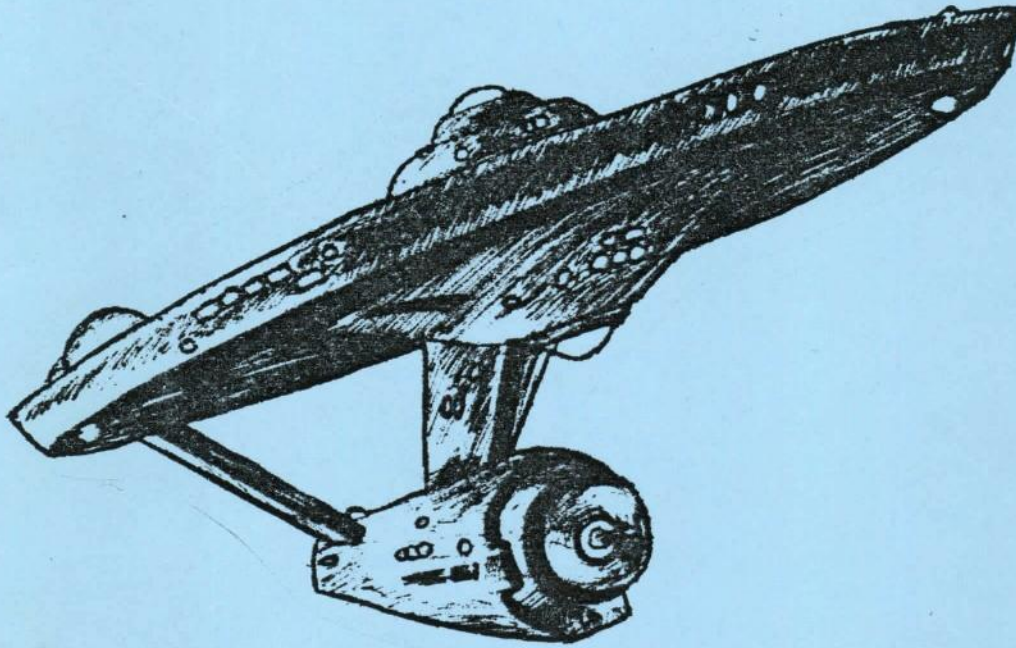


Scotpress

ENTERPRISE



INCIDENTS 7

STORIES BY

Jennifer

Guttridge

a STAR TREK

fanzine

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS 7

Stories by Jennifer Guttridge

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ScoIpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise Incidents 7, the second of our anthologies of stories by Jennifer Guttridge. As I type this, Enterprise Incidents 6 has just gone on sale, and I've already had some very favourable comment on it.

As with the last issue, three of the stories are appearing for the first time, while one has been printed before - The Huntress first appeared in Tricorder Readings 3 (in America). Tricorder Readings has not been available for many years and I doubt if many copies ever found their way to Britain.

My thanks again go to Janet and Valerie for helping me with the typing of the stories for this zine.



Countenance of a DARK ANGEL

Long ago, the sun had set beyond the distant tree-lined horizon. It was dark except for the final fading blush of pink in the western sky. The stars were out, twinkling specks of silver that should reign alone until the rising of the twin moons.

Slowly, the pink blush faded into greyness, the ragged line of tree tops becoming indistinct. The breeze of evening had dropped into stillness and the countryside was quite silent, as if aware of the approach of some catastrophic event.

Then, as the true blackness of night became complete, IT appeared, low down in the eastern sky. A dull red point of light, moving slowly at first but gathering speed and growing brighter and larger as it rose higher in the sky. There was a great whooshing of air, a rumble and a crack as if of thunder close at hand. The object in the sky was falling, streaming fire like the tail of a shooting star. Another ominously low rumble rolled across the sky. The first fury spent, the fires burned lower, a dimming red glow, but large enough to dominate all the land.

There was a rushing, a rending, a tearing of atoms as elemental forces came into play. The object was braking, trying desperately to halt its headlong rush to destruction. A blunt squarish nose lifted, still glowing cherry red, and then it plunged, turning completely over once as it fell.

It landed, somehow right side up, and crashed on into the hilltop, its nose ploughing a long furrow into the black soil. The rocks and the living trees in its path ripped free of the ground with the sounds of fearful crackling.

Nothing could stand in the way.

It lunged to a sickening halt on the very top of the hill, an angular yet peculiarly streamlined shape, its metal blackened and smoking hot, radiating its intense heat into the air. For a moment there was silence, broken only by the click of heated metal and the crackle of fires started by the passage of fiery machinery.

Then in the side of the craft, a door opened, quickly, revealing within a darkness blacker than the void from which it had fallen. A single figure staggered from the hatch, choking on the foul fumes that issued from the interior and billowed blackly into the night sky. It paused, clawing at eyes burned and blinded by heat.

Oxygen-rich air surged about it and ignited its clothing. Bright fire streamed from its back as it ran, turning it quickly into a living torch. With a scream of pain on its lips it hurled itself from the top of the landing skid and rolled its body in the dew-wet grass. The flames spluttered and went out, reluctantly relinquishing their hold of death on the living.

Whimpering, the man creature dragged itself on hands and knees away from the blackened hull that had carried it. Then, in the darkness, it raised its head and looked back, as if puzzled, as if remembering something that it had left behind. But it was too late

to go back. There was a grating roar from somewhere deep inside the scorched wreckage. Momentarily, a purplish glow spread through it and then it erupted in cascading, boiling fiery fury.

The flames leaped upwards, red and gold and blue-white, lighting the night sky. The man creature gave a small cry as the waves of heat washed over its painfully burned body and redoubled its efforts to drag itself away. It succeeded for a short way - far enough to ensure the continuation of whatever life force it retained.

The flames reached higher, challenging the sky in their dance of triumphant destruction and the roar of their savage laughter filled the night silence. The blaze of light spread over the surrounding ground and in the penumbra of the shadows the figure collapsed, pressing its face into the coolness of the grass.

Still it cried softly, nursing its pain. The light of the consuming fires flickered in delight across one outflung hand and glinted on the double ring of gold braid around the cuff of the scorched sleeve.

Long moments passed as the creature sobbed the breath into burned lungs, and then, as it drew itself into a pathetic huddle, the sobbing ebbed into silence and the crackling of the fires dominated the night alone.

It was the cool, clear hour before dawn when Spock stirred and lifted his head.

The pain of the movement contorted his face. He was sore; his whole body was scorched and his back and hands blistered. He gritted his teeth and struggled to sit up.

He sat on a round hilltop. There were two pink moons low down in the sky, and in their waning light he could see a hulk of blackened and twisted metal, still clicking as it cooled. Sloping away downhill into darkness there were trees and cool undergrowth, and all round an impression of space as if of spreading countryside.

Spock got his legs under him and stood swaying, his head down like an injured bull. He looked again towards the hot wreckage and there was a frown on his face. He had a deep conviction that he should know something about it, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what. He shook his head, bewildered, struggling with a stubborn memory, but nothing came.

Raising his eyes to the sky, he saw that there was a lightening towards the east, the heralding of the rising sun. The slowly growing light was painful to the scorched retinas of his eyes, and sprang tears onto his cheeks. He looked down and his gaze fell on his burned hands. He began to realise just how badly hurt he was, and how much he needed help.

He turned away from the hilltop and began to pick his way down through the woodland. He was dazed, little more than half conscious. He stumbled and fell, and soon the blisters on his hands were broken and bleeding. Vines lay across his path waiting to wrap around his ankles. Tree roots arched up out of the ground with the deliberate intention of tripping him. Low branches took vicious swipes at his head and before long the whole cloudy grey vista was swinging in slow, lazy motion around him.

Spock wrapped an arm around a tree trunk and closed his eyes, trying to stand still. Bright orange lights exploded inside his head and he felt himself falling forward. He grabbed the tree hard and regained his balance.

Everything around him was distorted and out of focus. Colours blurred and ran together darkly. Distances elongated. In the strengthening light, trees took on menacing proportions. Their branches became arms reaching for him, twigs, clutching fingers.

Spock dismissed the notion brutally. Such thinking seemed somehow wrong to him, awkward and unnatural. Determinedly he made himself go on, driving his body from tree to tree, his mind merely an observer of its progress. He stumbled on a root, clutched at a tree he thought he saw and fell heavily.

There were no more trees. He lay in deep, luxuriously cool grass at the edge of the wood. Before him was a broken fence, a narrow, rutted dirt road and on the far side, out of sight to him now, he could hear the running of cold spring water. The sound of that water made him realise how parched his mouth and throat were, how much he wanted to bathe his hands and wash the dirt from his face.

He struggled back to his feet, seeing more clearly now, but still experiencing pain if he looked towards the bright east. He found the gap in the fence where two of the poles had rotted away and fallen, and squeezed through the gap. The road was perilous to walk on. There was a steep bank on either side, two deep ruts and a flattened ridge along the middle with, here and there, a tuft of stringy grass growing. Spock stumbled uncertainly across and on hands and knees crawled up the bank of the further side.

The ground sloped away, down below the level of the road, and then evened out. He came to some rough stones and then smoother pebbles. The sound of the water was very close now. He reached out a hand and experienced a sharp shock as his fingers dipped into liquid ice. He gasped at the pain of the cold on his burns, and pushed on with dogged determination. One foot more; six inches; and he plunged his face into the running water, drinking greedily - great gulps that chilled his stomach and made him retch. Then he lay with both hands and one cheek in the water and rested until he grew cold.

The sun rose majestically over the horizon, a bright golden ball. The countryside sprang to life. Colour and form took on new dimensions. Spock sat up stiffly and blinked, his eyes adjusting painfully.

The country stretched away from the foot of the hill like a mist shrouded map. Patchwork fields and a narrow winding road, hedgerows and scattered clumps of trees, and in the distance the grandeur of a rising forest.

Spock straightened out and stretched as well as he was able. His hands were raw but washed clean now, and numbed by the cold of the water. He made his way carefully along the bank of the brook to a place where the water eddied into a still pool before flowing on downhill. Spock slumped onto his knees and looked into the still surface.

A face stared up at him from the fluid mirror. A pale, dirt-smudged face, high angular cheekbones, downward slanting deepset

eyes, black upswept eyebrows and a fringe of fine black hair, wet now. The mouth was firm with a thin, rather cruel upper lip, a slightly heavy nose and delicately pointed upswept ears. The face was his own, there was no doubt of that, but he stared at it as if it were that of a stranger, grafted on.

He recognised nothing about it.

Carefully, wonderingly, he washed the dirt from the face, feeling out the flat contours of the cheeks and the hard angles of the bones beneath a very thin padding of flesh. He could see the ravages of fire, taut discoloured skin, and there was a deep gash across the forehead at the hairline. He leaned close to the water and bathed the wound, using the cold to numb the pain. The washing made the cut open and bleed. Spots of bright green blood dropped into the water.

He examined the face again. He was becoming used to it, accepting it as his own. The wound stopped bleeding and he automatically smoothed the fringe of black hair over it. He studied the dark eyes and they looked gravely back at him out of the pool. The pupils were large and almost black, and they were troubled.

Spock stood up and made his way back to the road. The rutted surface curved away out of sight round the side of the hill, deserted. Spock began to walk, slowly, not exerting himself, following one of the ruts to keep himself from wandering.

The Widow Codee was a homely, respectable woman. Since the death of her husband she had lived alone in a small house of wood and stone. She kept a cow in the barn and she raised chickens and sold eggs in the weekly market together with her home-made bread and cheeses. During the afternoons and evenings she wove the local wool into cloth to exchange for vegetables and a little fresh meat when there was a slaughtering. She was fastidious, both in her person and in her house-keeping. She was kindly, honest, and above all, pious. She feared God and she dreaded the eternal fires of hell.

Widow Codee rose at dawn every day of her life. She prayed and milked her cow, and turned the beast out to graze. Then she returned for a meagre meal of bread and salt meat before going out with her pail to collect eggs.

This day began for her just as any other. The chickens squawked about her feet as she took the brown eggs from the nests and laid them, still warm, in the pail. Returning into the fresh morning sunlight, she raised her eyes to the hill. There was a figure on the road, distant, walking slowly and it seemed to her rather unsteadily. She paused, shading her eyes.

It was odd that anyone should go to the hill so early, and after the happenings of the night before it was remarkable that anyone should go to the hill at all.

The Widow was still pondering the problem when the figure passed out of her sight behind a rise in the land. She raised her eyes to the hilltop, golden green in the early light. There was no sign now of the blazing inferno that had riven the night sky. She touched her hand to her forehead in the sign of the God and, still puzzled, she carried the pail of eggs to the house. Inside, she mixed a batch of bread to bake for the next day's market and having placed the dough

beneath a cloth to rise she went back into the yard and began to sweep with her broom of bound sticks.

Spock leaned against the wall of the barn.

He felt sick and dizzy. The long walk down the hill had drained all his strength and left him so weakened he could hardly stand. His vision, which had for a short while cleared, had now clouded again so that he could hardly see. He was faint with fatigue and hunger, and his burned back was stiffening.

With groping hands he felt his way to the corner of the barn. There was a single storey cottage built of grey stone and tar-soaked wood. The windows were small and unglazed, their shutters now thrown wide. There were chickens scratching and pecking, and an old dog asleep in the sun. A woman was sweeping the dust from before her door.

She was a stout woman, past middle age, dressed in a sober tight-bodied black dress that hung to the ground and an equally long white apron. Her grey hair was tied back inside a white bonnet and her work-worn face was bent over her toil. She had not seen him.

The dog raised its head and looked at him, and then got up with a sharp bark of surprise. It wagged its tail in wary welcome. The woman also looked up and her eyes fixed on his face.

Spock, his weight supported almost entirely by the wall of the barn, held out a hand towards her. "Help me," he begged. "Please help me."

The woman's eyes widened until the white showed all the way round. She took a step backwards, her whole body beginning to tremble and shudder. The sweat sprang from her skin and stood out in glistening beads.

Spock took an unsteady step towards her. "Help me!"

The woman screamed, a long piercing shriek of terror that cut through the air. Spock blinked, recoiled. The woman screamed again, snatched up her broom and hurled it wildly at him. Spock put up a hand to defend himself but the broom handle caught him a heavy crack on the arm and glanced off his skull. Weak as he was, the blow was almost enough to fell him.

The woman hadn't remained to find out what damage she had caused him. She had turned and fled, her long skirt flapping about her legs and her face buried in her hands as if she were trying to shield her eyes from some terrible sight. Spock saw her vanish round the corner of the cottage, fleeing for her life.

Bewildered, he shook his head. He knew that it was hopeless to make any attempt to go after her. His sight was failing. Everything appeared twisted and distorted as if he were looking through ancient whorled glass. His head felt oddly light and unsteady; it had a tendency to flop backwards. He felt his grip on his senses slipping.

Feeling his way more than seeing, he staggered along the side of the barn and then launched himself across the yard, aiming for the cottage door. He stumbled on the step of the porch, saved himself from falling, and dragged himself inside. He was struck by the

impression of cool dimness and simple homespun comfort, but there was no opportunity to assimilate his surroundings. His consciousness was fading fast.

The Widow Codee ran all the way to the village, no mean achievement for a woman of her years as the distance was something over two miles. She arrived all but dead, purple in the face and her clothes stained with sweat and the dirt of the road. Her bonnet had fallen from her head and hung from her neck by its strings; her thinning grey hair had loosened from its pinnings and dangled stringily about her shoulders.

When she reached the village she still did not stop. She ran on, her eyes wide with terror and her face wet with sweat and tears, oblivious of the startled stares of friends and acquaintances who knew her well. Down the twisting street she ran, right through the village without pause for breath, to the door of the building that stood alone, set apart. The mark of the God was above the door, offering comfort and protection.

Widow Codee stood weeping and hammered on the wooden door until her fists were raw and bleeding. Footsteps finally sounded on the stone floor beyond. A bolt grated and the door swung ponderously open on great hinges of iron. The Widow Codee flung herself onto her knees and clutched at the legs of the man who stood before her, burying her face in the skirts of his robes and making them wet with her tears.

The alarmed priest tried almost frantically to disengage her. "Come, come, my good woman," he told her kindly. "Why dost thou weep so?"

Harder still the Widow clung to him. "Oh, Father! Father! Forgive me, for I have sinned and brought down terrible vengeance upon the heads of us all!"

The priest scowled and swallowed. He was uncomfortably aware of the growing crowd of curious onlookers. "Your evil cannot possibly be so extreme," he told her firmly, lifting her onto her feet. "The Lord knows that you are a pious and God-fearing woman. Come. Come within." He took her, still weeping, inside the building and closed the door firmly on the ogling faces.

Once secure inside the sanctuary of the consecrated building the Widow Codee broke into a fresh flood of uncontrollable tears. She was red of face and short of breath, and she clutched at her chest as if in pain. The priest didn't know what to do. He flustered around her offering cloths for the tears and words of consolation, necessarily pointless for he had no idea what had caused the woman's grief.

At long last the wrenching sobs slackened and he could make an attempt to extract some sense from her.

"I saw him! I saw him!" the Widow cried. "He came for me! He held out his hand to take me away!"

"Who was it that you saw?" inquired the enlightened priest.

"He came to my house!" the woman sobbed. "He came to take me! Me that's feared the Lord all my life and never had an evil thought!"

He was standing there by the barn! He spoke to me and held out his hand!"

The priest laid a kindly hand on her shoulder. "Tell me, my daughter, have you been visited with a vision of the blessed Lord?"

The woman raised her eyes to him, wild with terror. "The good God knows that it was nary the Lord!" she said. "Straight out of hell, 'twas the devil himself!"

Spock stirred and sat up painfully. He felt distinctly better despite the nightmares that had accompanied his sleep. His back and hands were stiff but the burns were dry and the blisters no longer wept. The injuries were preparing to heal. There was a gnawing pain in his middle that he recognised as hunger. His head was light from the want of food.

He looked around with new interest. In the light from the small windows he could see the glint of simple, lovingly polished wood. The fabrics were coarse, homespun, the colours simple reds and blues and browns. The floor was of stones, fitting tightly together and scrubbed to an even whiteness. There was a neat bed in one corner, rag mats on the floor, a small fireplace and, on a shelf, some jars and dishes. It was those that attracted Spock's attention.

He went over and lifted down one of the jars. It contained roughly ground flour. A further investigation produced salted and dried meat, which he frowned over and discarded, and a variety of hard root vegetables. Spock made himself a meal of these, and with a full stomach he felt his strength returning.

Outside, he sat on the porch step beside the dog and nursed its old head in his lap. He found his whole situation puzzling, and most strange of all was the behaviour of the woman. She had fled from him in unqualified terror. He could find no reason for her fear. He had made no gesture of enmity towards her, indeed, he had been incapable of doing so. He had asked only for help. Cast about as he would, he could find no cause for her abrupt departure and as time passed it became increasingly clear that she was not going to return. It seemed that the only thing he could do, after all, was to follow her.

Still with difficulty and pain, he began to walk along the road down which the woman had fled.

The Council of Village Elders gazed gravely at the woman over the table. The five stern men summoned in haste by the priest had at first been incredulous, but they had listened to her story and been convinced by the sincerity of her tears. Koled exchanged a worried, grey-eyed look with Braymin who sat next to him, and then looked again at the Widow.

"This demon you saw - 'twas close at hand?"

Widow Codee wrung her hands and moaned. "As close as two arms' lengths."

"Tell us, how did he look?"

The Widow rolled her eyes. "'Twas the devil incarnate. Taller

than a man, with hair that shone blue in the sunlight and pale horns on his head. His eyes were of black fire and the scars of the Inferno were on his face." Her eyes closed and she swayed.

The priest put an arm around her shoulders. "She should rest now. She can tell you no more."

Koled nodded. "Yes. Take her." The priest led the woman from the room, and the Council Elders leaned their greying heads together.

"Truly there is a demon come into our midst!" Aldek said in a hushed voice. "Last night the hill opened and released the fires of hell. I heard the roar and saw the flames from my house. They lit the sky, and dimmed the faces of the Twins."

"The demon must have been spewed out of the Inferno!" Braymin declared. "But why? What have we done that the powers of the devil should be visited upon us?"

"The woman? Maybe she conjured the demon," Aldek suggested.

Koled shook his head. "The woman fears God. The demon is not of her production."

Aldek looked at him. "We must defend ourselves. What shall we do?"

"The Lord will protect us," Braymin said simply.

"No. The Lord will help us to protect ourselves," Koled told them. "Set watchmen to guard the road. Send a rider to the castle to fetch the Lord Senagold. Gather the women and children into the church where the sign of God will protect them. Arm the men with scythes and axes and sticks and stones. If the devil has sent his advocate among us, he will not find our strength wanting!"

The village was nestled in a hollow of the hills, a collection of low grey stone buildings that blended into the green and grey and gold of the landscape. A clear stream ran through, crossed by a wooden bridge broad enough to carry the wheels of a native ox cart. The street was deserted.

Spock was struck at once by the unnatural silence and stillness. It seemed that there was no-one in the place, but the abandonment was recent. Smoke still rose from the smouldering embers in the forge.

Spock made his way slowly down one side of the street, his eyes watchful and alert. He estimated from the sun that it was almost noon. The street should have thronged with people, and yet his footsteps sounded alone.

He had reached the central square of the village before he saw the first sign of movement. A tall grey-haired man stepped out of a building directly in front of him. He wore long white robes with a symbol emblazoned in purple on the chest, a circle with a spot in the centre. He held the same symbol, cast out of apparently solid gold, above his head on a long pole. The expression on his face was as black as thunder, and his eyes bored into Spock's with feverish intensity.

Spock stopped and stared at him.

The priest raised the sign of the God high. "Back, Demon!" he cried. "Cower before the power of the Lord!"

Spock blinked, but he was given no time to formulate a reply. The buildings round the square erupted and spewed people onto the street, men dressed in woollen tunics and leather leggings.

Their faces contained varying mixtures of anger and fear, and their hands held an assortment of primitive tools and weapons. There was a murmuring in their throats that rose quickly to a growl of hatred.

Spock took a step away from the glowering priest. There was nowhere to run to and no sense in fighting, but the crowd hardly seemed likely to be amenable to reason. They were closing in on him, shoulder to shoulder, their faces grim. A menacing silence fell in the street. Spock took another step backwards and his back came up against a wall. He looked imploringly towards the robed priest, knowing instinctively that there lay his only hope of help, but the priest's face was piously expressionless.

Someone in the crowd shouted, a gruff man's voice raised to a pitch of frenzy. A metal tool rebounded from the wall close to Spock's head. Others in the crowd followed the example. An avalanche of implements and then sticks and stones descended mercilessly. Spock raised his arms to protect his head and felt the missiles pounding his body.

The angry shouts of the crowd rose to a roar in his ears. He felt a growing pain that intensified with each blow. A brick struck him on the head and another on the back of the neck as he fell forward onto his knees. He looked up with clouded eyes and caught a final fleeting glance of the face of the priest, immobile as he held the circle emblem above him. Then something solid hit him on his already gashed forehead and the darkness of insensibility descended as he slumped forward onto the ground.

For long moments the stones continued to pound on the inert body, each landing with a dull thud. Then the priest raised his hand and the bombardment ceased. Spock lay without moving, one arm flung out, his head cradled in the other, a touchingly Human gesture - so the priest thought. He bent down to examine the creature more closely. Indeed it was a strange being, but not nearly so terrible in appearance as the Widow had described. It had not horns, but its ears were deformed into smooth points.

Koled stepped past him and knelt down, reaching out a tentative hand to touch the creature's neck.

"Its flesh is warm," he said. "It neither numbs the touch like ice, nor burns with the fires of hell." He straightened and looked at the priest, puzzled. "It lives," he said slowly. "What shall we do with it?"

The priest raised the symbol of the circle high.

"A dark angel has been delivered into the hands of the Lord!" he declared. "We must send word, and guard it safely."

Spock opened his eyes without moving any other part of his body.

There was a dark shadow across his vision that frightened him. He lay in dimness on a hard, cold floor and there was a sense of enclosure about him. Cautiously, he explored his own body.

The burns were sore and broken once more; every part of him had been pounded and was bruised, and he was cut in a dozen places. A closer inspection revealed no broken bones, but there was a crippling ache in the small of his back that he feared might cause trouble later.

His back screamed protest as he tried to sit up. He found that his hands were bound tightly behind him, and he had to struggle with the bruised muscles of his back to pull him upright.

He was in some sort of cellar, beneath - so he assumed - some building. In any event it was mostly below ground, because the only window was small and high in the wall, unglazed and barred with a heavy iron grille. A patterned shaft of sunlight slanted down onto the floor and from its angle he judged it to be mid afternoon. The cellar was littered with broken kegs and bales and smelled of old dust and cobwebs.

Spock failed completely to understand the reason for his imprisonment. He had done nothing to antagonise anyone and yet everyone he had met seemed filled with hatred and fear and became instilled with violence at the very sight of him. His mind was peopled with the images of their faces, angry hostile masks that hid unaccountable terror.

He considered, picturing each face in turn, trying to find some clue that would unite them in their animosity. He recalled the bonnetted woman, the still-faced figure with the circle emblem, the man in the crowd who had thrown the first missile, various other features that he recalled only dimly from the stoning, but nothing seemed significant. Something that was significant, and something that troubled him greatly, was the fact that he could remember nothing before the painful awakening on the hilltop. Search his mind as he would, he could find no trace of any past life he might have had, not even an identity, only impenetrable grey mists that spoke of time and nothing more.

Painstakingly he relived each and every action from that first moment, trying to call to mind some incident, some inadvertent gesture, that might have turned these strange people against him. He had seen no-one in his stumbling process down the hill. The road had been deserted. He had washed his wounds in the stream, made his way down the road...

He stopped his mental progress and backtracked. He recalled the face that had looked back at him out of the pool. It had been an angular, brooding face, all flat planes and sharp unrelenting curves, whereas the faces of all the people he had so far seen had been filled and rounded. Their eyes were round and grey or blue, his were dark and slanted. Their ears were rounded and protruded from their heads. His lay flat and were sharply pointed. Could it be his own appearance, clearly different from theirs, that set them against him?

He was still pondering the problem when he heard a sound behind and above him. He turned. There was a staircase leading up to a solid-looking wooden door, and it was from beyond this door that the noises came, the sounds of heavy bolts being drawn back. He waited,

still sitting on the floor looking up. There was a moment's silence and then the door opened stiffly. A crack of light appeared and widened, and three faces peered through it into the gloom.

Someone - a man - began cautiously to descend the stairs. He wore a tunic, tight leggings and high leather boots. His face was very round and his head balding, giving the impression of a round pink ball, but all the joviality such a face should have held was dispelled by the expression of fear. In his hand he held a long pole armoured at one end with two savage spikes - a pitchfork. He came down the steps with trepidation, spurred on by determination and the two watchers who remained in the doorway above. Spock watched him come with interest.

Halfway down, the man paused and looked round, obviously not sure where Spock was. The pitchfork poised, ready for throwing. Spock decided that the best thing he could so was sit quite still and say nothing, to avoid at all costs attracting those gleaming spikes into his chest. The man saw him and jumped visibly, as if startled to find him still there. He gestured to his companions, pointing Spock out to them, and completed the descent to the cellar floor.

The man edged round, keeping as much distance as possible between himself and the captive, and the pitchfork pointed constantly at Spock's belly. Seeing that Spock made no move against their companion, the two watchers came curiously down the staircase.

The pink ball-faced man grinned suddenly. "Seems harmless enough to I," he laughed and poked at Spock's legs with the prongs of the pitchfork. Spock sensed the belligerence in their attitude and drew his legs under him and sat on them, gathering himself for possible action.

The men gathered round him, grinning, gaining confidence, each displaying to the others that he was not afraid.

"So that be the devil," one of them said. "He has not claws or tail and he breathes not fire. In what lies the power of his evil?"

The three considered Spock for a moment.

"Stand him on his feet," the third suggested. "Perhaps he is deformed in the back or legs."

The ball-faced men nodded and poked at Spock again with the pitchfork. The spikes came dangerously close, and Spock moved, coming to his feet gracefully despite his bound arms. The three watched him nervously, and then approached him again, the pitchfork held ready.

"Make him dance," one of them whispered. "The dance of the devil will display his power."

Ball face nodded again, chewing on a sweating upper lip. He poked savagely at Spock's legs.

"Stop!"

At the command, four pairs of eyes turned upwards to the top of the stairs. The white-robed priest stood just inside the door, the circle emblem in his hand gleaming dully. Spock's tormentors seemed almost as afraid of him as they were of Spock.

"Come from him, Innkeeper," the priest demanded. "Leave what is the Church's to the Church."

Reluctantly, the three men withdrew and went slowly up the steps, their heads hanging. The priest stepped aside for them to pass and then looked down into the cellar. For a moment, his eyes and Spock's met, both wary, both a little afraid. Then without a word the priest went out and closed the door quietly behind him. Spock heard the bolts driven home.

Left alone, Spock shook his head in dismay. His mind was in turmoil. The unpleasant interlude had left him with one firm fact, the first he had had, that in this society one of his kind was considered a devil.

Spock pulled at the bindings on his wrists. They were tightly tied leather thongs and his flesh had swollen round them so that they bit deep. There was no escape from them. He paced round the cellar fretfully, stumbling in the gloom.

The shaft of light crossed the floor and started up the wall, growing dimmer. The cellar became cold and Spock found himself hungry once more. There was no sound from beyond the door, but once in the late evening he heard a distant rattling as if of shod hoofs on stones, and men's voices calling. Then all was silent once more.

Eventually he sat down again, not feeling well, not understanding, not remembering.

The sound of the bolts being drawn back roused him out of a fitful, devil-peopled sleep. He was on his feet before the door opened, and two men appeared. One held a lantern and a smaller, less ornate edition of the circle emblem, the other a hook-bladed knife. They gestured to him impatiently and led him out of the cellar.

The building was a kind of hostelry. There was a short stone passage and then a large room set with tables and chairs. There were candles and wall torches lighting the room with smoky yellow flames. A fire burned warmly and the windows were shuttered against the chill of the night air. Spock realised how thoroughly cold he had become.

The room was filled with people, all men, and of two different types. One group, the larger, were the villagers in their rough homespun clothes. Spock recognised the ball-faced man, the Innkeeper, among them. The second group was much smaller, consisting of only four men. They were a different breed, their cheekbones high and fine and their unroughened hands bedecked with rings. They wore rich embroidered floor-length cloaks, the hoods thrown back on their shoulders. Everyone was tense and as Spock was led into the room they fell silent. He was the centre of attention.

One of the richly dressed men stepped forward, a tankard in his hand. He was grey haired and grey eyed, and had a calm, confident manner.

One of Spock's guards poked him in the back with the hook bladed knife. He gasped and took a stumbling step forward. The grey haired man looked him up and down and walked slowly round him and then looked into his face.

"They tell me that you are the devil," he said lightly in a precise voice. "You do not appear overly satanic to me. Show me your magic."

Spock shook his head. "I have no magic."

A quick murmur of voices ran round the room. "He speaks! The devil speaks!"

The grey haired man held up his hand for silence and got it. "I am Squire Senagold. You will address me as Lord." He contemplated Spock for a full minute. "Do you deny that you are the devil?"

"I deny it!" Spock said with conviction.

Senagold whipped out his free hand and caught Spock a hefty blow alongside the head. "Call me Lord, dog!" he snarled.

Spock felt something trickle down the side of his face. Senagold's eyes narrowed and he put forward a tentative finger. It came away wetly green with blood from the newly opened cut beneath Spock's fringe.

Senagold stared at the blood and then at Spock, his face paling. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What are you?"

Spock shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted honestly. "I can't remember."

There was more murmuring and a ripple of uneasy laughter, quickly silenced.

"Then tell me, where do you come from?" Senagold, recovering quickly from the sight of Spock's blood, inquired, not unkindly.

The ball-faced Innkeeper smirked. "'Tis clear as the light o' day where he's from, M'Lord. His clothes and his flesh are burned by the fires o' hell itself!"

There was another rumble of conversation, this time on an angry, fearful level. Senagold regarded Spock thoughtfully. "Indeed, the marks of the fire are upon you," he said. "In what way were you burned?"

Spock thought desperately, but could remember nothing before that morning's sunrise. "The hill," he said. "I remember only the hill."

"You see!" The Innkeeper pointed an accusing finger. "It is admitted! Last night on the hill the fires of hell burned high! We all saw!"

"I see," Senagold said, then, to Spock, "as Squire of this Manor, I am responsible for the laws here. Both the laws of the King and of the Church. Have you broken the laws of either? Think carefully."

Spock shook his head. "I have broken no-one's laws."

Senagold walked round him again, considering, his cloak swishing on the floor in the quietness. "Do your wrists pain you?" he asked, seeing the tightness of the leather thongs.

Spock looked round at him. "They do."

"Then free yourself. If you are a devil, or even a minor demon, you have that power."

"I'm no demon."

"Yet the devil has put his mark clearly upon your face," Senagold said, staring pointedly at Spock's ears. "You have made a pact with him? Sold away your soul? Be you a warlock? What spells has he bidden you cast? Answer!"

Spock stared at him, bewildered, not knowing what reply to make. Senagold smiled a grim smile. "No matter. That will doubtless be determined. The Church has been summoned to claim that which is the Church's. Meantime, if you cannot free yourself, I will free you."

Spock felt the cold hardness of a knife blade against his wrists, a sharp tug and then relief as the thongs slackened. He took his hands from behind him and examined the new sores.

