. Not that I know of. Has one of the men been trading illegally in it? If so, I - "

"No, not your men," Kirk assured him, glancing at McCoy as he spoke. A negative headshake answered him. Meersham noticed the look and followed Kirk's

gaze to the insignificant box McCoy held. When he looked back, Kirk was perched on the desk edge, his eyes intent on Meersham's face. It suddenly seemed uncomfortably hot and crowded in the office.

Kirk's next question increased the unseen pressure. "Okay, Mister, you can finish with the innocent act! Start telling the truth. Where is Spock?"

"Before you waste your breath any more," put in McCoy, "I ought to tell you that this little gadget of mine can tell when you lie. Saves a lot of time, doesn't it?"

Meersham shot him a look of pure hatred, and stared defiantly at Kirk. "So you've got me. It won't do any good, Kirk. I still won't talk."

Vorda strode majestically forward. "If you do not wish to talk with Kirr', I shall take you to my prison warders. They know many interesting ways of obtaining information without killing the prisoner."

"All we want is the truth," said Kirk. "Tell me now - or later."

The mine owner looked round at the intent faces, decided to give in - for the moment. "I'll tell you... The Vulcan was snooping... We had to stop him somehow."

"Where is he?"

"The mine. Level 12. We didn't hurt him, Kirk - remember that."

McCoy frowned worriedly. The readings did not indicate a lie - but neither was it the entire truth. His concerned gaze met Kirk's, but there was still the question of the tirthanum.

The questions continued, and Meersham quickly admitted finding a seam of the mineral on Level 13. He seemed eager to tell everything now, which aroused Kirk's suspicions even more.

"Fine," said the Enterprise captain. "Then you won't mind showing us it after you take us to Spock."

They left the office, Meersham leading the way with a security man at his side, Kirk and McCoy behind, and the two Gairmites at the rear. Ambassador Shondar excused herself with the explanation that she rarely saw eye to eye with enclosed spaces. She watched the party enter the levels, prepared for what might be a long wait. Behind her, the rest of the security men began searching for further evidence, as ordered previously.

No words passed between the men as they sped downwards in the mine elevator. Spock had explored the tunnels on foot, but this group had a definite destination in mind. Meersham avoided Kirk's eye, staring angrily at McCoy instead. He contemplated making a break for it when the lift doors opened, but the guard had a phaser pressed firmly against his side. He led the way quietly for a short distance, then came to a halt.

"Where now?" Kirk asked with thinly-veiled impatience.

Meersham glanced insolently at him. "Find out for yourself, Captain."

Kirk stepped forward, ready to take him apart if need be, when McCoy gripped his arm. "It's okay, I have a trace. The tricorder isn't operating one hundred percent, but I am getting Vulcan readings."

"Let's go."

The doctor moved into a badly-lit section of tunnel, watching the tricorder readings carefully. His eyes widened at one point, and he called back to the others. "Don't come any further. This says there is an odourless gas about here - pockets of it up ahead. I'll go on alone. Spock's not far away now."

Kirk nodded reluctantly. "As you say, Bones. The tunnel is getting too narrow anyway. Be careful - if that gas is inflammable and a spark is created..."

Meersham and Menon'ar exchanged looks. The Gairmite prince edged one hand towards his waist pouch.

McCoy hurried on, trying not to fall as he stumbled across unseen debris. He could hardly see a thing, but he kept going. The Vulcan readings were stronger, but so were the gas indications. He had no guarantee he was not breathing the poisonous fumes at that very moment. An ankle gave way suddenly; he fell forward into the dirt. The swimming sensation in his head as he got up made it clear he was breathing gas, but he had to keep on.

Something he had touched registered in his mind - he reached out again, mouth close to the floor to catch a thin current of air coming from the main shaft. There it was again; soft, rumpled hair, a body lying limply in the dirt.

"Spock! Thank God..."

He crawled further on, pushed his hands under the Vulcan's arms. The tri-corder lay forgotten on the tunnel floor as McCoy strained to pull Spock away from the pocket of gas and back to safety. Halfway there, Kirk joined him, too anxious to wait any longer. Together they carried their friend.

Light seeped into the darkness and McCoy breathed a sigh of relief. A few minutes more, and he would have Spock up in sickbay.

"Menon'ar! No!"

Kirk exploded into action, throwing himself in a flying tackle as the prince made to throw a K7B incinerator at the Starfleet men. Vorda, who had seen his son's swift movement but had been too shocked to move now stood by in ashamed disbelief as Menon'ar was disarmed by Kirk and the security guard. Kirk pushed the alien unceremoniously over to Meersham, trying to ignore the increased pain in his side where the sudden twisting movement had reopened the wound - he could not consider that now.

"Get over there with your friend!"

"He's no friend of mine!" cried Meersham. He glared at Menon'ar. "You would have killed me too, and yourself, you son of a -"

"Be quiet!" roared Kirk. In gentler tones, he spoke to McCoy. "Bones, how is he?"

"Can't say for sure," the doctor answered. "I'm beaming up now, and I want you in sickbay as soon as you come up."

As the bright dazzle died away Kirk turned to his two prisoners. "I don't care if you are a potential High King, Menon'ar. If Spock dies, I'll hold both you and Meersham responsible, and then your lives won't be worth living!"

Behind him, Vorda nodded in quiet approval.

"Captain, I have much to thank you for. If you had not come here, my unworthy son would have achieved his plan to rob me of my throne and give my people to the Klingons. When I think of how close he and the miserable Mee'an were to victory, I shiver."

"The lure of riches is a powerful thing," said Kirk. "The Klingons would have given a great deal for a planet rich in tirthanum."

"Ha! They have cut their own throats, for none of my ilk will welcome them here," Vorda declared. "As for Menon'ar, I no longer know of him. I have no son."