"You must be in need of refreshment," Senagold said, gesturing to the Innkeeper. "Here, drink." He took a filled tankard from the hand of the wary Innkeeper and held it out to Spock. "Good malt ale will revive your strength."

Spock took the offered mug gingerly and sniffed at the dark honey-smelling liquid. He sipped at it. Its taste was bittersweet, not unpleasant though it scorched his throat. Its wetness and coldness were refreshing. He swallowed two long greedy draughts of it and then looked up gratefully. Senagold was watching him, a slight knowing smile on his face. Spock realised at once that he had been tricked, but it was already too late. He could feel the drug coursing through his veins. Senagold's face blurred. He fought desperately for his balance. The mug tipped and the remainder of the ale spilled out onto the floor. Spock followed it down into darkness.

Spock's metabolism reacted in the most peculiar way to the drug forcibly fed him. All that night and the whole of the following day he lay in a feverish semi-conscious stupor with only brief moments of lucidity. He was scarcely able to move, every muscle and nerve had been numbed to uselessness, but the intended effect on his alien chemistry was incomplete. Occasionally he would stir and try to lift his head, and his eyelids would flicker. Images, sights and sounds impinged on his mind, leaving a confused kaleidoscope of impression.

There were distorted voices, the touch of hands on his body, and particularly on his head, fingers feeling and examining his ears. He saw faces, distorted, disembodied, before him. Once there was the face of Senagold and once that of the priest. Other coarse faces belonging to the villagers, morbidly curious and revelling in the thrill of fear. Later there were other men, grave faced and dressed in the same white robes the priest wore. The circle emblem was everywhere, in gold and iron and wood, and stitched in purple on their robes and tall white head dresses.

Several times he roused to find himself being moved, once carried in someone's arms and then, again and again, the jogging of a long journey. The roads were rough and the transport crude; some form of animal-drawn vehicle. They passed through a forest; Spock opened his eyes once to see the branches of trees passing overhead. The forest ended and they passed through smooth rolling countryside, various hamlets and a small township. Spock knew nothing of that. He slept deeply.

For a moment in late afternoon his senses fully returned. He struggled into a sitting position. He could just see over the side of the low cart-like vehicle. Beyond, in the fading light, all the green countryside had become grey. The road looked over a valley filled with low damp mist. Ahead, wreathed in cloud, was a building of massive grey stone. To Spock in his dazed state it gave the impression of some monstrous beast squatting malignantly atop a rounded hill. Even as he slipped helplessly back into unconsciousness, he sensed a foreboding dread.

The rocking of the cart finally stopped and the cessation of motion stirred Spock one last time to a state of bare consciousness. He saw vaguely a high walled courtyard, angular and austere against a dark sky, lit only by an occasional burning torch and the light that spilled from an open arched door.

And in a lighted window he saw once more the sign of the circle.

Spock awoke to find his head and limbs throbbing with the unpleasant return of sensation. He lay face down on a cold hard floor that felt damp and unclean. His hands were free but he was so weakened he could barely lift himself from the floor with all the strength in his arms. With an effort, he pulled himself over and lay on his back, staring up into utter darkness and listening to the singing of the blood in his veins.

He had no idea where he was, only that he was hungry and extremely uncomfortable, and that his body trembled as if with fever. The place had a foetid animal smell about it made bearable only by the fact that it was cold. Outside the sounds of his own blood and breathing there was almost nothing to be heard; a drip of water, slow and steady; an occasional scratching sound close at hand; the even rarer muted clanking of metal on metal, very distant.

As the last effects of the drug finally wore off and his brain cleared, the snatches of memory returned hauntingly, like recollections of a childhood nightmare. He remembered the crouching grey building looming above him through the mists and a snatch of conversation half heard. The Citadel. The Citadel of the Lord.

Suddenly he was in no more doubt as to his whereabouts. The Citadel and the grey building were one and the same, and he lay in some dank chamber constructed among its foundations.

Driving himself to the effort, he sat up and as he did so he became aware of a fetter round his ankle. A chain dragged and clanked on the floor. By following it back he found its end attached to a ring set solidly in a wall slippery with slime and running water. He used the ring to pull himself up, following - although he was unaware of it - the instinctive drive of his own people to remain on his feet regardless of injury or illness. His legs were still unfeeling, wooden. He balanced on them, swaying precariously. He felt sick and not only from the passing effects of the drug. He felt the need of sanitary provisions and it seemed that none had been made. He began to realise that the odour of the place was due to others before him having the same need and having used the most primitive of means to satisfy it. Spock felt his stomach churn and manfully swallowed down the flood of saliva that filled his mouth, determined not to add to the filth. He directed his thoughts firmly onto other subjects.

Spock and the caricature of a man who had appeared in the doorway exchanged long, long looks.

He had come with the first ashen light that had filtered in through the single barred crescent-shaped window high up in the wall. He went well with the cold grimness of that dawn, with dark, wet-looking skin that matched the stained stone walls. He was diminutive, something less than five feet in height, wearing a black tunic and stockings and a short black cloak. The dark skin was tightly drawn over prominent bones giving the head a skull-like appearance, a gaunt hook-nosed mask in which two small eyes burned like fire.

He stepped down the two shallow steps into the chamber, his cloak swaying and one arm hunched up under it in an odd unnatural manner. He confronted Spock with a grim, mirthless smile.

"So you are the one they call a devil," he said in a soft, slow voice. "I find that hardly credible. Were you a devil you would not have been taken so easily or by such primitive means."

"As I keep explaining, I'm no devil," Spock assured him wearily.

"No," the man agreed. "Nor even a demon. However, warlock you may be." He picked his way across the floor of the cell, and looked down at Spock intently, studying his face and ears and the torn, burned remnants of his clothing. "You have the marks of the devil upon you, certainly."

"I'm no devil," Spock repeated decisively. "I know nothing about devils or demons -"

"Or witches or warlocks or the Holy Mother Church herself?" the man demanded harshly. "Prove to me that you're not a warlock! Prove it now!" His bright eyes were suddenly narrowed, calculating.

Spock opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again, his mind pondering the problem of how to prove a negative. The little man smiled the same mirthless smile as before.

"I am Porteen," he said affably. "We are going to be seeing a great deal of each other, you and I. I have some questions to ask, and you will answer!"

"I'll answer anything I can," Spock agreed willingly.

"Yes." Porteen nodded thoughtfully and his eyes took on a hard glitter. "I know you will answer. First of all, however, let me remove you from these somewhat unpleasant surroundings, eh?" He turned towards the still open cell door. "Guard!"

A roughly dressed individual appeared at the shout, glanced at Porteen and hastened across the floor to Spock's side, bending down to unfasten the fetter.

"Come along." Porteen started towards the door, not looking back to see if Spock was following. "We'll get you something to eat and some good wine. You'll feel better shortly."

Beyond the steps and the door was a wide stone passageway lined

with many doors such as that which led into Spock's dungeon. The roof was supported by low arches that made Spock stoop although Porteen passed beneath them with ease. The passages were cold and damp and had an indescribable odour that whispered of cold sweat and animal suffering.

A little way along, there was a short flight of steps and then a small stone room. A windowless cell, even starker than the dungeon he had left, despite the fact that there was a stool and a low table set with food, meat and coarse bread, and a tankard threequarters full of rich red liquid.

"Sit down and eat." Porteen gestured to the stool. "And while you eat, we will talk."

Spock sat down awkwardly and Porteen noticed his discomfort with a professional eye. He closed the door and leaned his back against it, and hooked the thumb of his left hand in the belt of his tunic.

Spock looked at the plate of food and found his appetite suddenly gone. The small bright eyes in Porteen's dark face unsettled him, and his over-full bladder made him supremely uncomfortable.

"Who are you?" Porteen asked mildly, his soft voice almost a sigh. "They told me you couldn't remember your name, but I find that hard to believe."

Spock's eyes were on the untouched food and he didn't raise them to look at Porteen. "I can't remember my name. I can't remember anything. I hurt my head."

"Really?" Porteen was genuinely concerned. He stepped forward and looked closely at the wound. "Ah, yes, I see. But well crusted." Spock put a hand to his temple and found that the gash was indeed dry. "And you can't remember how you obtained that cut?" Porteen asked.

"No. I remember... something burning."

"Yes." Porteen fingered the scorched cloth of his shirt, and then his hand slipped inside a tear and touched Spock's arm. Spock found his touch singularly unpleasant - it was almost a caress, and he cringed. Porteen took his hand away at once. "You're not eating," he said.

Spock pushed the plate away. "I'm not hungry," he said; and then he told Porteen of his more immediate need.

Porteen nodded affably and gestured to a wooden pail in the corner. "By all means avail yourself. I'll be back shortly." He opened the door just wide enough to slip out, and Spock heard it lock.

True to his word, Porteen returned quickly, and he was not alone. With him he brought two burly men who towered over him and had a look of meanness. Spock looked them over sharply, and then turned his attention to Porteen, sensing that these were only henchmen.

Porteen's expression was one of intentness and interest and... something else. Could it be anticipation? He sat down on the edge of the table and regarded Spock keenly.

"You are more comfortable now?" he enquired. "Good. And you're sure that you don't want to eat? Not even a little wine?"

Spock shook his head, keeping a careful watch on the two burly men who stood, one either side of the door.

"Perhaps that's just as well," Porteen said softly. "You have been named a warlock and a heretic, and there is just cause for suspicion. The devil has placed his sign clearly upon your face and deformed your ears to mark you as one of his own. What private marks has he made upon your body? What secret signs of your pact?"

Spock stared at him. Both eyebrows rose in an automatic expression of surprise. "I... don't understand you," he said.

"Whatever they are, we have to find them," Porteen went on as if he hadn't spoken. "You have a choice. Either you undress yourself, or - " He gestured towards the two burly men - "they can assist you." He said it merely as a suggestion, but there was an inherent threat in his tone. His eyes were half closed, almost kindly.

Spock looked towards the men at the door. There were pleased, half-eager expressions on their faces also. He felt a knot form in his stomach and twist up tight. He knew positively that this experience was not going to be pleasant.

It wasn't, and neither was Porteen's thorough and revolting, gentle physical examination that followed. Particular attention was paid to the various scars on his back and the ones upon either side of his navel, and his burns were inspected and remarked upon. Stretched backwards over the table with his chin wrenched up by one of the guards, he felt Porteen's soft caress on his thigh and kicked out. His reward was a sharp slap across the groin that made him gasp and squirm. Porteen smiled a genuine smile and hit him again. Then he was tipped over onto the floor and before he could recover himself Porteen's pointed, polished shoe came jabbing in viciously.

Pure agony exploded upwards through his body and seared into his brain, deafening him and blinding him as he doubled up, clutching himself.

Porteen sat down on the table and watched, relishing each rasp of breath and allowing his eyes to linger on each anguished curve and knotted muscle of Spock's body. At his gesture the two guards backed away, leaving him until the pain began to abate.

"Bring him here," Porteen said softly.

Spock was lifted by the arms and dragged on his knees, still shuddering, to the table. Porteen put a hand on his head and stroked his hair gently. "There, there, my pretty," he crooned. "You must learn, my pretty one. You must be taught to obey, and to submit." His hand rubbed on Spock's neck and the pressure on the sensitive neck glands made the Vulcan grow cold. He brutally repressed the instinctive desire to recoil from the touch of another male, but somehow Porteen sensed the increased tension without knowing its cause. He increased the pressure on Spock's neck, pushing it past the point of sexual sensation and into the realms of pain. The pain was something Spock would rather have. Porteen felt him relax and withdrew his hand, disgruntled, realising that somehow he had lost out. He slipped off the table and walked round it.

"I am told that your blood runs the colour of spring grass," he

said, abruptly businesslike. "I must determine if this is true. Your arm!"

Spock looked at him out of narrowed, bitter eyes, saying nothing, doing nothing. One of the guards seized his wrist and wrenched his arm up onto the table. Spock fought him, but he was weakened and the two guards strong. The one held his arm firm on the table while the other twisted his right hand up between his shoulder blades, one foot planted solidly on his back.

"Don't struggle so," Porteen advised, once more gentle. "'Twould be a pity to damage you so soon. Another inch and your arm will be broken." He raised an eye to the guard, who leaned over Spock, pressing harder.

Spock gasped, feeling his bones crack, and stopped fighting. Very slightly, the pressure eased.

"Good." Porteen seemed pleased. "You learn quickly. Now we will see the colour of your blood." From the belt of his tunic he produced a small blade and tested the edge on his thumb.

At close quarters Spock saw the keen edge slit the skin of his forearm. Porteen inspected the green beads of blood with startled interest.

"'Tis true," he said in wonder. "'Tis true."

Spock carefully ungritted his teeth. "I don't understand," he said dully.

Porteen straightened. "The Lord decreed that a man's blood should be so," he said, turning the knife round in his hand. He nicked the skin of his own wrist. To Spock's amazement the drop that fell onto the table was the brightest red. "I am a man," Porteen said. "All men are as I am. What, then, are you?"

Left alone, Spock climbed back into his trousers, the only garment left him. He was cold, unhappy and degraded, and sore in an increasing variety of places. He sat on the floor in a corner and huddled his knees close to him, his back to the wall and his eyes dark and haunted. His skin crawled with the memory of Porteen's caressing touch and he felt deeply unclean because of it. The power and authority and deeply running influence Porteen wielded was obvious and search his mind as he would, Spock could find no way of insulating himself from his apparent and intended cruelties. He was alone and defenceless, without even a name to call his own.

He lowered his head into his hands and searched his mind yet again for some trace of where he might have been, *what* he might have been, before that hilltop dawn. He remembered fire, the sight and sound and smell of fire and the agony of fire burning his flesh, but beyond that there was only an impenetrable grey wall. It was as if he had been reborn with the sun that morning, fully adult, but with a mind washed clean of everything he had ever known.

He touched the dried blood that crusted the wound on his forehead. It was the only tangible evidence of the barrier that prevented him from knowing himself and it was also proof that he had not been created complete out of the fire, that something had happened to him before. The wound was clean and healing, and soon

that only link with his past would be nothing but a fading scar.

Whatever, whoever he was, it was plain that he did not belong here among these people. He was not one of them. He not only differed from them in every respect of appearance, but the cellular construction of his body, the very colour of the blood that ran in his veins, was different from theirs.

He stopped a moment, and considered that phrase, 'cellular construction'. It had a ring to it that seemed to echo. He centred his attention on the words, trying to force some memory to awaken, but beneath the onslaught of his intellect the insight fled and the grey mist swirled down once more.

The key turned loudly in the lock and Spock raised his eyes to find Porteen standing in the doorway. Porteen looked at him with sad reproach.

"You look so dejected, my pretty one," he said softly. "Let me comfort you." He held out his arm, quite prepared to put it reassuringly round Spock's shoulders.

Spock cringed back into his corner and shuddered. The thought of Porteen's soft hands touching him again was repulsive. Porteen stepped into the room and closed the door carefully. On padded footsteps he crossed the floor and crouched down at Spock's side. The gentle fingers caressed his bare shoulder almost lovingly and then ran lightly down his arm, feeling out the smooth hard muscle. Porteen sighed a deep sigh and for a moment his eyes became glassy. Then, with an effort of will, he stood up.

"Come along," he said with obvious reluctance. "There are things we must do, my friend. Things I must show you. Questions to be asked and answered." He turned to the doorway and then looked back at Spock expectantly. Spock got up and followed him warily.

Outside in the passageway, the two burly guards were waiting. They looked at Porteen and Spock saw a private smirking glance pass between them. They knew their master and his inclinations well. Spock walked beside Porteen and the two guards fell into step behind.

The further they went the darker and damper became the passages. Beneath his bare feet, the floor felt slightly slippery, an unpleasant sensation. The sharp sound of Porteen's shoes and the heavier boots of the guards were sounds that died flatly, absorbed by the massiveness of the stonework. They proceeded in silence, but Spock was constantly aware of the frequent sideways glances bestowed on him by the dwarfish black-clad figure at his side.

Porteen turned a sharp corner and Spock found himself at the top of a precariously steep flight of stone steps. The staircase was broad and led straight down into the large hall, both ends of which were out of sight behind the walls of the stairwell. The chamber was wide and very high and lit by shafts of pale daylight from slitted windows high up in the walls. The hall was unfurnished, a bare stone chamber. On the far side was a suggestion of dark cloisters wrapped in shade. Porteen looked at Spock, who had stopped, and gestured towards the staircase.

Spock put his foot on the first step and then recoiled as a scream rang through the hall and up the stairs. The voice was a man's, raised high in an extremity of fear and transcending agony.

The two guards were behind Spock in an instant, close together, preventing him from retreating more than the first step. Porteen put a restraining hand on his arm, his fingers unconsciously stroking the skin. Spock tried to jerk his arm away but Porteen's hand established a surprisingly firm grip. He frowned down the hall with an expression of displeasure.

"There, there, my pretty one," he crooned. "'Tis nothing. 'Tis nothing. Don't let it frighten you." Despite his reassurance, his frown persisted. "Come along, come along," he urged. Muttering and still gripping Spock's forearm, he led him down the steps into the hall.

At one end of the chamber there was a low platform, and on it a form of altar, adorned with a gold circle and a central sunburst. It stood on a stand on an intricately embroidered altar cloth and around it were chalices and salvers and tall lighted candles in jewelled holders. It was the only ornateness the hall contained, and apart from some simple wooden benches its only furnishing. Spock looked at it a long time, a slight frown between his eyes, and then he became aware that Porteen was watching him intently. Spock turned and met the small bright eyes.

Porteen gestured towards the altar. "Go, by all means," he said genially. "Sing your chant. We will wait for you. In fact, I should be most interested to hear it."

Spock blinked at him and his frown deepened. He had no idea what was expected of him. Porteen waited for a moment and then shrugged, extending his one hand upwards in a gesture of acceptance. "As you wish," he said. "We have spent long enough. The day draws on. Come!" He turned and led the way to one of the cloistered arches on the far side of the hall. There was a short passageway, another flight of steps and a second, even larger chamber.

Spock took just one look at what lay beyond the arched entrance and balked, the whole of his natural instinct summoning fresh strength into his weakened muscles and driving him backwards despite the pressure of his guards.

The chamber was lit by a fiendish red glow and in its scarlet black shadows lurked monstrous forms. Low angular frames of metal and wood, chains and ropes and pulleys, iron tools that would be more in place in a forge or foundry, pincers and tongs, wrenches and clamps. There was a thick, sweet smell of sweat and blood, and the rancid odour of hot oil. The chamber was lit by the coals of a large fire burning in a central well and round this well were gathered three men who straightened and looked at Spock with intent interest.

Porteen added his physical influence to that of the guards and Spock's retreat was halted by sheer strength of force.

Spock put his head down and shook it stubbornly. "I'm not going in there," he said with determination.

"Don't be so decisive," Porteen said lightly. "There's no pain involved merely with looking. I'm sure you'll find it quite fascinating."

Something twinged in the back of Spock's mind, almost a physical pain. For a moment it stunned him, and Porteen took the hesitation for further resistance. Holding firmly to Spock's arm he gestured to one of the men at the fire. "Fifer, he is reluctant to inspect our

little workshop. I feel that it is persuasion that he needs."

A man left the fire and came towards them, a massive figure clad only in boots and coarse trousers. The upper half of his body was bare except for a thick matting of chest hair. His head and face were naked, hair and eyebrows shaved, eyelashes plucked. His skin gleamed with oil and sweat and the red light of the fire played on his muscles as he walked.

Spock, in the arms of his guards, was incapable of avoiding him. The giant glanced at Porteen, who stepped aside, and seized Spock by the arms, his hands closing like vices. Spock struggled futilely. The giant pulled a grim face, and twisted, Spock still held fast in his grip. He let go and Spock flew through the air and landed hard against the fire well. He gasped and arched his back, twisting in the flood of fiery pain that exploded from the already sore gland above his hips.

Porteen shook his head and walked over, looking down at him sadly. "Do not be so foolish, my pretty one," he said softly. "Come along, now. On your feet."

Spock looked up at him and over his shoulder saw the naked scowling countenance of the giant, the great muscles of his folded arms bulging. Spock made an effort and on the third attempt succeeded in getting his legs under him. He straightened unsteadily and stood swaying, his back to the fire, aware that around him the two guards and the men who had been at the fireside had deployed themselves, leaving him no avenue of retreat.

Porteen's face lost its joviality. "I see you are in no frame of mind to appreciate the abstract intricacies of our art," he said. "Now, I think, is the time for you to answer some questions."

"How long have you served the devil's purposes?" he barked. "How long have you been a warlock?"

Spock looked at him evenly. "I know nothing of warlocks, or of the devil. In fact," he said with sudden deep conviction, "I don't believe such things exist!"

Porteen's face became even darker, and new hard lines appeared. "That is blatant heresy against the Mother Church," he snarled. "A man may be burned alive for even dreaming such words as you have spoken aloud. Burned alive! Now, answer - what is your union with the devil? Where did you meet him?"

Spock shook his head. "To my certain knowledge, no such meeting has ever occurred."

Porteen drew a long breath that filled his lungs until his tunic strained across his chest. Then he released it in a loud sigh and gestured to Fifer.

"It seems our friend needs a practical demonstration of our powers of persuasion. Prepare him!"

He stepped aside in a swift turning movement and as he did so his black cape swung. For a fleeting moment Spock saw his right arm. What had once been his right arm. Now it was no more than the twisted, blackened skeleton of a limb, carbonised skin and flesh glued in a shiny hard layer to the shrivelled bones. Spock stared for a long second stunned with horror, and that second was long

enough for one of the guards to step behind him and take his arm. Still shaken and momentarily off balance, Spock turned to face the new attack, and was seized at once in the powerful naked arms of Fiper.

Porteen, his cloak once more in place over the disfigured limb, nodded with satisfaction. "We will loosen your tongue, my pretty one," he said with slow, savage delight. "And the harder you resist the more pleasurable the task will be. Over here with him, Fiper, and let's to work!"

Fiper put his knee in Spock's back and pushed. Spock staggered, almost fell and received a hefty cuff along the side of the head. Stars exploded before his eyes and he dropped onto his knees. Fiper's vice-like hands gripped his arms from behind and virtually dragged him forward.

When his brain finally cleared Spock found himself naked, flat on his back and firmly secured to one of the frames, his wrists and ankles bound so tightly to the four corners that the leather thongs bit painfully deep and he was totally unable to move. Fiper was busily engaged in fastening ropes around his upper arms and thighs and was pushing a stout wooden peg into each turn of rope. Porteen stood beside him, his fingertips resting lightly on his shoulder, watching with an almost sad smile.

Spock gathered himself and heaved. The strapping at his wrists and ankles dug deeper and made him gasp. His limbs were stretched slightly and he was unable to get leverage.

Porteen's hand closed on his shoulder but remained gentle. "Lie quietly now," he murmured, his eyes fixed on the work of Fiper's thick fingers.

The last knot was tied and Fiper moved away out of Spock's sight. Spock lifted his head, trying to follow him. Porteen took his chin in his hand and pulled his head round.

"You'll pay me your attention," he said softly. "Now, I ask you again, what is your union with the devil?"

"I don't know any devil," Spock told him.

Porteen touched the points of his ears and allowed his fingers to slide down the column of Spock's neck. The sexual glands reacted to the caress instinctively and Spock shuddered with inner disgust. Silently, Porteen noted the reaction. "This disfiguration is of the devil's doing?" he said. "None other could have made such marks upon you. How were they achieved?"

"I don't know," Spock said again.

The back of Porteen's one hand struck him savagely across the face. "You will learn to answer with positive statements," he said. "What allegiance did you swear to the devil?"

Spock looked at him, saw the hopelessness of answering, and turned his head away. Porteen raised his eyes to Fiper and very slightly he nodded.

Fiper rubbed the palms of his hands down his trouser legs and reached for the peg in the rope around Spock's left arm. He twisted it and the rope tightened. Spock looked at him in alarm and

wriggled. It was useless against the straps. Fiper twisted the peg again and the rope began to bite into the bicep muscle. Spock tried to brace himself against the pressure but again the slight stretching of his joints thwarted him. Fiper gave the peg a final sharp half twist and wound a length of thin twine round it to stop it untwisting.

Porteen sat down on the edge of the frame. "You are going to answer the questions," he said. "All of them, and the longer this goes on the more discomfort you'll cause yourself."

Spock looked at him bitterly. "I don't know the answers to your questions. Nothing you can do will make me know them."

Porteen sighed and looked at Fiper again.

Fiper moved down towards Spock's legs and very gradually began to twist tight the rope round his thigh. Spock lifted his head to see what he was doing and Porteen's hand fastened about his throat with its amazingly strong grip and cut off his breath. "I told you to pay your attention to me," he whispered. Spock choked, the pain in his arm and leg momentarily forgotten in his desperation to breathe. "Why did you become a warlock?" Porteen asked, still holding tightly to his throat. Spock strangled and after a long moment Porteen let go. "Just tell me why, and we can spare you all this unpleasantness."

Spock gasped and panted for breath and slowly the darkness cleared from his vision. He made no answer to the question. Porteen gestured somewhat impatiently to Fiper, who tied the peg of the second leg rope into position and moved, silent and catlike for all his bulk, behind Porteen to Spock's right arm. As the last of the four ropes tightened Spock began to sweat. The pores of his hands and face and chest opened and began to run. Porteen watched Fiper work for a few seconds with a practised eye and then motioned that it was enough. He looked at Spock and noticed the beads of sweat and the slightly glazed look of pain in his eyes.

"Uncomfortable, yes?" he asked conversationally. "But not too painful. I assure you, if Fiper goes round you again it will really hurt. Now, for your own sake, at least name for me some of your associates. Who assists you in your magic? Where do you meet them?"

Spock rolled his head towards him. "I don't know what you're talking about!" he snarled between clenched teeth.

Porteen smiled a sweet smile. "A pity," he said, and without looking at him he gestured to Fiper.

Spock's arms and legs were numb, feelingless with the blood and nerves cut off by the tightness of the tourniquets. He thought, honestly, that there was little more they could do to him in that way. He was very wrong. Fiper unwound the twine that held the peg in place and took a firm grip of it, twisting very slowly. Fire erupted through Spock's body as the rope bit deeper into already bruised muscles. Spock bit back a sharp cry of pain and at the same time bit his tongue.

Porteen smoothed and stroked his fringe and watched him spit out blood. "You would not suffer so if you did not resist me," he said almost dreamily. "Name those who fly with you through the night and the pain will stop."

Spock managed to shake his head, but that was all he could do.

Fiper started to move once more towards his legs. Porteen waved him back impatiently. "No, no. Concentrate on his arms, his reaction is much stronger." He grinned suddenly. "We don't want him to go to sleep!"

Fiper nodded, his naked sweating face grim, and resumed his former position, straining the ropes tighter on first one arm then the other.

Porteen put his hand on Spock's arm, pressing firmly to feel the trembling, knotted muscles. "You do believe in the devil, don't you?" he enquired gently.

Spock ground his teeth and made no attempt to answer. Porteen nodded to Fiper who grunted with effort and leaned on the peg. Spock's skin burst and the congested blood erupted in a green spurt. Spock screamed and sank into an abyss of unconsciousness.

Porteen stood up and stretched his back and his arm. "Bring some water," he ordered one of the watching attendants. He looked across at Fiper, flexing and stretching his muscles, a workman waiting to resume his task, and then he looked down at the still figure on the rack, relaxed now but with a frown of pain still on his face, his limbs stretched and discoloured and smeared with his own strange blood. Porteen felt a pang that was almost pity, but pity well mixed with other, stronger emotions.

The attendant returned with a bucket and Porteen stood back. The icy deluge splashed into Spock's face and brought him spluttering back to awareness.

There was no mercy in the return to consciousness. The pain was still there, as intense as before. His hands and arms were numb and there were bands of living fire round his upper arms and wrists where his struggles had torn the skin. He coughed the water out of his lungs and blinked it out of his eyes.

High above, and seemingly afloat in green blackness the dark bright-eyed face of Porteen regarded him with interest. "I do not advise you to faint again," Porteen said. "Next time I shall revive you with the fire. You are stubborn and determined man, but I too am diligent!"

Spock felt a cold touch on his arm and twisted his neck to see. Fiper was rubbing something from a small jar into his distended flesh.

"A little oil," Porteen explained. "It will prevent your muscles from being torn. However - " his eyes narrowed thoughtfully - "it will do nothing to ease your pain." He looked across at Fiper and nodded, and then sat down at Spock's side. "I shall be at your head," he said. "When you have something to say you have merely to indicate and we will be prepared to listen. A word or a nod of the head will do."

Fiper's square hands tightened on the peg and he began to twist. Spock locked his jaws and grunted as the oiled ropes grew tighter. Porteen continued to ask his ritual, meaningless questions and gradually his soft voice faded and was lost in the hissing roar of blood in his head. In all the universe there was nothing left for him but pain. His blood coursed his torment through the veins of his

body and consumed the impressions of his senses. He no longer heard Porteen's voice or saw his dark face, and he no longer felt the rough boards of the rack beneath him. Fifer laboured and sweated over him and Spock felt nothing but the ever-increasing agony and saw nothing but the greenness; and after a long time, only the greenness remained.

Spock lay on his back, spreadeagled on the floor of the dungeon, a rough blanket thrown half over him. He was unfettered; there was no longer any need of chains. His arms and legs were merely dead appendages to a body that scarcely breathed.

After a long while his eyelids flickered and his mind climbed cautiously over the lip of the deep green pit. He was in pain still, but not the searing, all-consuming agony of the torture. Lazy waves of pain throbbed through him in a numbing tide that prevented him from thinking. His tongue had swollen until it filled his mouth and there was something wrong with his vision. All he could see was greyness. Desperately, he screwed up his eyes and gradually the shades of grey focussed into the stained stone wall of the dungeon, lit by the light of the single window.

He tried to move, and groaned with the pain. The sensation began to return to his limbs and with it, agony. He turned his head to look. His upper arms were swollen and discoloured, almost black, and there were long, deep, skinless grooves where the ropes had been tied and tightened. Both arms were torn and one bore a deep black gash where his own blood had ruptured his flesh. He scowled at the clotted blood and hated its colour for the pain it had caused him.

On the far side of the chamber, something moved. Spock forgot about hating himself for his differences; and for a moment he also forgot about the pain. He half sat up, the blanket falling away from him, and looked.

There was another prisoner in the dungeon, a woman, clad in a thin cotton smock and chained to the wall by an ankle. She whimpered and drew back into her corner, her hair falling across her face like a long dark curtain.

"Stay back!" she cried in a voice rising to hysteria. "In the name of God, stay back!"

Spock looked at her, startled, and shook his head. "I won't hurt you," he said and indicated his arms. "I can't hurt you."

She regarded him and his wounds a long silent moment and then she came out of the shadows into the fading light. Once she might have been pretty, even beautiful, but now her face was grey and creased with the lines of premature age. Her dark eyes gazed at him from sunken sockets; they were empty, hopeless eyes.

"They tell me thou art a demon," she said. "Surely thou dost look like one."

Spock's hopelessness mirrored her own. "I don't know," he said wearily. "Maybe I am. I... just don't know."

"Call your master!" She came as close to him as the chain would allow. "Quickly! Before Porteen returns with his torment! Take me with you to freedom! We will fly together. I will be your

succubus! I will suckle your familiar!"

Spock looked at her narrowly. "Are you a... witch?" he asked.

The woman lowered her head and shook it so that her hair swung like a dark bell. "No," she said bitterly. "I would that I were. When they put me to the torture I say that I am. I would say anything! They make me denounce myself, my friends, my own family!" She shook her head again and sobbed a dry sob.

Spock felt a sudden anger towards her. "You condemn others to this pain?"

"How can I do otherwise?" she asked. "Look what they do to me!" She held out her hands for him to see and his resentment was replaced by horror. All her fingernails were missing, torn from their beds, and the joints of each finger had been crushed to leave a swollen, bloody pulp. "They put the vices on my hands," she said slowly. "And while I suffer on the stool they burn my back with hot irons. To the same fate I have condemned my own mother!" She sank onto her knees and sobbed brokenly into her ruined hands.

Spock tried to get up to go to her, but his legs collapsed under him, and a second attempt was forestalled by the sound of a key in the lock of the dungeon door.

The door swung inward and Porteen came down the steps. Two guards followed him holding burning torches and beyond them lurked the giant figure of Fiper. Porteen looked first at Spock and then at the woman, a frown on his face. He seemed put out. The woman withdrew from him in terror.

"You have more resilience than I allowed for," Porteen said to Spock. "I had not expected you to regain consciousness so soon. I had intended to be here when... No matter, no matter." He shook his head and gestured to the guard. "Take the woman," he said. "Continue the questions as before."

The two guards deposited their torches in wall fixtures and moved towards her. She backed away, attempting to hide her mutilated hands behind her. Her tragic eyes widened with fear.

No," she whimpered. "Please, no!"

One of the guards seized her by the arms while the other unfastened the fetter. As they dragged her through the door she began to scream. "They'll make you admit it!" she cried. "You'll tell them anything! Anything!!!" The screaming went on until her voice could no longer be heard.

Porteen looked after her thoughtfully and then turned to Spock. "A condemned witch," he said. "I trust her example has served to make you more co-operative. You will co-operate, won't you?"

Spock took his eyes off the empty doorway, the woman's screams still ringing in his ears. "I don't know anything about witches or devils," he said again. "I don't believe in them. They're figments of your fevered imagination."

"That is heresy, and must be purged!" Porteen said firmly. "Fiper, come in and close the door."

The giant stepped into the torchlight, his naked head gleaming

with oil and his eyes fixed on Spock's face. He carried a thick coil of rope and the loops of a heavy whip. Spock felt his stomach muscles draw tight and looked at Porteen.

"The punishment for unpurged heresy is slow burning," Porteen told him. "The unrepentant soul will burn forever in purgatory. I must save your soul if I can." He gestured to Fiper, who stepped quickly forward and seized both Spock's hands in one of his, twisting the end of the rope around his wrists. The other end was thrown up and over a high beam and wrenched tight before being secured to a ring in the wall. Only Spock's toes remained on the floor; the whole of his weight hung from his already cut wrists. The wounds in his arms broke open and fresh blood ran down over his shoulders and into his armpits.

"I may not be able to save you from burning," Porteen said. "But I may be able to save you from burning for all eternity. Fiper, are you ready?"

Fiper allowed the whip to uncoil into two wide loops on the floor. It was a thick whip that tapered to a pliable tip. Fiper shook it out and flexed it experimentally. Porteen nodded and smiled, evidently pleased. He ran his hand over Spock's shoulder and down his side.

"Your muscles are very smooth," he said softly. "Almost faultless. It will be a shame to scar them, but it cannot be helped." He walked round and watched Spock's face, carefully keeping away from the whip. "Very well, Fiper. Proceed."

Fiper swung the whip back and then flicked it forward, down and across Spock's shoulders. Spock threw his head back and cried out sharply as the healing blisters on his back were torn away. Porteen looked at him reproachfully and Spock felt suddenly ashamed of his display of pain. The whip descended again, and Spock clenched his jaws and lips tight against a scream and felt the sweat break out over his body. The whip wrapped around him and the tip seared across his belly as it was jerked sharply back. Porteen eyed the fresh trickle of blood and then returned his attention to Spock's face, cataloguing and assessing each grimace of pain.

The whip whistled in the air and burned across Spock's back, his shoulders, his waist, his buttocks. Spock leaned his head against his arm and closed his eyes tightly, feeling the tears squeeze between his eyelids to mingle with the sweat; and locking his stomach muscles tight to contain the sobs.

Porteen held up a hand and Fiper let his hand rest at his side. Porteen looked closely into Spock's face. "You are learning what pain is," he said. "Renounce your evil master and throw yourself on the mercy of the Holy Mother Church, and the lesson need not continue."

Spock's breath caught in his throat. "I have no master!"

Porteen shrugged and stepped back and the whip continued to fall, shaving strips of skin and flesh from his shoulders and curling round his body to cut into his chest and belly. There was only one thing Spock wanted and that was to be free of torment; as the woman had promised, he would do anything, say anything to escape further pain. He groaned and slumped, his weight sagging onto his wrists.

"Enough." Porteen stepped forward and lifted his head,

searching his face anxiously for a sign of life. Spock sighed and opened his eyes and Porteen's face registered relief. "You do fear the eternal punishment of an angry God, don't you?" he inquired gently.

Spock managed a feeble nod. "Yes," he gasped. "Yes, I do."

Porteen raised an eye to Fiper, who undid the knot that held the rope. Spock slumped onto the floor, his shoulders heaving, and Porteen knelt down beside him. "You fear God and renounce the evil of the devil?"

"Yes, anything!"

Porteen shook his head sadly. "That won't do. You must be explicit. Say, 'I renounce the evils of my master the devil.'"

Spock fought to steady his breathing, and coughed. "I renounce the evils... of... my master..."

"Enough, that's enough," Porteen said. "Now say, 'I fear the Lord God, the Holy Mother Church and all her good works.'"

Stumbling, Spock repeated Porteen's words and then to his shame he began to weep. Porteen smiled a sad smile and put his arm around the bleeding shoulders. "There, my pretty one," he said. "'Tis over now. 'Tis over, and 'tis a good day's work. There'll be no more pain." He reached for the blanket and drew it close about Spock's shoulders. From beneath his cloak he drew a small gold circle emblem. "Kiss it," he ordered. "Purge yourself of your sins."

Obediently, Spock lowered his lips onto the circle and then Porteen pressed it into his hand. "Keep it so that you may pray," he said. "Now, drink." He held a vessel of cool water to Spock's lips and stroked his hair and neck while he drank. Then he sat beside him and waited until the drug contained in the water took effect and Spock fell into sleep.

It was no surprise to Spock to find that Porteen's promise that his torture was over had been a lie, or at least a temporary truth. Indeed, the thought only occurred to him as he was bound once more to the rack and the ropes of the tourniquet tied in the same wounds as before. The realisation of betrayal brought with it no sense of bitterness, only a grey, empty despair.

Porteen arrived late in the torture chamber and yesterday's mood of joviality was absent. He snarled at the guards and attendants and growled a greeting at Fiper. He greeted Spock with an angry cuff across the mouth and an order to Fiper to "Get on with it."

The ropes bit easily into flesh already bruised and flooded with blood. Spock writhed, grinding the still bleeding cuts on his back into the rough boards, now taking a masochistic pleasure in increasing his own pain. Fiper twisted the ropes tight and they left him there alone with his agony.

Some time later he heard screams from across the chamber, first a woman's, then a man's. He heard a hissing and smelt the stench of burned flesh. There was the low murmur of Porteen's voice and then for a long time there was silence.

In the red fire glow and the quietness, without even Porteen's dark features for company, the pain seemed far worse than ever before. Part of his mind watched with revulsion as his baser instincts struggled to increase the pain. The agony was unbearable and unrelievable, the only way to alter it was to intensify it. He trembled and sweated and shivered; there was a fever building inside him, caused by weakness and hunger and the uncleanness of his body.

When Porteen returned he had tortured himself into near delirium.

At once, Fiper unfastened the ropes and tourniquets and they put rough trousers on him and sat him beside the fire. From this vantage point, Spock could see all the gruesome business of their work. He watched for a while, but his senses were already numbed into non-comprehension and he ended up staring dully into the fire and feeling the burning of acids in his back as the internal metabolism of his body turned against him.

It was mid-afternoon when they came for him and he had no strength or inclination to resist as they led him back to the rack. He lay quite limply on his back, and Porteen deemed it unnecessary to bind him, ordering Fiper merely to hold his hands above his head. Porteen bathed his face with a cold, wet cloth until his eyes cleared and he recognised him.

Porteen, his temper improved, smiled at him.

"A few more questions that must be answered," he said lightly. "I must know the nature of your witchcraft. Without doubt you are possessed of demons. To drive them from you, we'll need to know their names?" He let the sentence end in a question.

Spock frowned at him. "Names?" He shook his head. "I don't know their names. Please, don't -"

"We'll find them out," Porteen assured him. "I already suspect the identity of one. Submission is difficult for you, and your neck grows hard to the touch. These are the signs of Verrier, prince of principalities. Is he the one that torments your soul?"

Spock nodded, aware of Fiper's grip on his wrists. "Yes."

"Hm." Porteen considered him. "On the other hand, these scars interest me." He ran a hand over Spock's abdomen. "They are very ancient scars. How did you get them?"

"I don't know. I've always had them."

"Behemoth delights in all sensations of the belly," Porteen said. "It is possible that these are devil's marks. Fiper, hold his head back."

Fiper gripped both Spock's wrists in one mighty hand and with the other wrenched his head back so that he could see only his sweating face. From the belt of his tunic, Porteen produced two sharp pins some three inches in length and with large heads in the form of circles. He touched the two distinct scars on Spock's belly and pinched them between his nails.

As he had expected, Spock failed to react.

He sat down on the edge of the rack and carefully applied the

point of a pin to one of the scars, pressing until it broke the skin and sank in a quarter of an inch. Porteen held it there and watched Spock closely. The heaving of his chest continued and there was no gasp of pain, no flinching. Porteen nodded knowingly and pressed the pin deeper. An inch; two inches. Spock shifted uneasily. Fiper's hand tightened under his chin and his eyes met Porteen's questioningly. Porteen nodded and indicated the pin, inserted almost to its hilt in the scar. Fiper returned the nod. Firmly, Porteen pressed the pin home. Spock arched his back and cried out, a wrenching sob as he felt the sharp point deep in his body. Fiper's hands gripped him like a vice, holding him in position, preventing him from seeing what Porteen was doing. Porteen put his hand on Spock's belly and felt the shuddering muscles. Then his hand wandered down into the warmth of Spock's groin and lingered, feeling and fondling and gripping hard. Spock, concerned only with the deep gnawing pain in his vitals, knew nothing of the violation.

Porteen pressed the second pin to the other scar until its point was an inch beneath the skin. Spock writhed with the pain of the first pin but gave no sign of feeling the second. The scars were deep and nerveless. Porteen pushed the pin deeper. Spock gasped as he began to feel the point. The pins moved with the rise and fall of his chest and the slow agonised twist of his body.

Spock's eyes glazed and his eyelids flickered. Fiper, watching him, grunted a warning. Porteen scowled at the interruption of his pleasure and with a slap drove the pin in as far as it would go. The sharp agony dispelled Spock's threatened unconsciousness. He screamed and twisted with such violence that he tore himself from Fiper's grasp. Spock doubled up, but the pain was still there, inside him, the deep points pricking and spurring him; there was no escape from them. He wriggled and fell off the edge of the rack frame and cried out as he hit the floor.

Fiper and Porteen were moving towards him, one from either side. Spock felt a sudden savage welling of primeval, pain-driven fury. One hand clasped to the agony in his belly he used the other to push himself onto his feet. Vulcan strength flowed from a final inner reservoir. He side-stepped Porteen and lunged at Fiper, going in with his head down and his shoulder leading. Fiper grunted and took a swing at Spock's head.

"Hit him in the gut," Porteen advised loudly. "The pins are still there."

Fiper clenched a great fist and drove it at Spock's belly. Spock turned sideways and yelped as the knuckles grazed him and jarred the pins. Driven by desperation, Spock brought his knee up in Fiper's groin and felt soft parts crush. Fiper shrieked and doubled up. Spock brought his head up under the giant's chin and heard a bone crack. Fiper staggered back and Spock went with him, pushing. Fiper toppled and fell backwards with a shower of sparks into the fire well.

Hot coals and an assortment of prepared heated irons scattered across the floor. Aware that Porteen was somewhere behind him Spock snatched up a large branding iron and turned, instinctively thrusting it forwards. Porteen was directly behind him, a heavy vice in his hand, preparing to crush Spock's skull. The flattened, glowing head of the branding iron struck him full in the face.

Porteen screamed a long, echoing scream. The vice dropped to the floor and he clawed at his cheeks. Spock pushed the branding

iron into his face until his eyes fried and then dropped it and turned and ran, fleeing for freedom - or death; he neither knew nor cared which. His last sight of Porteen was of a staggering black clad figure, its face pouring scarlet blood and its one arm groping blindly.

How Spock escaped from the citadel he was afterwards unable to relate. His memory was a confused jumble of long stone corridors; twisting stairways; hiding in dark corners while the feet of shouting, searching men pounded by; a haphazard melee of skirmishes with red clad guards and white robed priests. The one thing he did remember, quite clearly, was smashing a stone circle to the floor and feeling a savage flood of delight as it shattered into a thousand pieces. How he escaped he could not say; maybe it was witchcraft - or a miracle - but escape he did.

Someone was washing his face. It was a cool, sweet sensation and he lay a long time with his eyes closed, relishing it. Then the sensation ended and the someone moved away.

Spock opened his eyes.

He lay on his side on a bed of moss and soft animal skins in a shelter composed mainly of the same materials. There was a roughly-woven blanket over him and a bundle of clothes under his head. Somehow he felt more comfortable than he could ever remember. He tried to raise his head and felt the pull of open wounds. A hand settled on his shoulder and pushed him gently down.

A face came into his range of vision; a woman's face framed in a bell of soft dark-blond hair. Her eyes were brown and intense, and they gazed into his.

Spock frowned and blinked at her and tried to speak. His mouth was completely dry. Understanding, she held a drink to his lips and allowed him three swallows before taking it firmly away. It was only water, but to Spock it was the sweetest nectar. He wanted more, but she refused with a smile and a shake of her head.

"You'll make yoursel' sick," she said. "An' if you vomit ye'll rupture 'n bleed t' your death."

Vaguely Spock understood her reasoning and blinked slowly in deference.

"That's roit now," she said in her high singing voice. "Ye does as I tell ye, an' mayhap ye'll live till the mornin'." She belied the seriousness of her words with another smile, but Spock remembered what had been done to him. Concerned, he groped at his abdomen. "You leave yoursel' alone, man." She caught his wrist and pulled his hand firmly away. "If 'tis these ye're wantin', they're here." She held out the two circle-headed pins for him to see. "I pulled 'em out 'fore your senses could come back, or ye'd ne'r 'v stood the pain."

Spock swallowed. "The citadel... Porteen..."

"Aye, more devil than human he be, for all his high position," she said contemptuously. "I know where ye come from, man. The

Church guard ha' been searchin' the woods these four days gone. They been here an' gone away. They'll be back, but not for a while. You be safe enough."

Spock frowned. "I owe you a great deal," he said.

"Ye owe me nothin', t' be sure." She stood and brushed her hands down her simple straight skirt. "'Twas they that took me own baby sister from me, these three years gone by now. They named her a witch, 'n after their fiendish work were done they burned her alive. 'N her only seventeen."

"I'm sorry," Spock said.

"Ah, 'tis nothin' for ye t' sorrow for, man. 'Twas Porteen, may his black soul rot. They took one o' mine from me, 'n now I took one o' theirs."

"My blood... my ears... They call me a devil."

"I know o' yer blood. Lord knows I washed enough o' it away. 'N as for yer ears, well, ye're a strange one t' be sure, but ye be a mortal man in torment 'n no devil. Now ye take some rest, 'n let me about my work."

She turned with a swish of skirts and vanished through the door. Exhausted, Spock closed his eyes and slept.

When he woke it was dark outside. The shelter was lit by the feeble flame of a tallow lamp and filled with the smell of warm food. He lay with his eyes half open and relaxed, feeling the healing soreness of his injuries with a deep pleasure. The woman came to him with a bowl and sat down beside him and fed him with a spoon; a thick warm broth that tasted unpleasantly of meat, but filled his stomach comfortably. He learned now that her name was Tallad, married once for a short time but now a widow, and in return she asked his name.

He almost smiled and shook his head sadly. "I don't know. I can't remember anything about myself. I must have fallen and hit my head."

"Ah, yes." She inspected the healed wound. "Perhaps 'tis best. When a man's past leads him t' Porteen, 'tis often best forgotten."

He shook his head again, this time gravely. "I don't like... not knowing who I am." He looked at her suddenly. "How long have I been here?"

"Four nights," she said, setting the bowl aside. "Ye had the prison fever. Three days I despaired o' yer life. I had t' bind yer mouth lest ye cried out 'n brought the Church army down about our throats. Ye were lucky t' live; the pestilence ha' carried away many a strong man." Her eyes became wistful. "Aye, 'n 'tis a mercy for many. Now lie over so I can grease those stripes on yer back."

Obediently, Spock rolled onto his belly and she began to massage animal fat into his skin. He grunted with pain and then relaxed as the probing of her fingers eased his muscles, and gradually the soreness faded.

"What do you do, living alone here?" he asked.

"Do?" She laughed, a short, bitter laugh. "I cut peat from the bog 'n then I sell it t' the folk that live in the town. Properly dried it gives more heat than wood 'n burns for longer. As for livin' here in the forest, why 'tis the safest place for a widow woman whose sister was burned for a witch. There now." She wiped the excess fat off his back and covered him with a blanket. "Now ye'll sleep, 'n in the mornin' ye'll be feelin' a whole lot better."

She undressed unashamedly to her linen shift, put out the light and lay down on a pallet of moss beside him. Soon, they both slept.

It was that night that the first of the dreams came - the terrible dreams that left him drowning in a bath of cold sweat and shuddering with terror. He saw Porteen, his dark face close to him. There was a scar on his cheek, the sign of a circle burned deep, and the bright eyes were sightless yet somehow seeing. Spock was fastened immovably in a low hard chair, his arms bound tightly behind him. The massive hands of Fiper were forcing his leg into a high leather boot. Spock fought wildly with the strappings that held him to the chair. Porteen fastened a rope round his neck to hold him still, using the blackened claw-like remains of his right hand to tie the knots. Fiper turned from the fire, the light of the flames flickering over his sweating face and head and lending him the appearance of some demon emerging from the fires of hell. In his hands he carried a smoking pail.

Spock felt a soft touch on his shoulders; on one side the delicate, thin-fingered hand of Porteen, on the other the charred horror. Fiper looked to Porteen for the nod of approval and began to tip the contents of the bucket into the boot.

The first thing Spock comprehended was the sweet hot smell of boiling oil, and then, even before the pain, the odour of his own flesh cooking. Then came the agony, searing, wrenching, mind-tearing waves of agony. Fiper looked into his face and grinned a toothless black grin, and then he began to burn, his arms and legs and body, and last of all his face was consumed by fire until only the grin was left.

Porteen laughed a laugh that rose quickly to a shriek of hysteria, his hands, the good and the ruined alike, digging into Spock's shoulders and shaking him with the violence of the laughter. Spock screamed and screamed and screamed...

He awoke sitting bolt upright in bed, still screaming. The woman was beside him, with her hands locked on his shoulders shaking him. Suddenly freed from the horror, Spock tore her hands away, and then looked at them, puzzled. They were hard, work-worn hands, but a woman's. He let them go and buried his face in his own hands, sobbing.

Tallad sat on the bed and smoothed his hair, making no attempt to stop the flow of tears until he had cried himself dry. Then she pressed him back onto the bed.

"There now. 'Tis over," she said, almost to herself. "'Tis a fact that Porteen will fly back from the grave 'n haunt the souls he tormented in life. Don't fret. I'll sit here beside ye till the dark hour be past." She picked up his hand and held it firmly

between her own.

He looked up at her through strangely tear-clouded eyes and saw her against the night light that spilled in through the doorway, a straight, faceless grey figure. He tightened his hand in hers and closed his eyes.

As he lay there sleeping and holding the woman's hand he dreamed a strange dream. Not a ravaging nightmare of Porteen and Fiper and their fiendish doings, but a confusion of painless sights and sounds. He saw... a blackness, a blackness that went on for ever without any end, and he felt a strange longing. He saw a round, bright chamber filled with a cacophony of sound and a myriad pulsing, flashing lights. And there were people that he knew he should know. Faces - two male faces in particular; one lined, often hard with worry and unhappiness, blue-eyed and dark-haired; the other fairer, brown-eyed and with a soft smile of understanding. They spoke to him, but he couldn't hear what they said, only the sound of their voices, and neither could he make himself understood.

The days fled by into a week, then two. Spock's body healed itself, but with a slowness that worried Tallad. She rubbed fats and ointment and the juices of native herbs into his skin and made him strange potions to drink which often, to her concern, made him sick. Spock worried, not because of the slowness of his own return to health, but because she worried about him. But gradually, and in their own time despite their worrying, the wounds did heal and the bruises and the stripes on his back began to fade.

With the passing of the days his strength returned. He was able to sit up and feed himself, and she taught him to sew the hides of the small animals she caught for food, so that he could occupy himself while she was away in the daytime, cutting peat. She prepared the work, jerkins and waistcoats to be sold at the autumn market, and he sewed the seams with thin strips of leather, clumsily at first but with increasing dexterity.

So the days passed quickly and happily enough, but at night the dreams still troubled him. He learned quickly to dispel the nightmare of Porteen and Fiper and all the seemingly endless varieties of torment that his imagination could produce. Often he could banish them with little more than a grunt and a whimper, although the fire always brought him screaming and sweating to wakefulness for he saw faces in the flames. The other dream lingered with stubborn determination, and the faces haunted him. Always they seemed just a little hazy, looking as the woman had looked when he'd gazed at her out of tear-filled eyes. If he tried to bring them into focus or to give them names they faded into greyness, and he awoke with a terrible sensation of loss.

His wounds were healed and except for a lingering weakness in his muscles bequeathed him by the wasting fever, he was well. He worked around the shelter, doing the light easy jobs, mending things and making things, preparing against the coming winter. Tallad kept him close to home. She would not have him waste his strength on the arduous journey to the peat bog or on the heavy work she did there, and furthermore, the army of the Church made erratic searches of the woodland fringes, still apparently looking for him.

Then, after being away at the autumn market two days and nights, she returned with a strange tale. Fiper the torturer was dead, burned alive in his own fires, and Porteen was blinded, and - so the reports said - quite insane. She looked at him strangely across the meal of vegetables he had prepared, and when he asked why she said, reluctantly, that the whispered rumours claimed that a green-blooded demon had been sent by the devil to destroy the Church's Advocates, and had escaped the citadel mounted between the wings of a great black bird.

He looked at her solemnly for a moment and then they both began to laugh. He ended her doubts with a playful kiss that turned into a long, tender caress.

It was the next day that the Church soldier rode into the clearing before the shelter. He came early in the morning before Tallad went away to the peat bog, mounted on a stout sway-backed riding beast that resembled a lightweight hippopotamus. Spock was inside the shelter when he heard the clatter of the arrival and the loud shouting of the man's voice. Then he heard Tallad answering. As they had agreed, he kept out of sight inside. His very countenance would betray him, the countenance, she said, not of a demon but of a dark angel.

The soldier and the woman talked for some minutes and then the man's voice rose, filled with rage. Spock heard Tallad make a bitter retort and then she gave a little cry as if in pain. Spock moved quickly and carefully to the doorway. The soldier had his back to the door, and was gripping the struggling woman by the wrists. The redness of his uniform was bright against the forest and the golden circle on his back blazed in the sunlight.

Across the clearing the creature browsed in the lower branches and swished its tail against the flies, but Spock had eyes only for the face of the woman, white and snarling with fear but grimly fighting for her honour.

Quickly and silently he moved forwards, weaponless, not knowing what he was going to do but knowing that he had to do something. His last step was on the balls of his feet, then, without volition, the hand that had been raised for a short chopping blow to the neck altered its intention, reaching delicately outwards and up. His fingers closed firmly on the shoulder of the soldier, feeling and pressing and without a sound the man released Tallad's wrists and folded into a neat heap.

She held her wrists and looked at him, and then at Spock, with a kind of dawning wonder. "What did ye do t' him, man?" she asked.

Spock stared at his hand in bewilderment. "I... don't know," he said. "I don't know!"

Tallad swallowed hard and pulled herself firmly together. "We must be rid o' him," she said.

"Rid?"

"'T be sure." She looked him squarely in the face. "If he reports that ye be here, or even that I resisted him 'n he was attacked from behind, we'd both be hunted down 'n be burned alive for heresy. D'ye want t' be reunited wi' Porteen? Or another o' his kind?"

Slowly, stunned, Spock shook his head.

"Then let's get on wi' it." She bent down in a businesslike manner and inspected the soldier's body. She fingered the cloth of the jacket. "Too bright for t' forest," she said, "but 'tis a good shirt and breeches, 'n the boots are sound. You need boots, 'n a woman who lives alone cannot buy a man's clothing in the town." She began to pull at the soldier's feet and after a moment Spock knelt down and helped her strip the clothes off the inert body. Then, at Tallad's bidding, he wrapped him again in the red emblazoned jacket and loaded him onto the back of the animal. With the soldier's boots on his feet in place of his own home-made leather slippers, Spock took the creature's harness and followed Tallad down the forest path towards the peat bog beyond.

The bog was a vast, wild expanse of soft, uneven land. The animal could go no further and Spock took the weight of the soldier on his own back, carrying him to the edge of a soft spot where the water lay deep and still and the peat was treacherous. There, he laid him down and looked at him doubtfully.

"Must we kill him?" he asked.

The woman nodded. "We must. Or suffer 'n burn. 'Tis him or us!"

Spock nodded, a frown on his face. There was something about the features of the soldier, the set of the mouth, the relaxed laughter lines around the eyes, the wave of brown hair across the forehead. They were features he had seen... in a dream.

"Do it now," Tallad said. "It must be now. Roll him in, 'n the bog, 'twill do the rest."

Spock nodded dumbly and bent down. If the soldier had stirred, or even sighed, he could not have done it. He rolled him over, once, twice and then the body flopped, face down, into the water. They stood side by side in the chill wind and watched the red jacket and the head of light brown hair vanish beneath the still black surface. Then she took his arm, and clinging together they picked their way silently back towards the dark line of trees.

In the three days that had passed since the killing of the soldier, Spock's spirits had become more and more downcast. He wore the man's clothes, and the man's face lingered in his mind. The memory of it mingled with the face remembered in his dreams; the two interchanged and became one and the same, and cast a dark shadow over all his thoughts.

Tallad came from the shelter and found him staring up into the night sky. There was a sad, wistful frown on his face, an expression almost of loss. The light of the two pink moons changed the sallowness of his skin to an almost Human hue, and gleamed on the points of his ears. Silently she walked over to him and laid a hand on his arm. He didn't start, but it was some seconds before he responded to her, as if his thoughts were infinitely distant.

"The time has come," she said softly. "Tomorrow ye must go."

"Go?" He took her by the shoulders and gazed at her intently.

"Yes." She nodded quickly. "Ye must travel afore the winter rains swell the rivers 'n wash away the roads. Take the beast. I've no use for it."

He shook his head. "I don't want to leave. Where should I go to?"

She drew back, her eyes filling with tears that were blinked swiftly aside. "Want to or not, 'tmust be. Ye must go 'n search for the darkness 'n the faces ye cannot see. T'may be that when they be found, there'll be peace in yer heart."

Sadly, Spock took her hands. "When I find them I'll have a name to give - "

She pressed a quick finger to his lips. "'Tis best not said, for 'tmight never be."

He touched her arms and shoulders and neck, his fingers finding their own way, and then he lowered his mouth and kissed her. Her brow creased at his strange caresses, and then, tentatively, she returned them. Spock scooped her up in his arms and carried her inside.

Jim Kirk turned his back on the burned-out hulk he could no longer bear to look at. Instead, he glazed out over the roll of the countryside, turning now from late summer into autumn, green to gold. McCoy picked his way out of the wreckage and went over to him, his face lined and frowning, not quite knowing what to say. Kirk felt his approach and saved him the worry.

"They're dead," he said.

McCoy nodded. "They're in there. I don't think they had a chance to get out."

"No." Kirk shook his head in a kind of hopeless distress. "Spock..."

"We found six bodies, Jim. We can't identify them. The seventh must be buried in there somewhere. Do you want us to start digging?"

Kirk looked at the tree lined horizon with clear, sad eyes. "No," he said. "Let them... rest." He made a gesture of futile anger, raising a loosely clenched fist at the sky and then letting it drop to his side. He sighed. "Oh, Bones, a hundred systems we searched, only to find this." He turned then and looked at the shuttle, and McCoy saw the deeply engraved grief. "Spock and the others. Why did it have to happen this way? Why did it have to happen?"

McCoy reached out a hand to him and then withdrew it. Kirk was alone and could not be reached. "At least it was quick," he said.

"Quick," Kirk repeated bitterly. "Seven lives in a ball of fire..."

"Jim!" McCoy said stiffly, and pointed. A rider was coming up the hill, mounted on a cumbersome beast.

To find himself, Spock had returned instinctively to the hilltop

with its burned and blackened ruin. It was the last and only place he could remember. Now he stopped the creature's plodding progress and gazed at the small knot of men gathered below the brow of the hill. They were uniforms, but it was a uniform of blue and gold and black. Not the dreaded red of the Church army. He made up his mind to turn and run, but he didn't. As he watched, two of them left the others and started towards him, slowly at first and then swifter and swifter and then they were running as fast as the wind could carry them. Spock saw their faces, clearly and in focus, and with the clarity came their names, and then the floodgates opened and he clung weakly to the creature's neck as their eager hands reached for him and the memories of a lifetime came flooding back.

"He's healed, Jim," McCoy said. "It must have taken a long time without the help of a trance, but he's healed. He'll need rest to get his strength back. Right now he's wide awake and he wants to see you."

Kirk nodded and went into the ward where Spock lay, partially propped up in the bed. Clean and fed, he was recovering, the colour returning to a face that had been grey, and the premature pain-induced lines of age were fading. Spock turned his head towards him and his eyes almost smiled. Kirk looked him over and nodded approvingly.

"You look better already. McCoy says a few days' rest and you'll be able to get up."

Spock acknowledged with a tired nod. "I am... content to lie here."

A momentary frown of worry crossed Kirk's face. It was a statement as unlike Spock as any he had ever heard.

Spock noticed the frown. "I'll be all right, Jim," he said softly. "Memories take time to fade."

"Yes," Kirk agreed. "I know they do. This is yours." He held out his hand. In the palm glittered a golden disk. They'd found it tucked beneath the band of Spock's trousers, secreted away like some prized possession. Spock looked at it and for a moment his eyes refilled with pain. Then he took it and fingered it. The memories would fade, but the owner of the circle would be the stuff of nightmares all the nights of his life.

"Is it important?" Kirk asked.

Spock's hand closed about the circle. "No. Not important," he said, looking into Kirk's face.

"I expect you're glad to be away from there, Spock," Kirk said. "Spock?"

Spock didn't answer at once. He was just noticing that Kirk's eyes were exactly the same shade of brown as hers had been.



the HUNTERS

Castar Fii Biel Fienn, high chieftain of all the tribes of Kli Tieb, led them down the grand, richly draped passages of the palace, beaming with pleasure and gesturing expansively at the pictures, tapestries, statuary and other priceless works of art from the lengthy and varied history of his people. The palace was overwhelming in its size and in its grandeur. Chamber after vast chamber was filled with treasure - no more and no less than a storehouse for all that the rulers of Kli Tieb considered or had ever considered beautiful or valuable. It was a museum, a relic of a prolific and barbarous past that was over and gone and had little else to be remembered for, for the people of Kli Tieb were a stagnating race, degenerating into decadence and already on the downhill road that led inevitably into savagery and oblivion.

Biel Fienn was totally unaware that the achievements of his people were all in the past, and that there was no future. He chattered on quite happily. Kirk, Spock and McCoy followed him round, listening to the history of this object and that, to the legends they were attached to, and to the stories of the people they had once been connected with. It was a history of conquest and of war, of honour and pageantry.

For the past hundred years there had been nothing added to the collection. No more battles had been fought, no more discoveries made, no more journeys of exploration embarked upon. Also at that time, so they had discovered, the wheels of effective government had ground to a final halt. No new laws had been made and very soon the old ones had ceased to be enforced. The birth rate had dropped alarmingly and since no one had attempted to take a census the number and distribution of the population was a completely unknown factor. Biel Fienn didn't know the extent of his empire, and he didn't care. His interests were bounded by the walls that surrounded the palace grounds, and for all he knew, beyond that the world might have been flat.

He led them into an immense vaulted chamber where the fires blazed in gilded braziers and long tables groaned beneath the weight of laden dishes. Biel Fienn spread his hands in a gesture of generosity.

"A feast, my friends!" he proclaimed. "A feast in your honour! Come, sit, eat!"

He indicated great overstuffed, heavily embroidered pillows in the centre of the floor. Evidently these were to sit on. Kirk and McCoy settled awkwardly onto them. Spock followed doubtfully, sitting on the edge so that most of him was on the solid security of the floor. Biel Fienn dropped, literally, into the depths of the pillows, his blue watered silk robe billowing round him. He beamed at his guests in delight and clapped his hands together, a loud cracking sound.

A long line of men began to file into the room, their bodies heavy with muscle and rounded with fat, their yellow skins and naked heads gleaming with oil. Low-slung belts on their hips held elaborately carved and curved daggers and trailed skirts of the

native silk in gold and electric blue, but all the yards of material in the palace could not have disguised what they were.

Eunuchs.

The three officers watched their entrance uncomfortably and with mild revulsion.

Biel Fienn failed to notice. "My servants, Captain," he said appreciatively. "And my Palace guard also. Good, reliable men!" He clapped again and the eunuchs carried the platters from the tables and served them. Each of the officers took some small thing for politeness sake and was content. The closeness of the male bodies made them feel ill at ease.

"It gives me great pleasure to hear once more of the places beyond the skies," Biel Fienn said, still contriving to beam, even with his mouth stuffed full of food. "Your Federation does not send us emissaries nearly often enough to satisfy my hunger for news."

"Your Empire is a long way from the paths of commerce, My Lord," Kirk told him, using the formal mode of address. "It is not often that one of our vessels passes this way."

"Indeed." Biel Fienn nodded gravely as if all the wisdom of the galaxy was his, and then his face brightened once more. "Ah yes! Your wondrous vessels. How fortunate you are to have the ability to fly among the stars. Each tiny point of light, you tell me, a sun as bright and magnificent as our own."

"Why is it that your people never pressed ahead and developed space flight?" McCoy asked.

Biel Fienn shrugged. "All that we need is here. My ancestors considered the extent of our Empire sufficient. What was enough for them..." He shrugged again and refilled his mouth. In that one sentence and that single, nonchalant, uncaring gesture was the total cause and the total effect of the decline of Kli Tieb.

"Your position of chieftain," Kirk said. "It's handed down from father to son?"

"Yes, indeed," Biel Fienn nodded.

"You... have no son, sir?" Spock said.

"No. No, no. Plenty of time. Plenty of time." Biel Fienn clapped his hands once more and one of the eunuchs stepped forward, a great golden goblet filled to the brim in his hands. Biel Fienn drank greedily and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "You see, gentlemen," he went on, "here we do not have the impatience and the hurry that possess you. Here there is more time for everything."