"Your punishment is just, High King," said Ambassador Shondar. "Rest assured Meersham and his accomplices will be dealt with just as severely."

Vorda nodded contentedly. "I have confidence in Federation justice, else I would not have given them to you... Captain Kirr', tell me of Mr. 'ock. Is he well?"

Kirk smiled broadly. "He is, sir, although it was a close thing. He's already up and about - against doctor's orders, I might add."

"And what of your own injury?"

A knowing smile spread over Shondar's face as Kirk replied, "It is mending, your Majesty. Dr. McCoy has treated me, and I will be all right."

The High King viewed him shrewdly. "I think...like Mr. 'ock you too go against doctor's orders! I sympathise with your plight."

"Thank you."

Vorda nodded slowly, blinking once or twice as he turned again to Maria Shondar. "Ambassador, I thank you also for your help. You convinced the High Council most magnificently."

"Your Majesty is too kind... However, I feel my talents were wasted here. Captain Kirk is as good a diplomat as I."

"Ah!" laughed Vorda, "it is so. I have noticed. Kirr', do you become an ambassador also?"

Kirk shook his head ruefully. "High King, I have enough trouble with my ship. I'll leave diplomacy to the experts."

Closeted from the laughter and quiet chatter of the rec room, Captain and First Officer enjoyed a quiet game of chess in Kirk's quarters - the first in too many years. An atmosphere of peaceful companionship pervaded the cabin, mingling with a sense of completeness both men had missed in their time apart.

Kirk considered the board carefully, savouring Spock's company. He lifted his queen, slowly moving it nearer Spock's bishop. The Vulcan made no visible reaction.

"Hmm... You know, I think we didn't do too badly on Gairm. Starfleet Command certainly can't complain."

"One would assume so," murmured Spock. "However, the bureaucratic mind frequently finds something which is not to its satisfaction."

"You can't please all of them," Kirk agreed. Silence fell for a long moment then he spoke with a faint tone of puzzlement in his voice. "Spock, that was a very illogical, Human move you made!"

"It was meant to be," Spock answered blandly. "Your move, I believe."

The captain studied the board again, his mind on other matters. "Do you know something - for the first time in a long, long while, I actually feel at home. I should never have left the Enterprise."

"I concur. It was the single most illogical thing you have ever done... Mate in two."

It was a few seconds before Kirk's eyes left Spock's and actually looked at the pieces. The nonplussed expression changed to a broad grin. "Well I'll be - you sneaky devil! I never even noticed that knight. When did you...? I have to concede the game."

The delight in Spock's face matched his. They smiled, each relaxing in his new understanding of the other. Friends - and brothers.

"I won't give this up again," Kirk said softly.

"I wouldn't let you."

The half-teasing smile played about Kirk's lips. "Why, where will you be?"

"At your side - as always."

ZINE ADS

February 1981

Captain's Log - SAE for price and availability. Sylvia Billings, 49 Southampton Rd. Far Cotton, Northampton, England.

Orbit 304 available end of January, £1.50 incl. Also available, reprints of Orbit 301 (£1.25), 302 (£1.25) and 303 (£1.50). This is a general ST zine. The Scapegoat, a one-story adult ST general zine, £1.50, also available. There are also a number of K/S zines currently available - these include explicit same-sex scenes and will not knowingly be sold to anyone under 18. These include Duet 1 & 2, The Protege, Inevitable Love & Replica. Flyers as to content and price are available. SAE to Doreen DaBinett, Greenacres, Howe Road, Watlington, Oxfordshire, England.

Companion - issues 2 & 3 available. These are explicit K/S zines; age statement (over 18) required. Carol Hunteerton, 43 Old Bergen Rd, Jersey City, NJ 07305, U.S.A.

Galactic Discourse 3 - a genzine from Laurie Huff, 208 W. Crow, Eureka, IL 61530, U.S.A. Also Precessional, a novel dealing with lasting changes in the lives of Kirk and Spock. Addressed envelope and 2 IRCs for info.

Southern Star - a genzine which includes material other than ST. Rebecca Hoffman, 205 Pine Street, Greer, SC 29651, U.S.A.

Spin Dizzie - a genzine. Issue 4 available, issue 5 due soon. Marilyn Johansen, 11424 Kensington Dr, Eden Prairie, MN 55344, U.S.A.

Grip - a genzine, and Trexindex, a listing of fan writers, their stories and the zines in which they appeared, from Roberta Rogow, P.O. Box 124, Fair Lawn, NJ 07410, U.S.A.

Saurian Brandy Digest - most issues up to No. 27 available. These are mostly genzines, but there are one or two one-story issues. Sylvia Stanczyk, 1953 East 18th Street, Erie, PA 16510, U.S.A.

Enter-comm - a genzine from Marjorie McKenna, 1068 Bathgate Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1J 8E8, Canada.

Sun & Shadow - this is a Kirk/Spock relationship zine with emphasis on hurt/comfort. Carol Frisbie, 518 S. Abingdon St, Arlington, VA 22204, U.S.A.

Nexus - a genzine. Marty Barquinero, EE2 Irongate Apts, Beverly, NJ 11104, U.S.A.

Universal Translator - a newsletter giving info on zines in print and also zines in the planning stages. Mostly U.S. zines, but there is also a section devoted to foreign zines, mostly British. \$2.00 per issue from Britain; \$1.50 in the States. This price may no longer be applicable as U.S. postal rates were going up. For info contact Rose M. Jakubjansky, 39- 84 48th St, Long Island City, NY 11104, U.S.A.

Please remember to enclose a SAE if writing to enquire about a zine published in your own country, and an addressed envelope and 2 International Reply Coupons if you are sending abroad.