Neither do you have the drive nor the impulsion, Kirk added silently. Aloud, he said, "You are very fortunate to have such peace."

"Ah, yes. Peace." Biel Fienn looked round with sharp eyes and saw that his guests had finished eating. He waved to one of the servants who put a strong hand under his armpit and hauled him onto his feet.

Kirk and his men scrambled rapidly erect lest the same service

should be accorded them.

"I have some entertainment for you," Biel Fienn said. "Musicians, singers, the girls who dance, the men with whips. Yes? Come." He gestured towards the arched entrance of an adjoining chamber.

"That's most generous of you, My Lord." Kirk moved forward, side by side with the high chieftain. McCoy and Spock fell in behind. In the archway, Spock took one look into the brightly lit, gaudily draped room, and balked.

Kirk, who had been waiting for such an occurrence all afternoon, turned and saw him hanging back, and caught the pleading look in the Vulcan's eyes. He shook his head sternly and his expression said, *You wanted to come on this trip and now that you're here you can put up with it along with the rest of us.* There was to be no escape.

And so the evening was spent in the company of Biel Fienn amid the barbaric splendour of his palace. They ate sparingly of the roasted meats and the over-sweet sweetmeats. The wine was a thick syrupy brew that scorched the throat and lay heavily in the stomach. The dancers whirled and leaped with flying streamers and shapely limbs. The whips cracked and lashed through the air. A fire eater breathed flame and laid glowing coals on his oiled skin. A magician wove fantastic landscapes and bizarre monsters out of coloured smoke. And the high chieftain talked on and on interminably about the endless past glories of his people.

The smoke and the smell of burning incense stung their eyes and rose up into their heads, making them weary. Biel Fienn ate and drank and laughed, seemingly deaf to the trumpets and drums that hammered headaches into the skulls of the Starship officers. Well-intended as it might have been, the elaborate display proved tedious and tiring. The high chieftain's hospitality was overpowering, smothering - and yet it was somehow false.

It was a great relief when the last dancer cleared the floor and in accompaniment to what was presumably a native lullaby, the servants brought the traditional last drink of the evening, a vast gilt bowl of frothing liquid from which they filled goblets to the point of overflowing and handed them round to the chieftain and his guests. The drink was honey sweet and heavily spiced. It lay in a solid lump in the belly and Biel Fienn insisted that they each drain their cup.

It was with difficulty that they staggered to the centre of the great hall that was their beamdown point.

"You will come tomorrow," Biel Fienn invited. "Tomorrow I will have many great things for you to see. Many wonders, even to your eyes."

Kirk held up a hand, laughing and shaking his head. "Thank you. Thank you very much, My Lord, but we must stay on board tomorrow. There is a great deal of work to be done. The data our men have collected has to be correlated and there is specialist work that needs our supervision."

"Besides which we should all soon need a diet," McCoy murmured.

Kirk and McCoy took up their positions, but Spock still hung back as he had done all evening, although he was looking decidedly

more cheerful.

"Are you coming with us, Mr. Spock?" Kirk enquired.

"No, Captain. I do wish to remain behind for a short while."

"Oh?"

"There are some ancient structures beyond the palace grounds which I would like to investigate."

Kirk shrugged. "Certainly, Mr. Spock, if that's what you want to do."

Spock nodded to him, inclined his head to the high chieftain, and beat a somewhat rapid retreat.

For a Vulcan, the night beyond the palace walls was comfortably warm, and the air was clean, free of the smell of stale smoke, dust, and unwashed and perfumed and oiled bodies. Spock took several long, deep breaths of it that cleared his head and moved down the uneven road away from the palace. Looked back at from a distance, the building resembled a crude replica of a mediaeval castle, repaired and patched with towers and spires and battlements from an assortment of periods and places. It made a squat, ugly shape on the hilltop, blackly menacing against the night sky.

Spock turned and went on down the hillside, glad to be away from it. He left the road and picked his way through the trees that led down to the river, searching for the building he had seen from the high windows of the palace.

It was far more aesthetically pleasing than the palace. A rounded, humped shape that crouched on the river bank like a massive beast dabbling its toes in the water. Much as Spock had suspected, it was in ruins, the domed roof fallen completely on one side and many of the exactly curved walls deteriorated into piles of rubble. Spock picked his way through the broken masonry to the river and looked into the swiftly flowing black water.

Some of the stones had fallen down the bank and the water swirled and leaped over them as if they were a miniature weir. The spray splashed into Spock's face, cold and tingling.

It was a place of peace that seemed to him to be unchanged from the time of its creation. This river had flowed here over this gravelly bed, undiverted and unharnessed, when the human race that inhabited the planet had been no more than primitive mammals, and it would remain here long after they had passed into extinction. The only intruder was the building, temporary in duration, already returning to dust.

He felt a sense of pity and of contempt for the frailty of man and he wondered at the grandeur and permanence of nature.

He turned from the river rather sadly, because that was his nature and the way such thoughts affected him.

He walked slowly through the ruined passages of the building. The floor was uneven, the great slabs that composed it cracked across and broken and littered with the rubble of the crumbling walls. The sides of the massive passages had once been lined with intricately carved panels and inset with niches that had possibly contained

statues or images, long since vanished. The passages curved in on each other like the layers of an onion, each giving access to the next and all leading ultimately to the central core. He found that the carvings told stories, epics of battle and sagas of journeys. Broken and disjointed as they were, he derived more pleasure from the figures and the situations engraved there than he had from all Biel Fienn's tale telling.

He moved from one shattered, weather-worn panel to the next, examining their motifs with absorbed fascination and at last he came to the central amphitheatre.

It was a moderately sized oval chamber, roofless now, its original purpose indistinguishable. He moved very quietly round the walls, not liking to disturb the peace of the place, to the far end where an arch in the wall gave access to another, smaller room beyond.

He stopped in the doorway, and for him, time and the universe seemed to stand still. There was a carved panel on the far wall, the largest he had yet seen.

It was of a woman, garbed in a simple belted tunic and trousers pleated into fullness. In her hand she carried a long shafted spear aimed downwards at a beast cowering at her feet. But she was not looking down at the creature; her eyes were looking straight ahead at the archway, at him, and it was the eyes, the eyes and the face that held him captive.

Thrown into soft relief by the starlit gloom, it was a face of smooth planes and angles. A pointed face with a broad, friendly mouth, made grim by the impending kill. The nose was slender and straight, the most perfect feature. The eyes were set wide beneath arcing brows and wide forehead. They were eyes that, despite their stone blindness, somehow... saw.

Spock moved and the spell was broken. The room was small, square and roofless, littered with broken stones and other rubble. He walked round it, finding the other carvings paled now into insignificance beside that of the poised huntress. Her eyes seemed to follow him, and he was drawn, irrevocably, back to stand before it, looking up.

At the height of his good humour and liberally laced with a native beverage of considerable alcoholic content, Biel Fienn had granted permission for Kirk to send a sociological and environmental study team to the planet's surface. There was not much they could hope to accomplish during the short time of the Starship's visit, but as always Kirk worked on the assumption that a little knowledge was better than no knowledge at all. He told them to glean what they could in the time there was.

Spock beamed down with the mid-day change of duty watch.

The village consisted of cottages constructed from the scattered stones of larger, grander buildings, and roughly thatched with reeds from the marsh. An uneven cobbled street ran between them, beginning as a faint path on the hillside and ending beside the river where several of the flat punt boats were moored to posts in the bank.

There was very little technology left in the culture. They had

the wheel and they had fire. Their cloth was spun and woven. Their transport was large carts drawn by bulkily muscled bullocks that bore forked horns atop their flat skulls. Their trade seemed to take the form of barter.

Spock wondered at the regression of the people. These primitive village dwellers were the descendents of the builders of the magnificent cities, now crumbling to ruins, in the broad temperate belts of the planet, the constructors of the clean arching bridges, the sweeping roadways and the great deepwater ports now battered and reclaimed by the sea.

An old man drove his cart up the street. Two of the native bullocks pulled it. Its wheels jutted outwards at an unsafe angle and it rumbled and swayed alarmingly. The old man sat stooped forward in the driving seat, a whip dangling from one hand, the reins from the ring in the beasts' noses held loosely in the other. He stared forward over the humped shoulders of his animals, his eyes distant, distracted, as if his thoughts were far away.

Spock noticed the same expression in the eyes of all the people he encountered. The old women spinning and weaving in the doorways looked at him without curiosity and then cast their eyes down once more to their work. Business was conducted listlessly, neither party showing enthusiasm in the bargain. Everyone was middle-aged or over, and on his way to the river Spock saw only one baby, blanket-wrapped and laid in a woven basket in the sun.

The landing party had gathered on the river bank. Its members were staring gloomily into the dark water.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Watson?" Spock enquired, joining them.

"No, sir." The lieutenant straightened his shoulders. "There's nothing wrong. It's just the atmosphere of this place. Nobody here cares any more whether they go on living or not. Look at those children." He pointed downstream to where a group of a dozen or so children idled their time away in the shallows at the river's edge. They didn't play or shout or splash each other. They merely sat on the bank or in the few inches depth of water, fiddling with pebbles or bits of stick, not even fidgeting. Spock found their disconcerting peace unsettling.

"That's all they've done all day," Watson went on. "They don't act like normal kids, just sitting here like that!"

"They are children of a dying race," Spock said. "They have no future, no... energy."

"Mr. Spock, why should a race regress like this? We've seen peoples ravaged to the point of extinction by war and disease, climatic change, natural disaster, but there seems no reason for this... this apathy!"

Spock gazed across the river to the flat expanse of marshland. "A stagnant but extremely powerful established leadership, Mr. Watson," he said. "The high chieftain and his hierarchy have ruled the Empire for countless generations; no rebellion could overthrow them. They were content, obsessed with what they had. Their horizons and their technology ceased to expand, and - as no situation can remain static - they contracted. Hence this." He gestured back towards the village.

Watson sighed. "It seems a shame, sir. They had such great things going for them. They've gone downhill so quickly."

"The road to oblivion," Spock murmured.

"Sir?"

Spock raised an eyebrow at him and shook his head.

Spock took himself down to Kirk's quarters that afternoon to report on the progress of the investigation. Kirk scanned the tapes quickly and then put them aside with a morbid expression.

"At the rate they're going it won't be long before they revert completely to savagery."

"I estimate fifty more years," Spock said. "So far, the rate of decline has been amazingly fast, although in recent years it has slowed considerably. It should continue to decrease."

"But it won't stop short of extinction," Kirk added. "They don't seem to realise what's happening to them, do they?"

Spock shook his head. "They don't seem to care."

It was not until dusk that the hunters returned from the flat grassy marshes across the river.

Spock stood on the hillside after the landing party had beamed up, and watched them arrive in groups of two or three in a long line that straggled along the river path. These were the young people, those between the disinterested children and the distant-eyed grandparents.

The men and women dressed alike in breeches and leggings, jerkins and coarsely woven shirts. They walked quietly, tiredly, not talking much, looking down at the ground.

Carried on a pole on the shoulders of two men was a lean, short-legged antelope that grazed, often knee deep, on the weed at the bottom of the marsh pools. Bundles of other, smaller, animals were carried on men's backs. Clearly the people were reverting from animal husbandry to hunting wild creatures for food. To Spock's eye they did not seem to have had a great deal of success. Either game was scarce or their hunting techniques left a great deal to be desired.

The dusk deepened as they reached the village and they became lost to sight among the buildings.

Spock turned and climbed out of the darkness that filled the valley towards the ugly structure of Biel Fienn's palace, following the rough, rutted road. He had no intention of paying the high chieftain a visit; instead, he turned off into the woods long before he came to the massive gates.

The near, bright stars winked down at him through the shifting leaves of the trees and lit his way along the indistinct paths to the ruined building beside the river. Spock did not stop to look into

the swift dark water. Nor did he pause to gaze at the cracked panelling on the walls. He made his way directly and rapidly to the central hall.

It was as he had left it, desolate, quiet, its grandeur of substance stolen from it by time, but still splendid in essence. He paused in the entrance and then, slowly, went in.

The stumps of supporting pillars pointed shattered fingers of stone towards where there had once been a high vaulted dome but where now the stars stared down from a blackening sky. There was a shallow gallery round the wall, pedestals tumbled into the rubble; in the very centre of the floor was a hollow, lined with some substance to make it waterproof, now cracked.

There was here none of the technology of the city builders. This was a place left over from an earlier history, preserved and maintained with loving care until the apathetic carelessness that had swept over the people had brought about its downfall.

Spock moved through the amphitheatre to the archway, drawn there, it seemed, by the compelling eyes of the huntress. He noticed other things about her now - small, intimate details. The plaited cord that bound the rope of her hair. The ornately carved clasp of her belt. A buckle in the shape of a two-headed dragon. The small bolt that held the head of her spear to its shaft.

He couldn't tire of looking at her; his eyes were forever seeking and finding some new perfection in the work of the artist, the stitching of the seams in her tunic, the sweep of an eyelash, the folding of the flesh at the corner of her mouth. He sat on a fallen stone and gazed at her a long time into the night. Deep inside he felt the stirring of a kindred spirit with this brave woman of stone, and he was serene.

Starna was one of the young people. She still carried the light of vitality in her eyes. They were wideset and brown, her hair was honey blonde, coiled over her shoulder and tied with a thong of black leather. Lt. Michael Vickers, head of the sociological study group had discovered her and won her co-operation with small gifts. Not mirrors and perfumes that would have beguiled a young female whose race was on the upward path to prosperity, but solid, practical articles, a steel knife and a length of stout cloth.

Wary at first and a little fearful of the strangers, she had begun to talk to them, revealing the underlying details of her people's lives. Guided by Vickers's skilled and sensitive questioning she told them of the rites of birth and death, the curious ritual of marriage and the ensuing peculiarities of married life.

Spock arrived at the cottage at the end of the village street at the very end of one of the question and answer sessions, just as Starna was leaving. She had become accustomed to the men from the Starship and their array of odd equipment but in common with all of her people she still regarded Spock with a certain amount of suspicion. She walked carefully round him and turned back in the doorway, smiling at Vickers.

"May Raarn provide for you," she said.

Spock looked after her and then raised an eyebrow at Vickers. "Raarn?" he enquired.

Vickers nodded. "A sort of archaic legendary figure," he explained. "They don't exactly worship it, but it comes into a lot of their formal greetings." He gathered together his notes and handed them to the first officer. "They don't have an actual deity, but there are several of these ancient characters that carry over from the days before the cities, although it's hard to trace the source. There is so little written material left, and what there is is shut away up in that mausoleum."

Spock could sympathise with the frustration of a specialist separated from his material. "Raarn," he said. "A distinctly masculine name."

"Actually, no." Vickers slung his tricorder from his shoulder. "Raarn was a woman. A huntress."

Spock watched his back retreat down the village street, headed for the river. The thoughts of the Vulcan turned to the small ruined room on the hillside and the sightless eyes of the woman.

At least now he knew her name.

Kirk was in the corridor outside the transporter room and the two men fell into step on the way to the turbolift.

"You were late aboard last night," Kirk said. "We were wondering where you'd got to."

"I was ashore, Captain."

"Yes, we gathered that." Kirk glanced sideways but the Vulcan was obviously not prepared to elaborate without prompting. "McCoy was looking for you," he said. "He had some cultures he wanted you to look at. He was quite concerned that he couldn't find you."

"Really?" Spock enquired dryly. "I cannot imagine the doctor becoming unduly concerned about my welfare."

"You have no imagination. What were you doing down there in the dark?"

"Scientific studies, Captain."

"Oh?"

"Ancient wall carvings. Most elucidating."

"Wall carvings?" Kirk repeated, frowning. "McCoy put forward the rather more colourful theory that you had a woman tucked away down there."

Spock looked at him, totally blind to the glint of mischievousness in the Captain's eyes. "Dr. McCoy has a most curious sense of the macabre," he said stiffly and vanished into the turbolift.

The bridge of the orbiting Starship was manned by a skeleton staff of watch officers. Spock made his way round the balcony to the computer.

"Computer, historical bank," he said. "Trace origins and history of the female deity Raarn."

"...Working..." the computer responded. "Raarn...legendary hunting figure of planet nine three two X, Kli Tieb, currently under observation. Personage usually depicted as female..."

"Specific notations," Spock ordered.

"...None."

"Associated data."

"...Working..." The lights on the computer fascia flashed rapidly through a search sequence. "Stone of Raarn, ancient symbol of prosperity. No confirmed report of existence..."

"Enough," Spock said. The computer fell silent and he switched it off.

It was dark once more when Spock materialised on the planet's surface. He made his way down the village street to the cottage where the woman Starna lived and knocked on the door.

A man answered and called Starna at once. She looked at Spock doubtfully and invited him in. The main room was furnished with hand-made tables and chairs; a fire burned in an open hearth; and the place was full of draughts.

"Please sit." Starna gestured to a chair.

Spock sat and that seemed to put both her and the man more at ease.

"We are not used to seeing you after dark," she said. "Your people go aloft to the great ship in the sky."

"I came specifically to see you," Spock told her. "I have a question to ask."

"A question?"

"You told Lt. Vickers about the huntress Raarn. I want you to tell me about the Stone of Raarn."

Starna and the native man exchanged frowns. "The Stone of Raarn is gone," she said. "It has been lost for ten generations."

"But it did exist once?"

"Oh yes. The ancients said it led our people into the future. A great crystal that glowed with all the colours in the world."

"Do your legends say what happened to the Stone?"

"No. Only that it was taken in a great battle and never seen again."

Spock nodded and got to his feet. "Thank you. I'm sorry to have disturbed your evening."

Starna shrugged and smiled sadly. "Time is nothing to us now," she said. "We have nothing to do and nowhere to go. Our race is dying."

Spock turned and stared at her, stunned. "You know?" he asked slowly.

"We all know it," the man said. "Our ancestors built the cities, sailed on the seas and flew in the skies. We do none of these things. Always there are fewer children born. Soon there will be none, and our people will be dead. That is why you come here, to see us before we are dead."

"Is it not so?" Starna asked.

Spock looked from one to the other. "Yes," he said. "But we didn't know you knew."

"We learn it, and we become indifferent to it as we become older," the man said. "You have seen the look in the eyes of the old ones. They look back at the wonders of the ancients. Always back."

"If you understand what is happening to you, why don't you do something about it?" Spock asked. "It doesn't have to be this way."

"There is nothing we can do," Starna said. "We are only a few, and a few cannot change the world." She laughed. "If we had the mythical Stone of Raarn perhaps it would be different. It is said that the Stone led us into the future; when it vanished there was no longer any future. If we had it, who knows, maybe it would teach us how to work the great machines in the forest."

For the second time Spock was startled. "There are no machines in the forest. There were never any cities built near there."

Starna and the man exchanged long, thoughtful looks and Spock received the unmistakable impression that they were silently discussing his integrity. When they looked at him again their eyes held a look of wariness.

"We have been waiting for the opportunity to speak to you. You understand machines," Starna said. "We have seen the way your fingers know what to do. You could teach us how to use them. Then we could be as great as our ancestors."

Spock shook his head. "There are no machines," he repeated. "If there were, we would have seen them from... above."

"They are hidden," the man said, "in a chamber built by our forefathers far underground, where the chieftains can never find them. They would destroy them, and they are all that we have left!"

"And yet you tell me about them?" Spock enquired. "Why?"

"You can make them work," Starna said. "Holii and I will take you to them, and you can teach us." She reached for a coat that hung beside the door.

"Now?" asked Spock.

Holii, the man, nodded. "We go there only rarely and always in the dark. The chieftain's men must not follow. It is a forbidden place."

Spock reached for his communicator. "I must inform my ship - "

"No!" A powerful hand grasped his wrist. "No one must know!" Holii grated. "No one!"

Spock looked at him out of narrowed eyes. "What happens... afterwards?" he asked.

Holii caught his meaning and let him go. "We mean you no harm," he said.

Spock considered him for a long moment and then stepped aside. "You lead the way," he invited.

There was no path into the forest but Starna and Holii knew the way unerringly. They forced their way through a final thicket of heavily thorned bushes and came to a halt before a veritable cliff. A fault in the strata beneath the forest floor had lifted one section high above the other to leave a face of shining, naked rock. Holii glanced at Spock's face and then set off once more, leading the way along the base of the cliff. He hacked at the vines and bushes along his way with an iron-bladed machete. Spock followed him and Starna came last. Spock saw her pull bushes and branches across the path behind them to conceal the way.

Holii came to a place where the fault had widened to form a crack in the ground, a steep passage that led down beneath the surface.

Holii cleared away some plant growth and a black hole yawned at his feet.

"Down there?" Spock asked.

Holii nodded. "Down there," he said. "I'll go first." He handed the machete to Starna and started down into the darkness.

Spock hesitated, becoming increasingly aware of the woman at his back, and then he lowered himself carefully over the edge. He felt something under his feet - a bar of smooth metal - and then another further down. It was a ladder pinned to the rock wall of the shaft. He turned to face it and climbed down.

It was like descending into the pit. The ladder went down almost vertically into the darkness. After a moment Spock heard Starna's footsteps above his head and knew that she was following him down. He could feel the ladder with his hands, hard machined metal, definitely the work of technology. He came at last to a solid metal platform and in the same instant a light flared as Holii set light to a torch. Spock looked round.

He was at the bottom of a deep well, on a seamless silver metal floor. There was a circular opening in the wall, rimmed with metal. The light of Holii's torch flickered on it. Starna climbed onto the platform and she and Holii looked at him,

"That way," Holii said, gesturing to the opening with the

torch. Spock peered inside. A long metal tube reached away before him, dimly and irregularly lit in the light of the torch. Spock climbed in and started walking.

The sides, walls and ceiling had been made in one continuous length, and there was half a mile of it.

Spock felt Holii's hand on his arm. "The floor, it ends here."

Spock looked down and found himself on the edge of what looked like a long drop. Holii handed him the torch, sat down and eased himself over the edge. Spock passed the torch down and followed. It was ten feet to the floor. The light from the torch lit only a part of the chamber. It was a vast room, high and wide, and it was filled with the ranked banks of a complex computer. There were rows upon rows of tall, backward slanting consoles, matt grey fascias with a myriad telltales, hundreds of dials and screens, all dead and inactive.

"The machines," Starna said. "You understand them?"

Spock shook his head. "Not at once. That can't be expected. It takes time."

Starna and Holii exchanged glances of anxiety. Spock moved to the nearest console and studied it. There was very little he could recognise. He stood quite still and listened.

At first there was only the soft sound of their breathing and the burning of the torch, then as his concentration became more intense, he heard, far beneath the silence, a gentle hum. Somewhere, after untold years, an energy source still lived. He reached out a hand and threw a vital switch. There was a brief thrum of power and the console lit with yellow and white lights. At the same time a greenish glow lit the chamber. Starna and Holii cowered away.

"It's all right," Spock told them. "It's an automatic lighting system. It must operate as soon as the servo mechanisms realise there's someone there. If we'd used the door it would have come on straight away."

"There is no door," Holii said.

"There must be an entrance somewhere. The way we came in was some kind of ventilation shaft."

They shook their heads and he could tell by their faces that they did not understand. He returned his attention to the console, knowing before he began that he faced a hopeless task.

An indeterminate time later he turned and found himself alone. There was no sign of the two natives. He switched out the lights and shut down the computer. Even in the darkness he couldn't see the flickering torchlight. Guided by memory and the touch of his fingertips he found his way back to the tunnel. He hoisted himself up and put his mouth close to the metal walls and called along it.

"Starna! Holii!"

He waited, aware that the formation of the tunnel would carry his voice. After two minutes there was still no reply or answering light. He set off down the tunnel, walking slowly, one hand on the wall to guide him. He came to the metal platform.

He was stopped by the pressure of Starna's hand on his arm, pulling him down. He crouched and gradually his eyes became accustomed to the night light filtering down from above.

"What's happened?" he asked. "Where's Holii?"

In the dimness Starna motioned him to silence. She drew him back into the tunnel.

"The chieftain's men," she whispered. "They are in the forest above us. Holii has gone to see."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You had to learn about the machines," she said. "Now you have learned, you can teach us."

Spock shook his head. "That's not possible," he told her gently. "It would take a lifetime, even for a trained scientist, to understand all of what they do."

"Then they are no use to us," she said, her voice bitter with disappointment.

"No. There are teaching machines for doctors and engineers, but you would have to be a doctor or an engineer to begin with. Your people are... too primitive."

If she took offence at the unavoidable cruelty in his words she had no time to display it. A startled shout from above died into a gurgle and ended in silence.

"Holii," Starna gasped.

"Keep close behind me," Spock told her.

He held the phaser in one hand and climbed with the other. Starna followed him up the ladder, her hair brushing the soles of his boots.

Above ground the night was at its darkest, the long silent hours before the dawn. The night breeze had dropped, not even the smallest animal rustled its way among the trees. Spock offered his hand and the woman used it to help herself out of the hole.

"We have to get away from here," she said. "This is a forbidden place."

Spock nodded. Moving very slowly and quietly he crept along the base of the rock face. Starna stuck to him like a shadow, keeping low. They came to the thorny thicket and crouched down. Spock sensed that there was something wrong.

He gestured to the woman to stay in the shelter of the rock and went on alone. There was a pair of feet protruding from beneath the bushes. Spock recognised the home-made boots. They were Holii's.

There was a stirring in the thicket directly in front of him. A massive bronze form rose up, one of Biel Fienn's palace guard.

Spock froze.

He could smell the foetid stench of the body oil and feel the

animal heat on his face. The warrior walked towards him with swinging strides that, surprisingly, made very little sound. How he failed to see him Spock never knew. He passed so close that the Vulcan could have touched the iron-bound club he carried.

He waited without daring to breathe until the great glistening back was out of sight and then he knelt down beside Holii. His neck was broken and the back of his skull crushed.

Then Starna was crouching beside him, reaching out a hand. Spock stopped her and took her away, using his strength against hers. He held her with her back to a tree until her stifled sobs abated.

"Can you go on?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

He offered her his hand and she took it for a short distance, gaining reassurance. There was a threshing in the bushes to the left. Spock slipped to the right, drawing the woman with him. She followed willingly, trusting him. The forest fell silent once more. Unnervingly silent.

They came to a clearing and crouched low in the shrubs at its edge. It was empty except for the starlight.

"Stay here," Spock told her. "I'll go first. Don't come after me until you're certain it's safe."

She nodded mutely and subsided into the bushes. Spock listened to the silence and then started across the open space, moving fast and low. Something heavy shifted in the trees ahead. Spock skidded almost to a halt and darted sideways.

A head and oiled torso appeared from the forest. Spock snapped a short beam of energy at it and had the satisfaction of seeing it vanish once more. There were other bodies gleaming among the trees now, moving rapidly towards him. He wrenched the communicator from his belt.

"Spock to Enterprise!" he called. "Enterprise, come in - "

Something landed with shattering force across the lower half of his back. The breath gushed out of his lungs, lights erupted in his brain. He felt himself pitching forward and could do nothing about it. He never felt the force with which he hit the ground.

Kirk clawed his way up out of a deep and dreamless sleep. The bedside intercom was bleeping insistently. He rubbed the stickiness out of his eyes and stared blearily at the chronometer. It was a little after three.

He tipped the rocker switch. "Kirk here."

"Duty officer here, sir," a voice said. "Sorry to disturb you, but we've just had a call from the first officer. It sounded odd, sir."

"Odd?" Kirk asked. "In what way odd? What did he say?"

"Well sir, he called in and then the channel went dead. He didn't say anything. And when we tried to call him back he didn't respond."

Kirk wiped a hand over his face. "You'd better send someone down to his quarters. He might be sick. I'll go along there myself."

"He's not in his quarters, sir," the voice said. "He was calling on a communicator frequency from the planet."

Kirk sat bolt upright in bed.

"From the planet? What the devil's he doing down there?"

"I don't know, sir. I - "

"No. Of course you don't. Keep trying to raise him. I'll be right up." Kirk closed the channel and reached for his trousers.

For the first few seconds of consciousness Spock was aware only of the insupportable pain in his back and the terrible fear that his spine was broken. He could feel nothing below the waist and his legs refused to acknowledge the commands of his brain.

He opened his eyes. He lay face down on a carpet that smelled of warm dust. There was a pair of ornate boots inches from his eyes. He turned his head so that he could look up. Above the boots were a pair of full, frilled trousers and a flowing blue robe. Biel Fienn was looking down at him, his small eyes thoughtful, his jaws working slowly.

Spock fought back the pain and got his hands under him, pushing himself up. Biel Fienn put a foot on his shoulder and pushed him down again.

"Lie still," he ordered, "or you will find yourself suddenly brainless."

Spock came to the conclusion that his back was not, after all, broken. There was an agonising tingling sensation growing in his feet that he would not be feeling if it were.

Biel Fienn tore a hunk of meat from a bone and sucked in the ends noisily. "You are a fortunate man," he said through the food. "Normally my servants would have crushed you underfoot like a beetle. Be grateful that you were recognised."

The boots walked away out of sight. "Tell me," Biel Fienn said, "why did you go into the forest?"

"I could answer better, sir, if I were allowed to sit up," Spock said with difficulty.

"As you wish."

Ignoring the screaming protest of bruised bone and torn muscle, Spock forced himself to sit up. There were two gigantic glistening guards behind him, one armed with a massive club, the other with a barbed pike, and there were two more at the door.

"That area of the forest is forbidden," Biel Fienn said. "Why did you go there?"

Spock raised his chin. "I did not know that it was forbidden."

"Oh come, now. There was a villager with you. The rebellious troublemaker Holiii. He must have told you."

Spock looked back at him squarely and shook his head, denying it.

"What were you looking for?" Biel Fienn inquired gently. "Tell me. After all, I am the one most capable of assisting you to find it, am I not?"

Spock gazed at him silently. The high chieftain's voice became harsher. "You can be made to tell me, you know. There is an assortment of ways. How would you like to be like one of them, eh?" He gestured with the stripped bone to the glistening bodies of his servants. "It can easily be arranged."

Spock looked at at the impassive face of the giant beside him. His skin grew cold and crept.

"We were searching for the Stone of Raarn," he said quietly, contriving to make it sound like a guilty admission.

Biel Fienn erupted into an outburst of gusty laughter. "The Stone of Raarn?" he repeated. "Impossible! You tell me the tales of children. It's a myth! The thing never existed. I cannot believe that you ever thought otherwise."

"I was told that it was concealed near here," Spock insisted with a trace of sullenness.

"So you went looking for it in the middle of the night?" Biel Fienn demanded. "Rubbish! Absolute rubbish." He gestured to the guards. "Take him away." A crooked finger stabbed at Spock. "Do not doubt that you will talk to me. Before long you will be only too glad to talk to me."

McCoy collected himself another cup of coffee from the dispenser and returned to his place at the table. "It's no use pacing up and down like that," he said. "All you'll do is wear the deck plates out and upset your liver."

Kirk shot him a distracted glance and continued pacing.

"Spock's a big boy now," McCoy went on. "He's old enough and ugly enough to take care of himself."

"He's in trouble and you know it, Bones," Kirk said shortly. "If only they'd had time to get a fix on that communicator signal - "

The intercom bleeped. Kirk leaped for it.

"Landing party reports no sign of the First officer in the village, sir," Uhura said from the bridge. "All landing parties have now reported negative."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk said. "Have the transporter room

stand by." He looked at McCoy. "That only leaves one other place he could be. Biel Fienn's palace."

McCoy frowned at him over the coffee cup. "Why the devil would Spock want to go there? To say he disliked the place would be an understatement."

"I doubt very much that he wanted to go there," Kirk said grimly. "Nevertheless, that's where I think he is. Come on." He headed for the door. McCoy finished the last of his coffee and followed him.

They materialised in the great dining hall of the palace between the burnished bowls of fire. Biel Fienn was there to greet them, smiling a grim smile.

"Ah, gentlemen," he said. "A pleasant but not altogether unexpected visit."

"One of my officers is missing," Kirk said bluntly. "I think I'm correct in believing that you know his whereabouts."

"You are a most perceptive man," Biel Fienn said. "Come, refresh yourselves." He slapped his hands together and two of his servants came in carrying trays.

Neither Kirk nor McCoy moved. "Where is he?" Kirk asked.

"Here." Biel Fienn gestured round. "Quite safe, I assure you. We've been... frightening him a little. Nothing more."

"You're keeping him a prisoner? I want him returned to me. Right now."

Biel Fienn shrugged. "That is not possible, Captain. I would be failing in my own duty were I to permit him to regain his freedom so readily. He was found in a forbidden area. He resisted apprehension. There was some conflict with my palace guard."

McCoy stared at the muscular bodies in alarm. "Where is he?" he demanded. "If he's hurt I want to see him."

"A few bruises and an injured dignity," Biel Fienn said. "No permanent damage, you can be certain."

"Why are you holding him?" Kirk asked.

"To establish the truth, Captain. The reason for your officer's intrusion into a restricted area."

"Have you tried asking him?"

"Indeed. He tells me some ridiculous tale about searching for a mythical talisman."

Kirk and McCoy exchanged doubtful glances. "Those bruises you mentioned," McCoy said. "They wouldn't by any chance be on his head?"

"If he has broken any of your laws, I shall see that he is punished," Kirk said. "But by our justice, not yours."

Biel Fienn scowled. "What guarantee do I have of that?"

"You have my word as a Federation officer."

"Your word?"

"If you do not choose to accept it, then the Federation will be forced to take steps against you. The man must be returned."

Biel Fienn's face became thoughtful. "This officer, he is important to the Federation?"

"To the Federation, and to me personally."

The chieftain's small eyes flickered shrewdly from Kirk's determined face to McCoy's. Biel Fienn was no fool and he knew when he was outgunned.

"Very well," he said. "Take him. But do not return to Kli Tieb. You are no longer welcome."

He turned his back on them and walked away.

McCoy scowled up at the pulsing diopanel above the bed. "You'll live," he admitted grudgingly, "but I want you to stay in bed for a while."

Spock turned over stiffly and sat up. "That will not be necessary, thank you, Doctor."

McCoy glared at him. "Well, I think that it *is* necessary, Mr. Spock. Partly to give that back of yours a chance to heal, and partly to keep you out of the Captain's way for a while. He's as mad as hell and after your life."

"I am most grateful for your concern, Dr. McCoy, if somewhat surprised by it." Spock slid awkwardly off the bed, winced, and reached for his shirt.

McCoy shrugged. "Well, it's your funeral, Spock," he muttered. "Literally!"

Contrary to McCoy's advice Spock set out with the deliberate intention of locating Kirk. He pressed the button beside the door of the Captain's quarters and heard the buzzer sound inside.

"Come!" Kirk's voice ordered.

Spock went in and faced his Captain across the desk.

"How's the back?" Kirk asked.

"Dr. McCoy advises me to 'take it easy' for a few days."

"Then why aren't you doing it?"

"I thought it advisable not to delay our interview."

"Uh huh." Kirk put down his stylus. "You have some sort of an explanation to offer?"

"No, Captain."

Kirk slammed his hand down on the desk, hard. "Then why the devil were you traipsing around Biel Fienn's forest in the middle of the night?"

"Scientific investigation," Spock said quietly.

"Scientific...! More bloody wall carvings, I suppose?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"Then what, exactly? Do you realise that you could have got yourself killed down there? Cost the Federation a priceless officer? Do you realise that you have got all future survey parties banned from the planet?"

Spock nodded unhappily. The look of pained misery on his face was so acute that Kirk felt his whipped up anger fade away and had a hard struggle to keep from laughing out loud at it.

"All right," he said. "What were you doing in Biel Fienn's forest?"

"At the moment of capture, escorting a young lady home," Spock said gravely. Kirk's eyes widened. "However, I had already made a most interesting discovery," the Vulcan added quickly. "There is a large computer constructed in a shielded chamber underground. It contains considerable scientific and technical data, probably compiled at, or just after, the peak of this civilization's advancement. The high chieftain knows nothing of it. The people consider that it belongs to them. However, they have no comprehension of its principles."

Kirk thought for a moment. "And what's all this rubbish about the Stone of Raarn?"

"Raarn was a huntress. A provider of prosperity. Her Stone is considered to have been a talisman for the future."

"You told Biel Fienn that you were looking for it. Did you find it?"

"Negative, Captain." Spock shook his head. "Even if it ever existed, it is now destroyed or irretrievably lost. However, the young adults do seem to believe that it heralded a prosperous future."

"What do you believe?"

Spock tilted his head. "I do not adhere to myths and legends, Captain. I merely report them. The fact that the people believe is important. It is not beyond our capabilities to provide them with a Stone of Raarn."

Kirk looked at him thoughtfully. "A new future for a people made to believe in themselves," he said slowly. "And a race with a future is protected by the Prime Directive, so the loss of survey rights wouldn't really make a lot of difference, would it?"

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"As for the rest," Kirk went on. "I think Biel Fienn has

already had his revenge for your trespassing." He drew a note pad towards him. "Let's get some specifications down for this Stone, and then we'll get down to the labs..."

"Now remember," Kirk said from beside the transporter console. "Keep the communicator channel open the whole time. I want a constant fix on you and the moment I hear anything that sounds like trouble I'm having you back up here before you're slaughtered."

"Acknowledged, Captain," Spock said.

Kirk nodded to the transporter chief. "Energize." The man's hands moved across the console and slid the three red levers up their slides. Spock's body disintegrated into shimmering gold and vanished.

Spock pushed open the cottage door. The interior was dimly lit by a single burning torch.

Starna turned, startled. She held a large bundle in her hands - a bundle that consisted of almost all her worldly goods. Her face was a pale tear-stained oval, her eyes dark hollows.

"I thought you would be dead," she said.

"No. My Captain wields considerable influence over Biel Fienn and his army."

"I'm leaving," Starna said. "They killed Holii for being in a forbidden place. They would kill me too."

Spock nodded. "You have to leave," he agreed. "I have something for you." He held out his hand. In the palm a large rhubidium crystal flashed in the torchlight with all the colours of existence.

Raarn put down her bundle and stared at it. "The Stone of Raarn," she murmured, wide-eyed. "Is it real?"

"It is as real as you believe it to be," Spock told her honestly. "Take it. Take it to the young people and the children. Go north. Live in the shadows of the cities your ancestors built. It may be that one day your civilisation will be as great as theirs, and then your children can return and use the knowledge stored in the machines."

Starna took the crystal and watched the firelight dance in its facets. "Perhaps then they will be able to join you among the stars."

Spock nodded again. "That may also be," he said.

Starna closed her hand about the Stone of Raarn, holding it tightly. She picked up her bundle and looked into his face for a long moment. Then she went out and closed the door quietly behind her.

"Are you ready to come board, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked from the communicator.

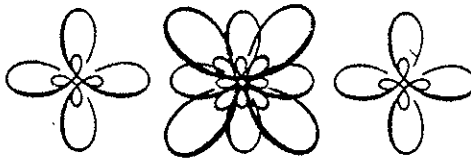
"Not quite yet, Captain," Spock said. "I have one more brief visit to make."

Spock stood in the archway of the small broken room and experienced a distinct sensation of sadness. He knew that he would be the last to look upon her with appreciation. She would be dust long before her children returned from the north to claim their heritage - if they ever did.

It could only have been his fancy, but he had the impression that there was a hint of sorrow about her mouth and also a faint glint of satisfaction in her eye. Or perhaps it was just how the starlight fell.

"Mr. Spock." Kirk said. "It's almost dawn. Time we were under way."

"Understood, Captain," Spock said into the communicator. "I am now quite ready to beam aboard."



the PEOPLE STEALERS

Kirk gazed with remote thoughtfulness at the distant slowly shifting starfields faithfully reproduced on the screen. Behind him Uhura's voice had become a monotonous sing-song endlessly repeating the same words over and over and over again.

"This is the U.S.S. Enterprise calling the Delta Sarroga colony. Come in Delta Sarroga. We are not receiving your signal. This is the U.S.S. Enterprise..."

The rest of the bridge remained in comparative silence, the ears of the crew straining for the whisper of a human voice across the parsecs that still separated them from the solar system ahead. Kirk was very much aware of the sense of foreboding that had come aboard the starship, a dread that could be tasted like a metallic tang in the air and seen in the eyes of every man and woman. He could feel it himself in the tenseness of his muscles and in the constriction that blocked his throat and caused him to swallow hard and often. It was an atmosphere that had materialized suddenly with the arrival of a brief and garbled message of alarm from the far flung and totally isolated colony of Delta Sarroga, and had been intensifying ever since. Kirk gnawed his knuckles and chewed his lips and the furrows across his brow became progressively more pronounced as the distance between starship and star system decreased. It was not until the primary, Sarroga itself, had emerged from the general star splattered background, taken on a typical four pointed shape and was shining a vivid blue white in the centre of the screen that he left his command seat and turned to Uhura.

"Is there no word, Lieutenant?" he asked unnecessarily.

She turned towards him, one hand to the receiver in her ear, her eyes large with weariness. "No, sir. Nothing."

Kirk placed both his hands on the balcony rail and leaned on them. It was a familiar gesture of exasperation. "Play back the distress call again." Uhura's hands moved obediently and a crackle of static came from the speakers interspersing with a man's excited voice.

"Delta Sarroga colony calling anyone who can hear. We need help! They're coming! We can't fight them! We can't hold out! Somebody, help us...!" The static roared and drowned out anything else that was said. Kirk could elicit no more information from the tape than he had from the message itself and the dozen replays he had listened to since. He sighed and turned to the computer station.

"Anything on the planet, Mr. Spock?" It was a plea as much as a question.

The Vulcan First Officer shook his head without taking his eyes from the shifting depths of the sensor screen. "Just coming into range, Captain. The configuration is normal. No unusual emanations of any kind."

"What about the colony?" Kirk was now at the Vulcan's side, doing his best to see over his shoulder. After a moment Spock looked

at him, his eyes close to his captain's, dark and unfathomable.

"No life readings," he said simply.

Kirk stared at him. For a few moments his mind became blank, unable to assimilate the facts, then horror dawned on his face. His body grew cold. "Mr. Spock," he said at last in a voice that was no more than a controlled whisper, "organize a landing party. You and I, security guards and a medical team. Let's go and find out what happened."

Kirk stood on a beach of coarse brown sand gazing out over the sullen swell of the sea. A succession of small waves were lapping half heartedly at his feet and lazily rolled the little rounded pebbles back and forth. It was a lonely and desolate place and it suited his mood. The only sounds to be heard were the muffled clinking of the the stones one against another and the soft, sighing, sucking noises of water on sand.

In all but one essential detail this fourth planet of the Sarroga system was of classical 'M' type configuration; Earth like. Its atmosphere was a pleasant oxygen nitrogen combination, its sun bright and and warming and without harmful radiation, its days blue and gold and its nights black and spangled with stars. The single missing element was life itself. For some unguessable reason that first vital combining of primary forces had not taken place and the planet, for all its promise, was barren. Before him the sea and the sky were forever empty and at his back, with the exception of the green patch surrounding the embryonic Federal settlement all the land was a lifeless wilderness.

A footstep crunched on the gravel of the beach. Kirk half turned to see Spock approaching along the crest of the beach head. There was something in the Vulcan's posture that foretold ill tidings and his face was set into stern lines. Seeing his captain he started down towards the waters edge. Kirk returned his troubled gaze to the seaward horizon.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" he inquired in a businesslike manner as the Vulcan drew level with his shoulder.

"A thorough investigation has confirmed our preliminary findings. No member of the colony remains alive on the planet."

Kirk's face maintained a carefully veneered mask of official expressionlessness and his eyes remained fixed on the faint grey line where sea met sky, but he doubted that he concealed his true feelings from the man beside him as a wave of icy helplessness and despair swept through him, and then an impotent anger. *How could it be possible?*, a part of his mind demanded. *How could a healthy thriving colony of seven hundred men, women and children vanish without trace in the matter of a few short hours. If there was a God anywhere in heaven how could He have allowed such a thing to happen?* A second inner portion of his mind answered the question as soon as it was asked, with calm conviction. It was one of the mysterious ways of space. One of the things man had been battling to understand since the moment he stepped off his own planet and challenged the unknown of space. And it was his job to try and solve some of the mysteries. "Is there no sign of them at all?" he asked aloud. "No indication of what happened to them?"

"None. It is quite extraordinary." The tone of Spock's voice betrayed his own perplexity more than his words. Kirk glanced at him.

"That last message said that 'something' was coming. Something they could neither fight nor get away from. Any speculation on what that something might have been?"

"At this stage we have insufficient data for an assessment. We've found no evidence of invasion or attack, nor of forceful resistance. Everything seems to have been peaceful up until the end."

"What about disease?" Kirk knew he was picking at the problem but was unable to resist the runaway impulsion of his thoughts. "Could they have been overtaken by some wild epidemic that wiped them out virtually simultaneously?"

"The bio labs have isolated no unaccountable bacteria or virus; besides which there is no human disease which decomposes a body so completely and so quickly that no trace remains after so short a time. Furthermore..."

Kirk sighed. "I know. Nothing was imported here that didn't have a catalogue number. What about some form of matter transference then? Could they have been kidnapped?"

Spock's expression was, if anything, tolerant. "A more interesting theory than all consuming disease, but there is no residual energy as there would be had a transporter of interplanetary capabilities been in use here, and no space ship has been in the vicinity for several months or we would have found evidence of its radiations."

Kirk suppressed a shiver that was not caused by the chill of approaching night. The sea had become a cold grey mass swelling with its own bulk beneath a darkening sky and a freshening landward breeze touched his skin through his clothes. "So here we are," he said, voicing his thoughts aloud. "Left with a Mary Celeste of a planet. Everything intact, the generators still running, but nothing left alive. Not even a cow in the fields." He fought down another, stronger, shudder and wished his uniform had pockets into which he might thrust his hands. With his face set in grim lines he turned his back on the sea and began to clamber back up the beach. Spock gazed at the horizon a few moments longer, then gave a barely audible sigh and followed his captain. The crunching of the sand beneath their boots was like the crackle of dry leaves turning into dust.

Already the settlement had the aura of a ghost town. The prefabricated buildings that had been homes and workplaces were gathering dust and the silent streets that ran between them were filling with shadows as the sun lowered into the cradle of the western hills. The breeze that brushed their cheeks rustled the leaves of sapling trees hopefully planted in the plots intended to be gardens. Somewhere a door had already broken loose and was banging back and forth, a lonely sound in the gathering dusk. Unlit windows looked out over precisely squared fields where rows of half grown corn stood soldier straight and the tussocks in the meadows were turning from green to black. Beyond the fields were the brown hills and the russet coloured sky. Side by side the two men walked slowly along the main street of the settlement and as the night changed from

purple to indigo to black the air of desolation soaked into them as if it were already a hundred years old.

One single storeyed building, set a little apart from the others on a little knoll at the end of the street furthest from the sea, was alone lighted, its windows spilling smudgy patches of brilliance onto the ground outside, a promise of warmth and shelter and a touch of homeliness in a dismal world. With a last look at the sprawling constellations that were lighting up the sky Kirk pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The building had been constructed as a gathering place - a church, a town hall, a lecture room, whatever was needed. It provided an ideal centre of operations for the Enterprise forces, and in obedience to Kirk's order they had all gathered there when dusk began to fall. There were a sizable number of security guards, some technical personnel and McCoy and his medical team. Someone had made coffee and they were standing around munching biscuits and discussing the mystery of the abandoned colony. Kirk, satisfied that his men had found themselves refreshment, exchanged a word here and there and made a bee line for McCoy.

"Bones, have you managed to turn up anything at all that might tell us what's been going on here?"

"Nary a thing, Jim." McCoy raised a thick china mug full of coffee to him. "Everything's just as you'd expect to find it in a colony like this, except that the people are gone."

"And nowhere they could have gone to." With heavily browed eyes Kirk stared beyond McCoy at the rows of pictures pinned to the wall at the back of the hall. They were the pencil and crayon scribblings of the settlement's children. They offered no inspiration. "No signs of a fight, no blood, no bodies," he muttered to himself.

"Also no disease organisms, no predators and, according to Spock, no residual energy." The doctor added and swigged coffee. "There's nothing left alive on this planet except for a few bacteria around the settlement itself. Everything that breathed has vanished like a puff of smoke in a high wind."

Kirk frowned a moment or two longer at the pictures on the wall, then blinked and looked hard at McCoy. "What was that you just said?"

"A puff of smoke," McCoy repeated, shrugging.

"No. Before that. You said, everything that breathed. In the case of this planet that means everything with warm blood."

"Jim..."

"Spock has to recalibrate his sensors to read life forms with body temperatures closely related to their environment."

"You're grabbing at straws, Jim."

"Maybe I am." Kirk's expression was morose. "Right now I'm in a position where I'd grab at anything. We've got to find a point we can work from."

McCoy conceded the point. "I'll run a survey on the remaining micro-organisms. Just to make sure you're not starting out with a

false assumption. I've got some specimens I want to culture when I get back to the lab. They might tell us something though I doubt it."

"You work on that. Meantime I want to talk to Spock about heat spectography. Where is he?"

McCoy looked round. Spock was nowhere to be seen. "I haven't seen him since this afternoon, Jim."

"He was right behind me when I came in here."

"He didn't come in with you."

With the doctor trailing him, Kirk started back for the door, pausing only once to deliver a brief order on the way. "Mister Yin, contact the ship. Have these men beamed aboard and released from duty for the rest of the night watch."

Outside, the night had become transparent with starlight. The buildings stood out starkly against the surrounding darkness. The breeze had dropped away almost to nothing but it was bitterly cold. There was no sign of the Vulcan. McCoy hunched his shoulders and tucked his hands under his armpits. "It's almighty cold out here," he grumbled. "Where in hell has he got to?" By way of response Kirk began to walk back down the street towards the sea.

It took all of fifteen minutes for them to find Spock, just long enough for Kirk to begin to wonder if he should summon the assistance of a search party. The Vulcan was out beyond the cluster of buildings standing beside the fence of one of the inner pastures. His posture was erect, alert, poised, his features intent, sharply angled in light and shade. He was staring across the fields at the lifeless landscape beyond. As far as Kirk and McCoy could see there was nothing to warrant his attention. Kirk motioned McCoy's impatient blusterings to silence.

"What is it, Mr. Spock?" he asked quietly.

Spock looked at him, his head a little on one side. "I thought I heard something, Captain," he said slowly. "Something out there."

Kirk looked towards the silhouetted hills. "What was it you heard?"

Spock shook his head, uncertain, unwilling to reveal his lack of certainty. "I heard - I thought I heard - the sound of music. The memory of music half forgotten. Someone singing - a long time ago," he shook his head again. "It's gone now. I can't remember exactly how it sounded."

Kirk heard McCoy's grunted 'Space happy!' and both he and Spock ignored it as irrelevant.

"Poetry, Mr. Spock?" Kirk suggested gently.

"No, Captain, an inability to express an intangible experience."

Kirk looked again towards the horizon. "There's nothing out there now. We'd better get back to the ship before the temperature drops below freezing."

McCoy chafed his hands and stamped his feet impatiently against

the cold while Kirk made the call, but Spock gazed out across the pasture with an inexplicable sense of loss.

Dawn was an unspectacular event. The sun lifted itself above the horizon with only a prolonged greying of the sky as preamble. Once up it was an orb of bright white light that was painful to look directly at. Kirk beamed down early, before the temperature had risen much above its night time low. He found a thin white crust of frost on the ground and a crisp coldness in the air that turned his breath to steam as soon as it left its mouth. The settlement was very much as he had first seen it except that in the harshness of the morning light it appeared newer, rawer, stripped of that air of long established permanence imparted by the mellow shadows of afternoon. Also there was about it an atmosphere of increasing depression. Kirk saw it in the faces of his men as they stood about in small groups awaiting their orders. He decided there and then to make an end of the 'in situ' researches as quickly as possible. With that in mind he instigated a fully comprehensive set of investigations intended to extract every iota of information from each corner.

That done he took time to look round himself. He spent several minutes standing at the fence where Spock had stood the night before, staring at the gently rising slopes of the hills. It was half in his mind to send out enough men to turn over every stone, but there was nothing he could see to justify the expenditure of manpower. There were rainwashed gullies, expanses of naked rock, mounded heaps of soft mineral rich soil, sterile yet but surely soon to be invaded by the seed from these man-made pastures, but neither in the neutral shading of the landscape nor in the unbroken contours of the hills was there anything out of place.

He was unaware that he was not totally alone with his thoughts until he heard a footfall immediately behind him and McCoy's voice said, "I thought I might find you out here on your own."

"Did you want me for something, Bones?"

"Only in an abstract sort of way." McCoy joined Kirk leaning on the rail fence gazing out at the hills. "I thought perhaps you might like to talk."

"Talk? What about?"

McCoy didn't look at him. "Was she very beautiful, Jim?"

Kirk realized that ever since the distress call had come in he had been deliberately avoiding all thoughts of the woman, and it hadn't been doing him much good. Trust McCoy to have realized that! "You know about her?"

"I recognized her name when I was checking the lists of colonists. I remembered you telling me something about her a long time ago. You were fond of one another?"

"I think I still am fond of her," Kirk said. "And she was very beautiful. I introduced them in a way, and I gave her away at the wedding. It seems - a million years ago."

"Why didn't you marry her yourself?" It was a personal question but McCoy was an old friend and Kirk took no offense.

"I guess - it was because I already had a beautiful mistress. That one up there," he raised his eyes towards the cloudless azure blue sky. "It wouldn't have been fair to either of them."

Concerning Kirk's choice between females McCoy wisely kept his council to himself. "According to the lists they had a son."

"Anthony. He'd be - seven now. He was a baby when I last saw him. The only time I saw him. He had his mother's eyes. They were such a happy family."

McCoy put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "We'll find out what happened to them."

"Sure, Bones." Kirk managed a fragile grin.

"I'll have some results on those culture plates in about an hour if you'd care to stop by the sickbay."

"I'll do that, Doctor."

McCoy gave his shoulder another squeeze and stepped away from the fence. He flipped open the lid of his communicator. "McCoy to Enterprise. One to beam up."

With his hands thrust deeply into the pockets of a hip length, warmly hooded jacket, Kirk skirted the settlement at a distance, found a steep but not difficult path leading upwards and followed it to the top of the cliffs overlooking the sea. The wind was blowing from the land now, carrying with it the smell of damp earth and growing things. On the sheltered side of some rocks someone, possibly a child, had planted some primroses. They were not thriving but one of them was lifting a brave bud. Kirk doubted if they would survive long. Two hundred feet below his vantage point the surface of the sea lay like a ruffled sheet of satin, its colour one shade darker than the blue of the sky. A collection of small white clouds floated unsupported a finger's breadth above the horizon. It was going to be a beautiful day. For a moment Kirk could imagine a flotilla of pleasure craft sailing into the bay with white sails flapping, or, further out, a timbered schooner of ancient design with masts straining against the wind. But the illusion faded swiftly. With an ever increasing number of exploitable worlds becoming available it was unlikely that the Federation would authorize a second colonization of this planet with its prospect of long term dependency and the ever present suspicion that what had happened once might happen again.

He remembered how gloriously happy Peggy had been when she'd described the planet to him. The joy had shone out between the lines of her letter, large filmy sheets filled with her tiny handwriting and signed with love. If the barren hills had been made of gold and the seas filled with the sweetest wine she couldn't have had brighter hopes for the future. They had had a blank page on which to write. They were going to build their new world from the bottom up using all that was best from all the other worlds of the known galaxy. Tony was going to grow up where everything was clean and bright. There was to be no ugliness and no misery, nothing that wasn't lovely and loved. Kirk had been happy for her, for all of them. In his mind he pictured her as he had last seen her, standing barefoot in a meadow on Taurus I with the towers of the famous silver city of that world soaring into the sky behind her. She had worn a pink gown trimmed

with white fringes and her ash blonde hair had been blowing free in the wind, swirling round her ivory tinted face. The prettiness of her youth had flowered into the full blown beauty of womanhood. Her lips had been grave with the sorrow of parting but her silver grey eyes had been smiling and she had raised an arm to wave him good-bye.

Kirk realized that the mood of depression was settling on him too. He straightened his back and took several deep head clearing breaths before beaming back up to the Enterprise.

On his way through the starship Kirk made a point of stopping off at the sickbay. McCoy, seated at his desk, looked up from the report form he was filling in. A grin of welcome spread across his face. McCoy was always grateful for any interruption to form filling.

"Hello, Jim. Can I tempt you to a drink while you're here?" The doctor was already reaching for his bottom drawer. Kirk held up a staying hand and shook his head.

"No thanks. It's too early in the morning for me. I called in to see how those culture plates were coming along."

"Come and see for yourself." McCoy put down his stylus and led the way into the adjacent lab. "We killed a representative selection of bacteria and conducted a microscopic examination. We found nothing abnormal, no mutant strains, that is. Even the influenza virus is a common recognizable form and that mutates faster and more dramatically than anything else known to science." McCoy unlocked the door of an incubator and lifted down a sealed tray. Through the clear cover Kirk could see the rows of little dishes inside, some of them stained and veined with thread like filaments, others erupting with little spots and pimples. "These," McCoy pointed with his little finger, "are all common cultures. These three are all varieties of the common cold. This is Rubella. This is Ubian fever. This is blue spot from Tyron VII."

"Blue spot?"

"Sure. One in every hundred of the population is a potential carrier. It's non fatal. Infants in infected areas are immunized at birth. All Star Fleet personnel have regular boosters so we don't spread it round the galaxy. It's no more of a threat than measles was on old Earth, although it's a damn sight less attractive. There's nothing here that could have caused the death of an entire colony, let alone its complete disappearance. But just to make sure..." McCoy fastened the incubator door. "I've introduced the planet's atmosphere into these closed cycle containers."

Kirk studied the sealed transparent boxes with pursed lips. "So far these animals are showing no ill effects," McCoy said. Indeed the white rats were fat and active and not at all sickly.

Kirk tapped on one of the boxes with a finger nail. "I think we're on the wrong road here, Bones. But keep an eye on these animals just the same. Let me know the moment they show any signs of getting sick."

"You bet." McCoy gave him a crooked smile. "If they show the least sign of vanishing you'll hear me holler all through the ship. Now, how about that drink?"

"I'll take you up on that. Just a small one though."

Back in the office McCoy extracted a bottle and a pair of glasses from the bottom drawer of the desk. "This is purely medicinal," he said, pouring two generous measures. "After an early morning stroll downstairs you need something to warm you up. Doctor's orders." He handed Kirk a glass and chinked them brim to brim.

"How's Spock?" he asked, having swallowed an appreciative mouthful.

Kirk looked surprised. "Spock?"

"I'm worried about that man."

"You're always worried about him."

"I guess so," McCoy grinned and shrugged and polished off the rest of his drink. "It's just that he's such a mismatched bundle of complexes and conflicting personality traits. Hell, sometimes he seems almost Human."

Kirk joined in the gentle laughter. "I know what you mean."

"What was all that about last night? Was that some kind of off-beat poetry he was quoting, about music and half forgotten memories?"

"I don't know what it was about. But I do know he was deeply disturbed by it."

"Now who's being a psychologist?"

"I don't know about that." Kirk set his empty glass down on the table. "I know he spent the entire night playing that harp of his. The same tune over and over again as if he were trying to recapture some forgotten air."

McCoy shook his head. "I don't think I ever will understand that Vulcan."

In spite of his sleepless night Spock was at his station working on his sensors when Kirk arrived on the bridge. The captain glanced automatically at the top edge of the planet centred on the screen, exchanged a pleasant word with Uhura's relief and made his way round the balcony to his First Officer's side.

"Any results on those heat spectography experiments, Mr. Spock?"

Spock looked worried. "There can hardly be any results when I have no idea what it is I am hoping to find."

"Life sensors pick up the body heat of warm blooded life forms."

"Life sensors record and report biological temperature differentials."

"That's what I said. Also a sensor probe leaves no traceable residue. If someone had managed to adapt a sensor..."

"Captain." Spock took on a patently patient expression and went back to basics. "A sensor is merely an electronic appendage of comparable abilities to an eye or an ear. It can neither remove, nor disintegrate, nor render invisible, any more than you or I could do so by blinking. Furthermore, if, by some inconceivable means one could be adapted to do so, the expenditure of energy would be formidable. I remind you, there is no trace of residual energy."

Kirk heaved a long sigh. "There's no way it can be made to hold water?"

"I regret not."

"Then that leaves me right back where I started with two dead ends to my credit." Kirk stared morosely at the computer, awaiting inspiration. He was still waiting two minutes later when the helmsman's voice came up from the well of the bridge sounding puzzled.

"Captain, helm sensors just picked something up. Extreme range, coming this way. Rapidly!"

Spock turned to his computer and Kirk moved towards the command seat. "Screens on. Full sensor sweep, maximum range. Someone try to get a picture of it."

For what seemed like an age the bridge crew worked in silence, then Spock turned in his seat. "I have it, Captain. Range five hundred thousand kilometers, and closing, mass, thirty and one half thousand kilograms, speed... approximately warp four hundred."

"That's not possible."

"Never the less..."

Kirk stabbed at the buttons on the arm of the command seat. "Red alert! All hands brace for impact. Engineering, I want warp manoeuvring power and I want it now! Mr. Spock, how close is that thing going to come?"

Spock was staring into the sensor. "It will be a close thing, Captain."

"If it hits us at that speed it'll never even know we were in the way! Engineering, how long...?"

"Three minutes, Captain."

Spock turned from the computer. "Forty-five seconds to point of closest approach."

Kirk gripped the arms of the command seat 'til his knuckles whitened. "There's no time! Mr. Spock... what is that thing?"

The 'thing' was on the screen now, an uncertainly round ball of white and blue and yellow glowing brighter than the brightest star and swelling with unbelievable speed. The screen stepped down its light intake and then blacked out, unable to cope. "Unknown, Captain," Spock said. "Ten seconds."

Kirk shifted uncomfortably in his seat. There was an increasing pressure against his eardrums and he could hear the whistling of his own blood inside his head. "Brace yourselves." The order was

superfluous; the crew was already braced. The seconds ticked away, more seconds than ten, Kirk thought. His ears were painful now. Everyone on the bridge but Spock had their hands clamped to the sides of their heads.

And then the Enterprise reared up in space, her framework screaming, the metal plates of her hull rippling with the impact. For her crew, hurled mercilessly against hard metal, there was universal unconsciousness.

When Kirk came to he was lying spreadeagled on the deck gasping for air like a fish stranded out of water. There was a ripping pain inside his skull and he had the unpleasant sensation that his flesh was crawling over his bones. Something was screeching in his ears making it impossible to think. When he opened his eyes there was only utter darkness beyond his eyelids. He tried to get up and every muscle in his body shrieked protest. With a groan he let himself back down on the deck and concentrated just on breathing, just on staying alive.

"Captain? Jim!" The voice was Spock's and there were strong hands under his armpits, lifting him and setting his pain wracked body down in the command seat. Kirk opened his eyes again. There was some dim light on the bridge now but his vision was blurred and milky. He leaned over the arm of the command seat and was violently sick on the floor. That made him feel a bit better and by contorting his face he was able to distinguish Spock's face just in front of him. The Vulcan looked terrible. His face was paper white and his nose had been bleeding. The blood was still crusted on his upper lip.

"What happened?" Kirk asked, mumbling through bruised and swollen lips.

Spock sat down at his feet, too battered himself to stand any longer. "It passed us by, Jim. It missed us by about a mile."

"Missed us?" There was a pause while Kirk assimilated the fact. Then, with the realization that he was still alive the clamour in his head resolved itself into the howling of the ship's emergency sirens. "The Enterprise - the Enterprise!!!" He tried to get up and couldn't. "The Enterprise!"

Spock moved out of his field of vision and on hands and knees manoeuvred himself across a dangerously sloping deck to the computer station. After a few seconds the sirens became quiet. The silence was absolute. Spock's hand caressed the dead consoles and some tell tales glowed. He catalogued them rapidly in his mind and climbed back down the deck to Kirk. The captain was calling for him weakly. "Spock, the ship, what shape is she in?"

Spock came back to his side. "Uncertain, Captain. Instrumentation is out. However, we can assume that the primary and secondary hulls are more or less intact. Life support systems are functioning and we still have air so there can be no extensive hull damage. We have emergency lighting and the turbo lift system is operative so I suggest we try to reach the sickbay and base our operations there while we see what can be done for the crew."

"Yes, the crew." Kirk pulled himself together and with the help of Spock's offered arm got to his feet. "My crew..."

Kirk looked at the bruised and battered faces that circled the briefing room table. They were good men, the best. They had been a hairsbreadth from absolute destruction and they had got back onto their feet and put themselves and the ship back together. "Gentlemen," he said. "Now that the first emergency can be considered over I've called you all together so that we can ascertain the condition of the ship and the crew and find out what our priorities have to be. Mr. Scott, perhaps you'd begin by bringing us up to date with ship's status?"

"Aye." Scott, with a badly blacked eye, a long cut along the cheekbones and a heavily bandaged left arm, looked old and tired but the light in his open eye was one of fierce pride. "If I'd been told in advance what to expect I'd've said the old lady would have come apart at the seams. We've a few buckled plates in the bow and a split seam just aft of the computer core but apart from that she's structurally sound. The engines are fine but quite a bit of the instrumentation needs repair. The transport'll be out for another forty-eight hours but I'm expecting good news on the starboard side gravitation units at any minute."

A collective sigh travelled round the table. "Thank heavens for that," McCoy said. "With the ship at this crazy angle everyone aboard could do with one leg longer than the other."

Kirk agreed. "It'll be good to get back on an even keel. Bones, how are the crew?"

The doctor shifted his position to ease a stiff leg and a collection of cracked ribs. "Well, apart from the six dead that you already know about, there wasn't a man aboard that didn't need treatment. I've got fifty six still in sickbay and another hundred and three requiring continuing treatment including Scotty here, and yourself. Almost all the serious injuries are the result of falls, cuts, bruises, broken bones. Yeoman Dummar suffered a hairline fracture of the skull when some loose equipment fell on her but I've every hope that she'll make a full recovery. The strange thing is, there are a large number of concussive injuries. Minor haemorrhaging, unconsciousness, dizziness, breathing difficulties, things like that."

"If the doctor will allow me I think I can offer an explanation," Spock said, sitting forward in his chair and clasping his hands on the table. Of all of them he had escaped with the least injury, due perhaps to his greater strength and resilience, but his face was colourful. His eyes were ringed with emerald bruises and his lips, split in a fall, were smeared with yellow ointment. Kirk looked at McCoy, saw that he had finished and nodded. "There is no doubt," Spock went on, "that the cause of our near destruction was the close approach of a vessel travelling at speeds approaching warp four hundred and two." He paused a moment to allow that to sink in. Scott shook his head in grudging admiration. "The concussive injuries were caused by the hull and its contents being suddenly and briefly compressed by a wave of passing pressure - the bow wave, if you like, of the alien ship."

Kirk frowned at him. "Pressure waves can't travel through space, Mr. Spock."

"Everything is relative, Captain, even the vacuum of space."

Particles too small and sparse to relate to us even at warps ten and eleven would be swept up by a vessel travelling at forty times that speed to form a substantial bow wave. It was the friction of those particles that made the ship appear to glow as it approached. Had it not been for the efficiency of our shields I fear that the Enterprise and everyone aboard would have been riddled with sub-atomic punctures."

The starship officers exchanged long uncomfortable looks and Kirk swallowed hard. "It seems we were luckier than we knew, Mr. Spock. What about the nature of the alien ship, its design, its propulsion?"

"No data, Captain. All we have are the basic vital statistics picked up by our sensors. Weight, mass... generally half again the size of the Enterprise."

"Do we know anything else about it at all... apart from basics?"

Spock steepled his fingers. "We know the direction it came from. We know the direction it went."

"At the moment I'm more interested in where it went," Kirk said.

"Into uncharted space, heading in a direct line for a radio source some four thousand and ten point seven parsecs distant."

McCoy whistled soundlessly. "That's a hell of a long way."

"It is that." Scott raised his undamaged eyebrow at him. "But I'd dearly like to get a look at those engines."

Kirk looked from face to face. "So, gentlemen, I have a command decision to make and I'm asking for your recommendations."

"We have to replace the forward plates and repair the sprung seam before we leave orbit, sir, or she'll come apart under warp drive," Scott asserted.

"And we have to get our men up off the planet," McCoy put in. "They're keeping healthy enough with the resources of the colony at their disposal, but the bottom's falling out of their morale."

"We'll get them up, Doctor. Spock, Scotty, engineering priorities are the hull and the transporter. Bones, your work's already cut out for you. Mr. Spock, what I have to decide is whether we stay here and keep trying to find out what happened to the colonists, or if we take a three week trip to see if we can find that ship, who owns it, and what makes it tick."

"I feel we are unlikely to make any progress here."

Kirk thought and nodded slowly. "That's what we do then. Effect repairs, check ship's systems and get on the trail of that ship."

With a general murmur of agreement the officers made their various ways to the door, Kirk and McCoy limping on opposite legs and gripping each other's elbows for support.

Ten minutes later the deck gave a nauseating lurch and gradually settled into the horizontal as the starship's artificial gravity balanced itself once more. A spontaneous cheer resounded through the

corridors.

With the blue white glory of Delta Sarroga twenty full days behind her and lost in the general luminous haze that was the spiral arm of the galaxy seen from afar, the Enterprise was nosing her way with justifiable caution towards the heart of a hitherto unrecorded nebula. Her journey, which had involved the crossing of the starless desert between the spiral arm and the central lens of the galaxy, had been an uneventful one and it had allowed time for the ship and her crew to finish licking their wounds and recuperate. Now, with the known starfields far behind and the new unknown ahead there was an electric excitement aboard.

Kirk dragged his eyes from the intricate and infinitely slow twistings of the blue and purple gas cloud and looked over Spock's shoulder. In the past two hours Spock had had precious little time to admire the nebula for its purely aesthetic beauty. His attention had been and was still divided equally and completely between the ship's various sensors, watching, listening, feeling with the ship's own nerve endings for obscured danger. Even with a team of highly trained specialists to assist him his job was a difficult one and the starship's progress necessarily slow. And all the while on the other side of the bridge Chief Engineer Scott fretted over the temperature gauges as the cloud thickened and the friction against the hull increased.

Speaking slowly in a well modulated voice designed not to distract too much of the Vulcan's attention from his work Kirk embarked on a line of questioning often undertaken in previous weeks. "Is there any sign of a residual energy trail from that alien ship?"

As always the answer was the same. "Negative. No direct evidence that it passed this way at all."

Kirk sighed. In the open tractless reaches of the star desert it was possible that they could have missed the trail, that it could have dispersed, that it might have been blown away by a vagrant ionic wind, but here in the heart of a gas nebula with its high density of reflective particles the path should have been preserved and plain for everyone to see. He was suddenly uncertain. "Perhaps it didn't come here at all. Perhaps it changed course."

"A course change at such speeds would require a vast wastage of energy, so vast that it would be totally uneconomic except under conditions of dire emergency. In a star desert such as we have just traversed it would have been unwarranted by all standard laws of navigation."

"I know." Kirk turned and leaned his rump against the edge of the console, his eyes once more drawn towards the screen. "You point the ship where you want to go and keep on going 'til you get there."

"And they did come here."

"Then how do you explain this lack of energy residue?"

Spock raised one eye to him and one eyebrow at him. "I do not explain it, I merely report it."

"Speculation?"

Spock spared him one more brief uneasy glance. "Do you insist, Captain?"

It was the closest he had come to volunteering information in a long time. Kirk decided to press him.

"I insist, Mr. Spock."

It was Spock's turn to sigh - a small, unhappy sigh. "I can only envision a method of propulsion completely unknown to us, which incorporates, among other things, total conversion." He saw Kirk's objection in advance. "It would be the product of a science as far above ours as ours is above that of the internal combustion engine. Captain, we are endeavouring to tamper with something that has not evolved naturally from our own science."

"We've done that before."

"But not on this scale. A technology of total conversion - practical, limitless power - could be culturally and physiologically disastrous to the Federation. We are not socially prepared for such an advancement and may well be destroyed by it."

"You're talking about cultural shock."

"There are many reliably reported instances throughout history to prove the theory."

"If that ship does have a total conversion drive then we're on the verge of the greatest technological breakthrough of all time. Are you suggesting we turn our backs on it and go home?"

"It might be the prudent thing to do. Even the knowledge that it may exist could cause long term disruption of our normal scientific development."

Kirk gazed at the screen, fluorescing brighter now with tinges of pink amid the purple and blue. Somewhere in the heart of the nebula, he knew by instinct, he would find the answer to an age old mystery and at the same time end the galaxy's energy problems for all time, but Spock's words were spoken with the sweet voice of reason.

Time and again on Earth it had been proven that the toys of a higher technology could be the downfall of a lesser, and throughout the galaxy diminished and vanished civilizations showed evidence of the same deadly influx of knowledge. Of such rationale the Prime Directive had been conceived. Should not he, as captain, apply that one unbreakable rule in reverse to his own microcosm of humanity? But he wanted very much to possess the secret, both for himself and for his race. The decision was his, and the time in which he had to make it was growing short.

Spock's distractedly neutral voice interrupted his reverie. "Our sensors have located a stellar mass inside the nebula. Course one six mark six."

Kirk stepped down into the well of the bridge. "Lay in that course, Helmsman." For several seconds he studied the screen. "I don't see it, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan looked over his shoulder. "Its visible light is being absorbed by the gas cloud. It is, however, emitting powerful radio pulses on all frequencies. Indications are of a small,

intensely hot star, possibly a blue dwarf."

Kirk sat down in the command seat and watched the screen. The luminous gas clouds of the nebula pressed closer about the Enterprise, blinding her, deafening her, so that it was with the most tenuous of senses that she felt her way, and at the same time it shielded from her with its beauty the secret at its heart.

Shifting, twisting, glowing veils hung before the starship, shot through with silver, so dense as to be almost impenetrable, but in that moment they began to thin as if cobweb curtains were drawn aside. For a moment the screen darkened, and then began to glow again and fill with a stronger, more direct radiance, blue and silver. Kirk squinted against the glare even as the screen backed down its light intake to minimum. The star was indeed a blue dwarf, a rarity among stars, barely bigger than a large planet. A shimmering blue white orb that burned with a ferocity that defied the eternal dark of space and held at a far distance those nebular clouds that were the spawning of its own nova, sending them fleeing outwards with fierce solar winds and creating about itself an area of clear space in which it blazed with unrivalled splendour. Its light flooded the bridge, scarcely abated it seemed by the dimming effect of the screen, putting to shame the feeble illuminations of man. Kirk for a moment imagined he could feel its heat searing his face. The awesome glory of it put all thoughts of turning back out of his mind. Transfixed he raised a hand in Spock's direction. "Are we in any danger, Science Officer?"

"Negative." Spock's eyes were glued to his sensors. "At this range the radiation is within our shielding capacities. We must, however, maintain our distance."

"Are there any planets in attendance?"

"One, in a wide orbit. Although I can offer no explanation as to how it survived the star's nova phase."

"At the moment I'm not asking you to explain." Kirk leaned forward in his seat and studied the helm console. "Lay in a course for the planet that won't take us too close to the star." Spock shot him a glance but said nothing. The blue dwarf star drifted out of the screen and was replaced by the distant wall of nebular haze glowing brightly white in the star's light.

When it first appeared on the screen the planet displayed a milky disk and the hazy outline that denoted possession of a substantial atmosphere. As they approached it and it grew larger on the screen details began to emerge. From pole to pole it was enveloped in an even white blanket of cloud. One hemisphere was edged with an unbearably bright white light reflected directly from the sun. The rest of the cloud was uniformly hued with the softer tones of the nebula. There were no breaks in the cloud and no way of determining visually what might lie on the surface below.

"Venus, how beautiful thou art in all thy shrouded glory. What untold mysteries lie concealed within thy breast?"

Kirk looked up in surprise, unaware until that moment that McCoy was at his shoulder. "Why, Bones, I didn't know you were a poet."

"It's not mine." McCoy chuckled dryly at the thought. "It was written a long time ago when they were first exploring the home planets."

Kirk looked again at the planet now burgeoning to fill the screen. There were vague bandings visible now in the cloud structures. "It certainly is a beautiful sight. Helmsman, put us into orbit. Mr. Spock..." Kirk left the command seat and moved towards the computer. McCoy followed still watching the screen. "Sensor readings of the planet's surface?"

"Apparently 'M' type. One large continental mass. Several smaller islands. Temperature an overall seventy five degrees varying only a little between the equator and the poles. The even distribution of heat and humidity is probably due to the cloud cover. The atmosphere is compatible with humanoid life although somewhat rich in certain trace elements."

"Life forms?"

At this query Spock frowned, recalibrated his sensor and frowned again. "Most curious, Captain. Sentient life forms are abundant and varied. Quite remarkably so, and there are among them some that could not have evolved here. They appear to be sub-divided into communities, each with its own specific territory, and there is little intermingling between the species. Technology is on a very basic level. There is no generated power in evidence."

"And no total conversion reactor?" Kirk sighed. "It doesn't make sense."

"Captain," Spock was studying the sensor screen with scowling intensity. "I am picking up readings from what appears to be a settlement of human beings."

McCoy glared at him. "You mean humanoids, Spock."

"Negative, Doctor. The biological configuration is of homo sapiens." He touched the computer and the lights flowed between his fingers. "Some seven hundred and eighteen individuals."

"Seven hundred and..." Kirk stared at him. "That's the exact number of people missing from the Delta Sarroga colony!"

"I'll get my medical kit." McCoy was already turning towards the turbo lift. Spock looked at Kirk in concern.

"I ask you to reconsider the advisability of exposing our culture to a technology so far in advance of it."

McCoy turned back, angry. "Jim! I have to get down there to those people. They might be sick, injured... women, children!"

Kirk nodded in complete agreement. "McCoy is right. And in any case your sensors reveal no evidence of an advanced technology. Until we ascertain the situation those people must be considered at risk. We're beaming down. At once!"

With the Enterprise left secure in the charge of her engineering officer together with instructions to flee at the first sign of the express train approach of the alien ship, Kirk beamed down with Spock and McCoy and a trio of security guards. They materialized in a parklike woodland. Beneath their feet was an undulating expanse of neat lawn. Dotted about in an apparently random fashion was a variety of strange trees, smooth slender stems with dense masses of

tiny green and white star-shaped leaves at intervals all the way to the top fully ninety feet above their heads, shorter willowy types thatched with bunches of slender yellow leaf, round humped shapes of ribbed umbrella like leaves in a dark, almost blue green shade, low tangles of pale-stemmed tiny-leafed shrubs. Each tree had the room it needed to grow into a perfect specimen of its kind with a stretch of fresh green grass between. Above the tree tops the sky was a dome of pure unbroken whiteness. The sun shone strongly through the cloud cover and although it cast few shadows it was very warm on their backs.

While Kirk and McCoy made a tentative examination of their surroundings, picking some of the small white flowers that grew in clumps in the grass, estimating the height of the tallest tree, walking to the top of a slight rise in the land to see what lay beyond, Spock made a painstaking investigation with the tricorder. As he researched the look of concern on his face deepened. Kirk, speculating with McCoy about the nature of a faint path worn in the grass, saw the look. "What is it, Mr. Spock?"

"Very strange, Captain. I am recording traces of structures so inestimably ancient as to be beyond the scope of the tricorder. Indications are of an immense metropolis extending from this point in all directions for an immeasurable distance."

Kirk looked perplexed. "There's no trace of it now."

"It has completely vanished. All that remains are vague disruptions of the planet's magnetic and gravitational fields."

"Jim!" McCoy's hiss was impatient and it snapped Kirk's attention back to the practicalities. "The people!"

"Yes, of course. Spock," Kirk looked at the Vulcan. "Which way?"

Without recourse to the tricorder Spock indicated a direction and the landing party set off across the grass.

As the green sward unfurled itself about them it looked more and more like a large elaborately laid out park. The common forms of tree abounded and here and there were special rare specimens, a dome shaped mound of red and orange flowers which glowed with a faint luminescence and from a distance for all the world like a blazing fire, a twenty foot tall pillar of flat overlapping plates of dark vegetable flesh that exuded the powerful odour of spiced stale socks. There were birds with iridescent black and green plumes and colourful multi-winged butterflies in the air and once, a long way off they glimpsed a group of pale skinned animals with blunt heads and large timid eyes but they were up and skittering away on tiny lightning fast feet long before the landing party drew near.

Before long the roll of the land took a downward turn. The trees began to thin and the individual specimens were smaller and less mature. Spock, with an eye on the tricorder, slightly altered the direction of their march and at last emerged altogether from the woodland and stood on a gentle down sloping hillside.

The luxuriously verdant grassland continued to make a fine meadow surrounded on all sides by trees, while in the remote distance there was a suggestion of purple mountains. A stream twisted and turned through the meadow, purple reeds fringed its deep cut banks, green fronded water weed waved in its slow current, sandbanks edged

its shallower bends to form narrow beaches at the water's edge. Someone had thrown a crude bridge between the banks. On the far side there were grazing animals that looked remarkably like terrestrial cattle. Upon the nearer bank was the encampment - it could be called nothing more - of the transplanted population of Delta Sarroga.

Those people, who had set out so bravely to build a new world, had been reduced to the lowest ebb of civilized humanity. Their dwellings were merely scrapes in the ground, some of them roofed with cast-off clothing on a frame of supple branches. The smoke from smouldering cooking fires rose straight up in thin wispy columns. A baby's wail could be heard clearly on the still afternoon air.

Kirk, to the credit of his modesty, had never arrived anywhere anticipating an open armed welcome, but the blank apathy he encountered now was something which, under the circumstances, he found astounding. The children scarcely looked up from their play. The women watched them pass with empty eyed curiosity as if it were only the bright colours of their uniforms that attracted their attention. There were not many of the menfolk in evidence and those that were were gathering in a tight knot, heads together, watching the starship officers' approach.

It was one of them, a man Kirk recognized from the records as Elak Pazarrich, a white negroid native of one of the Arcadian planets and statutory commander of the Delta Sarroga colony, that stepped forward to meet them. He raised a hand in a formalized gesture of welcome. "Greetings, friends."

"Huh - greetings." Kirk caught himself aping the gesture and folded his arms to keep them firmly under control. "We - er - we're very glad to find you alive and well, Commander, even if you are a long way from home."

"This is home." Pazarrich indicated the encampment with a restrained sweep of the arm. "And I am leader here, but what is this word 'commander'?"

Kirk shot a long look at Spock who merely raised a non-committal eyebrow. "You don't know me, sir?" Kirk inquired of Pazarrich. "You don't recognise these uniforms?"

The puzzlement on Pazarrich's face was deepening. "You are friends," he said, but there was a note of uncertainty in his voice. Kirk felt the physiological press of the crowd that had gathered in behind the landing party. Their attitude was by no means hostile but like Pazarrich they were unsure of these strangers, for it was as strangers that they saw them. Kirk felt his shirt sticking to the fresh sweat on his back. The only sounds that came to his ears were those of the stream running deep in its bed, and the whimpering of a child. Anxiously his eyes searched the sea of faces for the one he could recognise.

He found her at last, standing with a group of other women. Her fair hair was dishevelled and the pale green tunic she wore stained, but the delicate bone structure of her face and her beautiful eyes were unmistakable, unforgettable. He took her by the arm and drew her forward. "Peggy, Peg, you remember me? Jim Kirk?"

Creases formed themselves across her forehead and her eyes filled with confusion. "I don't know you. I've never seen you before."

Kirk, aware of the uneasy shifting of the crowd, resisted the urge to shake her. He looked at McCoy, "Bones, what is it? What's the matter with them all?"

McCoy had his medical scanner in his hand and was studying the results on his tricorder. "Induced simple amnesia, Jim. With some pre-conditioning. Be gentle with her. Remind her."

Kirk eased what he knew was a ferocious grip on the woman's arm. He tried to dismiss from his mind all the eyes that were watching him, tried to make it a private thing between the woman and himself. "Think hard, Peggy. I want you to try to remember. A black velvet night on Catatala. You wore that long grey silk dress that you brought with you from Earth and you'd piled your hair up on the back of your head." He gathered her unbrushed tresses in his hand. "We danced the whole night in that little club on the top of the highest mountain, and then we watched the sun come up over the edge of the world." His forefinger traced the line of her jaw as it had once done so many times. She was still frowning but the panic had died from her eyes. They were thoughtful. In the corner of Kirk's eye McCoy nodded encouragement. "Remember the time we walked for hours through the Cyclopean foothills of Sceptre six. You slipped and twisted your ankle and I had to carry you all the way home. Remember the art gallery where you met John. You were standing beside the light sculptures and he said how lovely you were with the different colours moving across your hair."

"John." His face cleared a little. She looked long and searchingly into his face and he saw recognition dawn slowly in her eyes. "You - you were John's friend. Jim - Jim Kirk!" Her gaze swept the faces of her fellow colonists, the encampment, the greenness of the meadow and the trees beyond and fell finally on Pazarrich. "They've found us!" She cried. "Don't you see? The Federation has found us!"

It was as if her words broke a strange enchantment. A rising murmur of joy came from many throats and Peggy flung herself weeping into Kirk's arms.

An hour later Kirk sat down with his First Officer and Elak Pazarrich, cross legged beside the embers of an outdoor fire to discuss the pattern of events. McCoy, with the crying baby installed in his arms, had proclaimed himself fully occupied with preliminary health checks, and was absent.

Kirk sipped a bitter brew that bore no resemblance at all to coffee from a crudely shaped gourd-like vessel. He pulled a sour face. "The sooner we get you aboard the Enterprise and away from the necessity of having to drink this stuff the better."

Pazarrich favoured him with his slow rich smile. "Pretty foul, isn't it? But it does its job."

Spock had been scanning the liquid with his tricorder. "Indeed, Captain, tricorder analysis indicates that the beverage contains a variety of mild stimulants and narcotics which would prove beneficial in cases of fatigue."

Kirk eyed him over the rim of his cup. "I don't see you drinking any, Mr. Spock." Spock looked suitably affronted. Pazarrich obviously enjoyed the exchange. It carried with it the

needs of human normalacy, the flower of which he had found noticeably lacking in recent weeks.

"With the limited facilities we have my chemists have assured me that it's not poisonous. Seriously though, Captain," he said to Kirk, "do you think you'll be able to find room for us all aboard your ship?"

"We'll find room." Kirk was definite, steely eyed. "Rest assured, no-one will be left behind. However it will take some time to organize so while Doctor McCoy will have urgent cases transported to sickbay right away I'm afraid that unless some desperate emergency arises I shall have to ask the rest of you to remain here while we rearrange ourselves to make room."

Pazarrich nodded. "Of course, Captain. I quite understand. So far we've been shown no actual hostility."

"That might change now that we're here. Meanwhile, Mr. Spock and I have a list of questions and we'd like to start marking off some answers."

"To begin with," Spock said, "could you describe the method of your removal from Delta Sarroga. We received your distress signal but it gave no details."

Pazarrich scowled and his face became lined with an ancient worry as he tried to remember. "It's all a puzzle. Some of those mental blocks must still be operating. The details are fuzzy and confused, Commander Spock, and fading fast. They appeared out of a clear blue sky and they were on us in a matter of moments. Heaven knows what form of propulsion they use. They came down in hemispherical landing craft. They looked just like bubbles, two of them, but the odd thing was that if you looked closely at the hulls the plates looked as if they were concave rather than convex." He looked from Spock to Kirk and saw that neither of them fully understood. Helpless to explain further he pushed on. "They found everyone. The women, the children, even though we tried to hide them, and they herded us into the ships. Ourselves and the animals, even the children's pets. We must have been in some sort of hypnotic daze. We weren't able to resist them. I don't recall even wanting to. The voyage itself is just a mix up of confused impressions. It couldn't have lasted very long. We never did get a look at their starship. The landing and how we came to be here is just a blank space in my mind. Until you came we believed that this was where we had always been and this was where we belonged."

"You refer to 'them' and 'they' sir. Can you tell us what they looked like?"

Pazarrich suppressed a shudder that marked him as an administrator and not a scientist. "Great black creatures, taller and broader than a man. They had flexible webbed claws instead of fingers and their bodies were encased in massive double shells like a turtle's."

Kirk looked at Spock who shook his head gravely. "The race is unknown to me, Captain."

"And to me. Mr. Pazarrich, is there anything else you can tell us about them? Their weaponry? Their numbers?"

"Nothing else, Captain. We haven't seen another intelligent

being since we found ourselves here. We've been left to fend for ourselves with our own animals and what tools we could make for ourselves. There are various creatures in the woods that make good eating if you can catch them, various fruit bearing trees, a sort of fish in the stream here. We could survive but it would be hard. The work of generations."

"It might surprise you to know that there are other colonies of intelligent life scattered round the planet, presumably abducted like yourselves. Although I suppose you've been too busy surviving to do much in the way of exploration," Kirk said. Pazarrich shook his head doubtfully. "I think, Mr. Spock," Kirk went on, "that you and I had better look into this matter a little more deeply."

"I agree, Captain. And I suggest we begin with a structure not far from here. Tricorder readings are indefinite, but it appears to be a building of great size and great antiquity, and it is inhabited."

"Very good, Mr. Spock." Kirk got up and dusted off the legs of his trousers. "We'll take a walk in that direction while Doctor McCoy finishes his examinations and Mr. Pazarrich arranges for transportation and stowage with Mr. Scott."

Kirk discovered, as he had discovered before and subsequently forgotten, that in many abstract things such as the assessment of weight or the judgement of distance, Spock, despite his long association with Humankind, still thought in Vulcan terms. Consequently his 'not far' turned out to be a considerable distance. Spock's long loose-limbed stride covered the ground easily, but Kirk, with his human physiology and slight weight problem found it sometimes difficult to keep up. The conditions of climate were against him. The heat and humidity seemed to increase as the afternoon wore on toward evening, rather than growing less as he had expected. It was the greenhouse effect, Spock explained. Kirk found himself sweating again and looking forward with part of his mind to the time when he could shower and change into a fresh clean uniform. By the time they had arrived almost at their destination he was damp and short of breath and had a cramping pain in the backs of his legs.

The ordered landscape had unrolled itself about them in much the same manner as before, although the trees had become fewer and for the most part the tricorder had led them through glades and open meadows.

Finally Kirk stopped before a somewhat steeper hillside that obscured their view of everything that lay beyond. The perspiration was running down his face and he was panting a little from exertion but that was not why he stopped. "Spock," he called to the Vulcan. "Come and look at this." Spock returned with the tricorder and made a study of the thing at Kirk's feet.

It appeared to be part of a shattered roadway which, the indentations in the land proclaimed, had led to the North and the South. Massive slabs of deeply grooved metal were embedded in the ground. The close short grass had grown up between them and all but covered them and one or two had been twisted out of line. Even without the tricorder they could see that the metal was very old. Although uncorroded it was grey and powdery looking, dead. The grooves had once been lined with a bright reflective surface but most of this had vanished. Spock touched a patch that remained and it

crumbled away beneath his finger tips. "This was a frictionless surface," he announced.

Kirk got up from his knees and looked away to the North, imagining how the highway had looked in bygone aeons; a broad metal strip pointing straight as an arrow into the heart of the distant mountains. What sort of vehicle had fitted these grooves? What fantastic speeds had they achieved with their frictionless drives and limitless power? What curious creatures had ridden them and where were they now?

He turned to make a remark to Spock but found that the Vulcan was paying him no attention at all. He was listening, rather, facing the hill with his head on one side, a rapt expression on his face. The tricorder, still set to record, was forgotten in his hand.

"Spock? What is it?"

For several moments Spock didn't respond but when he turned to look at Kirk his eyes were filled with a deep longing. "I heard the music again," he said. "The same that I heard on Delta Sarroga but clearer, closer."

Kirk listened hard but heard nothing. "Whatever it is we came all this way to find," he said, "it's just over that hill. I can - feel it."

In the stillness of the late afternoon the two men climbed the hillside and stood at last on the summit looking down into the wide shallow valley that spread itself prostrate at their feet. The green lawns continued, spotted here and there with spreading green and gold trees. In the distance was the darker green of true forest rising upwards into the misty purple of the mountains. But this was only the groundwork of the picture for there, so vividly that it might have been a child's toy only a few steps away, in a shallow depression in the valley floor, stood the building.

Looking at it they could begin to understand the strange visual twist of the dimensions that Pazarrich had been unable to describe. It was a perfect oval. The straight smooth featureless walls appeared to curve inwards in a wasp waisted fashion. The domed roof curved inwards and yet met at the top to be crowned by a flattened globe that bore a peculiar cryptic symbol. The whole structure glowed with an inner light and that light pulsed through the metal opal walls and roof, pink white and blue white and faintly yellow. Some fantastic beacon of alien comprehension.

And as they looked at it in a sort of stunned unthinking wonder the music came again and this time, with no trees or hills or gulfs of interstellar space between, Kirk heard it as well. A host of alien voices raised in a haunting complex of melody that lifted and lilted and fell in time to the pulsing light within the building. It spoke to his soul and his soul answered it with a cry of yearning. He saw in his mind the Earth as he had last seen her, blue and green and beautiful in her mantle of white.

The sound that was not really a sound, the sound that they heard with their minds rather than their ears, washed over them in waves, rising to a tidal climax and then fading until nothing was left of it but a dying murmur. It neither called them nor repulsed them but while it was there it reminded them with heart rending poignancy of things that had been. When it was gone they were left with an inestimable sense of loss. A cooler, vagrant breeze touched at their

skins through their clothes.

Spock lifted the tricorder and scanned the valley and the strange edifice it contained. "Life forms, Captain. Inside the building. Humanoids and several others which are of no previously recorded type."

"Humanoids." Kirk glared at the building trying to summon the indignation they had felt upon first discovering the colonists and their conditions, but it was difficult. The alien music had swept away his anger. "At least we can make an attempt to talk to them. Let's go, Mr. Spock."

"Captain, this building is the only construction of any significance remaining on this planet. It is logical to assume that the inhabitants are masters of the planet and the possessors of the total conversion technology."

Kirk, who had started downhill toward the valley, turned back. "Not only that, Mr. Spock. Their ship, that building, the fact that their screening devices successfully concealed them and their - construction, from our sensor probes indicate that their level of scientific advancement is far ahead of anything we ever dreamed of. But higher order of technology or not, whoever's running this planet is responsible for the abduction of Federation personnel, and it's up to you and me to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Without waiting for further protest Kirk resumed his downward march and after a moments hesitation Spock followed, several paces behind and his reluctance increasing with every step of the way.

The structure in the valley was much further away and a great deal larger than they had at first supposed. The purple dusk of the planet was closing in around them when they arrived at the wide base of veined metal on which the monolith stood. It towered so high above their heads that they had to tip their heads back to look at it. In either direction the walls curved away and vanished into a twist of perspective, pulsing slowly and steadily with cold bright light.

All the way down from the top of the hill they had become increasingly aware of the absolute silence. It was as if they trod sacred ground upon which nothing living dared trespass. They saw nothing that moved, not the pale fleet footed creatures they had seen in the woods nor their larger red cousins that grazed the meadows, nor the raven plumed birds nor even the tiny bright cased insects that lived each in its individual hole in the grass roots and made the late afternoon elsewhere loud with their whistling. As the afternoon had become evening and the clouds had lost their bright whiteness and taken on the darkening subdued tones of the nebula it had seemed as if their very breathing was an intrusion on the stillness, as if a million watchful eyes noted every step they took, as if the alien structure crouched lower into its hollow awaiting them like the shrine of some long forgotten and jealous God. Now they stood before it and it gave no sign that it was aware even of their existence.

Kirk wiped his sleeve across his face and caught his breath while he studied the walls rising sheer above him. They were featureless except for its mottled blue and pink colouring and a suggestion of slightly darker veining.

"Mr. Spock?" he asked over his shoulder.

Spock had been at work with his tricorder. "The entities are inside, Captain. Quiescent."

"Are they indeed." Kirk scowled at the edifice. "How do we get inside? Go up and bang on the wall with a rock?"

"That would be a method of gaining the attention of those within."

Kirk, knowing the Vulcan's mood, decided to take that statement at face value and cast about for a suitably sized stone. He was however, saved the necessity. While his back was turned a portion of the wall turned into a shimmering mist which quickly dissipated and left an oval opening which gave both visual and physical access to the bright white lit chamber that lay beyond. Spock, who had witnessed the transformation, touched Kirk on the shoulder. "Captain," he said quietly.

Kirk turned and saw the portal and the being that stood just inside.

He - they regarded it automatically in their minds as being male - was the same height and general configuration as a man. He stood erect with his body covered by the pleats of a simple, faintly luminous white garment that resembled a loose shroud. His hands were folded before him, hidden in his sleeves in an attitude of Tibetan contemplation. The cowl of his robe was thrown back to reveal his head and it was his head that demanded their immediate attention. The cranium was totally devoid of hair and bulged forward over the forehead making the whole head appear too large and heavy for the body. The skin was translucent and stretched tightly over a softened and blunted bone structure. The nose was no more than the suggestion of a ridge down the centre of the face, the nostrils two small black holes. The mouth was a pale lipless slash between hollow cheeks. The ears were tiny fleshy frills around small openings in the side of the head. But it was the eyes that dominated. They were enormous, lidless, protruding forward and sideways out of the face; twin black faceted orbs that glittered with an intense intelligence.

The creature regarded them for several seconds without any noticeable expression. Then he bowed, very slightly from the region where his hips might have been. His lips remained still but he spoke clearly into their minds. "Be welcome, Captain Kirk and Spock of Vulcan. We have witnessed your coming from afar and have been awaiting you." With no apparent movement beneath the robe he shifted his position to one side of the portal, inviting them to enter.

Kirk took a deep breath. "Come along, Spock. Let's go and see what this is all about."

Spock hung back. "Captain, I must advise you that I consider this most unwise."

Kirk, his feet already on the metal platform, turned back, his hands clenching in anger. "All right, you've advised me," he snapped back. "Often and long. If you'd prefer not to come stay out here and wait for me. In any case," his voice softened, "one man can't induce shock in an entire culture even if I do learn more than is good for me." With that he turned his back on the Vulcan and started towards the portal and the watchful figure inside.

Spock, still clutching the tricorder, gazed after him. His face was a study of misery, his eyes filled with hurt and apprehension. All his instincts screamed at him that here lay inestimable danger to himself and to the diverse culture to which he belonged, but his heart told him that where Kirk, whom he loved and to whom he owed loyalty and life itself, went, there also he must go. He looked indecisively at the tricorder and at the fast gathering darkness, shifted his weight from one foot to the other in the manner of an uncomfortable small boy and finally with a very unhappy sigh made up his mind in what was for him the only possible way. He shouldered the tricorder, stepped up onto the platform and followed his captain into the brightness of the interior.

There was a slight resistance as they passed through the portal as if a mild forcefield were in operation, keeping the night air out and the internal atmosphere in. It brushed their hands and faces like electrically charged cobwebs and set their skins tingling. The robed figure bowed once more and turned to lead them, moving with the ease of one who floated rather than walked.

The interior of the building was divided not into rooms or chambers but rather into areas, separated one from the other by some solid yet indefinable white substance that formed not walls but partitions, the whole lit by bright white radiance that shone down from the limitless roof area. They passed several more similarly robed aliens, numbering perhaps six in all, two of them walking side by side with their hoods drawn forward and low down over their faces, one operating a complex piece of faceted crystal and silver metal equipment which the starship officers had no chance to observe and the function of which they could not begin to guess.

Their guide turned to them at last and addressed them with his mind. "It is desired that you should remain here and await my return. I will go now to inform the..." here he uttered a word that their minds could not translate but which bore the flavour of 'father' and 'master' and carried the overtones of fondness reserved for a loved child "...that you have arrived." He moved away and disappeared through one of the oddly and uniquely shaped openings.

They found themselves in an irregularly shaped area of uncertain size, roofed only by the expanse of mistily bright space above their heads. While Spock scanned a slow circle with his tricorder Kirk unhitched his communicator and tried to call the Enterprise, and then McCoy. There was no response from either quarter. He snapped the device shut and turned a meaningful eye on Spock. "We're cut off. Apparently their defenses are still very much in operation."

Spock looked non-committal but before he could make any relevant comment their privacy was invaded by an entity they recognised at once from Pazarrich's description as one of those that had carried out the abduction of the colonists and piloted the alien starship. Pazarrich, due perhaps to his failing memory, had not conveyed the assault the creature's appearance made upon the senses, the queasy lurching of the stomach, the sudden unbidden desire of the legs to retreat. Its bulk was impressive. It stood head and shoulders above Spock and was as broad as the span of his arms. Pin head eyes gleamed redly from a black bullet shaped head. The whorled and polished plates of its shell hinged across the middle to allow flexibility to the softer parts inside. All four limbs were as thick and as shapeless as the legs of an elephant and covered with a rough leathery hide, but each hand ended in half a dozen joined talons that bespoke all the dexterity of a man's hand. The creature exuded the odour of sour pond water. Its breathing made the sound of a leaky

bellows pump wheezing in time to the regular inflation of air sacs just visible beneath its armpits. It produced a deep and rapid clicking sound somewhere down inside what ought to have been its chest but if this was an attempt to communicate neither Kirk nor Spock was able to respond. They had retreated to the furthest wall and were staring at the creature with the same transfixed expressions that Pazarrich and the colonists had worn. There was a numbness in their bodies and in their minds. Neither would obey the frantic demands of instinct and reason. The creature began to advance towards them, shuffling on great splayed feet that still bore a vestigial trace of webbing. Its body swayed from side to side as it shifted its centre of gravity to keep itself upright. As it came closer it lifted its right hand towards them and they could see almost lost in the folds of its palm a small device with a control knob and a tiny metal edged nozzle. It could have been anything. Their confused minds thought of it as a weapon.

They did not notice the robed alien return. They became aware that he was back only when he stepped forward, not between them and the black creature but into their line of sight. They neither saw nor heard anything but they received the impression that he thought sharply at it. The creature withdrew at once, turning and shuffling out. The officers found themselves weak at the knees and sweating, but freed of their terrible fascination. The alien was looking at them.

"It is to be regretted that your first encounter with an 'Oratchu' was not a satisfactory one. They are our servants, obedient in all things. Intelligent, but literal minded. The..." again he used the patriarchal term that refused to translate "...is waiting now to receive you." Without waiting for them to reply he ushered them gracefully but insistently into the presence of another alien.

This personage was much older. His age was apparent in the folds of loose flesh under his chin, the slight forward stoop of his shoulders, the air of ageless wisdom that he wore about him like an aura. In contrast to the first alien he addressed them vocally, in a voice as thin and dry as rustling paper.

"Captain Kirk and Spock of Vulcan, be welcome." He made a small stiff bow to each of them in turn. Then he looked sharply at Kirk, his faceted eyes bright. "All your questions will be answered, Captain. But while we talk perhaps your companion would like to examine some of our mechanisms. I see that it is a consuming interest of his. More so than the talk of an old man. Perhaps our space vessel...? So different from your own." Kirk and Spock exchanged a long look. The alien intercepted and read their thoughts perfectly and perhaps more deeply than either of them realized at the time. His voice held the faintest trace of amusement. "You need not fear, gentlemen. No harm will come to either of you, be you together or apart."

Kirk realized that whatever these people decided to do he and Spock were at that moment completely vulnerable. Against the powers they possessed the phasers at their sides were little more than toys, and the starship was out of earshot above. He decided that it would be in their interests to play the situation as it came and hope that the offered hospitality lasted. He gave Spock a slight nod. Spock addressed the alien. "I would be honoured, sir."

"So shall it be." The older alien turned to the younger and a stream of intricate thought impressions flowed between them. The

younger bowed. The elder turned his eyes to Spock. "My associate/brother/acolyte will show you the way."

When Spock had gone Kirk realized suddenly that he was very much alone. The older alien detected the sudden surge of panic. "Your officer will return to you shortly," he said. "Come. Sit beside me, and we will talk."

Seated not uncomfortably on a resilient white hummock that had apparently been formed out of the floor itself, the alien began to speak, its voice little more than the whisper of bygone ages.

"I can see that in your eyes, Captain, we have committed a great crime against your people. This was never our intention. Let me tell you of our own origins and then perhaps you will understand what we have been striving to achieve. Ours was the first galactic civilization, springing from the hub stars and spanning the galaxy from rim to rim in the aeons before your star was ever born. A magnificent union of divergent races, peaceful and prosperous under a benevolent administration. We achieved much. Planets so beautiful that the heart hurt when the eyes beheld them. Stars which surrendered up their energies to the demands of our technology. Complete freedom from want, from disease, from persecution. Absolute equality of rights. Perfect environment. Total elimination of waste. We reached out and touched the far flung galaxies. We all but conquered death and the decay of the body.

"Although the golden age was long indeed it was but a moment in infinity. It ended finally as all things must end. Not from war or pestilence but crumbling away beneath the weight of ages. Until only we in this far flung outpost remain. There may be others isolated as we are, but we have called to the stars and no-one has answered. We have searched and found only ruins and dust.

"So we have remained on this planet. Our science defended it from the raw fury of the nova sun. We have transformed it from the great centre of trade and administration it once was into a garden. We stabilized its orbit, controlled its weather and made it productive in all things. And we have gathered to it all that remains of our once mighty civilization. Our sciences, our arts and our philosophies. We have collected like lost sheep into the fold those cultures that we found still struggling for their survival on a hundred forgotten worlds; the barbarian descendants of those who had known the full flower of civilization. This we have done so that something might remain.

"Our race realized long ago while it was still at the zenith of its achievement that it was merely the first of many such interstellar cultural unions; that others would come after it and after them until all the stars were cold and all the planets dead. Yours is one of several we have noted in the ebb and flow of life forces between the stars, but it is the first to come out of the young hot stars of the spiral arms. You have traits for survival and traits for self destruction but you have a rare vitality. It will be interesting to see what becomes of you.

"Your colonists were taken by error. The Oratchu who serve us thought them to be a lost remnant of our own people. That you saw our ship on another voyage and were able to follow it here was a curious coincidence which will give thought for many years."

Kirk, lost in the web of woven words, drew a deep breath and became aware again of his surroundings, the quietness of the

building, the alien's strange eyes watching him, the pulse of his own blood. "You - interfered with their minds," he said at last.

The alien produced a hand with at least a dozen blunt nailless fingers from its sleeves and made a gentle deprecating gesture. Kirk was fascinated by the hand. "We imposed a few simple mental blocks to inhibit the memory of hardship in their previous environment and to avoid any trauma resulting from their removal. Had you not come they would have found their own social and technological level. They would have been happy. No harm has resulted."

"I suppose not," Kirk brooded. The old man's words had widened the horizons of even a starship captain. Briefly he saw before him again the vista of a golden star-spanning society that had achieved all the aims of human endeavour. Paradise. Shangri-La. And he grieved for its passing. Somewhere, a long way off, he heard again the distant lilt of alien music rising and falling as it called him home to a distant golden sun and the trio of tiny blue green worlds that circled it. He shook his head in confusion. That was not home. That was someone else's idea of home.

He looked at the old alien sitting across the floor from him, his exact form uncertain beneath his robe. The old finally confronting the new. "Thank you, sir, for telling me your history," he said. "I'm sure that the Federation will be intrigued and inspired by it. I would like to stay longer and learn more but I'm afraid that must wait for a future occasion. I have to return the colonists to their planet and make a report to my superiors."

The alien looked at him with what might have been a faintly sad expression. "Our race is very old, Captain, and yours is still very young. It is said that the old are often jealous of the young. You must understand that this is not so in our case. This is not why we will prevent your departure."

"You can't stop us leaving!" Kirk was on his feet, his face reddening with controlled fury.

The alien remained seated, unmoved, implacable. "You are neither primitives nor degenerates, therefore we will leave you your own choice of action. But yours is a barbarian culture. We cannot allow you to return to your Federation with the knowledge of our existence. They and their enemies would come here and destroy us for our secrets to wage war on one another. Neither can we remove that knowledge completely from your minds as that would cause irreparable damage and that we cannot do. The choice is yours, you and all your people, and we will share our knowledge with you, even as your officer now learns the secrets of our space vessel. Or you will attempt to leave and we will have to send the Oratchu after you to destroy you."

Standing on the cool grass with the strange pulsing buildings at his back and the night breeze fanning his face Kirk found it hard to believe, or even recall, all that the alien had told him, but for hours the alien music had been playing sweetly in his head and he felt strangely at peace as if he had returned to a place where he belonged after being away far too long. He tilted his head back and looked at the sky. The clouds were low and dark, stained here and there with the soft blues and purples of the nebula. Beyond them was the gas cloud itself and beyond that the naked stars. For the first time in many years he felt no stirring of elation when he thought of

them. Their muted siren songs were drowned out by the echoes of the infinitely beautiful song of belonging in his mind. He could think of nothing desirable beyond the confines of the exquisite park-like planet and no reason to delay the setting up of a permanent settlement, right here in the valley beside the building, and the beginning of simple peaceful life.

He became aware of someone standing beside him. It was Spock. For a moment Kirk had difficulty in putting a name to the face. The Vulcan was apparently deaf to the alien music and was questioning him urgently. Kirk made an effort to attend to what he was saying and succeeded in pushing the soaring chords into the back of his mind.

"Captain? Captain, are you all right?" Spock had noticed the distractedly happy look on Kirk's face and the misty almost tearful expression of longing in his eyes and it worried him. Kirk's attention took a long time to centre on him and when he finally spoke his words were mumbled.

"Perfectly all right, Mr. Spock, thank you. Did you - get to see something of their starship?"

"Indeed, Captain. It is a most impressive feat of engineering."

"Most impressive..." Kirk swayed, his senses distracted to the point of complete absorption.

Spock caught him by the arm and steadied him. "Captain... Jim!"

"I'm all right." Kirk took a deep breath in the hope that it would clear his head. "Must get aboard, something I must do. Something I must arrange." He pulled out his communicator and fumbled it open. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here, sir." The engineer's solid Scots accent helped put Kirk's feet firmly on the ground once more.

"Do you have the colonists stowed away, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye. All secure, Captain. But it's a tight squeeze."

"It won't be for long. We're ready to beam up. Have Mr. Pazarrich stand by in the transporter room. I have to speak to him urgently."

"Stand by, sir."

Kirk folded the communicator and shot a glance at Spock. The Vulcan was watching him with a frown on his face. Knowing Kirk as well as he did he was aware that something significant had taken place and that there was about to be a counter-reaction of equal import.

"Where exactly is the alien ship?" Kirk asked, carefully controlling - and he hoped concealing - his growing anger towards the aliens and their prolonged subliminal attempts to persuade him to remain.

"In planetary orbit, shielded from our sensors. We reached it by means of a sophisticated matter transporter system." Seeing the look of alarm on Kirk's face he added. "There is no danger of orbital collision. The Oratchu are excellent pilots."

"Are they indeed. Are they the only ones aboard?"

"Yes, sir. Their masters rarely leave the building, and never the planet."

Kirk considered. The germ of an idea was starting to form in his mind. An embryo plan born of anxiety and indignation but a plan he dare not allow to develop into thought for the aliens were undoubtedly monitoring his mind. And yet somehow he had to let Spock know what the situation was. "The aliens intend to make us stay here," he said curtly. "They're afraid of our savage young culture. And they have the power they need to make us do what they want."

Spock's response was lost in the shimmer of the transporter beam.

Kirk leapt from the transporter pad, grabbed Pazzarrich by the arm and dashed for the elevator. "Pazzarrich, do your people want to go back to Delta Sarroga?"

"Why, yes, Captain. More than anything. It is our home."

"Would they be prepared to take a risk to get there?"

"I think that they would."

"I hope you mean that."

Kirk paused only once on his way to the bridge. The corridors were crowded with people trying to orientate themselves with their surroundings. Amongst them he saw one sweet face that he knew.

"Peggy," he put his arms round her and kissed her fondly, and then shook hands with the tall dark haired man at her side and ruffled their son's hair. He was a fine boy and he still had his mother's eyes.

The woman took his hand in both of hers. "Jim, what's going to happen?"

"Everything'll be all right," he told her. "Just trust me."

Arriving on the bridge Kirk gave Spock a hearty if unnecessary push in the direction of the computer and snatched the command seat. "Mr. Scott, how long before we have warp power?"

"We have it now, sir. I thought..."

"Spock." Kirk swung towards the Vulcan, not allowing his mind to dwell on his coalescing idea, evolving it one stage at a time as he went along, hoping to win the necessary fractions of a second from the aliens' responses. "Plot me a course as close as we dare go to that dwarf star. Execute it the instant you've got it - warp eight." He stabbed at the intercom button. "All hands prepare for warp manoeuvres. Helmsman, get us underway. Spock, let me know the instant that the alien ship shows up on our sensors." Carefully he unknotted his hands and forced himself to walk, rather than run, across the bridge. He lowered his voice. "Spock, how fast could we travel through the gas cloud without burning up? What's the maximum speed?"

Spock spared him a puzzled and not altogether calm look from the sensor. "Warp one point five. Perhaps warp two."

Kirk pressed his sweating palms against the balcony rail. "Make it warp two." He turned and looked at the screen. The planet had gone, left far behind in the starship's wake. Now the blue dwarf blazed in the centre of the screen brighter than the eye could endure, growing infinitesimally larger with the passing minutes. "Any sign of that ship?" he demanded.

"Negative."

"Not yet," Kirk muttered. His mind churned with questions. How long would it take the Oratchu to get their ship under way? Would they obey to the letter the orders of their masters? He was pretty certain what those orders would be. And were they really such good pilots? They had sailed dangerously close to the Enterprise once before.

Spock spoke. "I have the ship on our sensors, Captain, coming after us."

Kirk braced himself firmly into the command seat and fixed his eyes on the screen, not allowing himself to meet the questioning eyes of his crew, not allowing himself to think more than a few scant seconds ahead. "How long to the star, Mr. Spock?"

"Twenty seconds."

"Radiation bombardment increasing past the danger level," Scott said from the engineering station. Kirk ignored him. He sat forward in the command seat, his jaw white with tension, his eyes running with tears as he stared at the blinding glory that by now all but filled the screen. Spock turned in his seat.

"The alien ship is almost upon us, Captain. It seems they intend to run us down."

To all intents and purposes Kirk ignored him as well. "Steady as she goes, Helmsman," he said tightly. "When I tell you bring her hard about to port. I want to swing round that star as fast and close as I can."

"Captain..." Spock's voice held a note of controlled alarm.

"Now!" Kirk said.

The Enterprise screamed and skidded into a hard turn that put a third of the circumference of the blue star between her and the alien surprised crew of the pursuing starship.

"Straight for the nebula!" Kirk shouted as everyone scrambled for their seats. "As fast as she'll go. Cut speed to warp two the moment before we enter the gas cloud. Evasive manoeuvres. Spock, what happened to the alien?"

Spock looked up from the scanner, a gleam in his dark eyes. "We lost them on the turn, Captain. They've banked to come at us again but they lost speed and I think we'll beat them to the gas cloud."

"That's all I ask." Kirk looked at the screen. The pastel shaded clouds of the nebula looked invitingly but deceptively close. Although he felt that all he had to do was reach out his hand and touch them they were still a long way away as the Enterprise closed the distance. The alien starship closed it faster, an incandescent fireball that swept all before it to destruction.

It was a sizable portion of forever before the helmsman moved to slow the starship's headlong flight. The crew braced themselves and staggered against the fierce deceleration, maintaining their places. The Enterprise shed her speed barely in time. Her hull heated almost to glowing point as she touched the first fringes of the cloud, and then the glowing haze closed in behind her. "Manoeuvre!" Kirk yelled, jumping for the computer. "Spock, the alien?"

The gas molecules of which the nebula comprised were few and far between but they were dense indeed when compared to the clean swept spaceways between the stars. When the alien ship, braking frantically in the wake of the Enterprise, plunged into it the effect was similar to hitting a planet sized brick wall head on. At its still inconceivable speed there was no way it could have avoided destruction. It shattered, disintegrating into a million hurtling fragments that flared and died as friction stripped them atom from atom. Then the nebula was as it had been before, without even a swirl to mark the starship's passing.

Spock's shoulders relaxed as he straightened from the sensor. He raised an eyebrow at Kirk. "It burned up," he said. "There's nothing left."

Kirk allowed himself a single wolfish grin of satisfaction. "Helmsman, as soon as we clear the nebula set course for the spiral arm. Gentlemen, it's time to go home."

"Captain, what made you think the aliens wouldn't use weaponry to destroy us when we refused to obey their edicts?"

"Call it a hunch, Spock. An illogical, Human hunch. I think they were basically an ethical people, but their ethics had become twisted and distorted with time. They didn't want to kill us unless we forced them to. They wanted to give us until the last possible moment to change our minds. They thought that when we saw their ship coming after us and realized we couldn't outrun it we'd turn back. Those were the orders they gave to the Oratchu, and the Oratchu obeyed them in all things, remember?" He looked wistfully at the small viewscreen on his desk. The image it relayed was that currently on the central viewscreen on the bridge, a distant haze that was resolving itself as the days went by into recognizable patterns, the constellations that wrote "welcome home" in glowing letters across the sky. "I'm glad none of them were aboard. I find it difficult to grieve for an Oratchu. I do regret not being able to bring away some shred of their great learning. With their total conversion drive perhaps one day we could have reached the farthest galaxy."

Spock looked uncomfortable. "Captain, I neglected to tell you, while I was a guest aboard their ship I managed to make some surreptitious investigations with the tricorder. It was fortunate that I was able to conceal my thoughts or they would surely have destroyed us outright."

"Spock - what did you get?"

Spock produced a tape square and put it down on Kirk's table. "This contains sufficient data to extrapolate the basic principles of the total conversion drive. I trust you will consider carefully the possible implications of introducing the technology into our culture?"

Kirk turned the square of yellow plastic over in his fingers. In his hand the fate of a thousand races, a hundred thousand planets, for good or ill. Suddenly it seemed a very fragile and very dangerous thing.

"I will, Mr. Spock," he said. "I will."



the DESERT STAR

On the bridge viewscreen the star was a bright violet speck extending streamers of white energy billions of miles into space. Brilliant as it was, it was still only tiny, but growing steadily larger with each passing minute. All around, the blackness of space was absolute, unbroken even by the distant haze of far-flung galaxies. Kirk found that its complete isolation produced an unaccountable unease within him. He sat forward tensely in the command seat, a frown on his face and his eyes fixed on the screen.

"Do you have a spectro-analysis on the star, Mr. Spock?"

Spock looked over his shoulder without straightening from the scanner unit. "Affirmative, Captain. The star appears to be a normal O type. Its curious colour is produced by impure elements being converted to light energy by the hydrogen-helium transmission."

"Radiation levels?"

"I can detect nothing unusual, Captain."

Kirk's frown deepened. "Steady as she goes," he murmured. "Ease us in gently, Mr. Sulu. I'm in no hurry at all."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Kirk got out of the command seat and went to stand below the computer station, his eyes still on the odd phenomenon on the screen. "Spock, what do you think... that this star's doing here? I mean... It just shouldn't be here!"

"Indeed it should not, Captain," Spock agreed. "This area is a star desert. There should be no solar bodies within four parsecs of this position. The forces created by the spiralling motion of the galaxy should have drawn it into the galactic plane eons ago."

"But they didn't. It's still here."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Indeed," he said again.

Kirk sighed, his eyes thoughtful. "Starfleet Command wants it investigated, but I don't want us to go in too close until we know some more about it. Compute us an orbit to keep us well out of range of any radiation that that sun could throw out."

"Acknowledged." Spock turned back to the computer.

The star and its dazzling rays had almost filled the screen, blotting out the surrounding blackness of space. Kirk considered it, chewing his lip. The closer the starship sailed to the star, the more uneasy he became. His sixth sense, the one that linked his nerve endings indivisibly with those of the starship, was tingling, and that almost always meant trouble.

The faintest possible tremble ran through the deck plates of the starship. A tremor so slight that only the instruments picked it up. The instruments - and Kirk. He moved forward anxiously to the

helm.

"What is it, Sulu?"

The helmsman was staring at the console. "I don't know, Captain." He shook his head. "Instrumentation reads normal."

"Confirmed, Captain," Spock said from behind him.

"Hold your position, Mr. Sulu." Kirk sat down in the command seat. The tremble came again, this time strong enough for everyone to feel it. "Mr. Spock," Kirk said. "I want to know what's causing that shudder."

"Checking, Captain."

"Captain," Sulu looked up at the screen in alarm. "She doesn't respond to helm control. We're being pulled in towards the star."

Kirk slapped at the intercom button. "Engineering! Mr. Scott, full reverse power! All decks, stand by alert!"

The mounting drone of the warp drives formed a background noise to the howling of the sirens. On the screen, the star continued to grow.

"It's no good, Captain," Sulu shouted above the noise. "We're still being pulled in!"

"Scotty!" Kirk snarled into the intercom. "Get some more power out of those drives!"

"Captain," Spock said from the sensor. "We are not being pulled into the star."

"What?" Kirk stared at him.

"It is not a collision course, Captain. We are being dragged - "

There was a blinding flash from the screen. The Enterprise lurched and bucked as if she were trying to break her own back. Crew members were thrown from their feet. They scrambled for their stations. The nose of the starship dipped and sent them staggering again. The violet star seemed to blaze from the screen. The Enterprise gave another mighty lurch and then she became quite still, stopped in space.

No-one felt the cessation of movement. Throughout the ship there was silence and stillness. The crew lay sprawled on the decks and across the consoles, their minds blanketed by oblivion.

Kirk stirred and lifted a head that felt oddly light off the deck. He opened his eyes and squinted, unable to understand what had happened. All around him was a violet and silver glow. Rays of the two colours flooded the bridge like fluorescent moonbeams, shifting and gleaming, illuminating every surface and every corner, dimming the bridge lighting into insignificance.

Kirk looked at the screen. It was bright with violet light, but the rays that streamed onto the bridge came not only from the screen; they seemed to be coming directly through the metal of the

walls and the equipment. Kirk shook his head, trying to clear the strange effect from his mind.

It made no difference; the violet sunbeams remained. He put out a hand to the command seat and used it to pull himself onto his feet. His head swam, but quickly settled. He looked round him, and saw his crew sprawled around, their skins and uniforms tinted violet.

"Sulu!"

Kirk knelt down beside the helmsman. He still breathed and at Kirk's touch he began to stir. Kirk left him and made his way unsteadily across the bridge and up the steps to the computer station.

Spock was sprawled out on the deck, his head cradled on his arm.

"Spock!" Kirk put a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. "Spock! Come on!"

The Vulcan stirred, raised himself on an elbow and shook his head to clear it as Kirk had done. Then he looked around.

"Jim! The light!"

"Yes, I know. It's something to do with that star." He helped Spock to his feet and the Vulcan turned at once to the computer. Kirk went on round the balcony to where Uhura was struggling uncertainly to her feet. He helped her sit down. "Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Captain, I think so. Captain, the light...!"

"I know, lieutenant." Kirk looked round the bridge and satisfied himself that his command crew was all recovering. He made his way back to the computer.

"Well?"

"Sensors read nothing unusual, Captain. The effect we are experiencing is caused simply by the light rays."

"That's impossible!" Kirk snapped. "Check your equipment, Mister!" He turned away and went down the steps to the command seat. Spock looked after him, frowning at the curtness in his voice.

Kirk sat down. "Mr. Sulu, our position?"

Sulu studied the helm console. "I don't know, sir. The readings are all confused."

"What's your helm setting?"

"Just as it was before, sir. Sixty three mark two two."

"Reverse helm. Impulse power one half astern. Back us out gently."

Sulu's hands played across the console. The ship juddered gently. The violet shading remained unchanged. "We're not moving, sir."

"Full impulse power astern."

The juddering increased. "She doesn't respond, sir."

Kirk pressed the intercom button. "Mr. Scott, do we have warp power?"

"Aye." Scott's voice came back uncertainly. "Captain, there's an awfully strange light - "

"Never mind about the light, just concentrate on your engines."

"Aye, sir," Scott said, mildly offended.

"Mr. Sulu, full astern warp factor one!"

"Warp one astern, sir."

Kirk felt the ship strain. "Warp three!" he ordered. The ship shook.

The intercom bleeped protestingly. "Captain, she'll tear herself apart!" Scott said irately.

"Captain! What the devil's going on!" McCoy broke in. "Where's the light coming from?"

"Get off the line, Bones!" Kirk snapped. "Scotty, I want all the power you can give me!"

"The ship can't take it!" Scott yelled. "She'll crack up, Captain! She'll pull herself apart!"

"Is that your professional opinion, Engineer?" Kirk growled back.

"Aye, sir, it is!"

"Mr. Scott is probably correct," Spock said from the computer. "The ship is being held in a web of conflicting forces. Sensors indicate no possibility of her being able to pull herself free, even at maximum warp; and a prolonged attempt to do so could result in severe structural damage."

Kirk released a long, taut breath. He could feel the trembling of the ship in his arms and legs. "Cut engines," he said reluctantly. The drone of the drive died away into silence.

Kirk got up and walked through the violet light to the computer. "Mr. Spock?"

"I've checked the sensor circuitry, Captain. I can detect no malfunction. The light registers as just that - light."

"Then how do you explain the fact that it's coming in through a three-shelled hull of duronium?"

"I do not explain it, Captain. It is a phenomenon unknown to science."

"What about radiation? Are we in danger?"

"Again, nothing abnormal detectable." Spock turned to the

computer and pressed a white button. Kirk watched the play of the lights.

"General cross-spectral radiation," Spock said. "Nothing in large enough doses to be dangerous."

"Can you establish our position?"

Spock got up and moved over to the sensor. "Our position is stable relative to the stellar primary."

"Are we orbiting it?"

"Negative. We are in motion about the stellar primary, but our velocity is less than that necessary to maintain an orbit. We are being held in position some five hundred miles out."

"Can you explain that?"

"Negative, Captain."

The intercom whistled. Kirk went down to the command seat to answer it.

"Kirk here."

"Security here, sir. There's been a disturbance on Deck Six. Two casualties taken to sickbay."

"I'll be there." Kirk closed the channel and went up the steps to the turbolift.

It was an eerie experience, that journey through the corridors of the starship. The structure of the vessel seemed insubstantial; unreal. The violet sunbeams shone through the walls and filled every room. Odd deep blue shadows lay at strange angles as if the beams could not penetrate surfaces that were almost parallel to them. The faces of the crew members were tinged with blue so that they resembled walking corpses a week dead.

A man lay on his back on the examination table, breathing rapidly and harshly, his blond hair plastered to his forehead by his own sweat. There was a wet stain across the front of his uniform shirt, turned black by the violet light. McCoy glanced briefly up at Kirk and then bent once more to his task.

Kirk looked down at the pale, sweating face and the closed eyes, listening to the ragged breathing. It seemed to go on for an age. Then the pulse beat of the dio screen faltered and stopped. The breathing ceased.

McCoy straightened and sighed, and pulled the sheet up over the man's face.

"You couldn't help him?" Kirk asked unnecessarily.

"I can't work miracles," McCoy grunted. "And that's what it would have taken to save him - a miracle. There's not a major organ that isn't damaged. Heart, lungs, liver, spleen - you name it."

Kirk looked at the shrouded body and then followed McCoy across

the room. "Security said there were two men."

"That's right. Swedish Sam, there, and the fella that carved him up. Technician called O'Dean."

"Where's O'Dean now?"

"Through there." McCoy nodded to the ward and led the way.

O'Dean lay on a bed, apparently asleep but still fully dressed. "He's sedated," McCoy explained. "If I hadn't put him to sleep he'd have killed himself as well."

"What's the matter with him?"

"It's too early to say for certain. I've not had time to make any tests, but it must be some sort of mental aberration. He was completely homicidal."

Kirk gazed at the still face and noticed the gleam of sweat on the upper lip and the almost frantic action of the eyes behind closed lids. "Get me a complete medical report as quickly as you can, Bones."

McCoy folded his arms and nodded. "I'll do that, Jim. Jim, what's going on? Where are we? What's that light?"

"We can't answer any of those questions just at the moment, Bones," Kirk told him. "We're somewhere in the vicinity of the stray star. Spock says the light is just that - light."

"But that's impossible!" McCoy declared. "Light can't pass through solid objects! Spock knows that! This shines through the hull, the equipment - through us, even!"

"We don't understand it yet, Doctor." Kirk went to answer the whistle of the intercom. "Kirk here."

"Security here, sir. Crewman Drewell has sealed himself in the exit hatch, maintenance level J. He refuses to come out, sir."

"I'll come down," Kirk said. "Bones - "

McCoy already had his medical kit in his hand.

There was a small group gathered about the inner door of the maintenance airlock, standing quietly in the violet sunbeams. A security guard stepped forward as Kirk and McCoy arrived. "He's still in there, sir. We can't persuade him to come out."

Kirk nodded and went to the wall intercom. "Drewell, this is the Captain. Drewell, can you hear me?"

From the intercom he could hear someone singing, crooning softly to himself.

"Drewell?" he called. "Drewell!"

"Leave me alone," a voice said petulantly from the speaker. "I just want to be away from all you damned people. I want space to breathe. Space to be on my own!"

"Drewell!" Kirk said. The voice was singing to itself again. Kirk switched channels.

"Kirk to bridge."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Mr. Spock. I'm on maintenance level J. We've got some trouble down here. We might need some cutting gear."

"I'll see to it, Captain. Spock out."

"Drewell," Kirk said into the intercom. "Come on out. Let's talk about this."

Drewell stopped singing. "Talk? I don't want to talk. I want to be on my own."

"Let me, Jim," McCoy said. "Drewell, this is McCoy. I've got a room down in sickbay that you can have all to yourself. No-one'll bother you at all. Why don't you come out and look it over?"

For a time Drewell didn't answer. He was singing softly again, just to himself. Then he said, "I'm going for a walk now."

"Drewell!" Kirk yelled. "No!"

Even as he spoke, Spock arrived with a cutting torch and two cylinders of gas. Kirk turned to him. "Cut through the locking mechanism! Quickly!"

"He's cycling the airlock, sir," the security guard said.

Kirk hurled himself at the intercom. "Drewell! Don't do it! Don't - "

"The outer door's open, sir." The security guard looked at him, his eyes wide with horror. "He's gone outside. Sir, he wasn't wearing a space suit."

Kirk stared at him, feeling the blood drain from his face. In grief and frustration he pounded his fist into the metal of the wall.

The intercom whistled, and after a moment Kirk reached up and answered it.

"Kirk here."

"Bridge here, Captain," Sulu said. "There's something coming into sensor range, moving slowly - and it's big, Captain. It's really big."

"On my way, Mr. Sulu." Kirk gestured to Spock to follow, and started for the bridge at a run.

A single, fleeting glance at the bridge viewscreen was enough to show Kirk that it was useless, rendered blind by the violet brilliance. Spock went immediately to the sensors.

"What is it, Mr. Sulu?" Kirk asked.

"It reads like a planet, sir," Sulu said, "but it's moving far too slowly."

"It *is* a small planet, Captain," Spock confirmed. "Mainly comprised of metallic ores. Its velocity is only slightly greater than our own. Nevertheless, it is overhauling us. It will overtake us in seven minutes."

"Collision course?"

"Negative, but it will pass close by." Spock looked at him over his shoulder. "It has a powerful gravitational field, Captain. It may affect our relative position in space."

"If it can do that, we may be able to use it to swing us away from this star." Kirk pressed the intercom button. "Kirk to engineering. Mr. Scott?"

A confusion of shouting voices answered him.

"Engineering, what's going on down there?" Kirk demanded. There was a long pause during which the shouting died away. Then Scott came on the line.

"Scott here, Captain."

"Scotty, what the devil...?"

"One of my engineers just went berserk, sir," Scott said breathlessly. "He was trying to jettison the antimatter pod."

"He didn't...?"

"No, sir. We got hold of him."

Kirk sighed. "Have him taken to sickbay. Scotty, I want full warp power as soon as you can get it."

"Aye, sir," Scott said with a trace of reluctance. "Two minutes."

Kirk looked towards the computer station. "Mr. Spock, compute the optimum moment. I want to add all our power to the pull of the planet."

"Acknowledged."

"Another large slow-moving body on the sensors, Captain," Sulu reported.

"Another planet, Mr. Spock?"

"Affirmative. Same composition as the first."

"You have full warp power, Captain," Scott said from the intercom.

"Stand by, Mr. Scott. Mr. Sulu - "

"Captain," Spock said. "I now read a third and a fourth planetoid. Their gravitational forces act together to cancel out any benefit the first might have afforded us."

Kirk heaved an exasperated sigh. "Very well, Mr. Spock. Mr. Scott, stand down." Kirk sat in the command seat. Momentarily he experienced the faintness he had felt upon first regaining consciousness. Sulu turned in his seat and stared at him.

"We're not going to try and pull free, sir?"

"There's no point in damaging the ship, Lieutenant."

Sulu's tilted eyes widened, bright and hard with fear. "We can't stay here!" he cried frantically. "Look at the screen! Look at the star! We'll burn!"

"Control yourself, helmsman!" Kirk told him firmly.

"We'll burn! We'll burn! I don't want to burn!" Sulu was on his feet, stabbing frantically at the helm controls. Kirk got up quickly and took him by the elbow, pulling him away from the helm. Sulu struggled with him, his face wet with tears. "I don't want to burn! I don't want to burn!"

Kirk saw Spock's fingers close on Sulu's shoulder from behind and the helmsman collapsed. Kirk lowered him to the deck.

"Any damage, Mr. Spock?"

"Negative, Captain." Spock neutralised the helm.

The intercom whistled. "McCoy here, Jim. There's something bad going on. I've got five raving lunatics down here that were sane an hour ago."

"Make that six, Bones," Kirk told him, looking down at Sulu. "Do what you can for them. I want a full medical report in an hour."

The briefing room was a weird alien place. Quiet and cool as always, but now soaked through and through by the shifting violet light. The gathering of officers was subdued, made ill at ease by the change in this familiar room. Spock especially, Kirk noticed, seemed uncomfortable and unwilling to meet anyone's eyes. He watched the Vulcan closely.

"The casualty list's gone up to twenty seven," McCoy said. "That includes the two fatalities. Their minds are crumpling as if under immense mental pressure."

"And the two deaths, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"Sam Van Nern was killed by O'Dean, sliced to pieces with a butcher's knife. O'Dean's still in sickbay under sedation. His mind's gone. Drewell walked straight out of the air lock in a state of mental derangement."

"And Sulu, and Scotty's man, and the others?" Kirk said. "They all seem to be overwhelmed by some obsession. Can you account for it, Doctor?"

"Negative, Captain. All the men are fit. Their body chemistry and hormone levels check out as normal, except that the adrenalin level in the blood is raised, but as all the men are in a state of considerable excitement that can hardly be considered significant."

"You keep saying 'men'," Kirk said. "Are all the casualties male?"

"I don't have any female patients at the moment."

Kirk turned to Spock. "Can you forward any explanation for this madness, Science Officer?"

Spock shifted uneasily in his seat, shot him an almost guilty glance, looked at McCoy and then lowered his eyes to his fingers, locked together on the table top. "I have received the radiation and radiography lab reports, Captain," he said quietly. "There is a possibility that the affliction may be caused by an ultra short wave radiation of a type previously unknown to science."

"Explain," Kirk ordered.

Spock gave him another swift, self-conscious look and drew a deep breath, bracing himself. "I was mistaken, Captain," he said unhappily. "The light is *not* simply light as we know it."

McCoy grunted with bitter satisfaction and then fell silent at a look from Kirk.

"It is a hitherto unknown phenomenon," Spock went on awkwardly. "A radiation with a wavelength of more than one million two hundred thousand angstroms."

"And that could be the cause of the madness?" Kirk asked, looking at Spock.

"It *could* be a form of radiation sickness. I should have to devise some tests to be certain."

Kirk nodded. "Do that. Spock, what possibility is there of shielding against this radiation?"

"None at all, Captain. Conventional X-rays have a wavelength of fifty angstroms. Our science knows of no substance dense enough to block a radiation wavelength this short."

"Scotty, what chance do we have of moving the ship?"

"At the moment, no chance at all, Captain. I don't know of any way to do it."

Kirk studied the table top, frowning. "Mr. Spock, what are these forces holding us here?"

"Partly gravitational, partly electromagnetic, Captain. The forces originate in the star itself, but they are twisted into a web of conflicting energy bonds by more than a hundred ionised metal planetoids, possibly captured asteroids. We are trapped in that web."

"I see," Kirk said slowly. "Very well, gentlemen. Return to your stations. You all have a great many questions. I want some answers."

There was a scuffling of feet and a gathering of papers and the room began to clear.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk said. The Vulcan turned in the doorway and

saw that Kirk wanted him. He came back into the room and stood by the end of the table, waiting. Kirk waited until they were alone and the door had closed before he turned. He looked at Spock coldly. "We are in a critical condition," he said. "So far, all I've had from you are errors of judgement and contradictions of fact. I'm not used to that, and I expect better from my First Officer."

Spock gazed at him for a moment and then lowered his eyes so that Kirk could not see the unhappiness in them.

"Is this radiation affecting your mind as well?" Kirk went on savagely. "Or is it just that you can't do your job? Is that it?"

Spock looked at him miserably. "I am not infallible, Captain. I am capable of making mistakes."

"Don't be insolent!" Kirk shouted. "I don't want any back talk from you, Mister! I want cold hard efficiency! And if you can't give it to me then you're relieved of your duties!"

Spock's eyes were bewildered. "Sir, this is a phenomenon never before encountered - "

"Shut up!!!"

Kirk swung round, his arm coming up in preparation for a vicious downward sweep. He felt the passing lightness in his head. He saw himself; red-faced, angry-eyed, his arm upraised; and he saw the Vulcan, pale, braced to take the blow to the face, unresisting. Kirk lowered his arm and put out a hand to steady himself against the table. He was shaking.

Spock pulled up a chair and urged him down on it. Kirk drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"Spock," he said quietly, "this light must be getting to me. The things I said to you - I... I'm sorry."

Spock looked at him and nodded. "Understood, Captain," he said simply. Kirk put a hand on his arm and a union of comprehension passed between them. The bond was re-established.

"Spock," Kirk said, "we have to find a way to protect ourselves from this radiation, long enough to work out a way to move the ship."

"I do not believe the ship can be moved by any purely physical means," Spock said slowly, as if working something out in his mind. "It is possible that the star is not entirely as we see it. That is, we do not see it in its entirety."

Kirk looked at him, simply waiting, knowing the reasoning power of the Vulcan's mind.

"The star has not been affected by the forces of motion created in our galaxy, in our universe," Spock went on after a moment's silent thought. "It may be that it is only partially in our universe, held in this unnatural position by its placement in some other space, some other time."

"And we're caught up in another universe?" Kirk asked uncertainly.

Spock nodded. "A flux of dimensional displacement. It is

possible."

"How do we get out of it?"

Spock raised an eyebrow at him and shook his head. "I simply do not know, Captain."

When Kirk arrived in sickbay he found reason to be grateful to the rays of violet light; they prevented McCoy from seeing the true pallor of his face. Nonetheless, the Doctor looked at him anxiously. "Are you all right, Jim?"

"I'm fine," Kirk lied. "Bones, we need some protection from this radiation. If we're going to think our way out of this one we'll need all our faculties. Can you provide some sort of medical barrier?"

"Well..." McCoy looked dubious. "I've a sedative that seems to quieten the men already affected, but it lays a man on his back. A watered down version might delay the onset of the symptoms, but not for long. It'll get us all in the end."

"Can you prepare a weakened dose?"

"Sure. It'll only take a minute." Spock put down what he was doing and went through into the lab. Kirk wandered round the violet-lit sickbay feeling lost and insecure. The idle silence of the starship was unnatural, she seemed like a stranger and she no longer murmured her intimacies to him.

A high-pitched shriek ran down the corridor and died flatly into the silence. Moments later the sickbay door opened and a group of three struggling security guards entered, fighting desperately with a woman who was doing her best to scratch her own eyes out. Kirk could do nothing but stand and watch in helpless horror as the woman's sharp nails dug into her cheeks and came away bloody. She screamed, but again her hooked fingers clawed at her face. A medical orderly appeared with a hypo and emptied it into the woman's arm. She gasped and her eyes rolled. She folded into his arms.

McCoy came to the lab door as she was carried away. "The first female casualty," he said. "So the women aren't immune."

"No." Kirk held out his arm. "Give me the first shot. If it helps me you can dose the rest of the crew."

"Sit down," McCoy advised. "A full dose of this'd flatten you." He pressed a hypo to Kirk's shoulder. "I wouldn't give this to Spock if it's possible to avoid it, this type of sedative invariably turns his stomach out. It might slow you down a bit. Try and take it easy."

Kirk looked at him sharply, armed with a suitable retort, and caught the twinkle in the Doctor's eye. He rubbed the sore spot on his arm and grinned.

There was a young crewman in the turbolift, huddled on the floor in the corner, his knees drawn up to his chest, his eyes wide, sucking hungrily at his thumb. He rolled his eyes at Kirk and whimpered as the Captain moved towards him, attempting to withdraw further into the corner. Kirk left him alone and called McCoy up on

the intercom, telling him where to find his latest patient.

The drug was beginning to work on him. He felt lethargic, heavy-limbed and tired-eyed. It was as if he were moving in a thick fluid and as McCoy had warned him, it was certainly slowing him down. He made his way directly to the computer.

"Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan raised his head. For a brief instant his eyes were clouded with some inner distraction. They cleared at once, became bright and alert. Kirk struggling with his own slowed thinking, failed to notice.

"Spock, you say that these planetoids are bending the star's magnetic forces into a web around us."

"Correct, Captain."

"If we broke up some of the planets with photon torpedoes might we be able to tear a hole in the web?"

"Doubtful, Captain. The web I referred to is a metaphorical illustration; it has no physical substance. If we destroyed the planets we would alter the patterns of force, but not necessarily to our advantage. We might be thrown into the star itself."

Kirk rammed the palm of his hand into the back of the Vulcan's chair. "Compute it out," he said. "See if you can work out a selective pattern of destruction so that we can use the star's own twisted gravity fields to swing us away."

Spock nodded and turned to the computer. Kirk went down to the command seat. "Arm photon torpedoes," he said. "Stand by alert."

"Jim!" McCoy came down the steps from the turbolift. "Don't you think you ought to do something about recovering Drewell's body?"

"Recover it, Doctor?"

"Bring it back inside for a decent burial. We can't just - "

"One more corpse aboard the ship of the dead!" Spock shouted down from the computer. "One more body to crowd this spaceborne coffin!"

"Oh, Christ!" McCoy said.

Kirk was already on his feet, moving slowly towards the Vulcan's station. "Spock. Spock, come away from the computer."

"You!" Spock pointed an accusing finger at him. "You who ministers unto the living dead! You who steers the white ship of death across the dark seas! In all the universe - "

Kirk made a desperate grab but the Vulcan was too fast and too strong. Still seated, he caught Kirk easily and pushed him back down the steps into McCoy's arms.

"Touch me not with your cold hands of death!" Spock commanded.

Looking up at him, Kirk felt genuine fear touch at his heart. The Vulcan's face was quite mad, his eyes drawn into tight slits

beneath the upswept brows; slits that extended right round the sides of his head. His ears were white except for the tips, flushed green, his lips parted in a slight snarl, his nostrils slightly flared. Every angle of his face was clear, his breathing had become shallow, a thick vein pulsed rapidly in his throat. He looked demented, unreachable, and he sat beside the most valuable piece of equipment aboard, the one machine that might just possibly be able to think them out of their lethal predicament.

"Come away from the computer, Spock," Kirk said with quiet forcefulness. "Come away from it!"

Spock shook his head, looking down at Kirk from his deep dark slitted eyes. For a moment the slightest of smiles played about his lips. He looked the very incarnation of evil.

"I have life!" he declared. "I will not submit myself to you, master of death! I live!"

And then he did exactly what Kirk had been afraid he would do. With an extravagant gesture he flung his arm back, some declaration of freedom and victory over death on his lips. His hand smashed into the array of computer lights; there was a flash and the Vulcan was thrown bodily from his seat to land on the deck some eight feet away.

Kirk ran up the steps to him, sparing a single despairing glance for the burning wreckage of the computer. He knelt beside him, smelling, despite the stench of charred insulation, the smell of scorched cloth and a sickening odour of partially cooked meat. He reached for Spock's right hand.

The Vulcan whimpered, feeling pain through his unconsciousness.

"Let me get to him, Jim." McCoy was on his knees at his side, directing all his attention to Spock's breathing and heartbeat, and none at all to the burned hand.

Kirk left him to it and went to douse the still flaring computer.

Scott looked at Kirk mournfully over the charred remains. "It's not the slightest bit of good trying to repair it, Captain Kirk. The whole unit'll have to be stripped out and replaced."

"Are the memory cores damaged, Scotty?"

"No. Their own fail-safe circuits saved them. But we can't tap them without the main control console. All the computer outlets on the ship feed in through here." He looked at the computer miserably. "Fed in through here," he corrected.

"What about auxiliary control?"

"The computer unit there got the backlash of this. That's burned out as well."

Kirk heaved a great sigh. "Can't you jury rig it?"

"Aye. I could. I could rebuild it from the ground up. But it'd take months of wiring and testing. These computers are a work of art. To hand make one..."

"All right, Mr. Scott. You've made your point. We don't have the time."

"No, sir," Scott agreed.

Kirk gazed at the blackened circuitry as if looking upon the last remains of an old and trusted friend. He placed his hand on the back of the seat and bowed his head, lost in thought. When he looked up again, Scott was gone.

McCoy looked up grimly as Kirk entered the sickbay. There was sweat on his face and his blue eyes were hot with anger at his own helplessness. Sickbay seemed full to capacity; every bed was occupied and one man sat in a chair, his arms folded on a table, his head cradled in them, unconscious. McCoy wiped his hands and then rubbed the towel over his face, drying the sweat.

"How many?" Kirk asked, staring round at the frenzied activities of the medical staff.

McCoy shook his head despairingly. "I don't know, Jim. We lost count long ago. Somewhere between a third and half of the crew."

"How's Spock?"

"Come and see for yourself."

McCoy led Kirk through the crowd of casualties to one of the small private rooms at the rear of sickbay. Spock lay on his back in the bed, apparently asleep.

Kirk was surprised. There was very little bandaging in evidence. Spock's right hand was outside the sheets, bathed in the pinkish glow of a sterile field. There was no sign of the contortion and disfigurement that Kirk had been fearing, only a green mark below the skin that started at the base of the fingers and vanished halfway to the elbow. There was a trace of grease on the skin, but no other dressing.

McCoy reached up and switched off the sterile field. "He's not as badly hurt as you'd feared," he said, reading Kirk's thoughts. "His hand's burned and his heart took a jolt, but it's settled down again now. He's no worse off than the rest of my patients except that the drug makes him sick."

Kirk frowned. "With the power that runs through that computer he should have been fried crisp."

"His boots and the chair he was sitting in saved him. He was insulated and so the charge threw him clear. If he'd had his other hand on metal, he'd have been cooked alive."

Kirk looked at the Vulcan's face and considered. He had a feeling that McCoy had said something significant but he couldn't put a finger on what it was. "Bones, pass out those shots among the crew. I want a diluted version of that sedative given to everyone not yet affected. And I want another dose myself."

McCoy's look of doubt increased, creasing his face. "Jim, I don't think..."

"I have some thinking to do, Bones. I need that shot."

"All right." McCoy turned from the Vulcan's bedside and led the way back into sickbay.

Kirk walked the violet lit corridors of the starship alone. He didn't see them or the misery that filled them. His eyes were distant, downcast; his footsteps followed the contours of the starship's forward disc; he was unconscious and uncaring of the direction they took. He felt ill. His limbs were numb appendages, his mouth dry and filled with the taste of sawdust. His mind was sluggish and he had to struggle with it to make it function. He knew he had the answer; he had all the information and there were facts that seemed to belong together. It was as if he had all the pieces of a jigsaw, but they were muddled and confused with several other puzzles, and he had no idea what the finished picture should look like. There were bits that matched in colour and pattern, but they refused to fit together.

The computer, the brain of the starship, was gone, but a loss Kirk felt more keenly was the loss of his Science Officer, his computer expert, his friend, the only man aboard whose mind rivalled that of the ship herself. He felt like a man who had been blinded and his right hand cut away, left in the centre of a maze to lead his people out. He couldn't see or feel, but he knew instinctively that there was a path, and he had to find it.

Kirk stopped at an intersection and listened. Someone - a woman - was wailing brokenly, an empty hollow sound of despair. It tore at him, that terrible cry, filled his head, drew the tears from his eyes. He rested his forehead against the bulkhead, his hands pressed flat against the cold metal, his eyelids squeezed tight shut. Still he saw the violet light. It saturated his mind, penetrated the inner sanctuary of his sanity.

Abruptly the wailing of the woman ceased and Kirk was left floating in a limbo of silence. He wasn't thinking any more. He was blind, deaf, senseless, alone. His brain no longer functioned; he was in the emptiness between sanity and madness. He gripped the wall, his nails bending and breaking against it.

Three words rang loud and clear in his memory.

Threw him clear.

McCoy had said it. Spock had been insulated and he'd been thrown clear!

Kirk's eyes opened. He stared at the bulkhead without really seeing it, a kind of dawning realisation on his face. The pieces of the puzzle began to move, to form the beginnings of sense.

Kirk strained his memory.

Spock had said something; it seemed to be half of eternity ago. Something about the planetoids... Kirk struggled for the words and their meaning. The planets were captured asteroids, and they were... *ionized metal!* Kirk rammed his fist against the metal wall in sheer joy.

"Scotty!" Kirk grabbed the Engineer by the elbow and spun him round bodily. "Scotty, the hull! What's the condition of the outer skin of the hull?"

Scott stared at him. "Captain, are you feelin' all right?"

"I'm all right. Scotty, *what's the condition of the hull?*"

Scott looked at him a moment longer and then turned away, still doubtful, and walked the length of the power hall to the main monitors. Kirk waited impatiently while he checked circuits and studied the lights.

Scott's frown deepened. "I don't understand it, sir. The whole of the ship's hull seems to be ionized."

"Ionized!" Kirk repeated in a whisper. "We've got it, Scotty!"

"Sir?"

"Scotty, when a man's insulated, an electric shock throws him clear; if he's not insulated the current flows through him and locks him to the terminals."

"Aye," Scott agreed. "But - "

"It's the same with the ship! We're locked to this star because the ship isn't insulated!"

"But ionization isn't electricity, sir."

"In this instance, it's acting the same way. The current, the force, is ionization. We are ionized. If we could insulate the ship, we'd be thrown clear of the star!"

"Assumin' you're right, sir," Scott said, "how do we insulate a starship?"

Kirk stared at him, his hopes shattered. Then he turned and began pacing back and forth across the deck, his mind racing. He had the answer in his grasp, and yet it seemed... impossible. It had to work - somehow.

He turned. "Scotty, if we fed an electro-magnetic charge through the outer hull, used it to produce a barrier between us and the ionization field...?"

"Aye. It might work at that," Scott agreed. "But you'd need warp power to do it. And which way do you polarize your magnetic field?"

"Polarize?"

"Aye," Scott nodded, a wry smile on his lips. "Mr. Spock explained to you about the two universes touching and this star being the link between them?"

"Yes, he did."

"The way in which you polarized the hull would determine which

of the two universes we were thrown into. Our own - or..."

Kirk nodded slowly. "And we don't know which way either polarity would throw us."

"It could be worked out, sir," Scott said. "The computer could've done it in a couple of hours. A man with a pencil and paper could do it in a week - if he knew how."

Kirk looked at him narrowly. "And Spock?" he asked.

"Well, the First Officer's a law unto himself. He might be able to do it in twenty-four hours. But Mr. Spock's - "

Kirk was already on his way to the door.

McCoy lifted the Vulcan's eyelid with his thumb and peered at the dilated pupils.

"How long before he comes round now?" Kirk asked.

"A few minutes. It won't do any good, Jim. You saw what he was like. His mind was gone. He may even be violent, and he's been known to snap those straps."

"Let me worry about that, Bones."

McCoy scowled, tested the tension of the thick restraint straps and left the room. The door closed quietly behind him. Kirk sat on the edge of the bed and watched the Vulcan's face.

For several minutes, Spock lay quite still, sleeping out the last of a drugged slumber. Then his breathing shortened. A nerve twitched at the side of his mouth, his lips parted and he sighed, the expelled breath producing a small groan.

Kirk leaned over him, one hand by each of the Vulcan's shoulders. "Spock," he said softly. "Spock, can you hear me?"

Spock's eyelids flickered.

"Spock!"

His eyes opened and his gaze drifted, unfocused. Kirk put his hands firmly on his shoulders. "Spock, listen to me. You have to listen to me."

Spock closed his eyes again, and retched emptily. Then he started to heave against the straps, fighting desperately for his freedom.

"Gently! Gently!" Kirk said, trying to settle him.

Spock fought him. "No! Let me go! Let me go!" He rolled his head, and there was sweat glistening along his jawline. He let go a torrent of fluent high Vulcan that was too rapid for Kirk to attempt to translate.

Kirk put a hand under his chin and held his head still. "Spock, you must listen!"

"Trapped! I'm trapped!" Spock moaned. "I'll die here! I'll die!"

"This is Jim Kirk," Kirk said distinctly. "*Listen to me!*"

Spock's eyes wandered back to his face. The black pupils were still wide open but he was making an attempt to focus. "Jim?"

"That's right. Now, listen to me. You've got the radiations sickness. Your mind is affected. You have to fight it off."

Spock's eyes filled with fear. "I'm trapped! I'm trapped!" he cried, his voice trembling. "Jim! Jim, help me!" He struggled, his muscles bulging. The straps groaned alarmingly but they held. For a moment it seemed that he was trying to get his hands to Kirk's throat.

Kirk set that thought determinedly aside and again took the Vulcan by the jaw, pulling his head round. "Listen to me and I'll set you free!" he hissed.

Spock heard. Immediately, he became quieter, his eyes fixed trustfully on Kirk's face, the sweat drying on his skin. Very simply, Kirk explained what had happened and what had to be done. Spock listened and did his best to understand.

"You're a sick man, Spock," Kirk finished. "I know that. But I need you. Do you understand? I need your mind!"

Spock frowned, the sweat starting again from his pores. "My mind," he breathed. "Control."

His eyes closed and he turned his head away. "I must control... Trapped... I'm trapped..."

Kirk sat by him for a long time, but he didn't move any more and seemed to be deeply asleep. Despairingly, Kirk got up and left him. Outside the room he met McCoy's inquiring look, and shook his head.

When Kirk reached the bridge Uhura was singing some crazy song into the communications console. All the channels were open and her voice was carrying through the ship. Apart from her, the bridge had been abandoned.

Kirk had just time to take that in before Uhura threw her arms around his neck and dragged his head down. Her eyes were half closed and her earrings swung and glinted in the light. Her dark skin was burnished with the faint shine of moisture; in the violet light it looked almost blue.

"Captain," she murmured softly, caressing his cheek with the fingers of one hand while she held him locked to her with her other arm. "Captain Kirk." She sighed. "Hold me, Captain. Hold me close."

"Uhura!" Kirk put his hands on her shoulders and tried to push her away. "Lieutenant, pull yourself together!"

"Captain - I love you, Captain." She raised her face to his in the expectation of a kiss, her lips parted. Kirk struggled with her, aware that everything she said was audible throughout the ship. "I

love you, Captain," she insisted.

Kirk slapped her once, hard, on the cheek. She took a step backwards, releasing him, one hand raised to her face in startlement. Tears flooded her eyes, running down her cheeks. She collapsed into her seat and slumped over the communications console, sobbing brokenly.

Kirk reached over her and closed the channels. He laid a hand reassuringly on her shoulder and went down to the command seat.

"Kirk to sickbay."

A strange voice answered him. "Sickbay. Dr. Curtis here."

"Another patient, Doctor. On the bridge."

"We'll see to it, Captain. Captain, could you come back to sickbay? It's important."

"On my way." Kirk paused long enough to arrange for someone to man the bridge and ran for sickbay.

It was a shambles.

Equipment lay scattered and smashed everywhere, the wreckage of one man's madness. Kirk looked round and then frowned at Curtis. "Where's Dr. McCoy?"

"Under sedation," Curtis said dryly. "He didn't leave us very much to work with."

Kirk looked with more concern at the damage. "McCoy did this?"

"Yes, sir. He was shouting something about 'the devil's workshop'. He's sleeping now. Would you come this way, sir?"

Curtis led the way to the room where Spock lay. The Vulcan rolled his head as they came in and looked at Kirk.

"Captain."

"He came out of it soon after you left, sir. He seems rational." Curtis sounded doubtful, and Spock gave him a look that in other circumstances Kirk might have found funny.

"I am rational," the Vulcan said with slow certainty. "If you will kindly release these straps, I have work to do."

Curtis looked at him, still frowning, and then at Kirk. "Captain?"

Kirk looked at Spock, and nodded. "Let him go."

Curtis unfastened the straps and Spock sat up, stretching his muscles.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Kirk asked.

"I'm sure, Captain. The madness is strong. I could not control it at once."

"And now?"

Spock looked at him and his eyes were quite sane. "If you will give me the readings I need, I will begin work immediately."

Kirk buried his face in his hands and tried to shut out the violet light that shone into his brain. He felt dizzy and sick, and there was a hollow emptiness inside him caused by hunger, but he found it impossible to eat. Over the past twenty eight hours the crew had been reduced to less than a quarter strength, and all the personnel remaining were suffering in varying degrees from radiation poisoning. The Enterprise was still solidly locked in her sluggish orbit.

Weary-eyed, Kirk looked up as the door buzzer sounded.

"Come."

Spock came in, carrying a report pad and followed by Scott. The Vulcan's skin was transparently white and stretched tautly over his cheekbones. It seemed to have taken on the colour of the sunbeams. Scott looked tired to the verge of death.

"The calculations are complete, Captain," Spock said, putting the report pad down on Kirk's desk. Kirk glanced at the rows of equations and was too tired to make any sense of them.

"Can we do it?" he asked.

"Affirmative. It is possible. It will only be necessary to activate one of the warp drives, but the diversion of power to the hull will have to be made at the linkage of the antimatter reactor."

Kirk blinked at the Vulcan, trying to fathom the technicalities. "That means someone will have to go up there."

Spock nodded in agreement. "We'll need warp eight for twenty three seconds to throw us safely beyond the influence of the star."

Kirk sighed and studied the report pad. "You're sure we'll end up in our own universe and not in some alien space?"

Spock didn't answer. His head was bowed and he was looking down at the report pad, his hands resting on the edge of Kirk's desk.

"Spock - these calculations are correct?" Kirk insisted. Still Spock said nothing and he refused to meet his Captain's eyes.

"They're correct, sir," Scott said. "I'll stake my life on it."

Kirk looked at him sourly. "We're all staking our lives on it, Engineer. Very well, gentlemen." He got up and walked round the desk. "We have to decide who is to go and switch the linkage."

"It will be a dangerous manoeuvre, Captain," Spock said quietly. "That particular region of the ship is highly sensitive; a single mistake could break the magnetic bottle that restrains the antimatter..."

"And blow us all to bits. Yes, I know." Kirk rubbed a hand over his face. "It has to be done. The question is, who's to do it?"

Spock and Scott looked at each other. "It should be one of us, Captain," Spock said. "We two have the necessary knowledge."

"Agreed," Kirk said. "But which?"

"I'll go, sir," Scott said stiffly. "The First Officer's more valuable to the ship than an Engineer."

Kirk shook his head. "Invalid, Scotty. A few more hours and none of us'll be the slightest use to anything or anybody." He paced the room, his two officers watching him silently.

He turned and looked at them. "I'm sending you both," he said at last. "If one of you fails perhaps the other... If you both fail - well, there won't be any second chances. Start as soon as you can, gentlemen. I'll be on the bridge. I'll fire the warp drive on your signal."

The crawlway reached from the humped back of the secondary pod high above the populated section of the Starship. This was an area where the ship ruled herself, pulsing quietly with awesome power. The forces of induced gravity weakened here; the starship had no need of them. Their absence made the stomach feel light and lent a curious swimming motion to the limbs.

The crawlway itself was a low tunnel through the intricate circuitry of the ship, the floor a continuous length of polished metal along which a man slid on his back, pushing with his legs and using the spaced handholds to pull himself along.

There was no provision made here for the comfort or convenience of men. Colour coded conduits snaked low, reducing the already minimized headroom still further. There were numerous access panels, following one after the other, each clearly marked with an identity code; and a constant stream of radiation warning tags passed backwards above their faces, reminding them of the danger they climbed into.

Scott went first, carrying the switching mechanism and a communicator. Spock followed with a tricorder and the necessary tool kit. It was slow, hard work and the strain told quickly on muscles already weakened with weariness and the effort of the past days. The men didn't talk. They saved their breath for climbing. Very soon the sweat was gleaming on Scott's skin and running down into his ears.

The closer they climbed to the antimatter, the more intense became the feeling of electrified tension in the air around them. They experienced the beginnings of the tingling sensation on their skins, the first warning that they were in close proximity to the most explosive substance known to science.

Twice Scott hesitated, and then he stopped climbing altogether. Spock twisted his neck and looked up at him. "Mr. Scott?"

Scott was trembling from head to foot, visibly shaking. "I can't go up there!" he whimpered. "I can't!"

"Mr. Scott!" Spock said again. Scott was backing down on his head, moving awkwardly in the narrow confines of the tunnel, trying to turn round. Spock fended a boot away from his face and pushed

with his legs, moving into position alongside Scott, squeezing them both tight against the walls of the crawlway. His fingers tightened on the Engineer's shoulder and the fear-filled face relaxed. Spock twisted almost double and took the switching device and communicator from Scott's belt. Carrying them himself he wriggled on past the Engineer's unconscious body and continued the climb alone.

Kirk paced up and down the bridge between the helm console and the screen. His eyes were misting, clouding over with weariness and strain and encroaching madness. It was twenty minutes since the two officers had entered the crawlway; there had been no word from either of them. For all Kirk knew they could both be insane, ripping the guts out of the ship. Or they could both be dead, each killed by the other. Somehow he scarcely cared. He couldn't even remember their faces clearly.

"Helm," he said. "Prepare to initiate warp drive on my order. Warp factor eight."

"Warp factor eight," the helmsman replied. "Standing by."

Spock stretched his head back and looked up the crawlway. There were ten thousand insects crawling over his skin, his hair was electrified and standing out from his head. He considered it a most unpleasant sensation.

Two more strong pushes with his legs brought him to the slightly wider chamber at the end of the tunnel. He positioned himself before the armoured hatch that lent access to the delicate fabric of the magnetic bottle. He slipped the catches and slid the hatch to one side.

Beyond was the eerie universe of antimatter, pulsing with strange shifting light as the magnetic field ebbed and flowed. The crawling sensation increased tenfold. Spock resisted the impulse to shudder and carefully began to align the switching mechanism.

Part of his mind watched and supervised the working of his hands. The other part cowered in terror from the thing Spock feared most in all the universe - insanity. The monster reared before him, sharp-fanged and bright-eyed, drawing ever closer as the violet rays burned at his brain.

Spock struggled against the encroaching madness, fighting his fear. His fingers, numb and clumsy, twisted the last connection into place. His hands were trembling. In an effort to assert his will over them he bit his lower lip, his teeth clamping down hard. There was a salty taste on his skin - the taste of his own sweat. Ignoring the senseless notions that continually plagued his mind he checked the polarity of the magnetic probes and carefully began to lower the switching mechanism into the aperture. The antimatter flared around it, trying to reject, to react with this substance that was so opposite to itself. A trickle of sweat ran down Spock's face and dripped from the edge of his jaw. His hands shook.

The mechanism fitted neatly into place. Forcing his aching muscles to move with the slowness of ultra caution he withdrew the probes. Sweating and trembling he clung to the edge of the hatch, the tears of fear squeezing out between eyelids tight shut. With a

hesitant, disconnected hand he groped blindly for the communicator.

Kirk leaped for the command seat control at the whistle of the intercom.

"Kirk!"

Spock's voice was high-pitched, strained. "Captain, throw the switch."

"Mr. Spock, are you well clear of the antimatter?"

"Throw the switch!" Spock insisted doggedly.

"Mr. Spock, you have to get clear! If the antimatter surges you'll be killed!"

"Jim!!!" It was a scream of terror.

Kirk whirled on the helmsman, the agony of his decision contorting his face. "Warp eight!" he yelled. "Now!"

The helmsman hit the button. A controlled explosion rocked the starship. The lights went out, and in the darkness everyone stumbled and went sprawling as the deck tilted at an impossible angle. The ship lurched sickeningly.

Kirk experienced a tearing sensation in his brain and then a sudden, merciful relief. He opened his eyes and looked round.

It was dark. Totally dark. The violet sunbeams were gone.

He felt his way to the intercom. "Kirk to engineering. Get the emergency lighting on. And get some men to the crawlway! Mr. Scott and the First Officer are still up there. They might need some help getting back."

The Enterprise hung in the blackness of the space desert, unmoving. In the centre of the screen, at extreme range, a bright violet speck sent streamers of white energy billions of miles into space.

Spock studied the helm sensor. "Configuration normal, Captain," he reported. "I think we may safely assume that we have returned to our own universe."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk said. "Lt. Sulu, set course for the nearest starbase. Uhura, radio ahead that we'll be requiring the installation of a Daystrom duotronic master computer control immediately upon our arrival."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk looked up at Spock. The Vulcan was gazing at the screen, an expression of wistful longing on his face as he watched the violet speck diminish into nothing.

"Curious, Mr. Spock?" he inquired.

Spock quickly slipped the Vulcan mask of expressionlessness into place and raised an eyebrow. "I was merely considering what might lie on the other side of that star, Captain."

"We've barely begun to explore *this* universe," Kirk said, and then added, more kindly, "maybe one day men will go to find out what is on the other side."

Spock nodded. "I should like to be one of them," he said softly.

Kirk smiled, a gentle, sympathetic smile. "Full ahead, Mr. Sulu," he said. "Warp factor three."

